

Organization Practice

Revisiting agile teams after an abrupt shift to remote

Agile teams traditionally excel when their members are co-located. Here's how to ensure they're effective now that COVID-19 has forced them to work remotely.

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As organizations adapt to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, their agile teams can be a real source of competitive advantage. Such teams¹ are typically well suited to periods of disruption, given their ability to adapt to fast-changing business priorities, disruptive technology, and digitization.

But the abrupt shift to remote working in response to the coronavirus has challenged the typical approach to managing agile teams. Traditionally, such teams thrive when team members are co-located, with close-knit groups all working in the same place. Co-location allows frequent in-person contact, quickly builds trust, simplifies problem solving, encourages instant communication, and enables fast-paced decision making.² And while we know from experience that agile teams that have worked remotely from the start can be as effective, the sudden transition of co-located teams to a fully remote approach can reduce cohesion and increase inefficiency (Exhibit 1).

The good news is that while it takes real work, much of what leads agile teams to lose productivity when they go remote can be addressed. In fact, if the necessary technology is in place, a talented remote team can deliver just as much value as co-located teams. Assuming a firm's IT function will handle the organization's technology, we'll focus here on the

kinds of targeted actions agile leaders can take to sustain their people and culture and recalibrate their processes.

Sustaining the people and culture of a remote agile team

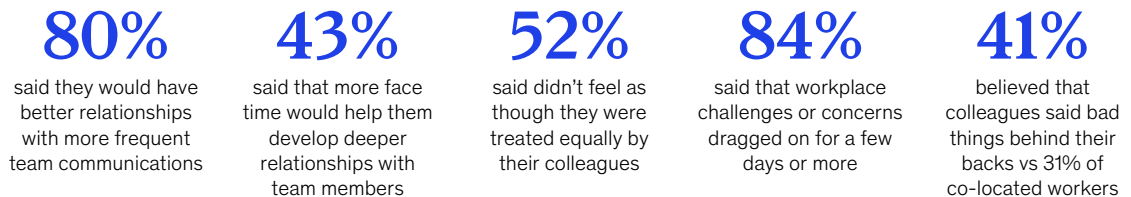
Remote work for agile teams requires a considerable shift in work culture. Without the seamless access to colleagues afforded by frequent, in-person team events, meals, and coffee chats, it can be harder to sustain the kind of camaraderie, community, and trust that comes more easily to co-located teams. It also takes more purposeful effort to create a unified one-team experience, encourage bonding among existing team members, or onboard new ones, or even to track and develop the very spontaneous ideas and innovation that makes agile so powerful to begin with. And these challenges are complicated by the unique circumstances of the current health crisis. Teams working from their living rooms or their dining-room tables are often sharing that space with children or other family members also working remotely.

Teams already operating remotely before the crisis are less likely to struggle, given their ability to handle ambiguity without losing focus and to concentrate on outcomes over processes. But many

Exhibit 1

The experience of remote working can lead to inefficiency and reduced cohesion.

Experience of remote work, % of respondents



Source: *Harvard Business Review*; Workplace Trends; Zoltán Lippényi and Tanja van der Lippe, "Co-workers working from home and individual and team performance," *New Technology, Work and Employment*, March 2020, Volume 35, Issue 1, pp. 60–79

¹ Small, independent, multidisciplinary organizational units focused on agile, high-value, project-based work.

² Daniel Brosseau, Sherina Ebrahim, Christopher Handscomb, and Shail Thaker, "The journey to an agile organization," May 2019, McKinsey.com.

teams that just switched to a remote way of working are facing new challenges, which may require revisiting team norms, cultivating morale, and adapting a team's approach to coaching.

Revisit the norms and ground rules for interaction

Virtual whiteboards, instant chat, and video-conferencing tools can be a boon to collaborative exercises and usually promote participation. But they can also require teams to reconsider existing norms and agreed-upon ground rules.

Some challenges may require team members to adjust to the tools themselves: team members should be generous with one another in offering practical support on navigating virtual tools—such as help formatting or recording presentations or informing the host about any technology issues. Teams need to get up to speed quickly on visual management and virtual whiteboarding and tailor established ceremonies into standard virtual routines. New ground rules for communication may be needed to keep people who are interacting virtually from talking over one another. For example, something as simple as asking each speaker to “pass the ball” by calling out the next presenter by name can help.

Other team norms may also need to be revisited—and revised. On an agile team, everyone needs to take responsibility for capturing spontaneous ideas and putting up blockers to avoid losing them. When using virtual whiteboards, for example, teams need to make extra effort to capture the collective view,

especially in larger remote teams. That will help avoid ambiguity and confusion in individual priorities. Similarly, when brainstorming in person, it's easy to organize and reorganize sticky notes in columns on a whiteboard. That's not always something that's easy to replicate using virtual-collaboration tools.

And while teams should put a premium on personal productivity and allow time for it, they may also need to make a conscious point of allowing themselves and others to have more personal interactions. For example, some teams will leave a video feed turned on for longer periods of time; this conveys visual cues that aid in coaching and collaboration and helps team members maintain a face-to-face relationship.

Importantly, teams need to be respectful of personal choices. Working from home blurs the lines between professional and personal lives. Team members may feel added stress about the impression they create on video, whether because of the appearance of their home workspace, interruptions from young children, or even family members sharing the same workspace. Teams should accept these limitations and interruptions graciously—and team members should feel free to set their own boundaries around scheduling and use of video.

Cultivate bonding and morale

Many of the kinds of activities that nurture morale for co-located agile teams—such as casual lunches, impromptu coffee breaks, or after-work social activities—are not possible in a virtual environment. Team members should encourage one another to introduce their pets and family members and

Working from home blurs the lines between professional and personal lives.

to show any meaningful items in their working space. Working remotely, teams need to make a more conscious effort to be social, polite, precise, and tactful—to ensure everyone feels just as safe contributing remotely as they did in person.

For many teams working remotely, some approaches to cohesion and comradery have grown quickly familiar. At one bank in the United States, for example, one agile team established virtual happy hours. Squad members join a videoconference call for a half-hour every week, sharing the beverage of their choice and talking about whatever comes up—other than work. Another team uses a website that generates quick and easy surveys. A designated team member (usually one appointed by the scrum master) sets up each poll with trivia questions to test team members' knowledge of one another. The whole activity takes under ten minutes, is easy to do, and winners get bragging rights. These activities might sound silly, but they're also fun—and a useful way of supporting morale and shaping a shared experience virtually.

Agile teams working remotely may also require a more deliberative focus on empathy, openness, respect, and courage. For example, team members may need to remind themselves to create and receive communications with a collaborative mindset and always to assume the best possible motivation from their colleagues. This practice is important to agile teams in general but to remote agile teams in particular, given how easily electronic communications can be misunderstood. For example, an agile team at one retail company has an explicit agreement that team members will always assume that the contributions of others are made with positive intent. Especially in written interactions and brief chat messages, the agreement observes that a comment that may seem appropriate to one team might not seem so to another. Assuming positive intent can create a safe space for team members to play a role as custodians of the culture, flagging such comments and negotiating new rules for collaborating. The person who flags an inappropriate comment can

bring it up with the person who made it directly or with the scrum master to resolve it. Or if needed, a small group could stay on the line after a stand-up meeting to discuss. To ensure that team members feel psychologically safe to voice their concerns, one US insurance company conducts an anonymous biweekly survey to solicit input. Tribe leaders and scrum masters use the survey to take the team's pulse—for example, on whether they're feeling overworked, how motivated they are, how many things they are being pulled into each day, whether and how processes are working, and what professional-development concerns they might have. The scrum masters and tribe leaders then agree on a benchmark goal and identify a list of two or three tangible actions to take over the coming weeks to improve—which might include visible teamwide actions or more personal one-on-one conversations. All of these are good practices even in a co-located setting, but they become even more critical in a remote setting.

Adapt coaching and development.

With coaching, agile teams should aspire to model remotely everything they would have done in person—but more frequently, given the abruptness of the switch to remote format. If you would do one-on-one coaching over coffee, try doing it remotely—while actually having coffee over video. Encourage all team members to turn on their video and actively monitor body language during group meetings, especially those in the role of coach.

At one US insurance company, for example, coaches observed meetings while scrum masters led them. Then the two got together afterward to compare notes, and the scrum master followed up with team members individually. Coaches also increased the frequency of feedback—with a regular cadence that included a short meeting every day or every other day. Some even kept a chat window open during ceremonies, to give people they were coaching real-time feedback. Coaches would also host open meetings, so that team members had an informal forum to seek impromptu support on an as-needed basis.

Recalibrating remote agile processes

The challenge for remote agile teams is that they'll be tempted to try to replicate exactly whatever has worked for them in a co-located setting. But what worked in the office setting won't always work remotely—or isn't always necessary. The trick is to work backward—start with the outcomes you were getting in the office and modify your scrum ceremonies as appropriate (Exhibit 2). It's all about adapting to the situation rather than sticking to a guide.

Consider breakouts, for example. Group meetings that use certain video-chat forums can allow large groups to break up into smaller ones for discussion, just as they'd do in person. At one US insurance firm, agile team members joining the virtual group late sometimes found themselves in an empty chat room because everyone else was in a breakout. Their teams were taking more time than they took during in-person meetings to cover the same ground. And they would often return to the general group without having assigned a spokesperson. In person, they'd

Exhibit 2

Remote agile ceremonies come with unique challenges.

Ceremony	Objectives	Challenges for remote teams	Solutions
Daily scrum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Share progress ● Identify impediments ● Plan for the day ahead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Team members switch to problem solving and stand-ups become unstructured conversations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use video to encourage teams engaged and focused ● Extend meetings from 15 to 30 minutes, with the second half blocked for problem solving
Sprint planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Agree on goals and scope of commitment ● Split up the work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Decentralization is a barrier for dynamic communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Break longer meetings into two—one to discuss stories and the other agree on refined stories ● Encourage prep work ahead of time, and agree on what can be done offline
Backlog refinement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Update and refine backlog ● Define plan to mitigate impediments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficult to drive complex problem-solving with content-heavy whiteboarding ● Difficult to align a large group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure access and familiarity with whiteboarding or collaboration tools and document information in real time so team members can follow along ● Host smaller sessions with functionally aligned groups and then share progress with the larger group
Sprint review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Celebrate accomplishments ● Collect feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demonstrations without face-to-face conversations and energy might devolve into status updates ● Presentation issues while sharing content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make it as vibrant and engaging a possible for stakeholders, without generating additional work (eg, share videos of customer interviews, etc.) ● Keep presentation content crisp and concise; integrate content to one place, with one person
Sprint retrospective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflect on team interaction ● Identify opportunities to improve working style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Video might affect the perception of safe environment for retrospective conversations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use anonymous digital tools and make sure team members know about it ● Let team members pick video or audio interaction mode

have had a host or group of hosts going back and forth to different breakouts to check progress, direct latecomers to the right room, and then call everyone back to the main room. They soon realized that in a virtual meeting, they'd need someone performing those same logistical functions. Teams may need to adapt their norms to let individual team members jump in as support, which isn't possible in a live setting.

Remote work may also require new ceremonies. For example, keeping teams aligned with organizational objectives can be even more challenging. This is easier for teams working together in person, where they can lean more heavily on organic interactions. But working remotely requires more purposeful and structured communication. To navigate that, agile teams at one company adopted biweekly division-wide meetings to identify and agree on objectives for the following weeks.

As performance stabilizes and teams grow more comfortable with working remotely, they may eventually be able to trim down the ceremonies and make them more organic. When an agile team at one insurance company first transitioned to remote working, team members found it necessary to double down on backlog-refinement sessions and documentation because the output of conversations was getting lost. Over time, they're seeing more organic conversations and collaboration and are beginning to refine ceremonies so that they're more lightweight.

Establish a single source of truth

Agile team processes are fairly informal when working in person, and there's little need for capturing notes and documenting agreements. Conversations are organic and in real time. Take morning stand-up meetings, for example. This is the daily huddle that keeps teams informed, connected, and aligned—and in person it usually takes 15 minutes of discussion. Teams make decisions with everyone in the room, so there's little need to record them.

Working remotely, teams may need to consider a different approach to documenting team discussion—producing a so-called single source of truth to memorialize agreements. This can then be kept in a single shared workspace. A remote stand-up can be more involved than an in-person one, depending on a team's cohesiveness and its maturity. If team members don't all participate in the event—or if there's a risk that they'll be distracted during the call—then it's important to calibrate the process to the context. The right approach is likely to be team specific, depending on team maturity and existing norms. Others might find it sufficient to simply submit their notes to a shared online workspace, with a bot to collect and compile everything for the records.

Similarly, most agile teams find that the importance of keeping their backlog clean, up to date, and well documented increases when working remotely. A user story inadvertently left active would be a minor matter for a team working in the same room, because a team member could quickly confirm its status verbally. But working in a remote setting, team members might work on a story for hours before getting an alert that it should have been closed.

Adjust to asynchronous collaboration

Asynchronous communication, such as messaging boards and chat, can be effective means to coordinate agile teams working remotely. In fact, we have already seen some teams replacing certain traditional ceremonies with asynchronous communication. For example, a team in a services institution has replaced some of the daily huddles by a dedicated messaging channel to which team members submit their updates and identify impediments to further work. This has the benefit of allowing team members to raise red flags at any point during the day, and it serves as the registry of concerns that have been raised and addressed.

Note that asynchronous communication needs to be used carefully. Teams that grow overly reliant on asynchronous channels may see team members feeling isolated, and the trust among them may suffer.

Keep teams engaged during long ceremonies

A remote-working arrangement creates new challenges to keeping agile teams motivated and avoiding burnout. Working in isolation is hard for any person, but particularly for agile teams accustomed to face-to-face communication and frequent interpersonal engagement. Multitasking and home-based distractions also take a toll, depending on how things are set up.

But approaches to keep team members engaged aren't unique to agile teams, even if the imperative may be more acutely felt. At one US financial institution, for example, a scrum master realized that staring at a video screen for more than a couple of hours was draining without the dynamic interaction of an in-person workshop. Her solution? For longer meetings, she began to schedule in a ten- to 15-minute exercise break every 90 minutes—with a shared videoconference tool to recommend different exercises.

Adapting leadership approach

The core mission of leadership stays the same, whether co-located or remote. But leaders need to


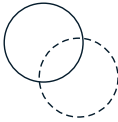
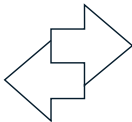
be more deliberate when engaging with customers and teams, especially when you have limited in-person interaction. Leaders in this context can be anyone on the team, whether product owners, scrum masters, or even a developer demonstrating leadership. Working in the same location, agile team leaders often empower teams to push work forward. Working remotely, they need to be closer to—and more proactive at—guiding their own team members.

They also need to be purposeful at engaging external customers and stakeholders. They must be transparent and reassuring in their communication about team performance and objectives. The tools and approaches can vary (Exhibit 3). But the individuals and interactions should be the main consideration. Leaders need to show, in their tone and approach, that everyone is in this together.

At one insurance company, for example, the product owner does five-minute individual check-ins with her team members throughout the week, asking if there's anything she can assist with or any problems she can help trouble shoot. She's also scheduled sessions with customers and stakeholders every

Exhibit 3

Various approaches can help teams engage customers and external stakeholders.

			
Challenges	Engaging purposefully	Providing transparency	Effective collaboration
Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Virtual sessions to continue to engage and solicit feedback from individual customers, focus groups, suppliers, partners, and other stakeholders ● Proactive sprint demos ● Offering specialized perks and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Emails and broadcast messaging ● Social media ● Live portals for updated health, operations, and engagement guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rethinking customer and external stakeholder engagement model ● Simplified surveys and polls, that help provide deeper insights ● 1-1 calls with customers and partners

week, in addition to the usual sprint ceremonies, to see if there's anything more the team should be doing to get their feedback. Too much communication can overwhelm people working remotely with emails and instant messages. So it's worth putting extra emphasis on making sure they feel heard without overwhelming them further.

The abrupt shift to a remote-working environment was a dramatic change that particularly affected agile teams. The hope is that these changes won't be permanent. But for now, teams can reinforce productivity by taking a purposeful approach to sustaining an agile culture and by recalibrating processes to support agile objectives while working remotely.

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