Increasing Opportunities for Casual and Unplanned Interactions Between Team Members:

A Formal Report

For

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Introduction

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, like many workplaces, the Digital Services team of Public Services and Procurement Canada were forced to quickly transition to remote-based work. The unplanned nature of this transition meant that the shift in logistics and the work-place dynamic occurred without strategy or research. Three years after this event, a lack of spontaneous or casual work-place interactions between team members has been highlighted as missing in the current work-place culture. Although the team is currently transitioning to a hybrid-based format, many interactions will continue to take place digitally long-term.

The team uses video, text, and audio based online communication to facilitate remote work. There are both synchronous (team members are communicating at a single point in time i.e. video call) and asynchronous (communications are not limited to a single time i.e. text channel) communications to support work activities. The most prevalent form of communications occurs within discord-channels, which are thematic asynchronous text-based conversations. In addition, there are daily scheduled check-in meetings where team members update each other on their day-to-day workplace activities. This report will investigate the benefit of casual or spontaneous workplace interactions, evaluate methods to encourage such communications, and make recommendations for incorporating them into team discourse. This report recognizes the value of remote and hybrid work which underscores the need to improve team culture with digital tools.

This study analyzes the primary data sources of two surveys to reinforce recommendations. In addition, secondary academic-based sources are referenced. To assess the methods for increasing causal and unplanned professional interactions between team members, I plan to pursue these six areas of inquiry.

1. What proportion of workdays would team members prefer to be in-person versus remote?
2. What incentives would increase team member's desire to work in-person?

3. How much unplanned interaction and how often would it need to occur to benefit personal and team performance?

4. Which digital tools are available and how could they be applied to increase instances of unplanned or casual interaction?

5. Is there a difference in value between digital casual interactions and in-person casual interactions?

6. How do we measure the impact of these interactions?

Briefly state conclusions

Data Section

Overview of Study Design

The recommendations in this report are based on the analysis of two surveys and a literature review. One survey was designed for the audience of the actual members of the Digital Services team. This survey is slightly longer in length (20 mins) and sought opinions on specific tools and strategies that could be used to facilitate casual or spontaneous interactions. The second survey was directed at hybrid or remote works in the field of technology and sought opinions on factors surrounding digital tools that might influence them to participate in events or techniques intended to facilitate casual or spontaneous interactions. Both surveys sought opinions on the ideal balance between remote and in-person work.

In addition, scholarly discourse on the subject is discussed to reinforce the benefits of casual and spontaneous interaction in the workplace to underscore the importance of this study. The articles referenced specifically discuss the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on workplace culture and offer recommendations on techniques to simulate communications that contribute to positive dynamics in a digital workplace. This review aims to validate both the motivation for this report and some of the recommendations being made.

Scholarly Article Review

A strong theme that is present amongst scholarly articles that discuss the impact of remote work on workplace culture, is the benefits of spontaneous and casual interaction between team members. Carol Cochran's article on instilling thriving remote workplace cultures, describes that "One of the most difficult aspects of remote work is the lack of spontaneous interactions among staff members who don't regularly work together. That spontaneity builds small but meaningful connections-the ones that foster trust and make you think, "Hey, I know someone on that team" when the need arises to reach out for a work-related situation." This sentiment is echoed by others including Cyndi Wenninghoff's discussion of how to shape remote workplace culture by writing that, "Connection isn't always easy across a dispersed workforce. But when you create connection-boosting activities with remote employees in mind, they can build meaningful workplace relationships and work toward common goals." These reflections both highlight that cultivating connection within a remote-based workforce is a challenge, and encouraging spontaneous or casual interactions contributes to a meaningful workplace culture.

Authors writing on this topic also investigate some of the ways that digital tools and remote-based activities can contribute to company culture. To understand that, this study relies on Cochran's definition of company culture, "What is remote company culture? An organization's culture, whether remote or otherwise, can be defined as how the people in the company work and work together to accomplish their tasks. Culture comprises a mission, attitudes, norms, behaviors, expectations, and overarching principles and values." To achieve this sense of shared behaviors and attitudes, understanding each other on a personal level is helpful to create a sense of shared experience and reinforce a common dynamic. This is suited well to interactions that are spontaneous and casual, as in not solely dedicated to work which is inherently formal. A level of comfort or sense of personal connection can even lead to low-stakes discussion surrounding work-related topics which can encourage creative problem solving. This improves employees' ability to work together to accomplish tasks and benefits a functional remote company culture.

To achieve an effective company culture within a remote workplace, authors discuss some of the high-level qualities of digital-based communication that aim to facilitate casual or spontaneous

interactions. Amy Vetter's publication on remote workplace culture recommends, "The goal should be to create an environment where everyone contributes, not just the outgoing or vocal ones. Reduce any red tape or formality associated with communication to avoid employees just keeping quiet, which isn't healthy for employees or your team." Avoiding formality is echoed in Cochran's work discussing how, "Less-formal activities are additional ways for colleagues to interact. Our people and culture team (which houses the HR function) organizes virtual lunches, Zoom trivia events, and other casual get-togethers. During those events, we use breakout rooms to help smaller groups of employees come together. That helps individuals develop stronger connections with each other." It is evident that on the high level, an effective remote workplace culture demands casual interactions where team members feel a sense of comfort and freedom to communicate without formality. These trends informed the design of the surveys and the subsequent recommendations.

Evaluation of Surveys

A critical analysis of both surveys highlighted important themes to consider when constructing recommendations for increasing instances of spontaneous and casual interaction in a remote or hybrid workplace.

Importance of Remote Work

A clear trend amongst both surveys as the value of remote or work-from-home. Every respondent from both surveys responded that even if every barrier to working in-person was removed, they would still prefer to work at home at least 3 days a week, with the majority preferring 5 days a week. It is evident that hybrid and remote workers value the option to work at home despite a lack of in-person interactions. The main reason cited amongst respondents of both surveys was the lack of time spent commuting. Respondents value the time they save in not commuting to a situated office such as one who stated, "Transit/Travelling Time, Financial Savings (Parking, Gas, Coffee, Lunches, etc..), and having time to complete other tasks around the house as a result of the time saved traveling to/from the office." This response highlights a sense of value from saving both time and money associated with being outside of the home.

Desire for Socialization and Collaboration

When asked for reasons why respondents may want to work in the office, the vast majority of responses highlighted the value of social connection with their co-workers. Respondents agreed that communication is easier and more natural when communications are face to face. This indicates that despite employee's desire to work from home, they are not completely satisfied with the digital tools and techniques currently in use to facilitate communications. One respondent highlighted that the downgraded communication which occurs digitally is not isolated to interactions amongst coworkers, but applies to "Catching up with the team, collaborative team exercises, and project discussions with clients may deliver better results if done in person." There is a clear value gap between online communication and in-person communication that is agreed upon by all respondents.

Value of Flexible and Fun Communications

Amongst respondents in both surveys, their rankings of the types of digital interactions they were most likely to participate in indicated a strong trend of valuing flexible and fun communications.

Figure 1

How often would Digital Service team members participate in the following activities:

- Virtual lunch where everyone joins a Teams call and eats together
- Virtual lunch where everyone joins a Teams call and eats together and the l...
- Virtual games session on a Teams call (such as online Bingo or group Wordle...
- Virtual games that can be played asynchronously or whenever team members ha...
- Interest-based Discord channels dedicated to specific topics (movies, books...
- Interest-based digital discussion groups over Teams where specific topics a...
- Discord channel dedicated to sharing work updates that encourages low-stake...
- Periodic meetings over a Teams call to discuss work updates that encourages...
- Drop-in discord room where anyone can join anytime
- Drop-in hours where team members can join a discord room during specific ti...
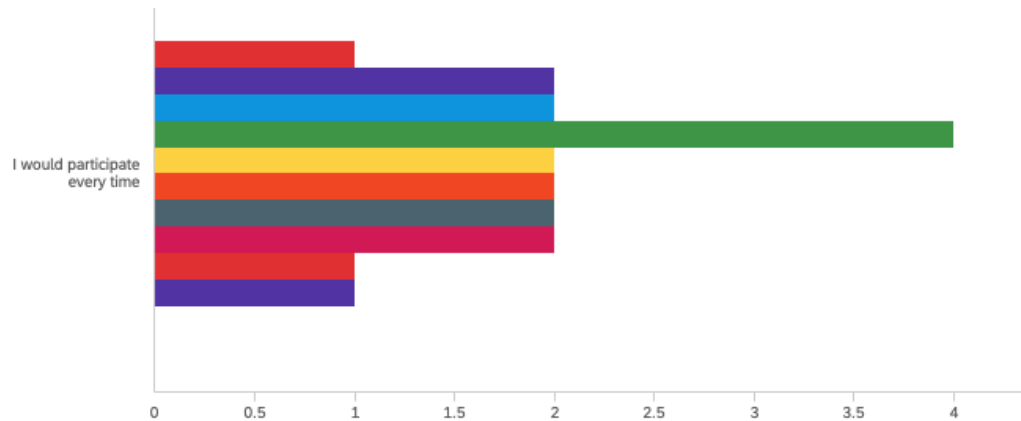
The results indicated that virtual games that are not situated in a specific time or space were the most likely to draw participation from team members. Asynchronous communication allows a sense of participation being low-stakes, casual, and convenient. The topic of a game inherently elicits a sense of play and relief from the seriousness of work. These factors are valued amongst respondents. One respondent provides an explanation as to why asynchronous activities are likely to promote participation describing, "Project deadlines and conflicting meetings could prevent participation." The conflicting schedules and daily routines of remote workers complicates participation in time-situated activities.

Conclusion

Recommendations

Maintain Flexibility to Work From Home

Provide Opportunities to Have Spontaneous and Casual Interactions Using Digital Tools

Digital Communication Strategies Should be Asynchronous and Playful

List of quotes to be incorporated into conclusion:

Therefore, to build a remote company culture, the focus must be on different practices: clear and open communication in all directions, a focus on results and the processes that get them, and trust. (Cochran)

Those small but significant interactions are an important part of strengthening the underlying fabric of a remote team. (Cochran)

The employee experience has a big impact on how employees perceive company culture, which directly affects their engagement levels (Wenninghoff)

Another way to help dispersed employees bond is through virtual events. The right events can engage and connect your employees, even when they're working miles apart. Ideal events are immersive and fun-like a chocolate-making class or a virtual escape room-to promote participation, active conversation, and genuine connection. (Wenninghoff)

But when your employees are working from home and can't leverage in-person connection, communication needs to be more intentional. Leaders need to create new vehicles that facilitate collaboration between remote and hybrid employees. (Wenninghoff)
less sociability, a need that can only be satisfied in person (interaction with colleagues nurtures friendships and brings a lighter dimension to the work-place, with shared lunch breaks among the best moments, whereas at home, they can feel "alone and abandoned" (Linhart)

A remote team that communicates effectively can dramatically impact its overall productivity and long-term viability. Even though everyone is separated, teams can build great communication cultures by bringing their office cultures to the virtual space. (Vetter)

The goal should be to create an environment where everyone contributes, not just the outgoing or vocal ones. Reduce any red tape or formality associated with communication to avoid employees just keeping quiet, which isn't healthy for employees or your team. (Vetter)