Shaping a Powerful Employee Experience in Globally Dispersed Teams

How to Improve Performance and Communication When Your Team Isn't Face-to-Face

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Depending on your perspective of the new world of work, all-remote companies like Buffer, Trello, and Zapier can inspire either envy or eye-rolls.

For some companies, they provide a welcome contrast to large organizations like IBM and Yahoo that made headlines for bringing remote employees back to headquarters.[1] For others, they provide a much-needed look at how to navigate a mix of remote and onsite staff or a corporate headquarters with locations spread around the world, also known as globally dispersed teams (GDTs)—an experience shared by half of organizations today[2] and only expected to grow.

"Some amount of virtual work is just the reality of business today," says John Baldoni, executive coach, leadership educator and author of *GRACE: A leader's guide to a better us*. "Whether your business is global or not, you work in a global environment with global resources. But at the same time, as a business grows or seeks to serve its customers, an onsite presence is often required. So teams become split between headquarters, working at a satellite location, and working virtually."

While some resources exist for all-remote teams or all-onsite teams, there's little support for teams that straddle both worlds. When team members are spread among different work locations, companies can struggle to address the unique factors that strain relationships and negatively impact the employee experience. The result is low morale, poor communication, and even poorer results that all but eliminate the benefits of GDTs.
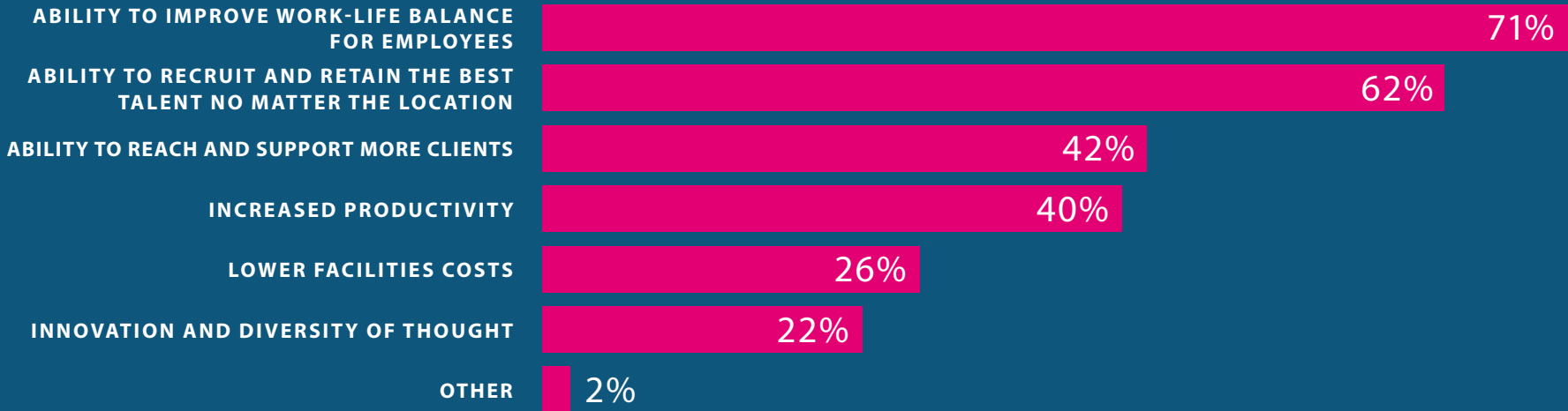
To better understand the unique issues facing GDTs today, Insights conducted a survey in partnership with HR Dive's Brand Studio and surveyed 209 professionals across a wide number of industries. Whether your company currently works with GDTs or you have plans to extend your team virtually or offsite, the survey results offer a lot of insights about building a successful team framework when your employees aren't face-to-face.

The benefits of building globally dispersed teams

Eight in 10 respondents that operate with staff working remotely could cite unique benefits they receive from having GDTs—from increased flexibility and autonomy for employees to improved client services at the organizational level. And that explains why these benefits can work themselves into an organization so deeply—they follow through on the natural logic that what's good for the employee is good for the business. This playbook explores the three most significant benefits companies can capitalize on when GDTs are successfully incorporated into a business.

What do you consider to be the biggest benefit(s) of working effectively with a distributed or remote workforce?

Benefit	Percentage
ABILITY TO IMPROVE WORK-LIFE BALANCE FOR EMPLOYEES	71%
ABILITY TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN THE BEST TALENT NO MATTER THE LOCATION	62%
ABILITY TO REACH AND SUPPORT MORE CLIENTS	42%
INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY	40%
LOWER FACILITIES COSTS	26%
INNOVATION AND DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT	22%
OTHER	2%

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1 Flexibility and autonomy leads to increased productivity

Forty-two percent of respondents considered the biggest benefit of working effectively with a GDT is increased productivity (42%), a sentiment supported by larger industry studies like the UK's Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service (Acas) in which 91% of HR professionals reported employees to be more engaged, satisfied, and effective as a result of flexible work arrangements.[3]

"Giving employees a sense of control over when and how they work requires vulnerability from the management team, and that makes employees feel trusted," says Hannah Prince, business psychologist at Insights. "And because work being performed offsite can make them feel invisible, employees find themselves wanting to prove that they're working hard, so they feel the need to produce more. One employee we interviewed said being trusted made them feel more in control and more motivated 'to want to try it more and go for it more.'"[4]

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2 Remote positions attract and retain talent with the promise of work-life balance— especially young tech talent

Overwhelmingly, survey respondents felt that the ability to offer work-life balance for employees was the greatest benefit of allowing employees to work remotely (70%), followed closely by the ability to recruit and retain the best talent no matter the location (62%), and to reach and support more clients (42%). This makes sense in the context of our increasingly global world of work, because as remote work becomes more common, in-demand talent can prioritize positions that offer the flexibility to work remotely.

This greater work-life balance is so important that in one Qualtrics/ SAP report, more than three quarters of millennials surveyed indicated they would take a pay cut to work remotely,[5] and another Deloitte survey found that for both Millennial and Gen Z employees, flexibility around where and when they work makes employees more likely to stay with a company for more than five years.[6]

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"No matter what your industry, teams with more diversity are bringing richer content to the work process. They're having more vibrant conversations and building better products that serve a wider range of customers."

Hannah Prince, business psychologist at Insights

3 Increased diversity leads to greater creativity and better service

Twenty-two percent of respondents indicated that the biggest benefit of allowing for GDTs is the increased innovation and diversity of thought that comes with it. After all, when companies limit their business's range to local candidates and local clients, they can't hire the best employees on the market or reach the best customers for their product or service — they can only reach the best within a certain distance, significantly limiting their potential for growth and missing out on the benefits that come with greater diversity.

"The ability to increase diversity by hiring employees in different geographical locations leads to increased diversity of thought and perspective," says Prince. "No matter what your industry, teams with more diversity are bringing richer content to the work process. They're having more vibrant conversations and building better products that serve a wider range of customers. And on a physical level, building a GDT enables you to service global customers in their time zone and with their local talent."

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Common challenges for globally dispersed teams

Of the 209 individuals surveyed, 84% indicated that their organization operates with at least some staff working remotely or as part of a distributed team. Of the 16% of companies that don't have any staff working remotely, the reasons given varied widely. For some companies, it's simply a requirement of the work to be onsite, such as certain healthcare and construction roles. But for 42% of companies, the choice was intentional—respondents either lack trust that remote workers are as productive or intentionally want to avoid remote or distributed teams for communication reasons.

For all the ways GDTs can help a business reach its potential, these results point to several common obstacles that can get in the way of realizing all of the benefits. Here are three challenges that, if not addressed, can cause employees to have a negative GDT experience.

Does your organization operate with any number of your staff working remotely or as part of a distributed team, including different branches of your business in different countries?
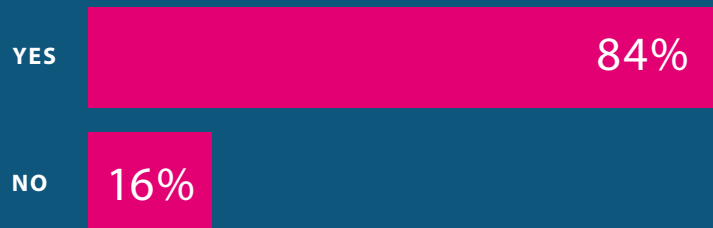
YES	84%
NO	16%

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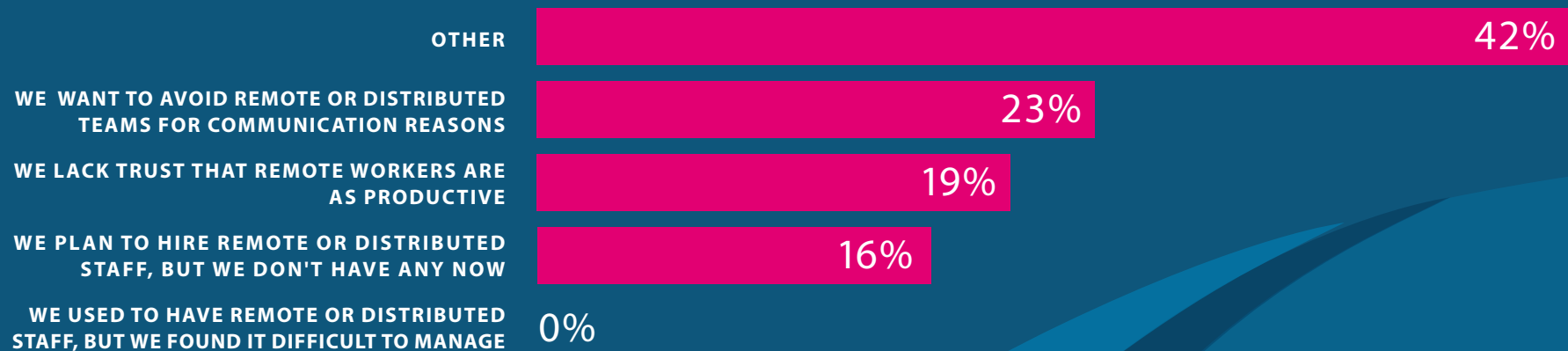
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1 Teams default to one-way communication

Whether due to universal communication habits or something inherent in the technological medium, GDTs can struggle with the fact that the exchange of information tends to default to one-way communication rather than two-way conversation. If not addressed proactively, this can lead to communication challenges, such as employees that don't feel they have a voice, are unable to speak up, or are not invited to provide feedback.

"Teams that don't build listening into their communication patterns run the risk of having employees feel they aren't being heard or that they're actively being ignored," says Baldoni. "Managers need to let team members communicate their point of view, and then listen, digest, and get back to them. It may not be logical to act on every idea an employee surfaces, but it builds trust when you close the loop."

To the best of your knowledge, why doesn't your organization support distributed and remote teams?

OTHER	42%
WE WANT TO AVOID REMOTE OR DISTRIBUTED TEAMS FOR COMMUNICATION REASONS	23%
WE LACK TRUST THAT REMOTE WORKERS ARE AS PRODUCTIVE	19%
WE PLAN TO HIRE REMOTE OR DISTRIBUTED STAFF, BUT WE DON'T HAVE ANY NOW	16%
WE USED TO HAVE REMOTE OR DISTRIBUTED STAFF, BUT WE FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO MANAGE	0%

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What do you consider to be the biggest barrier to working effectively with a distributed or remote workforce within your organization?
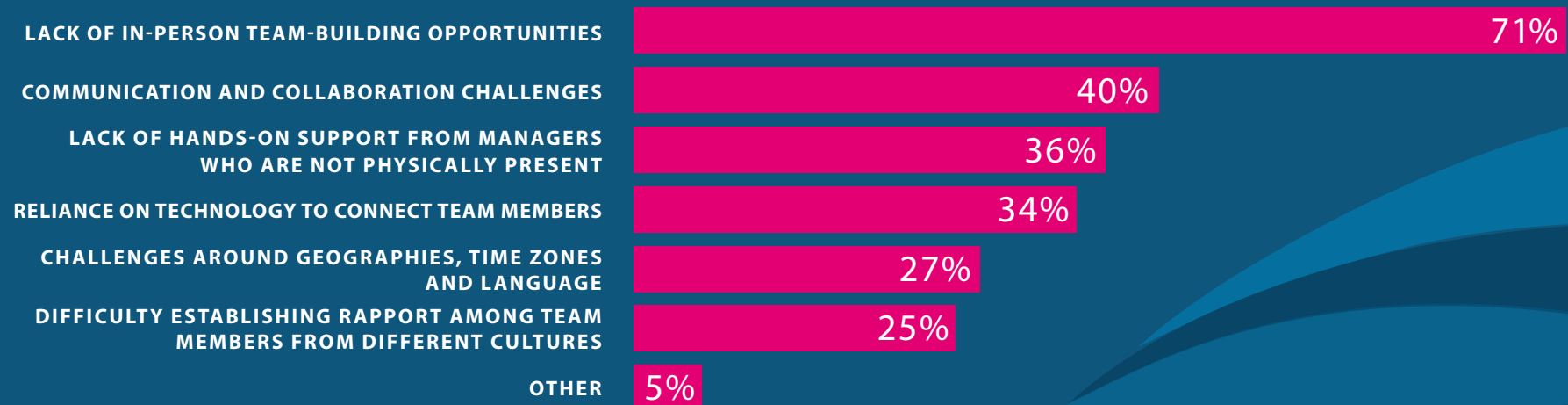
Barrier	Percentage
LACK OF IN-PERSON TEAM-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES	71%
COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION CHALLENGES	40%
LACK OF HANDS-ON SUPPORT FROM MANAGERS WHO ARE NOT PHYSICALLY PRESENT	36%
RELIANCE ON TECHNOLOGY TO CONNECT TEAM MEMBERS	34%
CHALLENGES AROUND GEOGRAPHIES, TIME ZONES AND LANGUAGE	27%
DIFFICULTY ESTABLISHING RAPPORT AMONG TEAM MEMBERS FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES	25%
OTHER	5%

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2 Teams assume that communication is connection

Communication has two parts: the method of communication, such as the tool or app, or in-person meeting; and the connection of communication, the feeling of mutual engagement and information sharing. When asked to consider the biggest barriers to working effectively with a GDT, survey respondents overwhelmingly selected options related to connection: a lack of in-person team-building opportunities (71%), communication and collaboration challenges (40%), and lack of hands-on support from managers who aren't physically present (36%).

"Communication in GDTs is a human challenge, not a technological one," says Prince. "No matter how fantastic our technology is, we're missing out on important inputs that facilitate communication and build trust from facial expressions and body language to the neurons and chemical changes that occur with seeing each other or physically being in the same space. When we have communication problems, we try to throw tools and apps at the problem, when what is missing is actually that human connection."
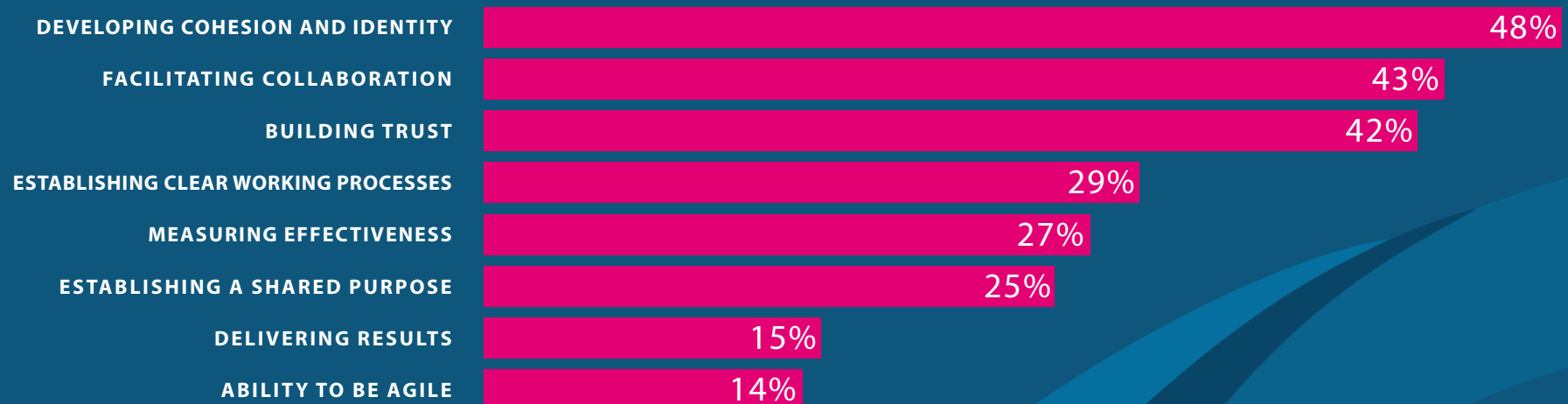
3 Different team members have different comfort levels with technology

Another challenge that surfaced among survey respondents is the sentiment that reliance on technology to connect team members was seen as a barrier to effective communication (24%). Approximately 60% of the workforce was born before 1980[7] and are not considered native technology users, which means they have widely varying levels of skill with technological communication.

"It's interesting that when you look at companies that are completely virtual, a lot of them are technology and IT companies," says Prince. "Because of the nature of their work, they're probably a lot more willing to use technology and play around with it, establishing a comfort level that is lacking among people from other levels of experience with technology."

Learn how the Insights team helped AstraZeneca's globally dispersed team achieve peak effectiveness.

Which of the following attributes of a healthy remote or distributed team do you think are the most challenging to achieve?

Attribute	Percentage
DEVELOPING COHESION AND IDENTITY	48%
FACILITATING COLLABORATION	43%
BUILDING TRUST	42%
ESTABLISHING CLEAR WORKING PROCESSES	29%
MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS	27%
ESTABLISHING A SHARED PURPOSE	25%
DELIVERING RESULTS	15%
ABILITY TO BE AGILE	14%

Designing optimal employee experience in globally dispersed teams

There's no escaping the necessity of collaborating with remote and offsite employees and clients. That's why it's so important to approach your business's GDTs with intention and design an optimal experience for everyone associated with your business. Here are several simple, practical steps Insights has helped organizations deploy to overcome the most common challenges and realize the benefits of GDTs.

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1 Establish clear universal guidelines

Don't leave your remote employees to fend for themselves. Establish clear guidelines and expectations around communication and share them with all employees. If you aren't sure where to start, work with a trusted partner with experience in this area or ask your most seasoned remote employees to host a working group and talk through the topic. Identify common communication challenges and solutions for overcoming them as well as default communication tools that will bring everyone together on the same page.

"When you're setting guidelines around remote working, make space to have conversations around the biggest challenges for your dispersed teams," says Prince. "It can be very helpful to call out simple things that make day-to-day communication clearer. For example, when you have a lot of people in the room and only two people on the phone, make sure they can hear and ask them to respond to questions first so they aren't drowned out by the voices in the meeting room. Or make it a team value to always assume good intentions, even if it might appear otherwise."

2 Monitor productivity, not time

Hard-working employees rise to the level of performance that's expected of them. And when the focus is on their work output, not the time spent "butts in seats," employees are eager to prove themselves by delivering higher levels of productivity. Workplace frameworks like the results-oriented work environment (ROWE)[8] can help teams shift to an emphasis on outcomes, not hours, and break away from the misconception that the most accurate measure of productivity is time spent.

"For the longest time, the sense among employees was that the longer they sat at their desk, the more productive they were," says Prince. "But leaders increasingly realize that's not true, and it's time to have those conversations with the rest of the company to determine whether or not staying late and working around the clock is actually productive in the long-term."

"For the longest time, the sense among employees was that the longer they sat at their desk, the more productive they were, but leaders increasingly realize that's not true."

Hannah Prince, business psychologist at Insights

> "I like to see companies prioritize high-quality video conferences for one-on-one and team-level interaction, which can be just as real and deep as sitting across the table from someone in real life."
>
> Dr. Karlyn Borysenko, chief science officer at RallyBright

3 Achieve better communication by focusing on connection

The heart of effective communication on GDTs is not the latest and greatest chat app; it's connection. Companies that successfully integrate GDTs into their businesses provide different ways for employees to connect, whether that's by defaulting all meetings to face-to-face video meetings, arranging for quarterly or yearly onsite all-hands meetings, or instituting rotating one-on-one get-to-know-you sessions over a coffee or sweet treat with products like Donut for Slack[9] or Coworker Coffee.[10]

"The biggest complaint I hear is that team members feel like they never talk with one another, and it's because they're only engaging via text," says Dr. Karlyn Borysenko, chief science officer at RallyBright. "I like to see companies prioritize high-quality video conferences for one-on-one and team-level interaction, which can be just as real and deep as sitting across the table from someone in real life."

4 Be sensitive to cultural differences

Increased diversity is a profound benefit of GDTs, but it can come with its own challenges like increased stress and tension.[11] This particular kind of tension is good for creative and innovative thinking, but it can cause short-term roadblocks in communication if not accounted for in your company's communication guidelines.

"When you're working with teams in different cultures, the predominant language is often a second language for the employee," says Baldoni. "It might be that team members aren't as comfortable expressing themselves in the predominant language, especially if it's bad news or pushing back on an idea. GDT leaders need to be careful to give everyone alternative ways of being seen or heard, whether that's by hosting regular one-on-one meetings or giving everyone time to give feedback in writing after important meetings."

5 Put trust-building front and center

Building trust is one of the most important efforts to make when it comes to fostering communication on GDTs, but also one of the hardest. Forty-two percent of respondents indicated building trust was one of the most challenging attributes of a healthy remote culture to achieve. To avoid having your remote workers run the risk of feeling shunned and left out by others on their team,[12] embrace specific trust-building activities, such as the following:

- Collect and share information on how each team member best communicates, such as the best method and time of day to connect, then use that information to build the team's meeting routines

- Ask virtual teams to meet via face-to-face technologies like Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, or GoToMeeting

- Kick off meetings with an invitation to share by asking, "Where are you in the world this week?" or "What's going on for you at the moment?"

- End meetings with a "Check-out" to accept feedback on what worked, what didn't work, and whether or not everyone who wants to contribute was able to do so

- Encourage informal interaction by scheduling virtual "cup of coffee" meetings for employees to exchange advice and ideas

- Sponsor professional development activities organized by role or department such as personality tests

- Default to open and transparent communication via email or listservs so that employees don't have to be onsite to be current on the latest company updates

- Host quarterly or yearly onsite meetings that bring employees together in person with time specifically set aside to mingle and build relationships, not just work

- Send regular employee surveys that allow you to flag and proactively address team challenges

- Send regular informal surveys that ask and aggregate the answers to trust-building questions

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6 Evaluate your need for a consulting partner

The final step in shaping a powerful employee experience in GDTs is to acknowledge that there is no one perfect process. Every organization must evaluate, negotiate, and design its own approach. And because this can be such a complex undertaking, it often helps to bring in a consulting partner with a depth and breadth of experience in bringing the best out of GDTs.

"Whether an organization is experiencing change from a restructure or merger, or simply wants to improve the effectiveness of its GDTs, a consulting partner can have an incredible impact on an organization's teamwork," says Prince. "If you need your team to come together and work together very quickly, consider working with a partner like Insights to improve employee self-awareness and awareness of others to form and improve working relationships."

"It's a common misconception that we as humans go into new situations with a default to trusting the people we work with. But in fact, trust is based on the connection you have with people, and if you don't have connection, trust isn't there. We have to do things and have interactions that grow and develop that trust."

Dr. Karlyn Borysenko, chief science officer at RallyBright

Learn how the Insights team helped LinkedIn build a highly collaborative globally dispersed team.

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Achieving more with high-functioning globally dispersed teams

Companies that are successful in today's world of work understand that the benefits of allowing for GDTs far outweigh the challenges. They know that a strong team is built on strong relationships, so they build guidelines and frameworks into the way they work to support those relationships. Because when relationships improve, so do countless other factors that impact how a business performs, such as communication, teamwork, productivity, and engagement. By bringing the focus to healthy relationships, companies empower teams to work quickly, effectively, and on the right things — delivering almost immediate organization-wide benefits.

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- Self-aware, emotionally intelligent leaders
- A valuing, connecting culture

We work with multinational organizations to improve their effectiveness, focusing largely on building and improving relationships. When applied within virtual teams, improved relationships can strengthen team identity, communication and performance.

If your teamwork is something you need to work on, why not get in touch to see how we can help.

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