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Strategies, Activities, and Actions to Build Strong Distributed Teams



RANGE

Culture in the Distributed Workforce

It's official: the workplace will always be distributed. According to an [April 2020 survey from MIT](#), nearly half of the United States workforce is remote – a statistic that was boosted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but a statistic that is only going to grow with time. After all, so many workers want more flexibility, so why would companies return to the old way of doing things?

But what happens to a company's culture when the company is no longer housed in a centralized office and is instead dispersed all over the country, or even the world?

Instead of thinking about your remote-first workforce through the lens of a lack of culture, it's vital to redefine what culture means to your company in the context of this new environment.

The Value of Culture

Culture is the set of behaviors recognized and rewarded by a company or organization. Culture is also how people feel and find a sense of belonging and relatedness, which are critical components of psychological safety and motivation.

Many modern office spaces already have an informal, ad hoc culture that lends itself to a strong sense of camaraderie among colleagues – but for many, speaking via video chat, email, or instant messaging can strip some of that human-ness away.

At the same time, remote forms of connection can help organizations to be more inclusive of different life schedules and geographic locations, and can even give people a more personal glimpse into each other's lives (think: kids, pets, room decor). An inclusive, remote-first culture has the potential to boost performance and retention in ways that a lack thereof won't, which is why it's vital that organizations who are invested in maintaining a great working environment prioritize this shift.

That's not to say you need to overhaul your entire internal approach to teams and team-building right this minute. There are strategies and activities that can be implemented – and those will be detailed in the pages to come – but the most important element is prioritization. Successful team building isn't done in a vacuum, and it's only through intentionality that you will be able to build a thriving remote-first team.

Daily Team Building

Successful team building isn't about one-off activities, like corporate offsite events and trust falls. In fact, many of the team building techniques touted in pre-remote work days have since proven to be largely ineffective at providing long-term benefits. While one-time team activities can bring people closer together for a little while, those bonds don't hold up under the constant pressures of an organization focused on delivering results.

The key lies within the trust that team members share. Leaders truly invested in building thriving remote teams must prioritize building trust between teams, team members, and managers. That sense of belonging that comes with trust underlies all great teams – and makes working together on even the toughest challenges easier, even across time zones and continents.

ICEBREAKER

The Range team created [Icebreaker](#), a free online tool, with over 300 team-building questions – to provide distributed teams with simple team-building questions that prompt each person at the virtual table to share something about themselves and an update about their day. Building trust starts with sharing pieces of yourself, and Icebreaker was designed to facilitate those interactions.

TRAFFIC LIGHT

Sometimes you just need to know that someone cares. It's a simple adage, but it's so true. We've begun implementing the "traffic light" activity during our regular remote meetings to check in on team members at the start of the day. Each team member shares whether they're in a red, yellow, or green mood, and other team members then have the opportunity to offer support or check in.

While some team members may not want support even when they're in a red mood, the activity opens up the floor for offers of help or a listening ear. Especially in a remote-first environment, when some team members don't have the physical barriers between work and home life that they're used to, a simple message of support or an offer to help with a project can make all the difference in strengthening feelings of trust.

DAILY TEAM QUESTIONS

At Range, we've gotten into the practice of answering team-building questions as a part of our daily status updates. When team members share what they're working on and how they're doing, they include not only an overview of their active projects and tasks, but also a response to a random question that our product generates each day. Here are some of our favorites:

- What's the perfect notebook for you? (Lines or grids? Big or small? etc.)
- If you could make a guest appearance in a TV show, which show would it be?
- Where, outside of work, do you get your best ideas?

Reading each others' responses to the prompts is something we always look forward to, and it helps us stay connected as a team — even when we aren't all working on the same projects or attending the same meetings.

Remote Team Building

Teams crave connections that are more meaningful than back-to-back Zoom calls. But when you can't get everyone together in a room or a conference hall, there are ways to embrace the fact that your remote-first team is scattered.

ASYNCHRONOUS GAMES

Turn-based or asynchronous games are great for playing on different schedules – or across different time zones. Whether it's a photo challenge, cooking contest, or scavenger hunt, these activities are great ways to carry over the engagement and excitement from one meeting to the next.



Engaging your asynchronous team to take part in these activities can be as simple as adding the activity round-up to the next all-hands meeting agenda. Encourage everyone in attendance to submit their photo, recipe, or scavenger hunt card ahead of time, and go through them before you start the meeting. Everyone will step into the meeting room with a light heart, knowing they've had the chance to get to know their colleagues a bit better before diving into work.

Ultimately, the element essential to these activities' success is to regularly and consistently implement them into the agendas of your team meetings. One-off implementations will do little to cultivate that sense of trust and belonging, but by demonstrating you're willing to put in the time and energy investment in building bonds will encourage each team member to do the same.

VIRTUAL OFFSITES

A virtual offsite – time set aside specifically for team-building and bonding events and activities – is a great way to prioritize team building outside of the daily work-related grind. Again, prioritization is key, so be sure to put a hold on everyone's calendar during these core hours well in advance, as well as announce this time so everyone can reschedule internal or external meetings. Be mindful of time zones and work hours as well; nothing kills an employee's participation or makes them feel devalued like knowing they can't attend an all-team event because they're the only one who has childcare pickup that day.



Virtual Offsite Idea #1: Selfie Hunt

At Range, we love to get our team members outside. During a recent virtual offsite, we sent our team members outside and challenged them to capture as many selfies with various people, places, and things around them. Not only did we get to experience different regions of the United States through the eyes of our colleagues, but we also got to see some truly wacky images.



Virtual Offsite Idea #2: Show and Tell



The Range team also recently implemented a regular virtual tradition inspired by MTV Cribs, where each team member shows off their home and work environments on video chat. It's fun, helps the team get to know their colleagues better, and builds social connections. We've also found it sparks a lot of interesting insights; workspace decor, sweet gaming setups, or photos of the family pet are excellent conversation starters.

Together, one-off virtual events and informal asynchronous touchpoints are a great way to help your teammates share a bit of themselves with one another. Even when teams that have no immediate plans to convene in person, they can strengthen team bonds through lightweight remote activities that bring everyone closer together.



In-Person Offsites

Company offsites – where a team, or even the entire organization, gets together for a day or two in a single location – are a resource-rich investment, but events like these that are well-designed can be game-changing for company culture, collaboration, and operations.

While virtual activities are great ways to bond on the day-to-day level employees need to stay engaged and collaborative, there's no denying there's something special about coming together in person, shaking hands, and sharing meals while collaborating around tough challenges or unique problems.

That's not to say you need to blow the whole company budget on a massive getaway to Jamaica or New Zealand – that might not even be possible for some team members.

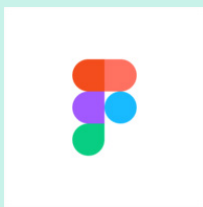
There are budget-friendly options for every team; the core focus should be on investing in a location that will inspire and reinvigorate employees while also motivating them to get to know one another in person.

The secret? If you've implemented daily check-ins and icebreakers, as well as regular remote offsite events like scavenger hunts or cooking challenges, that base level of trust will likely already be present within your organization, which will lend itself to a less awkward, more fun in-person offsite event. That's why Range advocates for an annual in-person offsite event, and no more or less. It gives teams plenty of time to build those bonds day after day, while also giving us all the opportunity to miss each other.

Tools for Successful Team Building

When it comes to team-building, it is essential to have tools that are created specifically for distributed teams to craft the caliber of culture companies and their employees need to thrive. These are some of our favorites.

FigJam



This browser-based design tool is perfect for everything from puzzle solving to virtual Pictionary games. In the past, teams have done everything from designing and creating trading cards about themselves to splitting up into teams, calling out animal names, and seeing who can doodle the best sketch in under 30 seconds. Making space for creative fun is essential for mental health and team building, and Figma helps us facilitate that.

Quizbreaker



Who doesn't love a quiz night? Quizbreaker's software is a fun, interactive way to test how well you know your teammates – and help you learn new things about them in the process. The software begins each session by presenting team members with sets of personal questions about themselves and their preferences. Teams then guess whose answers are whose in a round of multiple-choice games.

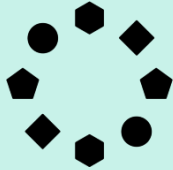
For team members who are a bit shy about sharing their personalities, or new teammates who may not know everyone yet, this provides a stress-free, fun way to gain insight into people's likes, interests, and personalities.

Donut



Create serendipitous, virtual coffee chats to help build connections across your company. Donut integrates with Slack and shares simple open-ended questions that prompt meaningful conversations, whether it's as teams go about their work days or during intentional breaks during the day.

Gatheround



Take your video meetings and turn them into fun online gatherings with Gatheround's intuitive solutions that can pair off mentors and mentees, tee up prompt cards for interesting conversations that go beyond the boundaries of the everyday grind, and pre-made templates for monthly leadership meetings, socials, and more.

Drawing Games



From competitive, team-based games like Draw Battle to funny, collaborative games like Gartic Phone, drawing games are one of the best ways to create moments of fun and connection on your team. Laughter isn't just a powerful stress reliever – it's also a great way to foster team connectedness, especially on remote teams, where spontaneous casual interactions are harder to come by.

Range



Range integrates team building into the daily flow of work. Asynchronous check-ins help teams stay in sync about their work while providing a valuable opportunity to share how they're really doing.

Teams with Range establish healthy habits, improve relationships, and celebrate accomplishments – in short, Range creates a culture of connectedness that scales.

