

5 tools to help your remote-work business click

August 12 2021, by Katherine Fan Of Nerdwallet



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Pre-pandemic, working from home was often considered a perk rather than a requirement. But once COVID-19 struck, many companies shifted to a remote-first work environment—a change that's now

permanent in some cases.

Recent Gallup research data shows that, on average, 52% of all workers, including 72% of those in white-collar occupations and 14% in blue-collar occupations, [performed their job remotely for all or part of the time](#) from October 2020 to April 2021. And 83% of employers believe that going remote has been positive for their company, [according to a January 2021 report](#) by professional services firm PwC.

While a remote-first structure can present some unique challenges, workplace performance experts encourage [business owners](#) to anticipate common pitfalls.

"Focus on overcommunicating, and find ways to encourage people to work together rather than doing it alone," said Thanh Pham, founder and CEO of productivity training company Asian Efficiency.

Whether your company is remote by choice or by circumstance, consider [apps and digital tools](#) in these five areas to optimize your telework setup.

1. INSTANT MESSAGING

Instant messaging software has grown increasingly popular in the workplace. A good system allows you to send individual messages as well as group chats—the virtual equivalent of walking over to your coworker's desk for a quick discussion. You also can share documents and images with others in your network.

Companies can create channels to host more permanent conversations across departments or employees who share common interests. And if your team communicates with clients or contractors on a regular basis, you can offer limited access to specific channels for group collaboration.

Slack and Microsoft Teams are two of the best-known brands for [instant messaging](#) on desktop and mobile. Both Slack and Teams offer free versions that anyone can use, while companies can upgrade to premium accounts with more storage, features and control.

2. VIDEOCONFERENCING

While messaging tools are perfect for quick updates and easy questions, videoconferencing software allows you to host team discussions and deliver companywide announcements face to face. Virtual meetings eliminate the need for a volley of emails and instant messages back and forth, and also allow you to see everyone else's facial expressions and body language.

Zoom became a household name overnight at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when everyone from businesses to schools to families scrambled to find ways to stay connected during lockdown. Other well-known brands include GoToMeeting, Google Meet and Join.me.

Zoom, GoToMeeting and Google Meet all offer free basic versions with upgrade options available, while Join.me users have to pay to host [virtual meetings](#).

3. SCHEDULING

Flexibility across schedules and time zones can be one of the biggest assets for a fully remote business. However, quickly tracking everyone's availability can present a challenge, especially when factoring in time zones and holidays.

You may already be familiar with Google Calendar and Microsoft Outlook, which sync calendars for everyone throughout your

organization. When you add guests to a calendar invite, the tool automatically shows you a preview of each teammate's availability so you can find a block of time that works for everyone.

If you primarily schedule meetings with individuals outside of your work organization, you may find Doodle or Calendly more useful for your needs. With Doodle, you create a poll of available meeting times, then invite your participants to choose the options that work best for their schedule.

Calendly works the other way around: You create a calendar with your available times, then share the calendar link with anyone who wants to schedule a meeting.

All of these scheduling tools are available for free, with upgraded functionality available for paid accounts. (Outlook for Business is free for a one-month trial, after which it's \$5 per user per month.)

4. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Project management systems help leaders and employees collaborate on company objectives by breaking down big goals into smaller tasks and actions.

A good project management tool allows you to tag collaborators for each project, then set and assign subtasks to individuals or groups responsible for that action. Subtasks can include deadlines as well as notes for quick reference. You can also designate custom privacy settings to ensure that certain projects are available only to people with the right clearance.

There are dozens of great [project management](#) tools available these days, many of which are only marginally different from one another. Popular names in this space include Trello, Asana, Basecamp and Monday.com.

All offer free versions with paid upgrades.

5. DATA STORAGE

Cloud storage saves your digital files online through a provider that takes on the responsibility of hosting and maintaining the servers that house your data. On your end, accessing your cloud storage should feel no different from pulling up a file on your desktop, although large files such as videos may take a little while to upload.

Well-known cloud storage providers include Google, Dropbox and Box, all of which offer free basic plans for consumers as well as paid plans for businesses.

TOO MANY TOOLS?

For a small-business owner, decision fatigue can be a real issue, and evaluating new software takes a lot of time and energy. If you're looking for an easy way to keep your team connected and organized, Google and Microsoft both offer comprehensive workplace management packages that combine most of these solutions and more for \$6 and \$5 per user per month, respectively.

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Citation: 5 tools to help your remote-work business click (2021, August 12) retrieved 14 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2021-08-tools-remote-work-business-click.html>

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