

How to Thrive While

**WFH**

# **WORKING FROM HOME**

A Guide to Supporting a Successful  
Remote Team



How we work and manage our teams changed overnight.

While software engineering has always been a field primed for remote work, the truth is, most companies relied heavily on teams being in offices to promote effective collaboration.

The coronavirus pandemic that led to shelter-in-place orders across the nation caused a radical pivot to fully remote teams. While it might be temporary, the dramatic lifestyle shift will undoubtedly have a long-lasting impact. As engineering teams adapt, the question stands:

### **How can we support our remote teams to be their best?**

Uplevel has always used data to connect the intangible with the tangible, using digital markers to drive real action. In response to COVID-19, our team has rapidly flexed new muscles, both in the way we work, and in the features we provide for our users.

We're developing new approaches and new tools. In this e-book, we share both.



WFH:

## How Uplevel Optimized for Remote Work

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**A**fter years of office-based teams, the sudden flip to working from home is an adjustment. We set up semi-functional desks at our kitchen tables, started new Zoom traditions, and tried to recreate our favorite food truck menus at home.



“As new restrictions and news updates come out daily, I’m doing my best to stay grounded, take care of my family, and also take care of my employees.”

Joe Levy, CEO



## What if WFH is our new reality? Adjusting to a (potential) full year of remote work

Even as certain states attempt to reopen business as usual, swift backlash from public health experts—and the general public—raises concerns about how we safely and successfully enact this next phase.

Despite the plausibility of resuming operations in the next several months, the reality is, most offices simply aren't built for social distancing measures. Open-concept office layouts and windowless conference rooms are a stark contrast to the self-isolation we've experienced in this pandemic. Add overcrowded bus commutes into the mix and you're facing a nerve-racking level of exposure.

Beyond office design, many employees will simply need or choose to stay home. With school districts continuing online learning through the second half of the year, many parents will be required to stay with their kids. We also know that many employees are caring for older parents. And, given the choice of wearing a mask for eight hours or continuing to WFH, mask-free and in sweatpants—we can't blame our teams for preferring the latter.

At Uplevel, we met as a company to open the discussion: What if we were a fully remote company? To our surprise, we reached a fast majority in favor. We're starting to think longer term.



# How to work from home effectively during this time of COVID-19

Many tech companies (Uplevel included!) are no stranger to flexible work from home policies, but fully remote work is a new reality. Here are top tips that make us most effective when working from home.

## **CREATE SPACE**

Whether it's a spare room or a spare table, make it feel like a dedicated work area. Remove distractions like TVs and social media notifications to help stay focused. Some places don't work: your bed, your bathtub, that backyard hammock...save those places for relaxation time.

## **GET READY FOR WORK**

Some people find it valuable to follow their pre-COVID routine, like showering and getting dressed before gam. (We won't judge you for staying in your pajamas, just put on new ones.)

## **OPT FOR VIDEO > PHONE**

Without video cues, it's hard to read people. If you have the opportunity to use video, try platforms like Slack, Google Hangouts, Zoom, and BlueJeans. But if you're feeling the "zoom fatigue" creep in, it's also OK to turn off video and pace around your room, or take a call on a walk.

## **GET CREATIVE WITH COMMUNICATION**

Slack messages lack body language and tone, so we recommend embracing your favorite emojis and GIFs. In the case of complicated or serious conversations, don't be afraid to move to an impromptu call or video chat.

## **CREATE A DO NOT DISTURB SIGNAL**

If you live with family or roommates, it's important to communicate availability. It can be as easy as leaving the door open or close, putting up a sign, or using noise-cancelling headphones.

## **EMBRACE OFFICE-FREE LIFE WITH DEEP WORK**

Away from the constant shoulder taps and desk chatter, it's a great time for that brain-heavy project you've been meaning to tackle. Set that DND signal and get into Deep Work.

## **TAKE A BREAK**

You used to take breaks in the office to make coffee or visit with coworkers. Make sure you give yourself breaks at home. Go screen-free during lunchtime, walk around the block, or play fetch with Spot.

## **BE SOCIAL WITH YOUR TEAM**

We started a Slack channel to share playlists we love and sometimes play charades as a virtual break.

## **REACH OUT**

Just because you aren't next to someone, doesn't mean you can't reach out for help. Communicate frequently, whether it's work-related or random tangents. Connection is key to efficient remote work.







## Managing a remote team during COVID-19

Managers aren't typically offered guidance on how to manage effectively from afar. That balanced, hands-on, hands-off management style you once prized might not translate to a fully virtual workplace. How can managers manage effectively from home during this pandemic? Our research points to these guidelines.

**Share more from behind the scenes.** Include your team in more frequent updates about priorities, process changes, or company news. What used to seem restricted to leadership now has greater impact on your team members' lives; it's both expected and respected to increase transparency during this time.

**Be wildly flexible.** No matter the frustration—maybe someone keeps missing stand-up, or disappears from Slack at random hours—understand that people are likely showing up the best they can. Opt to give employees the benefit of the doubt.

**Practice overcommunication.** Questions that may have prompted a quick trip to your dev's desk can feel too small to schedule a Zoom call. These days, overcommunication is healthy. Take the time to create new Slack channels or remote etiquette that addresses today's unique needs.

**Encourage frequent games of "Show & Tell."** Have you found a way to recreate your favorite takeout? Is the laundry room a surprisingly excellent location for Deep Work? How is your dog coping? The more we share, the more connected we feel.



**Find an excellent note-taker for meetings.** To get more value out of virtual meetings, choose someone to take detailed notes with clear action items, and share them broadly afterward. This will also help those team members that have to skip occasional meetings to attend to their second job of home-schooling.

**Maintain your weekly 1:1 rotation.** Remote work might raise more questions or need for updates—and if those are quelled by a light workload or constant Slack chatter, use the time to connect on mental or emotional health. We can all use an extra check-in.

**Trust your employees.** Micromanaging is so pre-pandemic. Communicate clear goals with your devs, without worrying about exactly when and how they go about hitting those goals. (You can always turn to data: Uplevel looks at Jira tickets, PRs, meeting health, and other factors that indicate effectiveness.)

**Forget about work.** (Occasionally!) We have so much swimming in our brains that Jira may feel intangible compared to “real life” at times. It’s okay to admit that work is just one area of our focus. After checking on projects, remember to pause and simply ask how people are doing.





MEETING HEALTH:

## Digital Communication and Zoom Fatigue

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**R**eplacing conference rooms with Zoom calls has upsides (like attending while curled up with your cat on the couch) and downsides (like the challenge of jumping into the conversation with a momentary lag in the streaming).





## Five WFH Guidelines to Meeting Health

### **1 ALTERNATE VIDEO AND PHONE**

For 1:1s or visual presentations, video meetings provide helpful context. In the case of a 50-person department meeting, good old-fashioned conference calls do the trick.

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### **2 DIAL IN EARLY**

Make the video conference available before the official starting time so people have a minute to problem-solve audio issues and catch up about personal life.

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### **3 ENGAGE EVERYONE**

It can be harder to get your voice heard on a video chat. As the meeting leader, make sure to call on folks or encourage people to “raise their hand” on chat.

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### **4 USE THE FEATURES**

Make sure the platform you use has a chatbox, emoji reactions, and other features to allow for attendees to ask questions or respond—especially in large meetings.

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### **5 DIVIDE AND CONQUER**

If you run a large team, consider holding more focused meetings with smaller groups and specific objectives, which encourage more engagement than a 20-person free-for-all.



## Zoom Fatigue

A day of back-to-back meetings was tiring in the office, but those days also included social conversations and walking around. Now, we're staying in the same spot, with less stimulation. Something new is happening: we're experiencing total "Zoom fatigue."

### SPACE OUT THE DAY'S MEETINGS

Avoid scheduling back-to-back meetings—at the very least, create a 10-minute buffer by scheduling 25 or 50-minute meetings.

### EXPERIMENT WITH NEW COMMUNICATION STYLES

Troubleshoot as a team to invent new customs, like a metaphorical talking stick. This eases the stress of trying to find a "natural" pause among many voices speaking.

### TRY WALKING MEETINGS

For 1:1 meetings that don't require a screen share, suggest that you and your meeting buddy both head out on a walk. (Audio is okay for these.)

### GET YOUR MULTITASKING IN CHECK

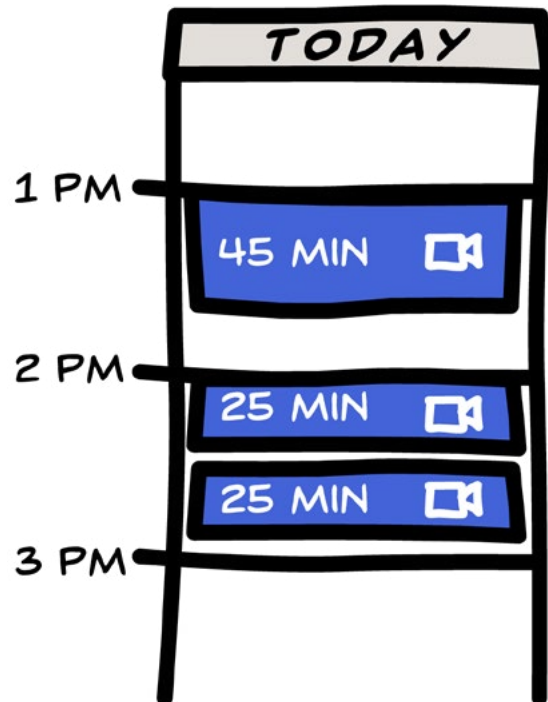
If you're already experiencing Zoom fatigue, the addition of answering emails and Slack messages on the side is only going to accelerate that fatigue. Opt for Do Not Disturb and full-screen mode to avoid distractions.

### MAKE IT FUN

Set aside the first five minutes for the banter that that typically begins in-person. You can also add fun elements by competing for the best custom Zoom background or setting a theme for the day's outfits.

### ESTABLISH A MEETING-FREE DAY

If possible, allow for one day a week (or, say, two afternoons a week) without any meetings. This lets your team enjoy the perks of working from home, like blasting your favorite music out loud, or wearing whatever feels comfortable.



## **It's time to upgrade your meetings: Meet asynchronous communication**

### **WHAT ARE ASYNCHRONOUS MEETINGS?**

Introduced to us by Uplevel advisor and world meeting expert Steven Rogelberg, PhD, “asynchronous meetings” balance collaborative teamwork with intervals of individual working time.

**TEAM + INDIVIDUAL  
BRAINSTORMING + DEEP FOCUS**



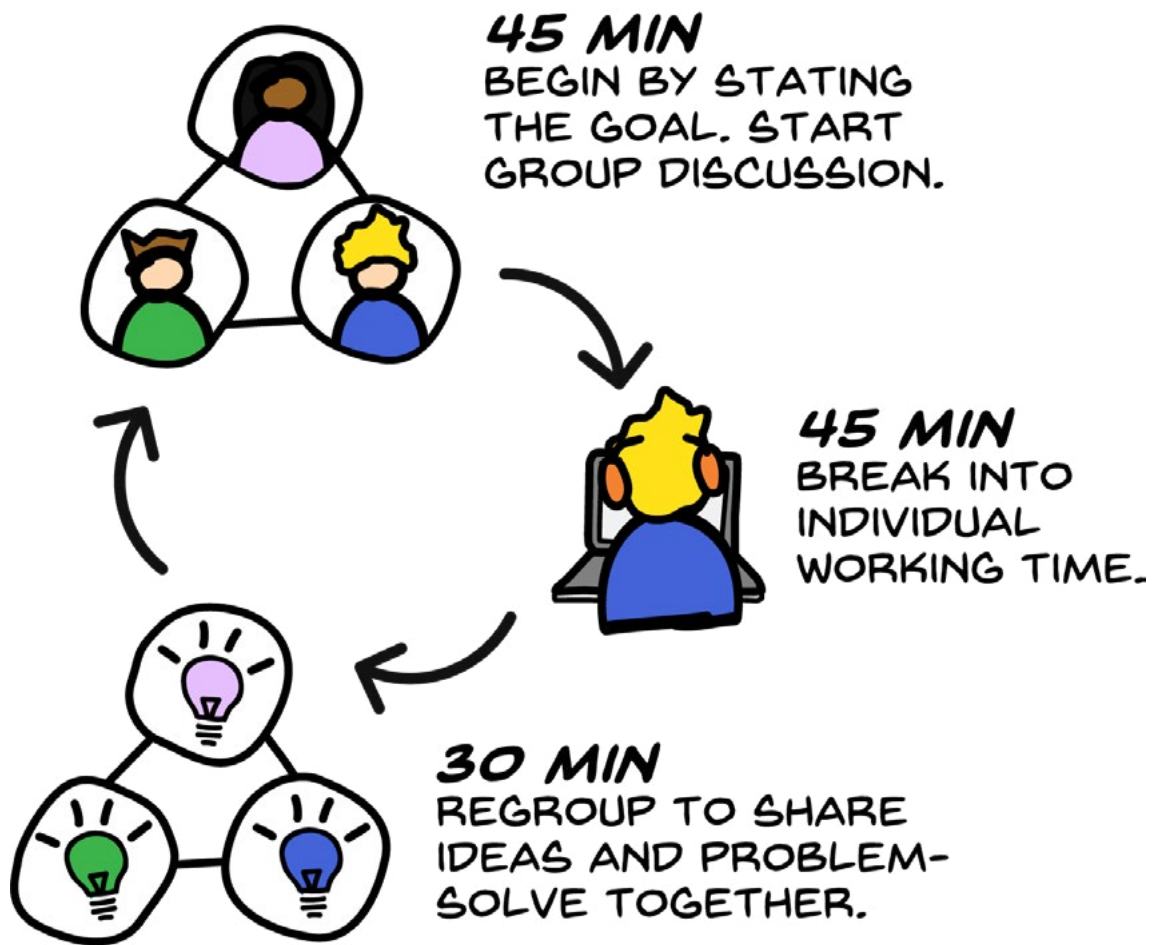
### **HOW DOES THIS CONTRAST WITH A STANDARD MEETING?**

In a typical meeting, everyone is working together at once, or synchronously. This requires everyone to be in the same place at the same time, and at a certain point, people start daydreaming or multitasking.

### **WHAT DOES AN ASYNCHRONOUS MEETING LOOK LIKE?**

Begin by stating a shared goal or outcome—say, to create a solution to a specific problem—and spark a group discussion. At a set time—say, after 30 minutes—the team breaks for individual working time. After another set amount of time, the team comes back together to discuss ideas and progress. Repeat the cycle as many times as needed.





REPEAT AS MANY TIMES AS NEEDED.  
(WE RECOMMEND CAPPING AT 3 HOURS.)

#### POWERFUL EXAMPLES OF ASYNCHRONOUS COLLABORATION

**Collaboration on a shared document.** Assign a person or small group to each section. Review as a team.

**New feature and product brainstorming.** Amplify each other's ideas and meditate on your own. (Tip: Leverage tools like Miro for sticky note exercises and instant votes.)

**Kicking off a new project.** Read the project brief as a team, then take time to identify questions or information gaps, and regroup to discuss. (Tip: Provide a JotForm or Slack channel to collect questions, giving moderators time to write or source thoughtful answers before getting back on-camera.)







RELATIONSHIP HEALTH:

## Virtual Social Un-Distancing

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**M**oving from office to home, we experience an imbalance in casual and professional interactions. Now, we're only talking during Zoom meetings, with no free-spirited desk chatter. When your team needs a boost, use the two-pronged approach of talking collectively and individually.

### **PRACTICE OPEN COMMUNICATION.**

Many work-from-home strategies were designed to be temporary solutions, and as we're looking ahead to many more months apart, those solutions need to cover us long-term. Schedule a dedicated check-in with your team, asking them to think on what's been helpful or challenging in the past several weeks.



### **DEDICATE THIS WEEK'S 1:1S TO A WELLNESS AGENDA.**

Even if your team has a friendly dynamic, some members might feel hesitant to share during group meetings, and might open up when given the chance. Use one-on-one facetime for a personal wellness check.

- Has anything surprised you about working from home?
- What do you miss about the office?
- How can I support you better or differently?

Amid the many adjustments we've made during COVID-19, strengthening the support network between coworkers is one we hope continues.



## **How to empower 1:1 meetings with actual data**

Too often, our weekly 1:1 touch base gets reduced to a few minutes over Slack, or serves more as a vent session than a problem-solving opportunity. We're leaving significant missed potential on the table.

### **PREPARING FOR EFFECTIVE 1:1S**

The best 1:1 starts before you meet. Consider a few key measurements of effectiveness or bandwidth, looking to calendars, JIRA tickets, or Slack activity for evidence. For managers, this might take more high-level observation to see if there is frequent context switching, or if work is stuck due to cross-team dependencies. Next time, collect the data and come prepared.



## Common concerns

"I'M IN MEETING HELL"

### **MULTITASKING**

How many meetings have been spent with an open laptop, catching up on email, either by you or those around you?

### **MEETING SIZE**

Are most of your meetings large (i.e., department-wide) or small (i.e., focused group sessions)?

### **CROSS-TIER REPRESENTATION**

Do attendees share similar job titles, or span multiple levels of the org chart? Is anyone an FYI invitation that could instead receive notes afterward?

### **RECURRING MEETINGS**

Is that weekly project status meeting still serving its purpose, or does half the group skip these days?

"I NEVER HAVE TIME FOR DEEP WORK."

### **RESPECT THE TIME**

Do you have deep work blocked but end up taking the time to actually do shallow work, responding to lots of short questions or interruptions or other things that don't require big blocks of time? That's not what deep work is about.

### **DO THE MATH**

How many hours every week are free for independent work? Has that number increased or decreased throughout the last quarter?

### **LOOK FOR OPEN BLOCKS**

Make sure you have at least some deep work time every single day.

### **FIND THE NORM**

How does your calendar compare to those of other team members? Maybe you're in too many meetings, or maybe it's a team-wide issue.



## What to ask about

"I'M SO BUSY, I HAVE TO MULTITASK."

### **CONSIDER THE "WHY"**

Are you multitasking because your to-do list is overwhelming, or simply because meetings aren't relevant to you?

### **THINK IN THE MOMENT**

Next time you find yourself flipping between ten different tabs, reflect on the root cause of this hyperactivity. Would it be helpful to learn about better organization or delegation?

### **LOOK AT THE TRENDS**

Some weeks are simply busier than others, but a persistent pattern of multitasking usually indicates something other than busy days.

"I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR WHAT I ACTUALLY WANT TO WORK ON."

### **CATEGORIZE YOUR TIME**

What are you actually spending time on? Does that align with your goals? Does it even align with your existing deliverables? Try to align your time to what's important to you and the company.

### **NOTICE THEMES**

Perhaps a business-critical product launch has consumed the past several sprints, or you find that you consistently get tasked with fixing bugs. How often are fire drills pushing out other deadlines?

### **CONNECT TO CAREER GOALS**

Where do you hope to spend more time? What skills would you like to acquire? Is there an area of the business you aspire to support?





# Supporting your team during a time of isolation

If you're hearing a chorus of resistance to daily check-ins or notice dropping attendance at Friday's Zoom happy hour, it may seem like a clear sign to leave people alone. However, we often hear from the loudest voices, which might be crowding out the quieter (and possibly, more isolated) ones.

## SIGNS OF ISOLATION

- 1 Solo vs. team projects.** Are some engineers involved in multiple projects, while others are focused solely on one?
- 2 Inconsistent 1:1s.** Do the same team members often get their 1:1s cancelled or rescheduled?
- 3 Non-work-related factors.** Are people impacted by news headlines or homeschooling responsibilities?
- 4 Team feedback.** Ask how everybody is feeling this week, and how that might compare to the early days of working from home. Overall, do they feel overstimulated? Under stimulated?

## HOW TO ADDRESS ISOLATION

- 1 Assemble new working teams.** Pair up developers that don't often work together.
- 2 Put a spotlight on solo projects.** For employees that are working on siloed projects—perhaps happily!—encourage a casual time to screenshare or start a Slack conversation for feedback.
- 3 Dream bigger.** Make time for group brainstorms, like innovating new features or pie-in-the-sky ideas.
- 4 Get social.** Try team lunches or happy hours, play online games, or encourage people to schedule 1:1 time (or skip-levels) with each other.
- 5 Encourage self-care.** Find ways to balance your own calendar, whether that's setting up more social lunches, or clearing the afternoons for more headspace.





WORK-LIFE BALANCE:

## Bandwidth, Throughput, and Burnout

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**T**he blurred lines between work and home can shift our mindset from 9-to-5 to 24/7. When we survey engineers about their goals, “reducing out-of-hours communication” lands at the top of the list. Here’s how to prevent it.



### **ALLOW FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING HOURS**

Without a commute or office to dictate our schedules, recognize that some team members do their best work from sunrise to early afternoon, while others thrive with a later start and later evening.

### **SHARE YOUR DAILY HOURS**

Establish a practice of overcommunication, whether that's using the Slack status to broadcast availability or sending a daily email.

### **COMMUNICATE REQUIRED ATTENDANCE WITH EXTRA CLARITY**

Delineate which meetings are required (like the daily standup that gets everyone aligned) and which are optional (like an FYI check-in where you can read the notes that are shared).

### **LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

If you send a late night message, your team will feel a pressure to respond. Try including a note in the subject line that no response is required until the next morning, or see if you can schedule messages to send at another time.

### **BALANCE OVERTIME WITH OFFLINE TIME**

Emergencies happen. Make it clear to the team that their availability is needed, then complement it with a late-start morning.

### **TAKE ADVANTAGE OF NOTIFICATION SETTINGS**

You may not be able to control others' messages, but you can control when you're notified of them. Confine the hours of your Slack notifications, befriend the Do Not Disturb function of your phone during lunchtime, and truly sign off for the weekend.

### **CREATE A CULTURE THAT RESPECTS BOUNDARIES**

Encourage team members to share best practices or to reach out with questions. Most importantly, respect their offline hours. We're all in this together.

