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Closing the Virtual Teamwork Skills Gap

Uncover the challenges faced by virtual teams and learn three strategies for developing an effective virtual team culture.

The virtual workplace has upended the way teams work together. To thrive in the new normal, organizations need to assess what they are doing to **build a culture of effective teamwork.**

Organizations had been inching closer to an embrace of remote and flexible work arrangements—that is, until the COVID-19 pandemic forced an overnight conversion to virtual work. Remote work is highly prevalent now, with nearly **42% of workers in the U.S. fully remote[i].** And it's here to stay: **90% of human resources leaders expect work to remain semi-flexible beyond the pandemic[ii].**

This sudden upheaval has demanded a tremendous shift in the way we work, and especially the way we "team." Effective teamwork will be one significant factor in determining which organizations thrive in the new normal and which struggle to survive.

To understand how teams have adapted to the remote workforce, Wiley Workplace Learning Solutions surveyed over 4,000 individuals[iii] between December 2020 and January 2021. **Our results reveal a widespread gap in teamwork skills plaguing virtual teams across the country.** That gap—between the teamwork skills employees have and what they need to be effective—accounts for some of the key challenges they face. And those challenges strike at the core of what it means to be an effective team.

Employees that lack effective virtual teamwork skills threaten both the trajectory of their organization's recovery *and* the success of long-term remote and flexible work. Already, *half* of respondents tell us they're concerned about the prospect of continuing to work virtually. And as we know, teams are comprised of individuals, each of whom needs the skills to make effective teamwork a success. That's why it's so critical for everyone to have a clear picture of what individuals and teams are experiencing—and why every leader must foster a culture of effective teamwork in their organization.

In what follows, you'll discover the challenges affecting teams in the remote workplace and learn three strategies to close the virtual teamwork skills gap in your organization.

Employees are struggling with the critical skills that make teamwork effective: connecting and communicating with colleagues.

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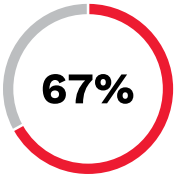
Working remotely is taking its toll on our feelings of team cohesion and connection. Nearly 7 in 10 survey respondents (69%) tell us they're struggling to maintain a sense of comradery with their team, and 62% say that doing so has become more challenging since the pandemic began.

7 in 10 respondents tell us they're struggling to maintain a sense of comradery with their team

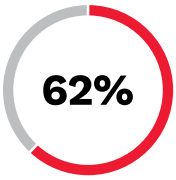
It's no wonder—we can't gather our colleagues for group lunches anymore, go on coffee runs with coworkers, or even catch up over happy hour. But missing that comradery means people are struggling to stay connected with their colleagues. In fact, two-thirds (67%) report feeling isolated from their team, so it's clear that these challenges are pervasive across organizations right now.



of respondents report feeling isolated from their team

Feeling disconnected or isolated from our colleagues not only affects our sense of team togetherness, but it also impacts how well and how easily we communicate with each other—which can be tough even under normal circumstances. 36% of survey respondents are finding it harder to effectively communicate with colleagues. That's understandable when there can be so much lost in translation across email, text, or chat—especially when nearly half (49%) feel out of the loop with what's happening on their team or in their organization.

Not feeling fully included makes other aspects of communicating more strenuous: 62% of respondents find having productive debates and discussions now at least somewhat difficult. And roughly 40% tell us that having those debates and difficult conversations (whether that's holding someone accountable or sharing that you don't feel heard) have become more challenging since before the pandemic began.

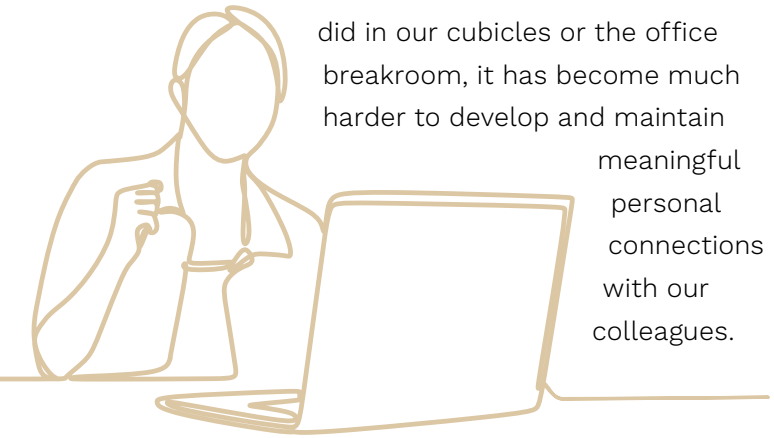


of respondents said having productive debates and discussions is now at least somewhat difficult

Compounding these challenges is a lack of confidence in our own teamwork skills and those of our peers. Less than half of respondents consider themselves effective team members when collaborating virtually, and only 49% feel their coworkers have the right teamwork skills to do the same. That number is even less (42%) for managers and leaders, who are most attuned to—and affected by—employees' ineffective teamwork skills. As a result, they're experiencing more trepidation about the prospect of long-term virtual teamwork than their direct reports.

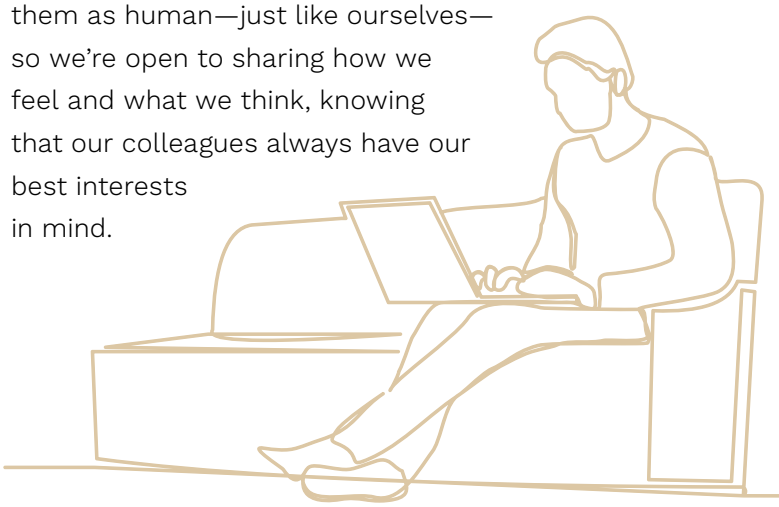
Challenges connecting and communicating hinder effective teamwork and carry significant implications for teams and organizations.

When we don't feel connected to our colleagues or experience team togetherness, we begin to lose a sense of cohesion. Now that we can't have the same casual conversations we once did in our cubicles or the office breakroom, it has become much harder to develop and maintain meaningful personal connections with our colleagues.



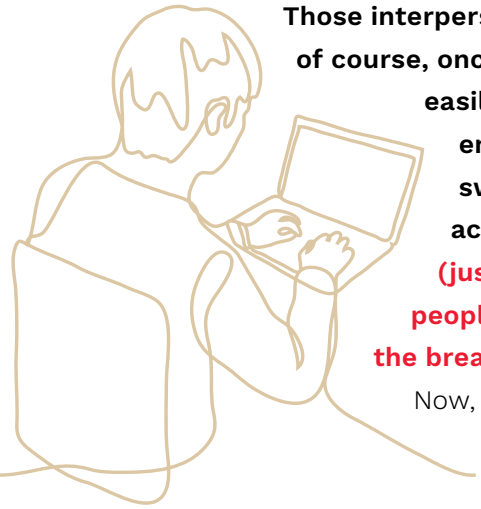
Consequently, our work becomes a bit less personal and a bit more transactional. We prioritize efficiency at the expense of effectiveness, so wrapping up a meeting with 5 minutes to spare becomes more important than fully engaging in and aligning on a topic—no matter how long it takes.

Critically, the small, seemingly trivial moments we once had at our desks or over lunch are the interpersonal interactions that, when compounded over time, build relationships and a foundation of trust in one another. That foundation of trust—the first, most consequential step in creating effective teams—means we know our colleagues as more than just the people we work with. And we care about them as more than just the people who help us get work done. We see them as human—just like ourselves—so we're open to sharing how we feel and what we think, knowing that our colleagues always have our best interests in mind.



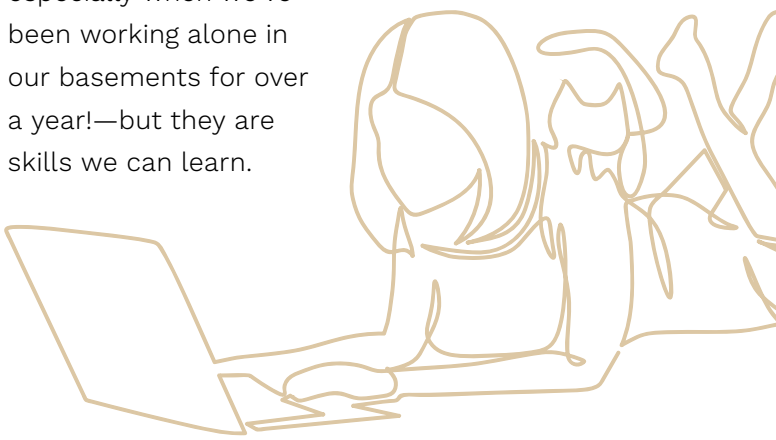
Great teams do not hold back with one another. They admit their mistakes, their weaknesses, and their concerns without fear of reprisal.

–Patrick Lencioni



Those interpersonal interactions, of course, once unfolded more easily in-person and encompassed a wider swath of employees across an organization (just think of how many people you'd run into in the breakroom or at lunch). Now, with little to no basis of in-person interactions on which to build and develop relationships, new employees and members of the new teams that emerge continuously across organizations face considerable difficulty generating trust in one another.

When we lack that interpersonal foundation of trust to stand on, we find it more difficult to do the hard, but necessary, work of being an effective team member. And this starts with each of us embracing the behaviors that foster effective communication and collaboration. These behaviors don't necessarily already exist in every one of us—especially when we've been working alone in our basements for over a year!—but they are skills we can learn.



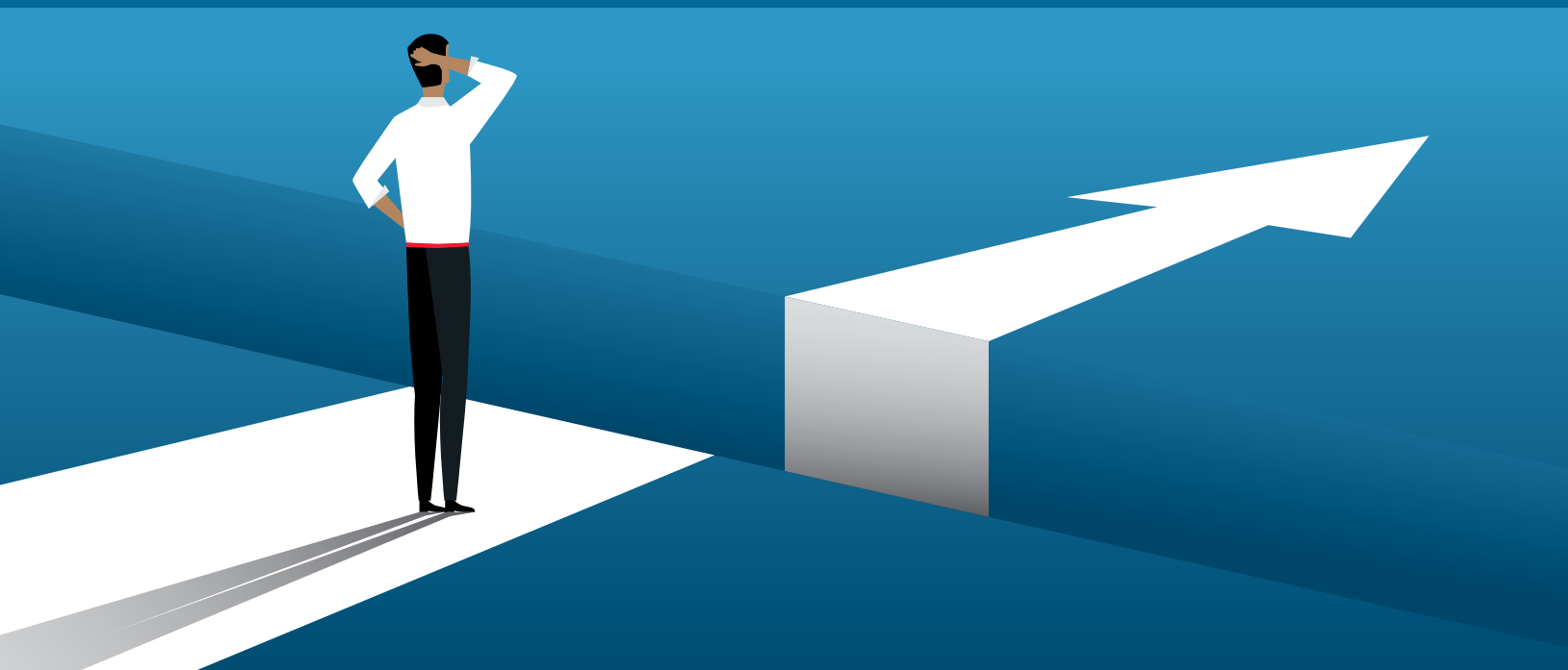
Fundamentally, effective teamwork requires us to be vulnerable—sharing our opinions, freely debating ideas with colleagues, holding one another accountable, and knowing when to ask for help and when to say we're sorry. But avoiding tension, conflict, and difficult conversations can stunt a team's growth, especially when the groundwork of trust—where mistakes can be made, forgiveness is granted, and our vulnerabilities aren't used against us—has eroded or, worse, never existed from the start.

Adopting effective teamwork skills is of utmost importance for individuals and organizations, not just because we will ultimately "team" better, but because there's a multiplier effect of any one person's ineffective teamwork skills. **The vast majority of respondents we surveyed (83%) occupy roles on two or more teams, so each employee doesn't only affect a single team (and a handful of people), but two, three, four, or even five teams.** That is a significant number of people for whom effective teamwork in a virtual setting matters—and, by the same token, who are negatively impacted by ineffective teamwork.

Though a potential liability, this multiplier effect can be a tremendous advantage in closing the virtual teamwork skills gap *if and when* employees are equipped with effective teamwork skills to benefit each team they're on.

Understanding the virtual teamwork skills gap is the first step to overcoming it. Creating a culture of effective teamwork requires a set of skills and a common language for all employees, and these are 100% learnable—no matter where employees are located.

The following are three key strategies for closing the virtual teamwork skills gap in your organization.



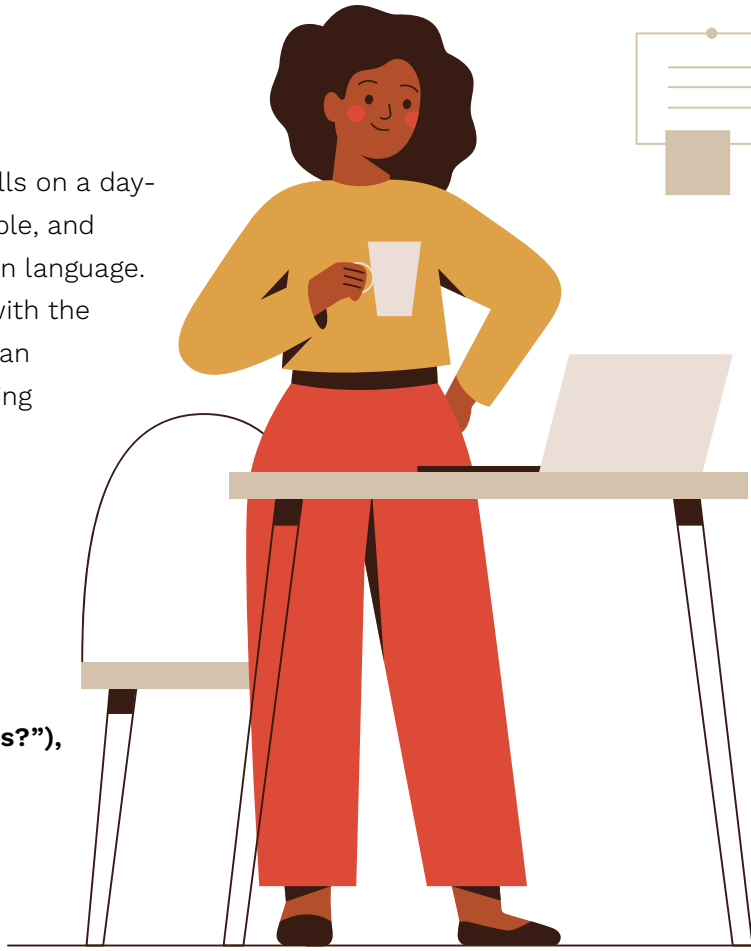
1

Building effective teamwork skills requires self-discovery.

Each of us approaches teamwork in a unique way, and those differences in perspective and personality, after all, are part of what helps teams thrive. They allow us to debate and discuss concepts and ideas and to uncover one another's blind spots. **So when each employee develops their self-awareness around their own personalities and behaviors, they become empowered to "team" in a way that feels meaningful—and thus memorable—to them.** As each team member becomes more self-aware, they can share these learnings and develop a deeper understanding of others as well, which unlocks greater appreciation for how their teammates like to work. This shared understanding is a foundational element to building stronger teams.

2

Like any skill, practice makes perfect (or close to it!)



Employees are empowered to apply their skills on a day-to-day basis when tied to a simple, memorable, and actionable framework and through a common language. When employees at all levels are equipped with the essential skills of effective teamwork, they can move seamlessly from team to team—knowing what it takes to build an effective one—and immediately begin contributing to collective results. And if they face challenges—say, not everyone has committed to an idea—they have a framework for working through it. **By asking certain questions arising from the model (“Why is that so?” “Did we not fully listen to and debate each other’s ideas?”), the team can quickly get back on track.**

3

Effective teamwork begins with trust.

In his best-selling book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni introduces a powerful and approachable model for effective teamwork and collaboration, with five key behaviors a team must practice: Trust, Conflict, Commitment, Accountability, and a focus on Results. Each behavior is important on its own, but also in laying the foundation upon which the next behavior is built. At the same time, the absence of any one of these five critical behaviors can cripple teams and organizations. **That's why trust—specifically vulnerability-based trust—is so crucial: by acknowledging our own human failures and foibles while appreciating the strengths of our colleagues, we unlock the other behaviors that lead to successful teams.**

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The bottom line is that remote and flexible workplaces are here to stay, and so too are the negative impacts of ineffective teamwork—unless leaders invest in equipping employees across their organization with the skills to "team" most effectively.

The Five Behaviors® can change the way you team.

The Five Behaviors® is the result of a partnership between Wiley and best-selling author Patrick Lencioni's groundbreaking model for developing high-performing teams through five key behaviors: Trust, Conflict, Commitment, Accountability, and Results. This powerful training teaches participants the critical behaviors and interpersonal skills needed to work together effectively by combining Lencioni's teamwork model with personalized insights. The result is a unique and impactful team development solution that empowers team members rethink their approach to teamwork, shape new, more productive behaviors to increase productivity, and create a common language that completely redefines what it means to work together to drive results.

To learn more about how The Five Behaviors can help your teams, connect with a Five Behaviors Authorized Partner.

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Study Notes and References

[i] According to Upwork's December 2020 "Future Workforce Report." https://www.upwork.com/i/future-workforce/fw/2020/

[ii] According to a Gartner survey conducted in December 2020. https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/12-14-2020-gartner-survey-finds-ninety-percent-of-hr-leaders-will-allow-employees-to-work-remotely-even-after-covid-19-vaccine-is-available

[iii] Respondents represented an array of organizational roles and industries and were located primarily in the United States. They were asked a series of questions about the impact the remote workplace has had on teamwork, including challenges stemming from the remote workplace, how teamwork has changed during the pandemic, and interest in long-term virtual work settings.