



4 WAYS REMOTE WORK CAN IMPROVE YOUR CULTURE




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ONE.

Our Culture Is Rapidly Changing

COVID-19 has put a lot on the chopping block: paperwork, commercial real estate, fancy desk decorations. For most companies, the immediate concern was logistics. How do companies suddenly go 100% digital overnight?

In the months since March 2020, there's been a scramble to find new tools (Slack, Zoom, Google Drive) to compensate for the gaps. Employees are dropping old habits and forging new ones to keep things moving, often faster than their companies can keep up with.

But it's not just how we do things that's shifting. Our culture is changing, too. After all, culture is built on the way we interact—and that's been blown apart in the wake of everybody staying home.

But it doesn't have to be all bad news. **Remote work has the potential to drive better outcomes, for employees and businesses alike.** Let's dive in.

TWO.

Why Less Face-to-Face Cultivates More Transparency

We all love those “have a sec?” conversations.

They’re quick, effortless, and get us answers faster than any finger+keyboard combination could. Similarly, we like being able to pull people into quick meetings where we throw ideas and “talk it out” until we find our next steps forward.

These processes don’t just get us results—they create a culture. These experiences, over time, tell us a lot about the work world we live in. For example:

- We know which coworkers we can rely on in a pinch, and which we can’t.
- We know who can lead a meeting and who isn’t worth inviting.
- We even get counter-culture culture habits; if “have a sec” conversations are common, perhaps wearing headphones becomes an easy indicator a coworker doesn’t want to be bothered.





When we go remote, we take fragments of these experiences with us. We still have an idea of who can lead a conversation and who can't—but even that is subject to change when you go digital. The best in-person talkers don't always translate well to Zoom.

While we might long for the familiarity and ease these familiar habits offered, they never gave us one thing: transparency. **A coffee run with a friendly colleague to figure out what's happening on a project shared by two departments doesn't have a paper trail.** In the same way, those helpful "have a sec" answers show up in reports and papers, but they aren't recorded for anyone else to discover themselves.

These little processes for information gathering are untraceable. Meaning if two coworkers have the same question, the person with the answers might get asked twice. Or not at all, if the askers don't even know where to go.

Going remote re-routes many of these hidden highways of information networking. We're forced into email or Slack or other collaboration tools to have our conversations. And while those tools present their own kind of conversation siloing, it's a start. There's a paper trail, and the more people have access to it, the more people can begin to capitalize on these processes for a faster, more effective teamwork experience.

These digital channels don't just provide an opportunity to spot these information channels and turn them into top-side processes, they also begin to help companies rebuild their culture around a state of transparency—**which is great, because transparency is the number one factor in determining employee happiness.**

In more than one study, employees indicated that company transparency was the number-one factor in determining their workplace happiness.

People can see what's being discussed, even if it's not directly about them. They know what their colleagues are concerned about, who really is the subject matter expert on a topic, or why another team struggles to get their reports out on time (e.g. the vendor is always late with what they need).

This openness can help teams build understanding and trust between one another, even if they don't directly work together. It can also give employees a more holistic view of the company and the impact they have in it, a key factor in company performance.

A recent survey of 3,000 companies by Regina Corso Consulting found that companies that provide employees and managers with context and visibility to their roles “consistently outpace their rivals.”

While the road to transparency often starts out business-oriented, with the right measures in place **this approach has the chance to create windows for honest conversations between colleagues and management about more sensitive topics.**

Perhaps a coworker wants to share their experiences as a Black professional in the tech industry.

Or maybe another is concerned the marketing team hasn't given enough support to its sales team but wonders if only they feel that way.

These conversations can now find places—spaces—in which to live and be learned from rather than lost somewhere in a hallway towards the espresso machine.

Remote work has pushed teams into channels that have paper trails. And while this can make some nervous, it presents a chance for companies to re-imagine their culture on a new level of openness.





THREE.

How Distance Lets Us Improve Accountability

Physical proximity was never really a guarantee of greater accountability. People may feel more obligated to remember or hold up their parts of a project when they have to respond to their coworkers face-to-face, but most in-office processes aren't necessarily better built for accountability by virtue of existing in a shared space.

So how does a virtual office impact accountability where physical offices don't? **By creating opportunities to design new processes that establish trust, fairness, and a blame-free (but responsibility-oriented) environment** for coworkers and management.

Accountability is a culture problem.

When workplaces suffer from a lack of accountability, it breeds mistrust among employees and management. When things go wrong, teams either take the morale hit and view lack of accountability as



an accepted part of the culture, or they try to resolve it themselves, often by minimizing the impact of individuals they suspect aren't "holding up their end" of the work. These kinds of results don't just foster division between coworkers, it also delivers a blow to productivity.

A Gallup study on the relationship between "employee engagement" (defined by twelve factors, including praise from leadership, strong relationships with coworkers, and knowing what is expected at work) had a direct correlation to performance. Companies who scored "at the 99th percentile had four times the odds of success (or above average performance) compared with those at the first percentile."

Most people want to do their jobs effectively, but only 33% know what is expected of them.

And a broken, unclear process with no one to take ownership for issues when they arise prevents breeds more issues. **Rather than focusing on how to fix a problem, people focus on these four points:**

1. *Why is it broken?*
2. *How did it break?*
3. *Who is responsible?*
4. *How can we fix it?*

It takes a lot longer to answer four questions instead of one, and the most important one (number four) gets shoved to the end of the line.

a. How to reset your culture dynamics through remote work

Remote work relies on online channels for teams and leadership to work together. These digital tools offer the following benefits:


1. *More documentation for projects and tasks*
2. *The chance to create a single source of truth*
3. *A chance to shift away from the blame game*

b. The benefits of documentation

By moving collaboration onto digital channels with built-in features like version history and unique user accounts, managers can reduce the risk of an accountability gap. They can see when edits to data sets are made, and who made them. They know where a project was on Monday, and how much it progressed by Friday. They can see who contributed and who didn't.

Digital paper trails are a chance to stop micromanaging (a temptation when you can't check an employee's monitor or drop by their desk to talk) without losing track of the big picture.

The metadata becomes the micromanager. This sophisticated of documentation is not only nearly impossible to replicate in office, but it also offers a



chance for employees themselves to get in on the big picture; **if they can see who has made changes and contributions—and if they know management is seeing the same story they are—they have more faith that they’re on the same page when it comes to decisions of fairness and responsibility.** They’ll know everyone is playing by the same handbook.

This is where a single source of truth documentation comes in.

C • The importance of creating a single source of truth

One of the biggest problems with in-office settings is that they allow for a high level of individualization when it comes to record keeping. Let’s consider a project kickoff meeting:

At the end of a meeting, everyone takes their own version of notes (which may or may not contain all relevant info) back to their desk to get started on their assignments. Weeks or months later into a project, a disagreement about assignments arises. Two employees aren’t sure a neglected part of the project belonged to the other or themselves.

If there is no evidence that coworkers can mutually agree upon, the issue may boil down to two things: who can argue with more authority or who kept their notes on hand. **Neither inspires confidence or trust between the coworkers, and management may be placed in a no-win scenario of having to decide the answer on such little evidence.**

The right digital tools can erase this problem by helping leadership create processes that include single source of truth documentation. What is a single source of truth documentation? **One source of data that everyone agrees is the real, trusted number.**

A single source of truth doesn't just help improve communication and set expectations for everyone on the team, **it also helps establish data management and collaboration habits that reduce future opportunities for conflict and confusion.** Everyone knows what's expected of them on any given project or process. Which leads us to the final point: *the blame game.*

d. Shifting away from the blame game for good

Increased accountability shouldn't result in increased punishment. Finding people to blame for mistakes and then punishing them only creates a culture of fear and risk avoidance. **Who's going to stick their neck out if mistakes put them on the public guillotine?**

Accountability should instead be an opportunity to foster openness and innovation. If people know their achievements will be recognized and their mistakes will become opportunities for improvement rather than humiliation—they'll see opportunities to improve upon their work.

FOUR.

Why The #1 Driver Of Your Culture Is Software

For many of us, the move to 100% digital workspaces wasn't strategic: it was reactive. We threw together what we could to make things work in the moment: *Slack, email, Zoom, DocuSign*.

But the need for speed means most of our solutions for data-sharing and collaboration were not designed with a long-term game plan in mind. Which is a missed opportunity for companies in need of a culture upgrade if it stays that way.

a. Why software will drive most of your new culture

Now that we're many of us are working remote, we depend on our software and digital tools to stay connected, both as people and as members of a shared project or task. They're the only lifeline between us and our coworkers, vendors, and clients.



Our digital tools will play a direct role in every collaboration experience we have. But this can be a problem if we don't fully understand how these tools are impacting us.

b. Determining your values, then find software that supports them

Since software is your entire company's new middleman for all communication, it's imperative to make sure it's not getting in the way of what you're trying to say.

Think of it like the classic game of telephone.

If your goal is to effectively bring everyone on the same page, the means by which you go about sharing that information makes all the difference. If you're using software that functions about as effectively as whispering in someone's ear, you can't realistically expect your team to start and end on the same page.

So how do you determine which software is right for you, your team, and the culture you want? Start by figuring out your values.

Consider the values already presented in this ebook: transparency and accountability. What would software look like if it were designed with transparency in mind?

C Transparency: what we want versus what we've got

Let's start with the end goal (vision) in mind.

- ***What would an ideal culture of transparency look like?*** A work culture where people aren't just open with one another, the data they work with and the conversations they have around it are also visible to others, eliminating data silos and missed learning opportunities.

Next, explore what kind of hypothetical tool might help make that vision reality.

- ***What kind of tool would support a culture of transparency?*** A tool that creates a digital workspace where data and collaboration on it are easily accessible by members of a team, department, or perhaps even several departments. Perhaps this ideal tool would also be set up to make conversations and data accessible/visible even when the individuals forget to do so (a common problem when people forget to hit the REPLY ALL to a group email or write a message in a direct Slack message rather than on a main thread).

Other features for an ideal tool might include: uninterrupted accessibility to anyone involved in a project (teammates, departments, perhaps even vendors); the ability to exist and update in real-time so people can see changes as they occur; spaces that foster opportunities for in-





depth conversations between individuals, management and employees, and teams that people can later access and read (even if they weren't in the conversation themselves).

Now that you've outlined what an ideal process and tool would look like, **it's time to identify where your current tools measure up—and where they don't.**

- How is your current software preventing you from reaching this ideal? It's worthwhile to look at the various software tools you have—both legacy tools and new ones you've adopted for lockdown—as part of assessing where things stand.

Here's a breakdown of email, for example.

Email, probably still the most popular form of collaboration tool on the market, offers many advantages:

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1. *It's easy to learn and people know it*
 2. *Most other businesses also use email*
 3. *People know the etiquette for writing emails*
 4. *Emails can be easily sorted/archived*
 5. *Emails can act as sources of truth*
 6. *Many people can be added in an email chain*

But if the goal is a culture of greater transparency, not status quo transparency, where does email fall short?

1. *The sender must decide who sees the conversation (meaning the conversation is almost inherently limited in its accessibility from the get-go)*
2. *It's easy to accidentally exclude people from ongoing conversations they need to be a part of by hitting the wrong REPLY button*
3. *Documents attached to an email are not visible to others unless they are shared*
4. *Past conversations can't be easily accessed by others*
5. *When an account owner leaves, their conversations, knowledge, experience, and decisions are either archived and difficult to access or deleted, contributing to knowledge loss among the team*



This same process can be done tools such as:

Slack

Pro: threads mean anyone related to a topic can see and review conversations they weren't necessarily directly involved in

Con: private channels make it easy for conversations and decisions to be made out of sight, reviving that in-office culture of "behind closed doors"

Google Docs

Pro: everyone can access at any given time and version history allows users to always account for changes

Con: you have to remember to share the link with others for them to see/access the information, or anything else.

d. Can your current tools be adapted to your vision or do you need something new?

Once a software tool's shortcomings are assessed, it's important to figure out if there are ways to either work around these issues (do you have other software tools that can make up for these gaps?) or if you need to find a new tool altogether.

Perhaps one of the easiest immediate solutions is to re-design policies around the tools you have. If, for example, you use Slack for internal communication, make sure all project-related and decision making conversations are held on threads accessible to everyone in the department.

It's important to get ahead of the tools you have and build policies around them that support the culture you want rather than letting the tools decide the culture you'll have.

e. Make sure you don't catch a case of Shadow IT

One other thing to consider when it comes to choosing software to support your values: avoiding Shadow IT pitfalls.

What is Shadow IT? *In short, it's any IT product used by a company that's not vetted or officially approved by the IT department.* This can include hardware, software, and web services and applications. These



tools and apps have become increasingly popular as developers have introduced new quick fixes and off-the-shelf solutions in response to the limitations of the old guard of tech tools (think: email, word processors, spreadsheets).

Shadow IT is used when employees find their current way of doing things (using approved company tools) doesn't work.

But when employees use tools that lack oversight and management, culture can take a major hit. More conversations, data sharing, and workflow processes become hidden to team members and management. And company culture becomes even harder to design and defend in the long run.

FIVE.


How Digital Tools Can Help Eliminate Hierarchies

In an office, hierarchies are often built into the very architecture of a space. Managers and C-suite executives have separate offices. Rooms or floors might separate different departments; and badges between them can communicate who has access and who doesn't. Even in shared space startups, islands of desks can serve as invisible walls dividing teams by rank and authority.

This hierarchy also extends past the office and into the very structure of the company itself. Headquarters holds a different meaning from satellite or branch offices, and employees, depending on the location they work from, can feel their value communicated through them.

But on a Zoom call, everyone occupies the same 2x2 inch square with varying video quality. The nature of a video call tugs on our better behavior; we talk, then stop and apologize, then wait our turn to talk again.





Extroverts might still speak more, but there are more opportunities to speak up. Chat features allow people to add their input if they want to be heard without interrupting.

In many ways, our digital world is flattening hierarchies to create a greater sense of equality between employees.

And this changing landscape presents an amazing opportunity for leaders to nurture a culture of openness and closeness with employees. After all, who can't help but feel their manager is a little more human when her three-year-old shouts with delight from the background? Or a CEO who talks about doing the dishes with his kids after sitting down to dinner?

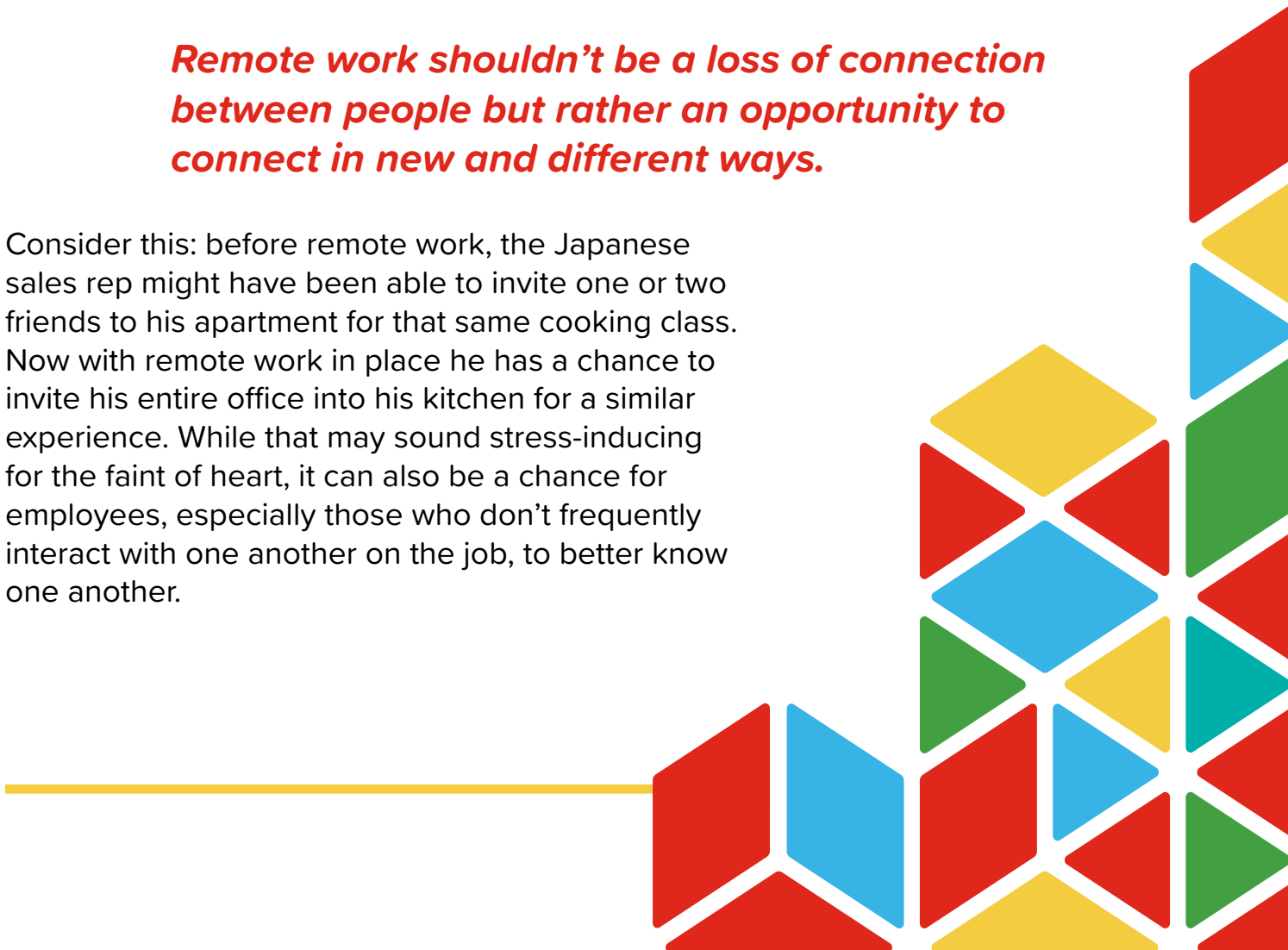
By taking our work home, we've erased the usual lines and boundaries created by separation of private and persona and drawn new ones that offer coworkers and leaders better insight on who we are—and how our identities relate to them on an intimate level. In other words, we can find more of ourselves in our coworkers by seeing more of their lives, and finding this shared humanness can bring out a heightened sense of camaraderie.

a. How can companies lean into this new opportunity for “shared humanity” bonding?

By creating more moments for people to share these intimate experiences with one another. For example, planned lunches or happy hours. Or even better, asking employees what they want to share from their personal lives and then creating the space for them to share it. Maybe the engineer with a passion for fitness wants to organize a lunch workout session for coworkers. Or the Japanese sales junior thinks he can brighten his colleagues’ day with a cooking class showcasing his hometown’s delicacies.

Remote work shouldn’t be a loss of connection between people but rather an opportunity to connect in new and different ways.

Consider this: before remote work, the Japanese sales rep might have been able to invite one or two friends to his apartment for that same cooking class. Now with remote work in place he has a chance to invite his entire office into his kitchen for a similar experience. While that may sound stress-inducing for the faint of heart, it can also be a chance for employees, especially those who don’t frequently interact with one another on the job, to better know one another.





SIX.

In Conclusion

Transparency. Accountability. Equality. And the tools that encourage these and other values.

Remote work comes with its challenges, but it also comes with an entirely new level of cultural potential—if leaders embrace it. Change doesn't have to be immediate, but if it's going to be successful, there needs to be a plan in place.

a. Learning from a company that's been there before

The challenges and opportunities we've discussed in this ebook are ones we at Kintone have personally faced—and achieved with the help of our digital platform (also called Kintone).

b. Who are we?

We're a Bay Area startup of 50 employees who went remote in 24-hours without a hitch when San Francisco's shelter-in-place order came on March 16th. We're also the subsidiary of Cybozu, Inc., a Japanese company of 500+ employees and \$1B market value that went fully remote on February 24th with similar ease. And we've been able to do some surprising things along the way when it comes to a culture of transparency, accountability, and equality. As a result of using Kintone, we've been able to keep almost all of our conversations visible so everyone, regardless of department or rank, better understands our company, our mission, and our values. This includes things like how bonuses are calculated, employee's 401k benefits, and our plans for the San Francisco office in the future.

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