



Off-White Paper No. 1

Distributed, Not Divided: The Urgency in Building Cohesion at Work

**PROGRESS
REPORT**

From Sylvain Labs, nontraditional business intelligence with matching tips and tools to help you implement learnings at work.

IN THIS PAPER

	INTRODUCTION
<u>03</u>	Through the Looking Glass: Inverted Ways of Working
	PART ONE
<u>05</u>	The Warring Forces of Cohesion and Entropy
	PART TWO
<u>08</u>	Building Distributed Cohesion
<u>09</u>	Environment
<u>10</u>	Culture
<u>11</u>	Technology
<u>12</u>	Rhythm
	PART THREE
<u>14</u>	Preparing for a Long Ride: Settling in Without Settling
	PART FOUR
<u>16</u>	Cohesion Toolkit

Distributed, Not Divided: The Urgency in Building Cohesion at Work

RELEASED

July 2020

CONTRIBUTORS

Steven Ebert
Trevor Larry
Jess Vander
Helen Li
Katie Sadow
Joey Camire

ABSTRACT

Losing a shared office space has wide-ranging effects on team dynamics that are just now starting to come into full view. In distributed work, leaders must intentionally design for cohesion – the unified feeling of togetherness critical for productivity, collaboration, and alignment around common goals. With concerted effort, the infrastructure that holds our teams together can be made even stronger by investing resources into the distributed equivalents of four key domains of the contemporary organization: environment, culture, technology, and rhythm.

In the COVID-19 world, we’re facing what can only be described as a complete phase shift – a total inversion – to our way of working. Duh, right? We’re all living it, but what do we do about it?

For time immemorial, organizations have been fundamentally defined by location. All other features of organizations were borne out of the people to whom we found ourselves in close proximity. As societies grew, we were able to stretch these possibilities with superstructures like governments – allowing for massive groups of people to work in cohesion while being distributed from one another.

However, the operative units of those superstructures were still the people who interacted with one another on a daily basis.¹ These units are where culture – norms, rules, agreements, friendships, relationships – are formed and perpetuated. When we lose the ability to interact with each other face-to-face, the structural integrity of our organizations weakens – the fabric that holds our teams together gets stretched thin.

As we all transition to distributed work, geography no longer serves as the root of our cultures or the glue of our work communities. In that world... In this world – how do we keep organizational cohesion strong? Is it possible to achieve even greater levels of social cohesion? Can we make our cultures and organizations stronger in a time where all of that seems impossible? What if our intuition for how we built our companies in the first place was all wrong? The question we set out to answer in this Off-White Paper is:

1. [Dunbar's number](#), baby! Oft-maligned, but forever in our (and a maximum of 150 other people's) hearts.

HOW CAN WE FIND NEW WAYS OF
CREATING COHESION FOR TEAMS THAT
DON'T RELY ON PROXIMITY?

INTRODUCTION

Through the Looking Glass: Inverted Ways of Working

PART ONE

The Warring Forces of Cohesion and Entropy

When thinking about the most crucial elements of a productive workplace, *cohesion* is arguably the most important. In simplest terms, cohesion is the feeling of unification that an individual has of being aligned with others against a common purpose. It's the feeling of being on the inside, together, a part of something bigger than yourself.

In his book, *The Heart Aroused*, poet-philosopher David Whyte talks about cohesion as it relates to a similar concept in complexity theory, called a “strange attractor”:

“All the evidence from the science of complexity says that given certain clear parameters...communities or teams will become self-organizing. They will be attracted to certain flowing states of organization natural to the people who make them up. In complexity theory, these flowing states are poetically called strange attractors.
...

A work team made up of collaborating individuals would...have, if you could measure and plot creativity, failure, and success, a strange attractor that depicted the edges and patterns of the team's behavior. This pattern would be constrained by the forces operating within the company and outside in the market, but it would be most affected by the focus and vision of the team. A strong vision and purpose acts as a kind of strange attractor, allowing individual creativity while acting as a natural constraint to behavior that is detrimental to the team. Without repressive rules, then, a cohesive team with a strong sense of its mission, ethics, and tasks can be allowed a lot of leeway to develop its own approach to problems.”

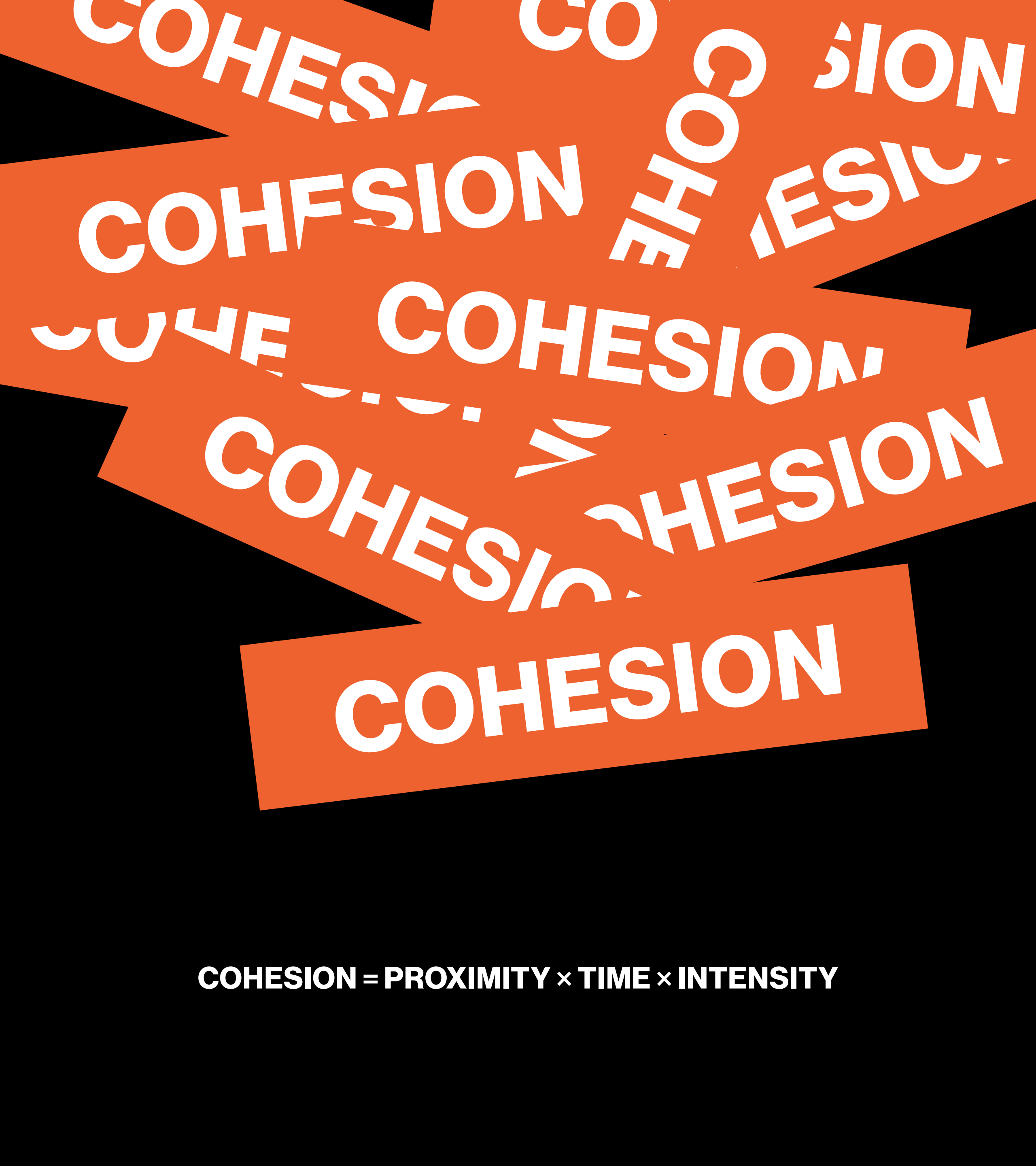
2. [Turns out](#), cohesion can lead to more productivity, and productivity can lead to more cohesion.
3. There's a ton of media that supports this principle. Hype House on TikTok and shows like *Too Hot To Handle* demonstrate that you can quickly shortcut cohesion building by simply doing more intense things in the same place.
4. As time goes on, we've seen that the flexible office is the much more successful (and dashinglly handsome) contemporary of the open office. Open offices were both a cohesion builder and a cost-saving measure; the flexible-office grew out of the pains of its implementation, with a focus on functionality and "zones" for productivity. Ask your local architect — she'll tell you all about it.

Whyte is roughly outlining the concept of *cohesion*, an intangible force that binds teams together around shared commonalities. There's lots of research around the benefits of cohesive teams; specifically, the symbiotic relationship between cohesion and productivity.² It makes sense: having a common vision with the people you work with, the easier it will be to make progress. While cohesion building is an organic process, the [Proximity Principle](#) can act as an accelerant³:

The contemporary office is loosely modeled around cohesion-building through *proximity*. Cubicles have been abandoned for open floor plans that promote communication; communal workspaces and kitchens have risen in popularity as they are means of bringing people together in less rigid environments. Most famously, Apple's campus model is circular, and operates on the same basic principle as Duty Free in an airport — to get where you want to go (bathrooms, kitchens, common space), you have to pass what the designer has deemed as the most valuable resource: other people. For airports, it's a way to get you to spend money; for Apple, it's a way to build community.

The effort to build offices that, in turn, build cohesion has been largely successful.⁴ Today, people now expect meaningful relationships with coworkers, and look for perks that act as surrogates for cohesion: office space design, lunches, community activities, and more. You can recognize cohesion across a few key domains:

- Environment:** The space you physically occupy
- Culture:** The ideals, values, and principles that connect a team
- Technology:** The tools/tech stack a company employs
- Rhythm:** The interpersonal patterns of collaborative creation and output



5. It just means the natural tendency for things to move apart, but a single word is so much more convenient.

But as time goes on, leaders in the space have noted [the shifting context](#) around how teams build cohesion while no longer relying on proximity. Shifts in the very nature of how we work – from the gig economy to organizations with global footprints – are inhibiting our ability to be proximate and form close connections with all our coworkers. Until now, we’ve paid little mind to this threat to team cohesion.

The COVID-19 pandemic created a dramatic and immediate forcing function for companies: build a functional de-facto distributed workforce. Suddenly, people were working from homes around the country and world, seeing coworkers and colleagues exclusively through video calls. Suddenly, the environments, culture, technology, and rhythms that were all reinforced through proximate interactions went haywire.

THIS **NEGATIVE IMPACT ON PRODUCTIVITY AND COLLABORATION** IS EVIDENCE OF A DIFFERENT FORCE: **ENTROPY.**⁵

Just like cohesion is a natural force, so too is entropy: it’s the organic process of things pushing apart. And in the same way that proximity naturally applies a cohesive force to teams, distance applies an entropic force. When a team is used to being proximate, it leverages proximity to its advantage across each domain – centralized spaces for brainstorming, camarade-

rie-building banter, shared lunches, and more. When proximity disappears, we miss out on the things we came to rely on: the shared environments, energies, jokes, snacks, moments, beers, and dance moves that make the sometimes endless workload worth it.

As it stands, many teams are powering through the chaos of distributed work on adrenaline and willpower alone, finding band-aids for broken ways of working. We may have cut down our commute times,⁶ but [work days are longer](#) and burnout is higher than before the pandemic and adding to pre-existing problems of the modern workforce. If teams are to remain distributed – and it certainly appears this may be the case – rethinking how to make our teams stronger and more cohesive without proximity will have long-lasting benefits for every organization. Looking to the tools at our disposal, then, in the forms of our organization’s environment, culture, technology and rhythm can help strengthen cohesion and fight the natural forces of entropy during this period of great change.

6. Here’s a head-scratcher: turns out people really miss these? There’s a lot of research related to [Marchetti’s constant](#) that explores the effect that commuting has on personal well-being. And while there’s plenty of research to support that long commutes are [wildly bad for us](#), there’s also support for the idea that short commutes can be [beneficial](#). The F train may have been crowded, but it actually might have been our saving grace.



PART TWO

Building Distributed Cohesion

Proximity is effective because it taps into our evolutionarily generated powers as social creatures to form bonds with others without even thinking about it. Proximity may be the fastest route to building cohesion, but it's not the only way to create a “strange attractor” for your teams.

Our goal in this section is to build a mental model for how each of the four business domains we have highlighted in Part One – environment, culture, technology, and rhythm – contributes (or detracts!) from cohesion, and to provide simple, immediate mechanisms you can implement to take action in your own teams, organization, or company.

7. Mirror neurons allow us to inhabit the emotions, sensations, and movement of those around us. When we see others sad or happy, we often feel some of that. When we see others move, we actually approximate those movements in our mind. When we see someone eat something, we can almost taste it. We are, in a sense, able to inhabit the experience of those around us and this creates an almost emotional hive mind.
8. No one knows the power that sensory stimuli have on us better than Aradhna Krishna, who established the field of Sensory Marketing. Her feature in a 2015 issue of *Harvard Business Review* reveals some of her longstanding research and how she pushes leaders to reconsider designing for all senses – not just sight – to communicate with consumers.
9. This is inextricably linked with the concept of **social appraisal**: the tendency to share an emotional reaction with others in response to the same scenario. tl;dr - Emotions are contagious.

Environments

As discussed earlier, well-designed environments are, in-effect, a cheat code for cohesion because we are naturally inclined to cohere with others in our shared environment. This is due, in part, to a type of specialized cell found across our cortex: the mirror neuron.⁷ When people all around you are buzzing, happy, and have purpose, it’s much easier to find those things for yourself. Just being with others frequently, for the duration of a typical work day, we cohere into some emotional superstructure.

Now this isn’t always good – it’s also where you find literature around subjects like emotional contagion. If people are negative, negativity will spread. If people are stressed or fearful, those feelings will spread. But this phenomenon, if you’re tapped into it, is something you can manage. The office, in that way, becomes an attentive leader’s extended sensory system for their team’s well-being and sense of cohesion.

In a distributed workforce, then, what we’re really encountering is the shutdown of our natural ability to cohere with one another when in a shared space. Mirror neurons work without having to think about it. Couple this with the fact that people’s new environments (their homes) are rarely designed for work, and you have the complete breakdown of the environment contributing to team cohesion. In the same way that the task-oriented office was designed to drive cohesion, home offices will need to be designed to address new needs that come with working from home.

This means we need to create new tactics to simulate what we’re losing when we lose a physical, proximate, shared environment: (1) emotional synchrony; (2) a way for leaders to assess and respond to the team’s health and wellbeing; and (3) a space designed for work.

Environment Action No. 1

Synchronize emotions and energy across the team.

Our senses deeply affect our attitudes, moods, and our memories.⁸ Sharing sensory stimuli is a natural biohack that attunes people to common elements in their environment, setting the context for what to pay attention to and how to interpret the world around them.⁹ Senses are a powerful force, if sometimes overlooked, when groups of people need to unite around a common consensus. Without the shared office space, special attention must be given to our emotional, sensory, and energy states, so that we can stay in sync with each other and sync into work.

Environment Action No. 2

Audit your team’s health and well-being.

The mental strength required to be productive from home during a global pandemic is challenging even among the most diligent of employees – yet some indications show increases in productivity and longer working days for employees compensating for having less time to work in-person. Such increases in productivity often come at a mental and emotional cost, and can be unsustainable if not managed appropriately. While employee health is always an important consideration for employers, taking a proactive and empathetic approach has never been more critical to keeping employees happy and healthy in distributed work.

Environment Action No. 3

Bring everyone’s home office up to speed.

We previously worked in spaces designed for work, but now we’re working in spaces designed for living. For most people, the burden of creating their home workspace was placed on themselves. In distributed work, with office space existing in our own homes, companies bear some responsibility for creating productive environments for their team.

Take a look at our energy-syncing **thought starters** the next time your team needs to find consensus.

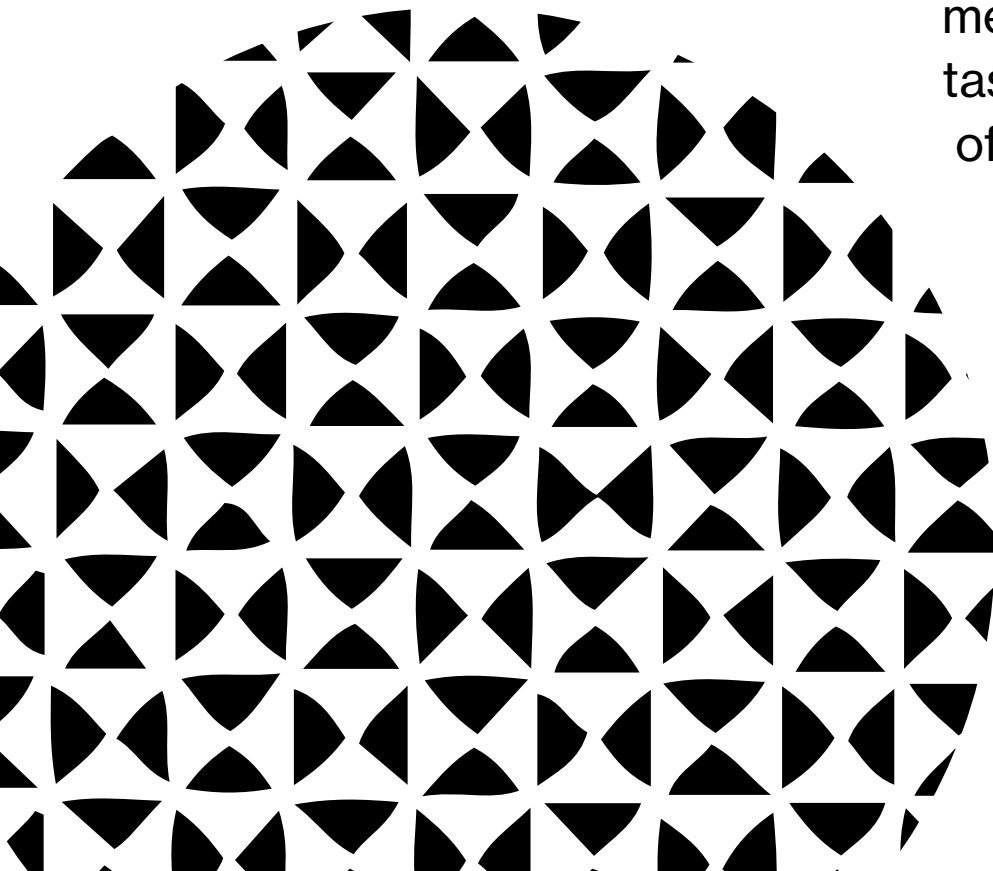
[page 16](#)

Tailor this **survey** to your needs! In it, we ask all things health, well-being, and home offices.

[page 17](#)

Check out our **WFH reading list** to stay on top of developing research around changing workspace needs.

[page 17](#)



10. Strong ties are the five or so people to whom you're closest. Weak ties are the people whose name you might know, but to whom you would have very little to say were you stuck together in an elevator.

Culture

If *environment* is the most literal domain for cohesion, bringing us together in physical space, culture is likely the most abstract. It's often one of the first questions that arises when someone inquires about a potential employer – “*What’s the culture like?*” – yet it remains one of the hardest things to pin down for companies and academics alike. We often refer to culture as “everything a group shares” – where “everything” means values, stories, points of reference, the way people interact and treat one another, and a sense of collective purpose. The more a group shares, the stronger their culture becomes. The stronger the culture, the more cohesive the group.

In distributed work, then, there are some key areas that feel under threat. Companies and teams that leave their purpose, beliefs, or mission loosely defined are susceptible to “story drift,” where the lack of daily interactions can cause individuals to interpret these important cultural elements differently. This becomes unsustainable in distributed teams where misalignment can easily grow because we don’t have the shared interactions and experiences to help fill in the gaps. Those stories spread more easily when the frequency of daily interactions are far more common, but in distributed teams, we’re losing the accidental and incidental contact with everyone we don’t work with directly. All individuals have “weak” and “strong” ties in their company.¹⁰ According to [Ben Waber of Humanyze](#), in pandemic-induced distributed work, communication with strong ties has increased significantly, while communication with weak ties has “fallen off a cliff” – dropping 30%.

This puts a huge responsibility on leaders of companies and teams to actively maintain company and team culture by: (1) solidifying and making explicit the purpose and vision of

teams; and (2) strengthening the interpersonal health of teams through new shared experiences and increased interaction.

Culture Action No. 1

Rally teams around an explicit purpose and vision.

Now that we have fewer daily interactions with teammates across our organization, what once may have been a unifying vision for teams can start to take new shapes and new interpretations, drifting among separate groups. To combat “story drift,” leaders must make the overall purpose and vision of each team clear, so that everyone can stay aligned around common goals. Whether in an all-hands meeting or an office-wide email, it’s vital to make purpose and vision explicit.

Culture Action No. 2

Share new experiences, especially across teammates in separate working groups.

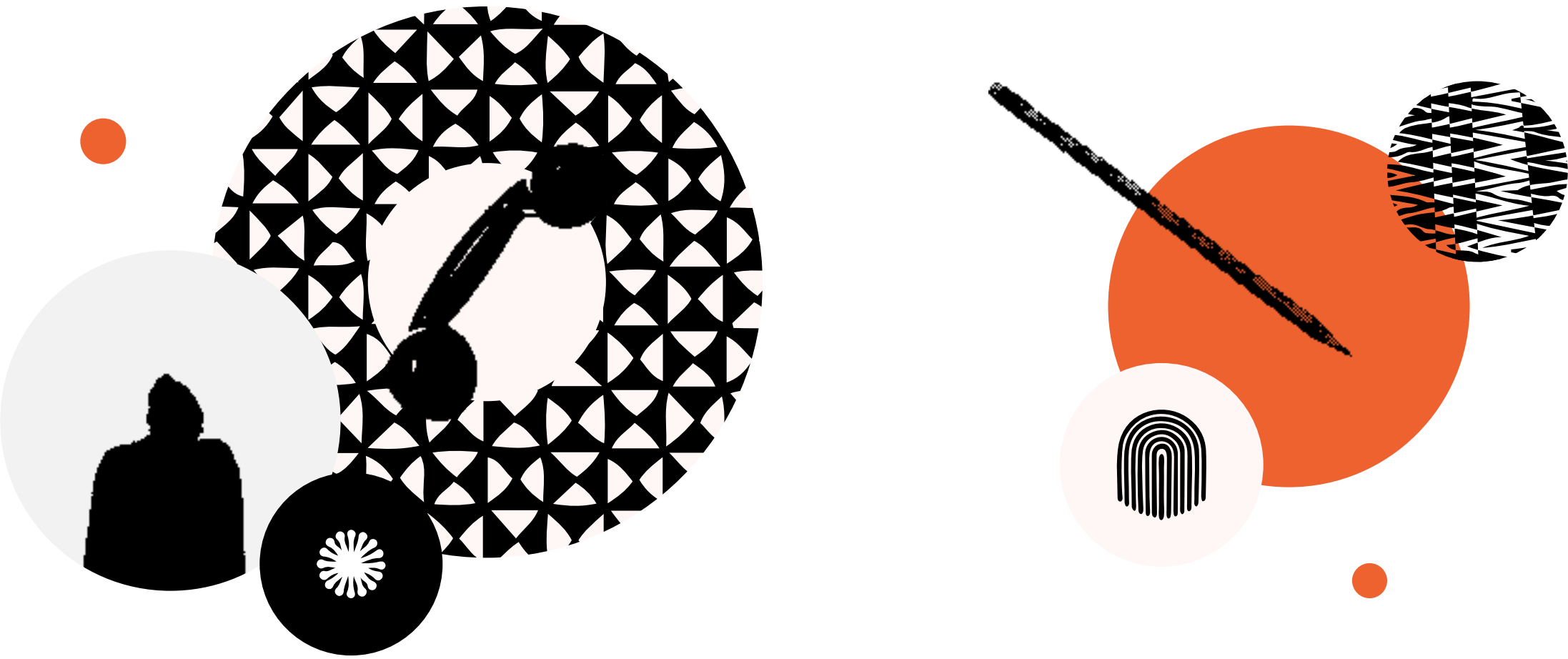
It’s easy for socializing to take a back-burner when we go remote. (The only coworkers we run into in the kitchen now are our kids and pets.) Part of staying connected with teammates is finding time to talk about life beyond work, and keeping those conversations alive with people beyond your immediate working team. From our first-hand experiences, we’ve found that scheduled, forced fun can actually turn out to be... fun? Sparking spontaneous and frequent interactions among teammates will keep bonds strong long into distributed work.

This list of **questions for leaders** can help ensure your vision remains clear.

page 18

Check out these **activities** for staying connected.

page 18



11. A wilder alternative: buy a full-size whiteboard for your bedroom and turn it into a [Rocketboard](#) like one of the authors of this Off-White Paper did.

Technology

In so many ways, technology is the most straightforward of the domains for creating cohesion. Essentially, there are two key questions a company or team needs to be able to answer with regards to their tools and technology as it relates to their ability to create cohesion: (1) what is the right tool for a given job; and (2) how have we agreed to use that tool?

Under normal conditions, this is one area that many teams are pretty good at. Engineering organizations in particular tend to be really great at this, ensuring the right tools are used at the right time, by defining their “stack.” Distributed work introduces a radical shift in context. New problems are arising for workers on distributed teams, and people are turning to new technology to solve those new problems, or evolving the ways they used existing technology in their “stacks.” (Think: working silently on a video call with your team running in the background to approximate presence; using a digital “whiteboard” to add visual stimuli to a brainstorm.¹¹)

The evolving relationship between team members and their tools creates a crucial area of focus for leaders: (1) clearly defining the use case for various tools; and (2) taking an exploratory approach to discovering new tools for collaboration and varied working styles.

Tech Action No. 1

Set clear expectations around use and purpose.

Every organization uses messaging and email differently. In most companies, the relative importance and urgency of each communication channel is something that we get a sense for over time. One of the tricky aspects of this approach is that leaving time expectations undefined [reinforces unspoken power dynamics](#) and contributes to the [always-on](#) feeling perpetuated by work tech, as people read and respond to messages around the clock. To get timely responses when necessary, it’s important to set out the [chronemic agency](#) of each communication channel and to be considerate of how and when each is being used.

Tech Action No. 2

Explore a diversity of collaboration tools for a diversity of processing styles.

Now that we’re separated, going analog for brainstorm sessions or workshops is, unfortunately, anti-social. Pens, papers, and whiteboards no longer do justice to the creative, collaborative nature of a brainstorm session. With (hopefully) neurodiverse teams and people with different skills and functions, there’s a lot to be gained from trying new collaborative, creative tools based on a combination of processing styles and the aim of the collaborative session. Now’s the time to embrace new options and rework old tools to see how they adapt.

See the [Urgency Matrix](#) for making expectations explicit among teams.

page 19

Check out our [Collaborative Tech Guide](#) organized by different activities and processing styles.

page 19

12. Ever heard of [Tuckman's stages of group development](#)? Now you have! The basic premise is that groups go through four stages of development - Forming ([meeting and learning about each other](#)) > Storming ([trust building by resolving disagreement](#)) > Norming ([tolerance and aligning against common goals](#)) > Performing ([achievement and success, often more than expected](#)).

Rhythm

Think of rhythm as the interpersonal counterpart to the technology domain: the formal and informal behaviors that enable teams to collaborate more productively and efficiently. The maddening part about finding the perfect team rhythm is that every team is different. Entire disciplines¹² have been formed around the way teams come together, establish norms, and define their ways of working. In this way, each team's rhythm is unique, informed by the individual members of the team. Defining this rhythm is a team sport; it's an arduous task that requires everyone's participation. With enough time, most teams can find their ideal collaborative rhythm – coordinating workflows, clarifying responsibilities, routinizing repeated tasks, ensuring quality, and smoothing ways of working. Rhythm builds cohesion because, like any rhythm in music, if everyone on the team understands it, they can anticipate what comes next.

But distributed work throws a wrench in the works because that rhythm is no longer centralized. Each person has a different home life, a different productivity setup, and personal lives whose unique contours exert more influence over their workflow than in a normal work setting. In other words, we now have to reckon with the fact that each of us has our own personal rhythm to operate against. This is challenging! Even high-performing team members with optimal home workflows can still struggle with cohesion, simply because of the challenges of having to reconcile the rhythms of different team members.

While it's tempting to double down and try to reinstate a central rhythm for a team, the smarter avenue for leaders is to lean into new approaches that give individuals flexibility. This doesn't mean shared expectations go away, but rather that

those expectations can be reached through individualized ways of working. For leaders, this means: (1) encourage teams to lean into “bursty” communication styles; (2) centralize resources to promote reflection for teams to use on their own time; and (3) to understand and adapt to the needs of each individual person.

Process Action No. 1

Learn team members' individual preferences and adapt to them as a team.

New demands outside of work upended personal routines so drastically that the average work day barely resembles the 9-to-5 life from before. Whether it be caring for children or finding the least busy times to go to the grocery store, employees' daily availability is less uniform. Some are using this to their advantage: early birds start writing coffee-fueled emails at 6 am while night owls kick into high gear after dinner. Whatever the individual case may be, it's important to share new routines with each other and communicate what will help us work best individually, so managers can coordinate optimal collective productivity.

Conducting an audit of teams styles and approaches can be a delicate subject, but when you allow people the permission and flexibility to do this, it can create a level of trust and autonomy that can greatly increase cohesion.



Ask teams to complete **Personal User Manuals** to understand the circumstances that help everyone do their best work.

Process Action No. 2
Create communication standards that promote “bursty” exchange.

In transitioning to remote work, we’ve relied on more constant communication as a crutch in keeping teams on track and monitoring their progress. It’s tempting to say over-communication is key, but a [study](#) published in the journal, *Academy of Management Discoveries*, reveals that teams who communicate in “bursts” – or short periods of high activity – are more productive and collaborative than their counterparts whose exchanges take place over longer periods of time and across multiple threads, or those who try to stay in perfect lock-step. A little distance is critical for deep work, but it can be hard to walk the line between micromanagement and feeling out of the loop. Restructuring meetings around windows of “deep work” and “active collaboration” is key to finding the right balance.

Process Action No. 3
Develop shared resources for mutual inspiration.

Since being confined to our four walls, the breadth and richness of our lives are feeling a bit...reduced. What we’re seeing, reading, and watching affects what we create, so it’s important those sources stay diverse and that teams continue sharing inspiration with the rest of the group for the healthy comingling and merging of ideas. Beyond creative inspiration, it’s easier than ever for departmental knowledge to get confined to silos across an organization. The healthy circulation of information can be stunted at this time, but keeping an easily accessible resource or portfolio of the latest updates in your department is an easy way to keep information flowing across small and large organizations alike.

To promote “bursty” communication within your team, check out [these resources](#).

[page 20](#)

Stay connected by sharing [inspiration and information](#) across the team.

[page 18](#)



PART THREE

Preparing for a Long Ride: Settling in Without Settling

Since the onset of COVID-19, leaders have had to navigate a complex tension: the acute fears surrounding the virus and the realities of keeping a business afloat and teams functioning. Leaders have wrestled with how to address two opposing concerns about employee well-being: the pressing need to keep them safe, and the latent need to keep them employed. These considerations, and the resulting decisions therein, are not trivial; there are material impacts on the livelihood and health of everyone involved.

We are now entering a moment of transition, with leaders coming to terms with the reality that the world as it was is a long way off. The sudden transition to distributed work is destined to have long-lasting effects on the principles that shape our organizations. So many questions remain: how long will the pandemic last? What roadblocks and pain points aren't yet visible? How can we use our knowledge of cohesion domains to try and foresee challenges and minimize friction? How do we onboard new team members? How can we create a new normal?

It would be easy to chalk these questions up to some secondary business function — executive coaching, employee satisfaction, retention, and the like. But the reality is that these questions are highly practical. We've seen significant shifts in the types of questions clients are asking us as they navigate these new realities, not only about how to work, but also about the work itself. How will my business change? How do I add value to the lives of our customers? What can we do in and beyond this moment? These are not ephemeral ideals; they are the fundamental questions that determine if a business survives.

The goal of writing this paper was to not only speak to the ways of building cohesion, but also to demonstrate a posture of meaningful response. “Agile” gets thrown around a lot as a buzzword, but this is a moment that demands agility. This is the thesis of this entire paper: we are being given the opportunity to rewrite the foundational ways of conducting business, and all of it is possible. What we’re encouraging, as you and your teams are rewriting those rules, is to weigh your decisions on their ability to create or conflict with cohesion. To do so requires flexibility, patience, and some brass tacks. It requires you to be transparent and communicative. It requires you to be uncomfortable – to step outside of the codified expectations around how we work together, and to embrace a new way of thinking. It requires a meaningful response, and at the very bottom of it all, none of that is possible without cohesion.

PART FOUR

Cohesion Toolkit

Sound: Create a collaborative work playlist (or several) for people to tune into throughout the day as though they have the background music from the office playing through their headphones. Additionally, starting meetings with a chosen tune can help set the mood and eliminate the awkward silences as people join the meeting.

Taste: Several office catering companies are adapting to distributed work with food deliveries, but other options could include sharing cocktail recipes for team happy hours or getting personal pizzas for the team after key deliverables and checkpoints.

Sight: Playing videos over a video call can be laggy and choppy, but sending a link to a video for people to watch can communicate a lot in a short amount of time. Other easier, quicker options are to do a quick tour of your deskpace when joining calls, inviting people into your space and vice versa. Turning on video should never be made mandatory, but eye contact and visuals can go a long way.

Touch: Unless you’re ordering comfy chairs for everyone, don’t go there. Or do what we did and order everyone company-branded snuggles.

Smell: We may be desensitized to the aromas in our home, but candles and essential oils can be a nice gift, right? Maybe there’s a new [Yankee Candle](#) scent that will remind people of their [long-lost office space](#)...

Emotion: The ‘emotional handshake’ at the beginning of meetings helps people connect on the same emotional wavelength and sets a tone for empathy and understanding among teammates and with clients. Some salespeople are reporting greater success with opening up a onversation about childcare rather than the weather.

Energy: With any of these thought starters, consider how it affects the collective energy of the people in the meeting and how it aligns with the meeting’s objective. Setting aside time for reflection during the meeting can be great to create calm and think through long-term implications of important decisions, while playing tunes can get the creative juices flowing during a brainstorming session.

Lack of proximity is most obvious in the environmental domain, with a lack of shared space impacting our ability to align. Here are a few ways to build alignment by syncing senses (say that five times fast).

ENERGY SYNCING
THOUGHT STARTERS



WFH READING LIST

The future of at-home productivity remains in development, with new and diverse opinions entering the public discourse. Here’s a list of some of the research and thought leadership we’ve found compelling.

[How the Coronavirus Will Reshape Architecture](#), The New Yorker, Kyle Chayka

[The Crucial Difference Between Remote Work and Distributed Work](#), Dropbox, Anthony Kosner

[Working From Home While Black](#), Harvard Business Review, Laura Morgan Roberts, Courtney L. McCluney

[What If Working From Home Goes On...Forever?](#), New York Times, Clive Thompson

[Corporate Aid Tracker](#), U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

EMPLOYEE WELLBEING SURVEY

We’ve rolled out this simple survey to track changes to our team’s well-being and productivity in real time. It’s helping us understand how attitudes and behaviors about WFH are changing, and lets us adjust accordingly. Modify to your needs!

Working from Home

- How much do you enjoy working from home? [1-10]
- How has WFH affected your physical comfort? [1-10]
- How has WFH affected your sense of wellbeing? [1-10]
- How has WFH affected your ability to be productive? [1-10]
- How has WFH affected your ability to collaborate? [1-10]
- How has WFH affected your ability to engage with clients? [1-10]
- How busy have you been since we started WFH?
[Less busy, More busy, About the same]
- Did you work from home frequently prior to the crisis?
[Yes, No, Occasionally]
- Do you have any concerns about continuing to WFH?
[Open-ended]

Returning to the Office

- How important is it to you to work in the office like we did before the crisis? [1-10]
- How eager are you to return to the office? [1-10]
- How open are you to wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) like masks and gloves in the office? [1-10]
- How open are you to WFH for another 3 months? [1-10]
- How open are you to WFH for another year? [1-10]
- How open are you to WFH permanently? [1-10]

Conclusion

- Do you have any concerns about returning to the office?
What are they? [Open-ended]
- Overall, how do you feel we have handled the COVID-19 crisis?
[Open-ended]
- Do you have any suggestions for other things we can/should consider doing? [Open-ended]

STAYING

Fewer in-person interactions can weaken team bonds, especially among people who don't work together directly. Explore activities and exercises that bring people together spontaneously around common interests, keeping team culture alive and inspiration and information flowing across the organization.

Activities

- [Water Cooler Trivia](#) - A trivia contest designed for office teams (with a Slack integration, to boot).
- [Hallway](#) - Virtual break rooms to promote spontaneous conversations for remote teams.
- [Virtual Escape Rooms](#) - Online puzzles that invite everyone to jump in together, stripping away titles, hierarchy, and specialized areas of expertise that may be inhibiting collaboration.

Sharing Info + Inspo

- Slack Channels or Google Chat Rooms - There's little of greater importance than an organized team communication platform. That said, there's room to help people manage their own notifications and stay on top of urgent messages, and creating rooms or channels around common interests can be a fun way to connect. (See [Urgency Matrix](#) for functional guidelines.)
- Shared social media accounts - For projects that rely on cultural relevance or outside inspiration, creating a shared social media account allows teams to send relevant posts directly to the group or log-in to see a curated feed about the topic or immerse themselves in the audience's perspective.
- [Gmail Groups](#) - We're always looking for new Gmail hacks and organization tips, and creating topical group threads is an easy way to share emails and links with multiple contacts all in one easy-to-reference location. Our recent favorites: a running list of COVID resources and industry Hot Takes.

CONNECTED

VISION ALIGNMENT
QUESTIONS

To combat "story drift," leaders must make the overall purpose and vision of each team clear so that everyone can stay aligned around a common goal. Whether in an all-hands meeting or an office-wide email, it's vital to make purpose and vision explicit with clear answers to the following questions.

- What is our vision? How have we defined it?
- How are we communicating that vision to our distributed team?
- How are we communicating our vision to partners and clients?
- How are we actively building toward our vision in a cohesive fashion?
- At Sylvain Labs, we often design workshop series for our clients to socialize strategy work and talk to teams about how it connects to their goals and timelines. Contact us if you'd like our help in mobilizing teams around your company's vision.



Not all modes of communication are created equal. Use this [Urgency Matrix](#) to make your workday comms more fit-to-purpose, and get the most out of each one by filling in which channels correspond to low- and high- urgency communication.

COLLABORATIVE

TECH GUIDE

As we’ve navigated new ways of brainstorming, planning, organizing, and delivering, we’ve explored a variety of tools that make output easier despite being distributed. Here are a few we really buy into:

Free-Flowing Brainstorms!

- [Jamboard](#) – Great if you’re already using the Google ecosystem. The UX can be a bit clunky at first, but it gets the job done.
- [Figma](#) – A darling of startups everywhere, Figma has a steep learning curve but can accomplish way more than hosting brainstorms.
- [Mural](#) – Similar to Jamboard, but made by Invision. Some find this platform to be a bit more robust.

Structured Alignment!

- [Trello](#) – Oldie but goodie; great for assigning tasks and keeping the trains on time.
- [Mondays](#) – Especially helpful for tracking and assigning if you’re used to Excel/Airtable-like environs.
- [Tape](#) – A beautiful project management tool ideal for large teams (or teams of visual designers).

Guided Walkthroughs!

- [Loom](#) – We haven’t needed this as much, but some of our team have used this to great success – designing and distributing simple video walkthroughs.

Mind Mapping!

- [Roam](#) – The Cult of Roam grows by the hour, with a completely novel approach to taking and organizing notes. Enter at your own risk; this could blow your mind into a million pieces and spatially organize them into a visual, interconnected network of thoughts.
- [Scapple](#) – Great for mind-mapping and brainstorms, Scapple is a virtual piece of unlined paper that lets you draw connections between pieces of information and spatially organize your notes.

PERSONAL

USER MANUALS



This is likely the most celebrated tool we've launched internally – a wildly helpful template for understanding each team member's working styles and communication preferences. It can feel like a big lift at first, but it goes a long way in making teams run more smoothly.

- [Personal User Manuals](#) – Understand the circumstances that help each team member do their best work according to their style and personality with this template enabling them to create their own internal user manual.
- [Working Hours](#) – Within Google Calendar, users can set their working hours for each day, signaling to others when they're available for meetings and when it's best to reach them.

Helpful guidelines to make the most of the time you're together, so you can make the most of the time you're apart. (If Hallmark cards had a professional aphorisms series, we would crush).

- [15Five](#) – A performance management tool built on the premise that team members spend 15 minutes writing updates that take managers five minutes to read.
- [Calendly](#) – A calendar tool that we recommend using to set aside blocks of time for optional 'office hours,' where people can jump in to get alignment and chat with each other about project statuses.

BURSTY

COMMUNICATION

RESOURCES



About us.

Sylvain Labs is a strategy and design consultancy. We help companies seize the reality and potential of their business, products and brands. And we do that through science and whimsy. Founded in 2010, wholly independent, and a Certified B Corporation.

We believe that knowledge is power — if you apply it. Enter the Progress Report. In our Off-White Papers, we provide practical guidance on how to respond to our rapidly-changing world. Now that's progress.

hello@sylvainlabs.com
getprogressreport.com

***PROGRESS
REPORT***