Forming New Collaborations in Remote Work

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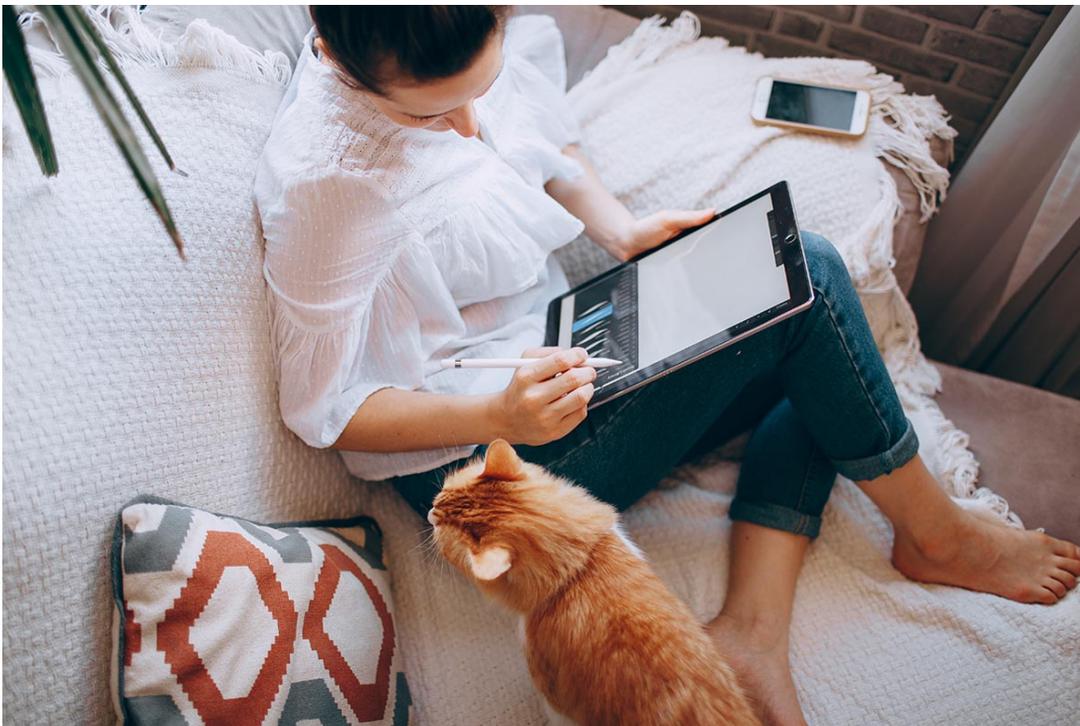

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Networks are resilient, but a year of remote work has taken its toll on organizations.

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Setting the stage

Most managers today know that networks shape all kinds of outcomes, from creativity and innovation to status and promotion. Ever since the COVID-19 crisis struck hard a year ago, managers have relied on their trusted networks of employees and partners to fight for survival. But a year of remote work is starting to take a toll on organizations. This is particularly true when it comes to forming new connections at work, where colleagues, suppliers, and customers have been reduced to invisible atoms in Zoom-space.

Studies of networks distinguish between deepening existing collaborations and reaching out to form new ones. On the one hand, we need our most trusted partners to engage in deep and meaningful conversations that take time to cultivate. On the other hand, we need fresh spice to keep networks from becoming stale and recycling old ideas. It's the new connections that have suffered the most during the pandemic (even though most concern has been with nurturing our existing ones).

Academic research often treats networks as growing spontaneously from encounters in the hallway or from employees being staffed to the same project. While such spontaneous outcomes are essential, there are also plenty of actions that managers and organizations can take to influence employee networks.[1] For instance, the design of our office buildings (where we used to sit) has huge implications for whom we talk to. We are much more likely to speak to our closest office neighbors, or to the ones our eyes fall on as we peek above the cubicle walls. By locating people strategically, a manager can influence the networks that form.

Similarly, company retreats often have the dual purpose of keeping people up to speed on developments inside the company and creating stronger bonds between the employees in a team. We are more likely to build strong connections with someone when we've shared dinner or solved a problem together—or even chatted about which kinds of cats are best (long-haired, naturally!).

But already in the pre-pandemic world, managers were quite aware that deepening existing collaborations is not enough. Making new connections is equally important. Everyone involved in organizing corporate events knows that companies purposely bring strangers together—angling for productive new matches—just as much as they aim to strengthen existing connections. Training events, secondments, cross-functional teams,

company breakfasts with directors, and so forth, all have the dual purpose of expanding an individual's horizon and forging connections between departments and functions inside companies.[2]

The problem

When COVID-19 emerged in the early months of 2020, companies were forced to send employees into home office. With in-presence meetings no longer an option, even the simplest coordination task required slews of phone calls and back-and-forth emails. More complex tasks and decision making were even more complicated, and full days of video conferencing quickly became a new normal. An internal study of Microsoft employees in China showed that **the amount of time spent on voice and video calls doubled from 7 to 14 hours per week**[3]—resulting in longer work days or crowding out other activities. Hard numbers from companies are difficult to collect, but several managers we spoke to are increasingly concerned about "online meeting fatigue." For many, the initial joy of working from home in their favorite pajamas has waned, while the challenges of juggling professional and private responsibilities have strained the mental capacity of even the most hard-working employees. Watching over the kids' homeschooling while replying to urgent and anxious requests from managers leaves little time to expand one's network. Rather, the lion's share of networking time is spent coordinating, helping, and supporting *existing* collaborators.

The danger for companies is clear and pressing. Lacking the creative spark from their network, employees may fail to create the next generation of products and services. And with no watercooler to gather around, the chance for accidental encounters that forge new connections has largely disappeared. If we do happen to bump into someone and engage in a conversation, quite likely the content will be transactional and geared toward topics that require immediate attention. It's not deliberate: our attention spans in front of a screen are simply limited, leaving little appetite for off-topic chit chat. Instead, pressed on all (virtual) fronts, chances are we prioritize connections from our past, bet on what we know works, and miss out on new, distant connections that can spark creativity.

When employees are overly focused on their existing network, organizations become increasingly "siloed" and inward-looking. Consider a study of email communications we conducted among employees in the headquarters of a large multinational company. Following the lockdown, all departments became more internally focused, reducing the proportion of communication across departments from 62% to 53% on average. Furthermore, while the number of contacts with whom employees communicated regularly did not change, the number of infrequent contacts (weak ties) dropped by 10% on average. These findings are worrisome. Considerable research has shown that cross-silo connections and weak ties play a crucial role in keeping employees' networks open and diverse, both of which are essential for creativity and innovation. While **some companies succeeded in nurturing their employees' networks during the pandemic**,[4] for most, the abrupt shift to remote work has stranded employees without tools to expand their network beyond existing contacts, make connections across silos, or inject their daily conversations with fresh and diverse ideas.

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In traditional pre-pandemic work, managers could rely on workplace serendipity to ignite new network formation. And employees had the time and energy to take part in corporate activities aimed at forming new collaborations. No longer. But what can companies do to respond to these challenges posed by remote work? Below we elaborate on some ideas for what companies can do during remote work to foster the formation of new distant connections. Such connections are important to build and solidify a corporate culture, improve coordination by growing awareness of what other people are working on, and sparking creativity and innovation.

Solutions for creating distant ties in remote work

Embracing randomness is key to breaking out from the digital cage imposed by remote work. Randomness—as in actions with no definite aim—is what makes it possible to form new ties in remote work. Indeed, the act of making new connections always has a random component: sometimes miniscule, sometimes considerable. By good luck for managers, digital technologies allow organizations to unlock the potential for random encounters, at a scale not envisioned in the pre-pandemic world. Here's what to do:

1. Use technology to impose random encounters
Technology offers managers a valuable tool to increase randomness in encounters. Random encounters have the benefit of exposing us to new and diverse connections. Almost anyone can remember the unexpected connection that equally unexpectedly created a business opportunity. At the same time, in real life we know that even well-educated managers struggle to go beyond their comfort zone—they go to the usual suspects when attacking problems and even when trying to expand their networks they start close to home. Most people rely on such local search heuristics, but digital technologies allow us to break away from this behavior. The solution is online randomization that is fast, cheap, and easy to enforce. You can, for example, randomly allocate people to digital breakout rooms or use apps such as Omegle or Clubhouse to bump into new connections.

Teaching shows the power of randomness in action. Students, like employees, are prone to forming isolated cliques that are hard to break into—and out from. We see it when we ask them to self-select partners for projects. We see it when we run buzz groups in the classroom. Clearly, we can counter these behaviors by imposing randomness, but in a traditional classroom situation these solutions—such having students move around— can also be costly and disruptive. Enter digital. Suddenly, with a click of a button we can break up rigid groups and promote new tie formation.

Of course, a company that aims for randomness in forging connections also has to consider the pool of people from which they randomly select. If a pool of candidates has no diversity in experience and expertise, forging connections at random may not create the desired benefits. As one seasoned manager at a consulting company mentioned: "We are using randomness to forge connections, and I have met new people. But they all think alike me."

2. Organize virtual events that are orthogonal to work

While organizations can benefit from exposing people to random encounters, smart organizations don't rely on randomness alone. We know from past research that organizing a shared event can bring together previously disconnected individuals.[5] Research has found, for example, that people collaborate more effectively when they have something in common.[6] A well-known pre-pandemic approach was to organize events unrelated to work, in which participants shared a common interest. This is easy to organize offline as people can meet over a board game or do sports together. Take Google's climbing walls in their Mountain View offices: people from different parts of the company climb together with the additional benefit of forging new connections. These can lead to distant work ties that are also durable, since ties with multiple points of connection are more likely to last. In other words, the more ways we connect to each other, the more likely we are to keep the relationship active and alive.

But how do these solutions travel into digital space? Creative companies have started to play with digital solutions. For instance, the consulting arm of Allianz, the German insurance mammoth, uses virtual quizzes for people to compete on non-work-related topics, forging bonds that can be used at work. EOS, the technology provider for industrial 3D printing of metals and plastic, has also experimented with sweating it out together, allowing their employees to do virtual yoga, meditation, and tabata classes.

Being a newcomer in an era of remote work is challenging as you have few connections from which to expand your network. Alberto—a recent hire in a consulting firm—shared how organizing a virtual event was integral to his onboarding. A native of Italy, Alberto offered a virtual class on how to cook a proper risotto, which people inside and outside of his team were invited to join.

Digital events don't need to be limited to sports, play, and fun, either. Digital versions of traditional socialization events can yield positive results. For example, many companies have experimented with virtual coffee, lunches, and dinners as icebreakers for people unfamiliar with one another. BASF—the largest chemical producer in the world—randomized people online to create new linkages between colleagues. Some participants told us the approach was a good way to meet new people and learn about their teams to a degree that would have been difficult in more "normal" working conditions. Their

experiences illustrate that providing employees with an opportunity to meet and mingle in settings disconnected from work can seed relationships that pay back to work down the line.

3. Set up virtual forums that support work

Most examples we've shared so far have dealt with forging stronger *horizontal* relationships, between team members at the same or similar *hierarchical* level. But there are plenty of opportunities to use digital technologies to create stronger hierarchical bonds, as well. Virtual meet-the-manager meetings are one example. Some companies use an open but selective approach wherein managers block out their calendar and allow any employee to book a virtual one-on-one. Others combine open office hours with virtual coffee breaks, where anyone can hang out, listen, and talk. Inviting contact outside of the hierarchical norm breaks down the silos that short-circuit organizational goals, and preempts hierarchical and functional filtering by connecting managers with distant employees.

Events can also be aligned with the corporate culture, as in the example of a beer company organizing a virtual beer with the CEO and informal beer tastings. For the virtual beer tasting, the design principle was simple and clear: every participant received the same beer and a brew master guided the tasting in small groups. And under no circumstance were team members from the same work group allowed in the same tasting group.

4. Wag the long-tail

In remote work, people with even the quirkiest interests can forge connections. The likelihood of this happening grows with the size of the network as chances are greater that two people will share the same interest. Managers can make use of digital platforms to support such "micro-communities" that cater for unusually narrow interests, such as board game aficionados meeting up over a virtual work lunch. Or consider Gainsight—a software-as-a-service company—that organized a "Take your pets to Zoom day."

The same approach can be applied to work interests. For instance, the KION group created informal virtual groups for megatrends impacting the company, such as a dashboard for agile methods to gather ideas and have people share their experiences. Lufthansa brought

together people across the company to brainstorm strategies for reducing its environmental footprint, attracting participation from hundreds of employees in sprints over four days.

Creating connections among distant people with similar interests and attachments to higher goals is a strategy known to bear fruit, but managers sometimes worry that benefits are short-lived. Interest groups are often driven by a small number of people and their focus can falter when members return to regular tasks. Here there are insights from how open-source software has sought to resolve this. Open source also relies on heavily skewed distribution patterns, with a dedicated core accounting for the vast majority of contributions. Communities that manage to sustain a high level of activity are good at roping in newcomers by providing encouragement and feedback.

Concluding Remarks

Some of these solutions carry an immediate cost. They create work on top of what employees typically do and require some slack or even redundant work. However, a manager who is serious about forming new connections between employees needs to invest. One CEO described trying nearly everything—virtual coffee, online classes, sending wine to employees for virtual wine tastings, to inviting magicians and beatboxers, teaching cocktail lessons, having external industry speakers, virtual escape rooms—all while catering to randomness. It was too expensive *not* to do it, she argued. Other companies still struggle, and employees feel more disconnected and isolated in their silo, which could have long-term negative effects on innovation.

Admittedly, we don't know yet which of the many ideas for forming distant ties online are the most effective. There is also no research comparing the effectiveness of following our proposals jointly, since researchers have only studied them individually. But we do know that it is too expensive to stand on the sidelines, only to later learn that employees' networks have withered to a point where their creativity and sense of belonging are in question. This terrible pandemic has caused enormous suffering to our societies. Yet, like all tragedies, it has also brought huge learning opportunities. Notably, we have learned that the advent of remote work does not diminish our need for a thriving network of deep and

authentic social relationships—both old and new. Learning to develop those relationships in the virtual work environment will not only help us through the current crisis. It will help us build more meaningful, engaging, and creative workplaces when the pandemic is over.

About the research

The research has three main components.

First, for more than ten years we have studied networks and distributed forms of work outside corporate settings, such as in online communities, open-source software, crowdsourcing, and hackathons. This research has investigated formal and informal collaborations between people and documented why and how people forge collaborations across units.[7] Our own work and related work in this area has increased our understanding of how ties that span silos come about. Yet, many of these lessons are drawn from an environment where we can meet physically.

Second, as the pandemic emerged in the spring of 2020, we turned more attention to analyzing how these lessons can be used for remote work. We collected email data from 1,500 employees (without content) from two companies in different geographic regions (one in Europe, one in Asia) and in different industries for several months before and during lockdown. Overall, they exchanged more than 4 million emails during the observation period.

Third, leveraging our own research and teaching network, we collected best practices from interviews and interactions with executives. We developed a set of practices companies have used to spur new connections in an era of remote work, and the challenges they have faced in the process.

▶ References

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