



HOW TO REMAIN REMOTELY AGILE THROUGH COVID-19

By Benjamin Rehberg, Martin Danoesastro, Shilpa Kaul, and Liza Stutts

ONE OF THE PILLARS of agile ways of working is team collocation. Study after study shows that teams that work together in the same place report higher productivity and effectiveness and better decision making. So, what happens when a disruption such as the coronavirus renders collocation inadvisable if not impossible? Can team members working in remote locations still be agile?

The answer is yes, although most teams—especially those that have been formed recently—will experience some drop in productivity. This should not be cause for concern: it's just more evidence that collocation really makes a difference. We are also finding that agile makes remote working much easier. Many companies that are working in an agile way say the following agile principles help them become more effective remotely:

- **Rigid Prioritization.** Creating backlogs and constantly refining them have made sure that individuals and teams

can work on the most valuable things even when they are remote.

- **Working in Small, Cross-Functional Autonomous Teams.** Small teams build resiliency and make it easier to change direction when needed.
- **Regular Rhythm of Meetings.** A regular meeting cadence helps to make sure that everyone is aligned and enables collaboration when people are working from home.
- **Agile Leadership.** Good leaders focus on concrete output and goals, allowing teams to have a common vision to work toward.

At its core, agile is a set of cultural values, principles, and behaviors, rather than a set of specific practices. Teams that remain true to the principles can still operate effectively until life and business return to more normal patterns. Here's how teams should focus their efforts.

Maintain Alignment

As we have observed before, small, cross-functional, empowered teams are at the core of every agile organization. The ability to act autonomously spurs ownership and creativity, enabling teams to make quick decisions and move fast. But a high degree of autonomy works only when there is also a high degree of alignment in and among teams, and the importance of this alignment is heightened when team members are working remotely.

Agile leaders need to make doubly sure that teams align around the company's overall purpose, strategy, and priorities. Leaders need to communicate intent, explaining both the why and the what, so that members stay focused on their team's goals and the connection to larger business objectives. In normal times, this alignment is the precursor to autonomy; in times of distraction, when teams are physically separated, alignment becomes more important than ever.

Prioritize Ceremonies

Regular ceremonies help bring structure and normalcy to the remote workday. A common cadence of virtual meetings and calls includes weekly team touch points of 60 to 90 minutes to discuss progress, forecast plans for the coming week, go through official communications from management, and raise any emerging risks or issues. Daily standups of 15 to 30 minutes are used to review progress since yesterday, plan for today, and raise any issues or blockers. In addition, virtual meetings (employing videoconferencing when possible) and instant messaging are used as needed to chat with colleagues about work and other issues.

It helps for leaders to be transparent about their calendar and commitments. For example, they should put placeholders in the online calendar so that colleagues can see their availability, and leaders should make time for regular ceremonies and touch points with their teams.

Use Virtual Tools

One piece of good news: there are plenty of virtual tools available today, and they can help. Consider using conferencing tools—for audio and video—such as Webex and Zoom. Larger companies can use their virtual private networks. An always-on connection during working hours can facilitate informal and formal connections among team members. Frequent calls or conferences during the early days of remote working can help people adapt to a new way of interacting. A breakout capability—the ability for team members to engage in one-on-one meetings while also remaining part of a larger virtual gathering—is an important component of simulating collocation. Virtual whiteboards are another useful tool for overcoming physical separation, as are collaboration tools—such as Egnyte, Hangouts, Jira, and Trello—and work-oriented messaging platforms such as Slack.

In planning how to work remotely, it can help to break down the activities that typically occur during a day and think about where in the physical office they take place. These spaces or rooms can be recreated using a variety of virtual tools. (See the exhibit.) Taking team members on a virtual tour of their virtual quarters can get them acclimated to remote collaboration.

Build a Virtual Team Culture

This may be the most difficult part of working remotely—and the most important. Culture is an intangible but critical aspect of the workplace, and it is easily lost when teams physically disperse. There is no water cooler or lunchroom in cyberspace.

Good leaders look for inventive ways to build a sense of culture for team members. One way is to invite team members into leaders' new work environment. Leaders can share photos or give a virtual tour of their home office—or even the house and the neighborhood. One of our colleagues recently wrote about her experiences

Translating the Physical Workplace into Virtual Rooms for Agile Collaboration

Workspace zone	Examples of tools	How it works
Team zone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared ownership Open collaboration Work in progress and task in progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SharePoint Online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A virtual whiteboard repository that anyone on the team can contribute to with notes, comments, images, and in-progress ideas; also known as the war room
Meeting zone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal and informal subzones Ad hoc and scheduled meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zoom Webex Slack 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multimodal communication channels that allow for a variety of styles and scheduling A spectrum of meetings, from informal and ad hoc (using Slack for messages and calls, for example) to structured and scheduled
Shared amenities zone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where all inputs live In-progress deliverables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dovetail Software GitHub Microsoft Excel Sketch Microsoft PowerPoint 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An area where the team makes things and organizes information Tools that can be shared in various communication channels to show work in progress
Alternate work zone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> End-of-day version for review Up-to-date version control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Egnyte 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A source of truth on deliverables, updated once per day An area where team leaders and others can see the status of deliverables

Source: BCG analysis.

replacing physical distance with virtual social intimacy. Another method is to assign roles to the team to ensure focus and to encourage engagement. A “rabbit hole master,” for example, ensures that the team doesn’t get stuck in unnecessary discussions. A “zen master” ensures that the team’s energy level is at its best. The “timekeeper” performs timeboxing.

Adhering to three good practices will also help create a functioning culture.

Empathy. Some people will respond more readily than others to the total disruption of their work environment. Those with children may have more challenges working from home than those without, for example. Consider that everyone’s take on this situation will be different—and talk about the various perspectives openly. Teams members that remain aware of one another’s circumstances can operate effectively until life and business return to more normal patterns.

Transparency. At a time when the only thing that seems certain is uncertainty itself, leaders should make an extra effort to be totally transparent about their work, ongoing deadlines, and their personal responses—even if the answer is, “I don’t know right now.”

Engagement. Encourage conversation among colleagues. That water cooler chat is important for sustaining relationships. Not all online conversations should be about work. Ask colleagues how they are coping or how their kids are making out.

WHILE NO ONE knows how long the COVID-19 crisis will last, it seems inevitable that many of us will be working remotely for at least weeks if not several months. Productivity may take a hit, but it doesn’t have to hurt. An agile approach can keep remote teams functioning effectively and make them more resilient for the future.

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