



Online Team and Community Index

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Background

Remote and hybrid work teams have become increasingly common in organizations around the world. In 2023, Askoy and colleagues¹ found 8% of full-time employees surveyed across 34 countries worked exclusively from home, while another 25% had a hybrid schedule (i.e., time in traditional offices along with designated days to work from home). While the benefits and challenges of remote and hybrid workforces continue to be debated, out-of-office employment continues to increase. Upwork² estimates over 32 million Americans will be remote by 2025, indicating continued growth in hybrid work teams.

A parallel trend is evident within business schools, particular among MBA programs, with an increasing percentage of MBA students earning their degree online in recent years³. The College of Business at the University of Louisville embraced this trend in 2019, with the launching of its own Online MBA program. UofL's Online MBA program quickly became one of the largest graduate programs at the university and has generated over 600 alumni from 2019-2023. To support the growing number of students and the unique teaching and learning conditions that stem from online education, the College of Business (COB) created an Online Programs Office, charged with supporting students and faculty across online classes.

Since its establishment in 2020, the Online Programs Office (OPO) has undertaken many responsibilities, including the configuration, introduction, and support of entirely online student teams. The scope of this work spans approximately 20 months, as OMBA students are expected to form into teams upon the start of their program and expected to work together frequently to complete various assignments/tasks. Best practices and years of collective OPO insights from creating and managing these remote teams has been curated into various resources and tools, including the Online Team and Community Index (OTCI).

What is the Online Team and Community Index?

The Online Team and Community Index is a self-report instrument designed to assess the cohesion and effectiveness of remote teams via five dimensions: Purpose, Trust, Communication, Collaboration, and Convenience. The OTCI includes an *Action Item Checklist* designed to provide users with tangible ways to improve performance in each of the five dimensions. The OTCI was informed by years of team dynamics research and best practices of successful remote work teams. It was also developed by the OPO using direct and indirect data gathered from OMBA working teams at UofL from 2019 to 2023; this included team satisfaction and feedback surveys, focus groups, and peer evaluations. The OTCI was designed as a self-report instrument, to be completed by some or ideally all members of a remote or hybrid team. If several data points (i.e., multiple self-report accounts) are gathered within a team, comparisons and correlations can be made across scores to better understand shared perspectives and team dynamics. The index is scored using a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

¹ Aksoy, C. G., Barrero, J. M., Bloom, N., Davis, S. J., Dolls, M., & Zarate, P. (2023). *Working from home around the globe: 2023 Report* <https://wfhresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/GSWA-2023.pdf>

² Ozimek, A. (2021). Future workforce report 2021: How remote work is changing businesses forever. *Upwork*. <https://www.upwork.com/research/future-workforce-report>

³ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/05/17/full-time-online-mba-enrollment-surpasses-personal-programs>

Five Dimensions of the OTCI

The five dimensions of the OTCI reflect emergent themes from years of data and best practices. Each of these dimensions reflect an important component of team success, especially in online settings. The dimensions also reflect elements of *community*, which the OPO refers to as authentic perceptions of fellowship in pursuit of growth and related goals. Cultivating this perception, while maintaining cohesion and team effectiveness, requires purpose, trust, communication, collaboration, and convenience.

Purpose is conceptualized as the alignment of the team's goals with the individual interests and needs of its members, ensuring the team's direction is both clear and meaningful to all involved. Purpose in this context requires a well-defined and shared vision that motivates members to actively contribute to the collective objectives. Purpose within team settings acts as a guiding force, shaping the behaviors of team members and setting expectations by which the team views itself. A well-understood purpose helps to foster a culture within teams where contributions are recognized and members develop a sense of belonging. Purpose serves as the cornerstone of any team's cohesion and effectiveness, driving both individual engagement and fueling collective achievement.

Trust is defined within the OTCI as the belief that team members will act responsibly, honestly, and with mutual respect towards one another throughout the team's existence. It encompasses the confidence that members will support each other and prioritize the collective interests of the team, creating a foundation of reliability and shared accountability. A degree of faith in team members is required but can be strengthened by practices and behaviors that promote transparency throughout the team. Interpersonal trust which stems from personal relationships, empathy, and understanding directly coincides with trust shared across the team. Trust, therefore, is not just about believing in the abilities and intentions of team members, but about actively building supportive relationships and open environment of work where each member feels valued and integral to the team's success.

Communication within online teams is characterized by the regularity, clarity, respectfulness, proactivity, and positive nature of messages among team members. Effective communication in online teams requires clear guidelines to prevent ambiguity and ensure consistent interpretation. Constructiveness is also pivotal for communicating within a remote or hybrid team, as interactions should contribute positively to group dynamics and/or team objectives. Proactivity and transparency help information to be consistently and accurately shared while intentional feedback loops help to avoid misunderstanding and promote trust. Communication is essential to the success of any team, but carries increased importance for online teams who may not consistently "see" each other.

Collaboration is described in the OTCI as the effectiveness to which a team completes tasks and solves problems by working together. Effective and efficient collaboration requires leveraging the diverse skills and creativity of team members to develop and implement innovative solutions. Respect, feedback, and appreciation for each member's contributions are crucial for nurturing a continuous and proactive culture of collaboration. The ability to brainstorm, manage projects, and successfully resolve conflicts are also instrumental in determining a team's collaborative potential.

Convenience refers to the access team members have to tools and resources that are needed to work together in remote or hybrid settings. This dimension is closely tied to online environments, as remote or hybrid team members require user-friendly access to various tools to enable connectivity and empower their work online. Compatibility, reliability, security, and ease-of-access are essential in defining this dimension and for allowing team members to collaborate, regardless of their location or time zone. In short, convenience captures the effectiveness of a team to manage and use the technology that connects them, which enables the possibility of online teams to work together.

Online *Team and Community* Index

Purpose



1. The goals of *my online community or team* relate to my interests and needs. _____
2. The purpose of *my online community or team* is clear and well-defined. _____
3. The goals of *my online community or team* guide the behaviors and expectations of the members. _____
4. The purpose of *my online community or team* motivates members to contribute. _____
5. The purpose of *my online community or team* is relevant & meaningful to me. _____

Total Purpose Score _____



Communication

1. *My online community or team* communicates regularly and consistently with each other. _____
2. *My online community or team* clearly and effectively communicates with each other, avoiding ambiguity and confusion. _____
3. Communication within my online community or team is respectful and constructive. _____
4. My online community or team communicates proactively and transparently, sharing relevant information and feedback. _____
5. My online community or team communicates positively and enthusiastically each other, building rapport and celebrating successes. _____

Total Communication Score _____

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Use the scale below to respond to each item.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**



Collaboration

1. I collaborate effectively and efficiently with *my online community or team* members to complete a variety of tasks. _____
2. I collaborate creatively and innovatively with *online community or team* members. _____
3. My online community or team members collaborate respectfully and appreciatively, valuing each other's contributions. _____
4. My online community or team members collaborate continuously and proactively with each other. _____
5. I collaborate openly and provide feedback to my online community or team. _____

Total Collaboration Score _____

Trust



1. I trust *my online community or team* members are doing their best to fulfill their responsibilities and commitments. _____
2. I trust *my online community or team* to work honestly with me and others. _____
3. *My online community or team* members respect my opinions and ideas, even if they disagree with them. _____
4. *My online community or team* supports me when I need their help. _____
5. *My online community or team* members act in the team's best interest. _____

Total Trust Score _____



Convenience

1. *My online community or team members* have easy and reliable access to the tools and resources that we need to collaborate. _____
2. The tools and resources that *my online community or team members* use to collaborate are user-friendly & compatible. _____
3. The tools and resources that *my online community or team members* use to collaborate enhance our ability to work. _____
4. The tools and resources that *my online community or team members* use to collaborate support various modes and methods of team communication. _____
5. The tools *my online community or team members* use are secure and trustworthy. _____

Total Convenience Score _____

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Purpose



- **Develop and Communicate a Clear Vision Statement:** Collaboratively craft a concise, compelling vision statement that encapsulates the purpose of the online community or team and cultivate buy-in.
- **Conduct Regular Feedback and Alignment Sessions:** Organize periodic meetings where members can share interests and needs to enable team to (re)align vision and direction when relevant and possible.
- **Establish and Evaluate Goal-Oriented Behaviors:** Identify and communicate specific actions that are expected from team members to achieve shared goals, including standards, guidelines, or best practices.
- **Foster a Culture of Contribution and Recognition:** Create a system where contributions are acknowledged and rewarded by identifying team and context-specific norms for recognitions and appropriate incentives.
- **Storytelling and Success Sharing:** Share stories and examples of team success and the broader impact of the team to illustrate the relevance and meaningfulness of the team's purpose and inspire future contributions.



Communication

- **Create clear communication guidelines:** Hybrid or remote teams rely on technology to communicate, yet we have different expectations for how to best use digital tools to communicate. Identify and articulate clear/shared expectations for using tools like Slack, Microsoft Teams, etc. along with the guidelines for sending and responding to different types of messages to avoid ambiguity or confusion.
- **Encourage and model respectful communication:** Quite simply, communicate in alignment with the established expectations to help lead by example.
- **Establish "open-door" equivalent:** Does your "Available" status truly mean your available? Clearly establish how team members can evaluate when/how is the best way to connect in real time.
- **Develop a "Good Morning" routine:** Establish a quick and painless method by which your team can greet each other before work, this helps normalize the initiation of communication between members.
- **Share a weekly wind down:** Whether it's a typical Friday afternoon, or some other time, each week typically has a "wind down" period when a break draws near (e.g., weekend). Establish time during this period for members to reflect and share their thoughts to help strengthen communication.

Strengthening Team and Community

Action Item Checklist



Collaboration

- **Prepare (in advance) for known challenges:** One of the most preventable limitations of collaboration is procrastination. Successful time management is crucial, especially for remote/hybrid teams to collaborate successfully across time (and space).
- **Develop plans and processes for identifying and resolving conflict:** Conflict arises in many forms, but common among all is that collaboration suffers when conflict is not resolved. Remote and hybrid teams must also take the added step of explicitly identifying conflict, as virtual work environments may often conceal an issue longer than usual.
- **Participate in virtual brainstorming:** One benefit of remote/hybrid teams is the asynchronous nature in which communication often occurs. When starting collaborative efforts or projects, allow for virtual brainstorming via group messaging, project management tools or other forms of technology to diversify ideas and maximize shared involvement.
- **Celebrate team victories:** All teams have shared victories that should be celebrated when possible. Acknowledging team wins in creative and genuine ways can boost future collaboration efforts.
- **Conduct a collaboration audit:** Periodically assess the team's collaboration efforts and gather related feedback to foster continuous improvement.

Trust



- **Collaboratively create norms and work routines:** From camera policies in meetings to standard lunch hours and communication expectations, clearly identifying team norms and routines builds trust.
- **Establish consistent virtual meetings and check-ins:** Intentionality is necessary in a virtual work world; find regular time to discuss challenges and updates to increase trust and understanding.
- **Facilitate and Encourage Mentorship:** Virtual work can be isolating and relational-driven concepts such as mentorship can often be limited by remote work environments. Plan and develop mentorship programs and opportunities that can span across modalities and reach all members of the team.
- **Build Personal Connections:** Create opportunities such as virtual coffee breaks so that team members can share personal stories or interests; empathy and interpersonal relationships that stem from these conversations become foundational for trust.
- **Incorporate transparent progress reports:** Use project management tools or others forms of technology to create shared awareness of progress and understanding of how individual contributions contribute to the overall team's performance.



Convenience

- **Assess needs and challenge assumptions:** Some teams require complex project management tools, whereas others do not. Some share large amounts of data, whereas others do not. Identify specifically your technology needs and align all selections with your purpose and resources. Be sure to challenge basic assumptions like time zone, internet speeds, etc. by consulting with all impacted team members.
- **Diversify channels and plan for contingencies:** Remote and hybrid teams often work through a standard system (e.g., Microsoft Teams), but what happens to corrupt files? What is the contingency plan if a certain tool or system fails to work as it should; diversify and back-up when appropriate.
- **Remove barriers to entry, when safe/appropriate:** Some things need password protections, some require multiple forms of verification. Yet, often, some of our tools and systems have unnecessary barriers to entry. Audit and remove semi-regularly.
- **Don't abuse the convenience:** With most team members a simple click or button away, avoid the temptation to abuse convenience tools or to use them at inappropriate times (e.g., midnight emails)
- **Manage or be managed:** Actively manage the tools that connect team members, or it will manage you.

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For questions about this tool, or how to use it, please contact:

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