

Decision-making in a remote work world

Factors to consider and
examples to follow



Smarter
technology
for all

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Permanent remote work is an inevitability for at least some employees, some of the time. Companies are evaluating and adjusting a range of business processes to capitalize on remote work's advantages.

One of these processes is decision-making.

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The high cost of a low bar

Fun fact: It's estimated that the average adult makes about 35,000 decisions every day¹ — 226.7 of them about food alone!¹ It's an eye-popping number that's open to interpretation. But indisputably, we field a steady stream of decisions daily, from tiny to consequential, intentional to less consciously considered. A McKinsey survey² reveals just how high the stakes are for business decisions — and how critical it is for companies to get decision-making right.

Only 20% of survey respondents said their organizations excel at decision-making. Fewer than half said decisions are timely, and 61% said at least half the time spent making decisions is ineffective. For a typical Fortune 500 company, the potential annual losses are staggering, equivalent to about 50 days of a manager's year and — collectively across the Fortune 500 — hundreds of millions of dollars in wages.

Ironically (in a good way), the things respondents cited as causes for this ineffectiveness are the very things that, when fixed, spell success for remote team decision-making. They include:

- Convoluted processes
- Unclear organizational roles
- Information overload (inability to separate signal from noise)
- Lack of empowerment

Solving these problems improves both communications and decisions.

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Two sides of the communication coin

Communication is the foundation of working together collaboratively and is essential for sound decision-making. As with everything for remote work, communication needs to be planned for and planned out. Central to this is finding the right balance between two types of communication: synchronous and asynchronous.

Each has advantages for a distributed workforce. Remote teams need to find the right equation, reaping the benefits and avoiding the pitfalls of both.

For many teams, the answer is mostly asynchronous, with synchronous for limited meetings, quick problem solving, and strengthening team relationships.



SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?



Synchronous communication

- Everyone “live” and current
- Deeper connections
- Faster action
- More distraction, less deep work
- Pressure to always be “on”

Examples:

Face-to-face conversations, video calls, group chat

Asynchronous communication

- Fewer time zone issues
- Increased isolation
- Slower action
- Easier to maintain focus
- Self-paced work

Examples:

Email, file sharing, collaboration platforms

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DECIDING HOW TO DECIDE

There are four common choices for organizational decision-making:³

- 1. Command** One authority makes the decision.
- 2. Vote** A group votes and majority rules.
- 3. Consensus** A group discusses until everyone agrees on a decision.
- 4. Consult** A designated decider invites input but makes, and is responsible for, the decision.

The “Consult” method seems to work best for remote teams. Decision-making by consulting has clear leadership and accountability, fosters team empowerment, includes transparency, and makes the best use of asynchronous communication.

Which model?

From RAPID (recommend, agree, perform, input, decide) to BRAIN (benefits, risks, alternatives, intuition, nothing) to DECIDE (define, establish, consider, identify, develop, evaluate), there’s an alphabet soup of variations out there for structuring decisions step by step. The specifics vary but all follow roughly the same high-level steps. For any decision, teams need to clarify the question, gather information, weigh the options, and make a choice. Most models include a follow-up step to evaluate the decision.

It doesn’t really matter which model is used. The value lies in choosing a model.

The shift to remote work and accompanying cultural shakeup can leave people feeling unmoored. Frameworks can be steadying. And a framework makes it easier to add one of the most recommended steps for dispersed team decision-making: Document so everyone has the same shared record of what happened.

What’s data got to do with it?

Since the work-from-home surge, many teams have focused on a trio of success factors and how to translate them from headquarters to home: autonomy, transparency, and accountability. One thing that fuels all three is data — access to the right information and empowerment to use it without the need for continual permission-seeking.

A tale of three companies

Here's how three very different companies approached the challenge of distributed decision-making and used data strategically.

CULTURE AMP

Software company Culture Amp's CEO thinks the reluctance of leaders to give distributed teams decision autonomy stems from a misguided notion that only certain people have earned the right, based on experience or skill. Actually, he says, it's because they have the context that someone else doesn't. He believes data is a pathway to context.

Culture Amp shares this context in a daily situation room to track everything that's changed overnight, both in the business and the external world — particularly related to the pandemic. About 20 leaders meet to review a deck on the latest crisis information, then the document is published on Slack.

Once they began giving people the data needed to contextualize their decisions, leaders became more comfortable giving teams the authority to make decisions without having to chase down approvals. This engendered trust on both sides.

ZAPIER

Distributed teams at workflow automation company Zapier use a framework called DACI (driver, approver, consulted, informed). Anyone involved in a decision plays one of these roles. Knowing decision roles upfront lets teams go faster and short-circuits friction and delays caused by ambiguity.

Zapier also uses a “decision log” to surface important conversations that might get buried in fast-moving Slack channels. It's used instead of internal email, serving as a searchable archive everyone can use to find old and new discussions and decisions.

MARS, INCORPORATED

Consumer packaged goods company Mars was in the midst of a digital transformation. With fast-moving, unpredictable consumer response to COVID, the rigid annual planning typical in the industry was no longer effective. Six weeks into the pandemic, online grocery purchasing had risen to a level Mars had not been targeting for five years.

Their solution? Speed up supply by reducing the subjectivity in communications and decision-making between their newly remote teams and relationship-centric supply chain. When they lost the supply chain's perspective, they had to rely on raw inventory, materials, and packaging data. Conversations became more focused, productivity improved, decisions were data-driven, and new, more probing questions were being asked. It's exactly the digital transformation outcome they'd been hoping for.

Remote teams can rock decision-making

As distributed teams become permanent fixtures in the enterprise employee mix, companies will use the lessons being learned now to improve performance and productivity — for both onsite and remote workers.

Tools like Microsoft Teams are designed to keep colleagues productively connected and ensure that everybody can continue to work as collaboratively, efficiently, and securely as they do in the office.

As a technology leader and the world's #1 PC manufacturer, Lenovo is committed to supporting workforce collaboration and productivity across the enterprise with world-class technology solutions and industry-leading service.

A woman with curly hair is seen from behind, sitting at a desk. In front of her is a laptop displaying the Windows 10 desktop with various app icons. To the right of the laptop is a small monitor on a stand, also displaying a video conference. In the background, a larger monitor shows a video conference with three participants. The scene is set in a modern office environment with large windows and copper-colored pipes on the wall.**Lenovo** **Microsoft**

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SOURCES

1 <http://science.uncvtv.org/content/reportersblog/choices>

2 <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/three-keys-to-faster-better-decisions>

3 Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler. *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2012

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