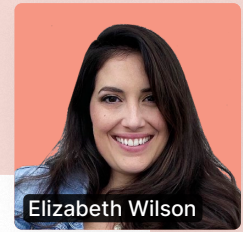




Joaquim Lecha



Whereby



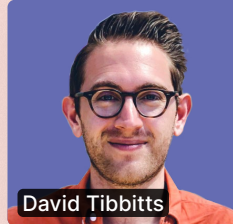
Elizabeth Wilson



Kipp Bodnar

Better Meetings Every Time: The Secret to More Productive Meetings in a Digital World

Leaders from HubSpot, Drift, Asana and more weigh in with real-world tips on how to have fewer, better meetings in a remote-first world.



David Tibbitts



Notion

DRIFT

HubSpot

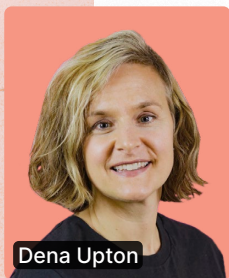


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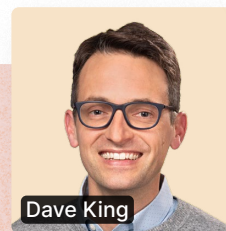
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Abstract®



Dena Upton



Dave King



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Introduction



In early 2020 much of the world shifted online – nearly overnight. Millions of workers around the globe accustomed to regular commutes and seeing co-workers in-person for meetings, collaboration, social gatherings, and more were subject to strict lockdowns that kept them working from home for months at a time.

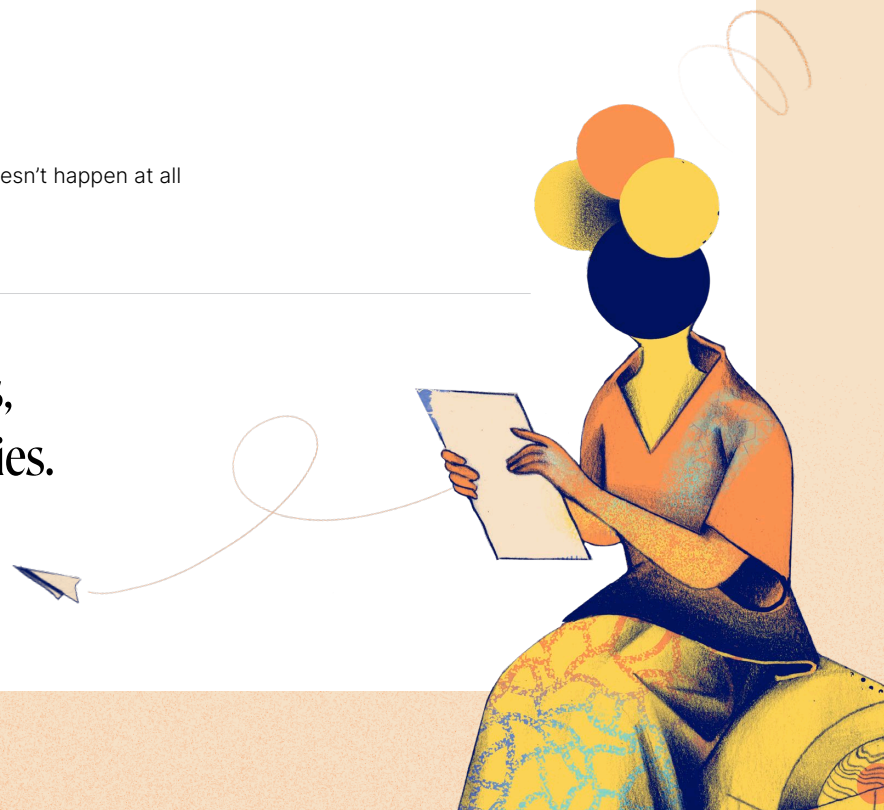
But business leaders around the world quickly adapted and did what was necessary to keep their teams safe and productive. By adopting new virtual meeting technologies and strategies, we've grown accustomed to this new way of working – in a primarily digital-first, remote world.

But getting there hasn't always been easy. And we've learned a lot along the way. But we know there's always room to improve. That's why we asked six experienced leaders to weigh in with their must-read strategies and tactics for better virtual meetings every time.

In these six exclusive interviews, you'll learn how companies like Typeform, Notion, HubSpot, Drift, Abstract, and Asana keep their teams connected – virtually. And you'll walk away with virtual meeting strategies including:

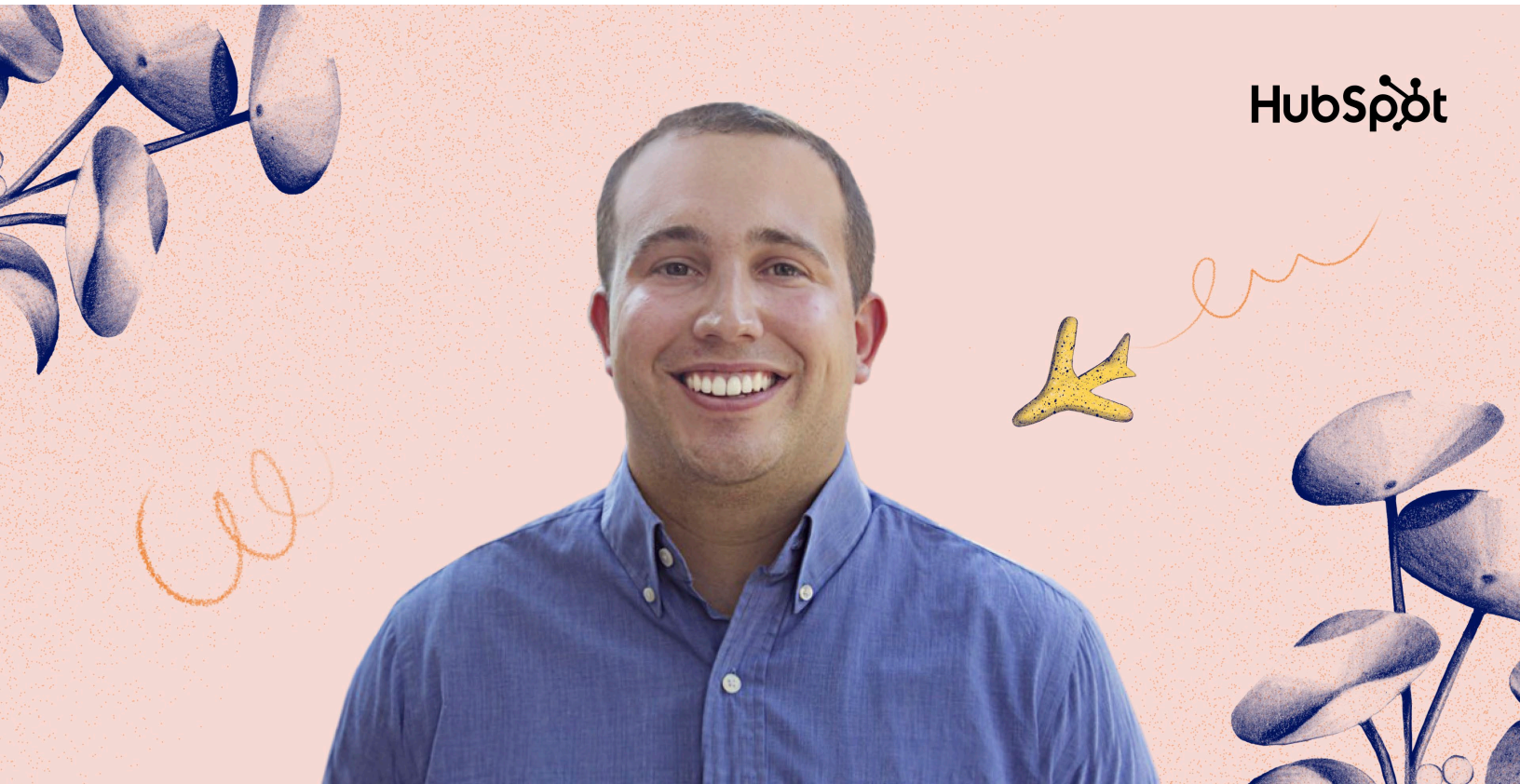
- When to actually have a meeting
- How to set a proper virtual meeting agenda
- Who to include in each meeting and why
- Why the best meeting might be one that doesn't happen at all
- ...and much more!

Keep reading for these tips,
best practices, and strategies.



Kipp Bodnar
Chief Marketing Officer at HubSpot

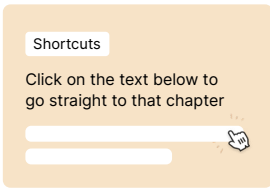
HubSpot's Kipp Bodnar Says the Best Meeting Is the One That Doesn't Happen at All



By now, it's clear that [remote work](#) is not just a stop gap to a post-COVID future – it is the future. Nobody knows this more acutely than Kipp Bodnar, the Chief Marketing Officer at HubSpot. Since his team went fully remote, he's had to navigate the ups and downs of remote work while keeping his [distributed team](#) unified.

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That involves a lot of communicating.

In fact, his whole job is communicating. He oversees strategy and marketing teams worldwide and [wrote the book](#) on B2B social media. He's a public speaker, a blogger, and a marketing advisor. His work is focused on sharing information, providing feedback, making decisions, and executing strategy – and communication is fundamental to all of those aspects.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Kipp spends a lot of time in meetings.

How much is "a lot"? He estimates that 75 to 80 percent of his weeks are spent in meetings – though he wishes that figure was closer to 50 to 60 percent.

Though there are a lot of upsides to [remote collaboration](#) – convenience, accessibility, more channels for feedback and engagement – the learning curve can be steep, especially when it comes to internal comms.

But when a meeting goes well, it leaves everyone involved feeling better informed and better prepared.

“That’s what a meeting is for; to get real in-depth perspective and knowledge in a compressed period of time,” Kipp says.

And when a meeting goes poorly?


“Endless charts, updates on data without context, without summarization and without clear decisions or actions that need to be made from looking at it,” he says, before adding: “Those are the worst.”

In other words, the worst meetings are the ones that would be better served as an email, a video, or any form of asynchronous communication that doesn't require an immediate response.

Here's how Kipp runs better meetings that justify their own existence every time.

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The virtual advantage

Since HubSpot's offices closed, all of Kipp's meetings are now spent online; a new development he says that has actually improved his team's internal communications. Before, they were split across offices around the world.

But when his teams went fully virtual, they quickly saw the upsides to this new mode of work.

Previously, meetings often entailed one group of people in one office meeting virtually with another group elsewhere in the world. Now everybody reports to the office virtually, cycling between Slack, email, and [video meetings](#) as their primary tools of communication. Kipp and his team members have found that there's much less information lost between disparate participants these days than before.

"If a few people are in a room and you're in some remote meeting, you feel very disconnected," he says. "You feel like they've had some type of conversation before the meeting has started, they're going to have it after you hang up, and you're disadvantaged because you don't have that perspective and that insight."

From the very beginning, HubSpot eased into the transition by carefully and deliberately establishing communication protocols so that no piece of information, no matter how small, granular or casual, could fall between the cracks. At HubSpot, emails are for information and feedback, Slack is for casual conversations and urgent messages, and meetings are for decision-making and in-depth feedback.

"We try to be very explicit about the way that people can collaborate, and what the best way to do that actually is," says Kipp.

With these new guidelines in place for how to best collaborate with each other, once people started logging on from their homes, those interstitial casual conversations no longer took place in closed-off quarters. Instead, it didn't matter if one team was in one city and a second was in another. Individual team members were now all equally present and empowered to collaborate with all parties present, using whatever medium worked best for what they had to say. Most importantly, says Kipp, this shift has made people much happier.

Leading a meeting with intention

Prepping for a virtual meeting isn't so different from prepping for its in-person equivalent. You have a person running the meeting, a list of topics and action items, and a time frame. But the difference is how you manage the meeting. Making use of the right tools and aligning your goals are more crucial than ever when it comes to virtual meetings.

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Every step should be approached with intention, says Kipp. When it comes to meeting size, first consider the purpose of the meeting. If the goal is to make a decision, keep the meeting as small as possible (he recommends no more than five people). If the goal is to solicit feedback, open it up to more people.

**“When in doubt, don’t invite somebody,” he says.
“They will be thankful for the time back.”**

In-meeting tools also offer opportunities to engage, solicit feedback, and give subtle cues to people. Kipp and his team rely heavily on chat – nudging someone when there’s a good opportunity coming to jump in with an idea, or to supply some data – to contribute to a meeting without disrupting its flow.

But time is also of the essence; if a meeting runs long or gets off-topic, it’s an indication that participants may not be aligned on the expressed goal of the meeting. In Kipp’s experience, when a meeting goes off the deep end, it’s likely because either the right goal wasn’t set from the beginning or there is an issue of conflicting priorities.

In either case, it’s up to the person leading the meeting to acknowledge the issue and guide the conversation back to its original purpose. In [virtual meetings](#), this means recreating the physical cues and body language of traditional [boardroom meetings](#) to get people’s attention.

“I will raise my hand until the person who’s talking is like, ‘Oh, what’s your question?’” says Kipp. “And I’ll go, ‘This is what I think about the thing you’re talking about, but I think it’s time we go back to the core thing that we need to decide on in this discussion.’”

When words fail, let your body do the talking

While everyone on Kipp’s team has been content [working from home](#) and [collaborating virtually](#), certain key elements of communication are harder to replicate. Body language, eye contact, and other subtle physical signals can get lost in the mix when you’re communicating via webcam to a grid of faces spread out on a monitor. And for Kipp, who many turn to as a source of feedback and direction, that nuance counts for a lot.

“I think being a leader is about how you show up,” he says.

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While previously he could signal approval or disapproval by simply leaning forwards or backwards in his chair, these days he finds himself playing to the camera to communicate his reactions – applauding when he's excited, leaning into his monitor to show engagement, and widely gesticulating with his hands to emphasize a point.

"I'm trying to communicate that this is how I'm feeling and reacting to this thing, which is the whole reason that we're having this meeting – so that we can feel and react to this thing together," he explains.

Make meetings magical, not monotonous

Kipp's work week is spent in and out of meetings, so he's become something of an expert. A great meeting for him is one that combines inspiration with education. A personal favorite is HubSpot's annual Field Trip, where they line up a day of experts to talk about a developing aspect of their business. They take this opportunity to fire off questions, receive feedback, take notes, and debrief.

"It's inspirational and educational all at once, and to me, those are the two criteria for a great meeting," he says.

For Kipp, a successful meeting boils down to having a clear goal, making thoughtful use of the tools available to keep a meeting on track, and leading with intention. Most importantly: Cull that guest list! If you have to ask yourself whether or not you should invite him – or anyone at all – to your next meeting, the answer is simple: Just don't.

"I'm way more thankful for the meetings that I don't get invited to than the meetings that I do get invited to," he says.

Maybe you can relate.

Ready for better virtual meetings?
Get started with Whereby today.

Try Whereby Today



Dave King
CMO at Asana

Asana's Dave King Wants You to Keep Your Wednesdays to Yourself



When scheduling a meeting with Dave King, Asana's Chief Marketing Officer, special attention should be given to the day of the week. Wednesdays are usually a no-go since that's the one day of the week that the company explicitly bans meetings.

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"That's for anybody inside the company," he clarifies. "I do make exceptions."

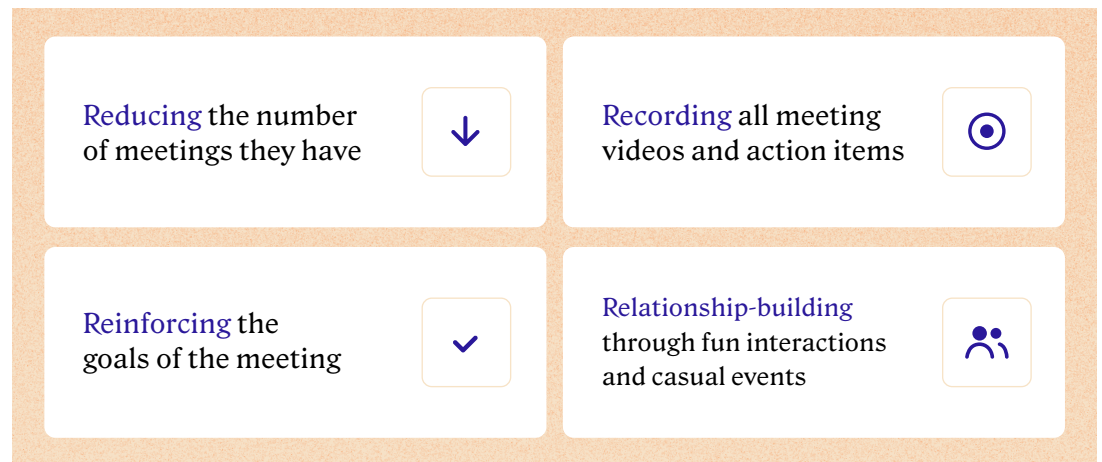
Dave leads a team that helps to build and market an organizational work management platform, so it makes sense that internal (and to an extent, external) communications rely on structure.

Every individual team at Asana sets their own cadence. For Dave's team, there's a weekly team huddle; every month, there's a longer team town hall meeting that helps everyone get up to speed and aligned on goals; and twice a year, the company holds a team offsite (or what in the past has been called a "work from woods").

But that's just the beginning of Dave's meeting schedule. Generally, his days are carved out into long stretches of meetings, with some blocks of focused work wedged in – plus a lunch break with his three kids.

"If I could double the length of those deep work sessions, it would probably be better," he says. "I'm always looking for ways to cut down on meetings."

If you're familiar with the three R's of recycling, then you may appreciate how Dave and his team at Asana approach meetings:



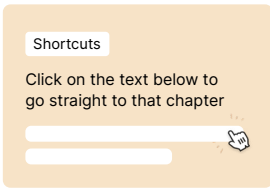
Despite their best intentions, the process is still fine-tuning itself.

"I'm still probably spending more time in meetings than I would like to," he admits. "Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday – pretty much full of meetings outside of those work blocks."

So let's talk about **No Meeting Wednesdays**, AKA **NMW**, AKA – in Dave's opinion – the best day of the workweek.

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The sound of silence

No Meetings Wednesdays are exactly as they sound: No meetings on Wednesdays (with some exceptions, like client calls). That means no scheduling a quick sync call with a teammate, and no unexpected team huddles – just a full day of blissful, deep, focused work.

“No Meeting Wednesdays was born out of this idea that people do their best work when they’ve got dedicated extended blocks of time to really get into a focused state and to experience flow,” he says.

While most companies take a hands-off approach when it comes to leaving their employees to work at their own pace and carve out focused work time for themselves, Asana has scaled up their employee deep-work time by turning it into a company-wide policy.

“If you leave it to each individual to find that chunk of time, they’re going to get interrupted by someone else calling a meeting or sending a Slack message asking you for something, and it’s kind of like a tragedy of the commons,” he says.

So far, the company hasn’t seen any drawbacks to the policy – no dip in productivity, no rush to fill up the other days with meetings. Teams still communicate by Slack on Wednesdays, but they make a conscious effort to minimize these types of social distractions. Now, Dave says, Wednesdays are most peoples’ favorite day of the week. In fact, when offices re-open, the company plans on turning it into Work From Home Wednesdays.

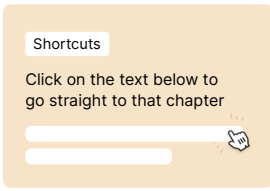
“No commute, no meetings, hopefully minimal Slack or other discussions; it’s just time to really focus on the craft,” he says.

Meeting with intention

Dave King has sat through some bad meetings in his day, so he makes a point to cut down on superfluous meetings wherever he can. These include status updates, coordinating tasks, and information readouts.

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“A lot of meetings are just called to answer these questions: ‘What’s the status of this thing? Hey, are you doing that or am I doing that? Let’s all get in a room to talk it out,’” he says. “Those are the productivity killers. They’re soul-sucking. Just a huge waste of time.”

One way Dave and his team make meetings more intentional is by sharing any “pre-reading” materials that will help people get prepared. Another is identifying “non-goals” for every meeting so that people know which topics to avoid asking about.

For example, say Dave needs to make a decision on some aspect of a new marketing campaign. He’ll outline that topic in an Asana task with relevant pre-reading and contextual information. If there’s a lower-priority topic that may detract from the discussion, such as budget, he’ll mention it in the Asana task so people know to not ask questions related to budget. That means everyone will come into the meeting fully aware of the main topic (marketing campaign rollout), the supporting materials, and the non-goal (budget discussion).

Often, Dave says, when a meeting is planned with all the necessary information outlined in Asana, the problems sort themselves out beforehand in the comments of the task, thereby achieving the purpose of the meeting before it even begins.

“That’s a really powerful thing,” he says.

Finally, to ensure that the meeting ends with strong and clear takeaways, Dave makes sure that all action items are logged in Asana by a designated note-taker. That means any impromptu “Can you follow up with this person?” requests are tasked in real-time, with firm deadlines attached so everyone is aligned on expectations.

Collaborating globally

Asana has 11 offices spread across four continents, so they take special care in deciding when to conduct meetings, how they keep minutes, and how to make sure everyone gets the message.

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To that end, technology and virtual collaboration tools have been indispensable. Asana's meetings take place at different hours to accommodate time zones, and all meetings are recorded for replay with detailed notes attached. If key members in a certain time zone are unable to make a scheduled meeting, they'll send in a video update to include in the meeting presentation. This lets them feel like they're still participating and being heard.

Making information accessible not only keeps core team members on the same page – it also allows other people to peer in and get situated if they want. One special consideration that Asana takes seriously is being able to accommodate people whose first language isn't English, such as team members in France and Japan. Having clear written communication and meeting video replay allows everyone to catch up at their own pace without missing any key pieces of information.

Getting together (without actually getting together)

For all the ways Asana's product keeps [remote teams](#) in sync and on target, as a company they've always focused on real, human-level office interaction. While this is easy to pull off in a physical office, it's been tougher to organically encourage day-to-day casual conversation as team members have shifted fully remote.

The solution looks a lot like structured play. Dave calls his team's weekly 25-minute huddle "the best 25 minutes of the week" – they play music, ask icebreaker questions, and share positive updates. People walk away energized, having learned something new.

They also try to replicate an office culture virtually through events, like having people eat together on video, or host virtual coffees, or [play interactive games through video](#).

"People feel most engaged when they know what their goals are, what they're trying to achieve, and what success looks like," Dave says. An element of human-level engagement, he adds, no matter how casual, can help bolster the collective sense of goal-setting and vision of success. "That means feeling connected to the people you're working with."

Still, despite everyone's best efforts to stay connected while working remotely, they still value in-person interactions over Slack messages fired off from disparate living rooms. That's why, when offices can safely re-open, the company plans on transitioning their currently remote teams to an office-first [hybrid work environment](#).

Joaquim Lecha
CEO at Typeform


Typeform's Joaquim Lecha on How to Make Meetings More Meaningful



For Typeform CEO Joaquim Lecha, a meeting isn't just a meeting – it's an opportunity to make a deeper, more meaningful connection. His vision was reflected in a [recent virtual event](#) that explored the ways people can have meaningful conversations to create better and more inclusive workplaces and societies.

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At Typeform, according to Joaquim, business has always been personal. In the company's early days, employees were clustered mainly in one of two Barcelona offices, with a third group centralized in a coworking space in San Francisco. Typeform's rapid growth in the past year, however, during a time when offices were closed, has tested how smoothly the team can scale while retaining a high level of personal connection.

Today, Typeform's 370-plus employees are scattered across Europe and North America. Among others, teams have sprouted up in the UK (mostly in London), Portugal, the Netherlands and Germany, with a handful of engineers based out of Russia, Poland and Hungary. And that small San Francisco contingent? Now it's a full US arm that encompasses nearly 15% of the company's headcount and it's growing fast.

"I haven't even started imagining what things will be like when we hit 1,200 or 1,500 or 1,800 employees spread all over the world," says Joaquim.

The company's sudden growth means that for every team member who was once able to grab some real face-to-face time in the communal kitchen or over beers in the "barception" area of their Barcelona headquarters, there's another recently onboarded coworker sitting behind a monitor in some distant city, hours behind or ahead.

In a time when many are working from home, how does Typeform keep new and long-time employees engaged, while continuing to nurture personal connections?

"With difficulty and learning," Joaquim says. "During COVID times, we've been able to hire a lot of talented professionals. We've had to be novel in how we approach workshops, onboarding, and communications."

It's an apt challenge for a leader whose company is all about gathering insights and creating meaningful connections at scale.

What is a meaningful conversation, anyway?

Joaquim and his team have spent a lot of time thinking about how to replicate authentic connections between individuals in an online setting. The way he sees it, successful companies use their products to engage with customers in a way that treats them like humans, creating authentic relationships while also maintaining scalability.

Typeform doesn't just solicit information from users – it engages them in a conversational, interactive experience that moves fluidly and helps brands get a more personalized understanding of their customers.

“Online interaction is enabled by technology,” Joaquim says. “Technology helps, but sometimes technology is not human-like. Sometimes it might be a little inhuman. We’ve thought a lot about how we can make those online interactions more human-like. And we’ve thought about the concept of meaningful conversation.”

For Joaquim and his team, a meaningful conversation has four main attributes:

1. It’s context-based.
2. It’s relevant to the participant.
3. It’s personalized.
4. It’s a beautiful experience.

In a team setting, this means being deliberate about who’s involved in a meeting, while providing participants with relevant context and discussion topics to [prepare for the meeting ahead of time](#), so that they feel valued and encouraged to contribute meaningfully.

It also means finding the best medium to gather, share ideas, and make decisions. At Typeform, more meetings does not mean more meaningful. Depending on the topic, the best medium might be a synchronous virtual meeting, but it also increasingly involves interactive tools like shared documents and video.

With that in mind, let’s look at some of Joaquim’s suggestions for how to make meetings more meaningful.


Embrace the asynchronous (and the synchronous)

On a given day, Joaquim has three to five meetings of 30 to 45 minutes in length – altogether he estimates that half of his workday is spent in meetings. As his team’s communications have shifted to a virtual environment, spread across multiple time zones, his team has begun to lean into the benefits of asynchronicity to give context to meeting participants.

“San Francisco and Barcelona are nine hours apart,” he says. “Written communication is so important. This means sharing documents, and writing clearly and thoughtfully. You have to provide context, make yourself understandable for others to read, and be able to contribute.”

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In addition to Typeform's monthly all-hands meeting, the company also holds a monthly asynchronous all-hands meeting where individual members prepare video presentations that people can view at their leisure.

Joaquim has evolved the ways he uses asynchronous communication to provide the right context and relevance for people. Previously, he would devote time to carefully planning and preparing presentations to give in front of his team. These days, he favors sharing the slides ahead of time so that when they all meet, they can use the time to actually discuss what has been shared.

His team has managed to scale this front-loaded approach by preparing video content that discusses company-wide topics like quarterly financial performance, user research, product roadmaps, and company policies regarding [work-from-home](#) benefits.

"Making that content available and letting people choose which videos they want to watch gives more power to the meeting participants," he says.

Make each team member feel special (because they are)

To Joaquim and his team, the key to success lies in talent. He knows that a few desks and computers alone don't produce anything without humans at the helm, and people respond best to individual and personal attention.

"In any kind of interaction, there are elements that need to be personalized," Joaquim says. "Showing people individually how valuable they are and how they can contribute will make them more effective at their work."

That sense of personalization extends to how Typeform approaches internal communications.

"Instead of trying to do one to many, we think about many one-to-ones," Joaquim says.

With colleagues he speaks to every day or several times a week, he's taken to using phone calls rather than [virtual meetings](#), so that he can maintain a focused conversation while reducing his own sense of [screen fatigue](#).

For larger meetings, he approaches each discussion with a clear purpose and stated goal, and from there he works backwards to achieve the desired outcome.

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"Why are we having this conversation? What is it we want to achieve?" he says. "Once we know that, we can ask: Is everybody well-prepared? Did we miss someone who has important insight? Based on the desired outcome, what is the best way to get there?"

Make the professional personal

Meetings at Typeform aren't all about making important business decisions and goals. Having meaningful conversations requires engaging with people on a human level. Over the past year, there's been a lot to engage with as people transitioned to [working from home](#).

"We were concerned about people not separating work from life," Joaquim says. "When we were in shelter-in-place, there weren't many reasons to do any other things." He encouraged managers to check in with their team members via regular 10-minute meetings and conversations to see how they were coping.

While these check-ins have helped replace some of the human connection lost between computer monitors and timezones, Joaquim says that for the Barcelona-based company there's no topping a meal shared between teammates.

"Here in Spain, we have a big food culture – going out and having a beer or wine with friends, having a good meal in a restaurant," he says.

Typeform's teams regularly [have lunch together virtually](#), since they can no longer do so in person. They have also moved whiteboard sessions and workshops to a digital environment to continue generating new ideas and to keep individuals socially engaged.

As offices gradually reopen and opportunities for in-person engagement return, Joaquim and his team's efforts to stay connected over the past year – from learning to work virtually to having better video meetings to welcoming new employees into the company culture – will go a long way in making sure that meetings at Typeform remain meaningful.

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Dena Upton
Chief People Officer at Drift

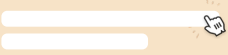
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Before the pandemic, Drift was known for its office culture. With offices in San Francisco, Boston, Tampa, and Seattle, the very essence of the company revolved around the in-office experience, and employees were expected to be there five days a week. As the Chief People Officer, Dena Upton would have been the first person to tell you how important this was. Now, she'll be the first to tell you the opposite.

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"It took being forced into remote work to realize that the assumptions we were making about the advantages of being in-office were all wrong," she says. Those assumptions were that 1) people needed to be in the same physical space to truly collaborate, and 2) that working in an office space made people more productive.

Now, Drift has become one of the first hypergrowth companies to announce their move to Digital First – for good. That means everyone at the company will work remotely, with the eventual option to use Drift's existing offices as Conversation Spaces once it's safe to do so.

"We actually realized that going remote allowed people to be much more productive," says Dena. "The last year has taught us so much about flexibility and remote work, and we've realized that it really works. We've gone through a one-way door, and knowing what we know now, we can't go back."

Lose the office, gain a whole lot

To Dena, making the change to Digital First signifies that Drift is learning how to thrive in a world where outcomes achieved matter more than hours in the office. "I talk to people who say, 'I can't believe you guys are going to make this digital, remote-first thing actually work,' and my response is, 'You have to! It's the new way of working,'" she says.

Three things became clear when Drift went fully remote:

Productivity increased

"When everyone is remote, the idea of proximity is taken away," says Dena. "We're focused more now on outcomes and execution and how people actually do their jobs in the hours in which they're most effective."

Ultimately, this leads to a more productive – and more equitable – work environment. Work goes to the most qualified person, no matter where they are, and people are rewarded for a job well done whether or not they've put in the appropriate "face time".

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The talent pool grew

Before the pandemic, Drift was very much focused on hiring people who could be in-office.

“When we went remote,” says Dena, “We suddenly had access to a talent pool we wouldn’t have considered before, due to those in-person rigorous requirements.”

Having added over 200 Drifters in the last year alone, 40% of the team is now located outside of the Boston headquarters. Not being bound by location has allowed Drift to find the best people for the job at hand, no matter where they work.

It was still possible to connect

With a culture that prioritized physical proximity, how would things change in a remote setting? Would it still be possible to feel connected to colleagues while [working from home](#)? Thankfully, the answer was yes – with a slight caveat. “When you’re gathering virtually you have to re-create the energy that might have come more naturally in person,” says Dena.

“We’ve really upped the production value of our meeting slides and added fun things like music to get people energized.”

Does it really need to be a meeting?

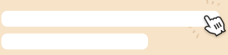
It was a relief to Dena to see that gathering virtually could still create a feeling of togetherness.

Prior to the pandemic, each week at Drift was bookended by two meetings: Monday Metrics and Friday Show & Tell. These meetings were done in-person, and functioned as a way to keep everyone looped in on what was going on in the company in terms of sales, marketing, hiring, product, and other exciting new projects.

These meetings still exist, but are now completely virtual. “It just meant we had to up the production value,” says Dena. “When you’re not together, you have to create that energy with better slideshows and more interactive and engaging features like music, voting, and chat.”

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Being aware of what's required to make a virtual meeting engaging has only caused Drift to double-down on a point of view they've long held: that there should be as few meetings as possible in any given week.

It's an often-repeated sentiment at Drift that meetings should be avoided 98% of the time. The internal communications team has even put together a number of resources meant to dissuade people from calling a meeting in the first place. "If you really think about why you think a meeting is necessary, it often doesn't hold up to scrutiny," says Dena.

Fewer meetings, more collaboration

Dena has found that when meetings are discouraged, new – and better – forms of communication and collaboration step in to take their place.

For example, if the purpose of a proposed meeting is to collaborate, this can be done asynchronously via Google Docs. Similarly, if the purpose of a meeting is to share information, maybe an update using Drift Video is a better idea, or a Wiki post, or even just a simple Slack message.

Having just expanded internationally with new teams in both Australia and London, the idea of asynchronous communication has become even more important at Drift. "We never want team members in different locations to feel like they're a satellite office," says Dena.

This is much easier to achieve when people have options for how they can contribute. "Even when it comes to all-staff meetings, they're recorded and available for consumption at any time, so the experience that someone would get attending the meeting live is the same as it would be for someone in Australia."

Survival of the sacred

Fortunately, and in spite of the pandemic, Drift has continued its rapid growth, and Dena notes that as a rule of thumb, there's a tendency for people to feel the need to call more meetings as a company gets bigger and more complex. Continuing to fight against this ethos has only made the existing, necessary meetings all the more sacred.

"There are meetings you'll never be able to replace with other tools, like one-on-ones and skip-levels," says Dena. Likewise, sometimes problems need to be solved synchronously, with a true, real-time brainstorm.

No matter the meeting, the message is clear: "Our people know that if you're in a meeting at Drift, it's because someone values your feedback in that moment," says Dena. "There's an etiquette that's come out of that. People are very good at shutting everything else down and not multitasking, at being present."

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Recognizing the limits of a remote-first world

Though the overall impact of going Digital First has been overwhelmingly positive, Dena admits that some things have been more challenging to iron out. "In a Digital First world, you end up working with the same eight to ten people quite a lot," she says. "You don't get much of a chance to see anyone else in the organization."

While the Monday and Friday video meetings are a great chance for everyone to gather virtually, there is still more effort required to recreate some aspects of office life, like unexpectedly chatting with someone you run into on your way to the kitchen. To remedy this, Drift is relying on things like the Slack donut bot to randomly pair people up to have a coffee virtually.

Dena is also aware that further challenges could crop up as Drift starts making use of its Conversation Spaces (which were formerly used as offices). "Our leaders will have to set an example," she says. "If your VP of Customer Success is in the office, the rest of the team will feel that they should be as well. It's really important that we continue to create an equitable environment by being thoughtful about where and how we show up in person." In other words, it's going to take work not to fall back into old patterns.

For now, Dena is relying on regular employee engagement surveys to see what's working and what could be revisited while everyone is working from home. Going Digital First is a big change, and it's not something Drift is going to perfect all at once. But given the ease with which they've managed each stage of their growth so far, it's a challenge they're up for – and one they can work out using video meetings that are planned and executed with intention.

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David Tibbitts
Product Marketing Manager at Notion


How Notion Innovated Its Way Out of Meetings Purgatory



When David Tibbitts first started working at Notion in 2018, meetings were somewhat of a rarity. As one of only 10 employees, there wasn't a whole lot that couldn't be worked out by rolling his chair over to someone's desk or sending a quick Slack message in the company's "General" channel (for a long time, their only channel).

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David joined the company on the Customer Experience side, learning what customers found both delightful and frustrating. Today, he's the product marketing manager responsible for the core Notion product (but many folks refer to him as the Santa Clause of software). In his role, he gets to package up the work of the engineering and product teams and figure out how to roll it out to Notion's audience of millions.

Along with David's role, the size of the company has also changed quite a bit in the last three years. Notion now has over 130 employees spread across their new international offices in San Francisco, Dublin, Tokyo, and New York. All that growth has made it more difficult to resolve things quickly, and over the years, meetings have become more frequent in order to facilitate cross-functional problem solving and keep employees in the loop on major projects.

David remembers the early days of introducing meetings, which were much less structured than they are now. In particular, he remembers weekly Support Team meetings that sometimes went twice as long as the allotted time. "We would end up rabbit-holing on things like tagging for ticket types and get stuck for 30 to 45 minutes on how to name one tag. It was a lot of time spent on something that ultimately didn't make much of a difference," he says.

The last year brought a tidal wave of change to most companies, and Notion was no exception. One upside, however, is that the change to remote work motivated Notion's employees to overhaul their approach to meetings. Today, David credits the structure they've implemented with helping them avoid unnecessary meetings that go over time.

How rapid growth – and rapid change – complicated communication

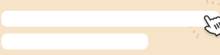
Prior to going remote in 2020, Notion had about 35 employees. At the time, the company still prided itself on having relatively few meetings. Anything that couldn't be worked out in person was addressed virtually. With a "no email" policy, most work taking place in Notion itself, and just one general-use Slack channel, all online communication took place in a format that was indexed and searchable – and visible to everyone at the company.

When the pandemic hit, Notion's employees were forced to work remotely and the option to communicate face-to-face disappeared. The level of activity on Slack increased by more than 50%, which made it more difficult for employees to keep up with the conversation.

Having avoided relying on meetings for so long, figuring out how to bridge the communication gap required flexing a muscle that, until then, hadn't been used much. David describes it as a steep learning curve. While before, everyone's calendars were relatively open, there was now a clear need to sync up in a more intentional way.

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Avoiding the Tetris grid of meetings

Perhaps it's no surprise that a company that helps teams document, streamline, and centralize everything turned to its own product for help. Notion needed to make changes that would allow the company to scale without gatekeeping information and overwhelming employees with a "Tetris grid" of meetings, as David puts it.

A Notion feature called Database Templates turned out to be the critical tool that allowed Notion employees to optimize their approach to virtual meetings. Using Database Templates, the meeting owner can choose from 15 to 20 meeting templates to structure and plan out their meetings. David knows all too well that as the organizer, it's a lot of work to come up with the content and structure for a meeting. Using this tool now allows him to circumnavigate that mental load with the click of a button.

Adding this structure also helped avoid the kind of meeting sprawl that many companies fall into. David notes that he opens most meetings by saying "We probably won't need the full half-hour for this," and it's true. With a clear idea of what the meeting is meant to achieve, and a solid outline for discussion points, there's none of the rabbit-holing that used to creep up before.

Flexing the communication muscle

Having established a clear purpose and structure for meetings at Notion, it's gotten a lot easier to ensure that communication elsewhere serves its specific purpose as well. As David describes it, employees rely on Notion and Slack to store all knowledge and collaborate on projects.

While Slack is used for synchronous, tactical commentary or to coordinate on decision making, Notion is used to document anything that's canonical or can be used as a reference. Keeping information documented this way – in a searchable format – makes it easier for people, especially new hires, to find the knowledge they need.

David has also noticed that other teams are continuing to innovate their approach to co-working. The Engineering Team in particular has tried out a number of platforms that make it possible for them to work "side by side," in a virtual environment that mimics the experience of working out problems in person.

Learning to love meetings

While Notion has avoided an "all meetings, all the time" approach by being smart about how they structure communication, David notes that he actually does enjoy video meetings, and would be happy with a 50/50 split between time spent in meetings and time spent doing work independently. "One thing I've realized about myself through going remote is that I'm a procrastinator," he says. "I need a deadline to motivate me, and sometimes that deadline can just be a sync meeting to update people on where we're at with a certain feature."

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He also notes that the best meetings have nothing to do with work or productivity at all. A long-standing Notion tradition has been the "Life Story" meeting, where one person will take 30 to 45 minutes each week to give a presentation about their life, their interests, and what shaped them as a person. David loves these meetings, as he feels that getting to know someone on a more human level can change your working relationship.

As Notion makes the slow transition back to office life, David is glad for the ways they've problem-solved their way out of a possible Meetings Purgatory.

"Going remote forced us to be comfortable with new modes of communication sooner," he says. "

I don't think we would have figured it out as quickly otherwise." He also believes that having to coordinate remotely made everyone more empathetic to Notion's new employees in international offices. In the future, there will always be the option to join a meeting virtually, as well as an effort to hold events that are entirely virtual.

Notion's product is built on the idea that structure can facilitate empowerment and easier access to information. Now that they've taken that ethos and applied it to their own communication structures, David is sure they can handle anything.

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Elizabeth Wilson
Head of Internal Communication Abstract

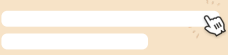
How Abstract Uses Collaboration to Improve the “Work Around the Work”



Abstract knows a thing or two about collaboration. The design intelligence platform provides tools that allow designers to work together, gather feedback, and improve their work easily. That ethos doesn't just apply to their products; the company's culture is built on core values like iteration, curiosity, and inclusivity.

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How Abstract Uses Collaboration to Improve the "Work Around the Work"

featuring Elizabeth Wilson, Head of Internal Communications at Abstract

Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that the company often turns to creative, unconventional solutions to solve its problems.

Like most workplaces that were forced to go fully remote in 2020, Abstract was feeling the effects of a fully remote meeting culture. Video fatigue among employees was on the rise, and it was getting harder to foster a feeling of camaraderie during virtual team building events.

So when Abstract's Head of Internal Communications, Elizabeth Wilson, was planning an upcoming All Hands meeting, she decided to try something different: a virtual visit to a llama farm. "Somebody forwarded me this link where we could have the woman who owned the farm join our video call and introduce us to the llamas, show us around a bit," says Elizabeth. "I was so nervous about it. I didn't know how it was going to go."

As it turned out, she had nothing to be worried about. The llama farm was a hit – and in an unexpected way, it changed the way people at Abstract approach meetings. "We realized that we can't just approach them the same way every time," says Elizabeth. "We need to try new things to keep people engaged. When we did something different, people were into it. Everyone was chatting and we went past our allotted meeting time."

The virtual llama farm visit was a fun way to test the theory of shaking up meetings at Abstract, but it was also just a small part of a larger strategy Elizabeth had been working on for some time. A big part of her role at Abstract is auditing, iterating on, and working jointly with key collaborators on improving Abstract's approach to meetings.

How information and iteration align at Abstract

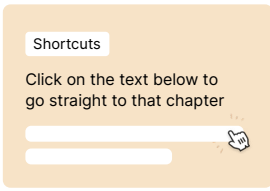
In her role, Elizabeth spends a lot of time thinking about information: how it's delivered, how it's taken in, and which channels it needs to flow through in order to reach the right people in the right way.

As part of building a larger communications strategy, Elizabeth makes sure that company-wide meetings at Abstract remain relevant, productive, and purposeful. She's done a great deal of work that addresses how each team – and the company as a whole – can make them more beneficial for everyone.

One main theme that Elizabeth has leaned on to inform this strategy is the idea of iteration. It is, and always has been, a deeply held company value at Abstract. Elizabeth and her team have embraced research, feedback, and trial and error to enable the company to prioritize asynchronous communication and keep meetings impactful.

Shortcuts

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Using Abstract's values to inform communication

As a company, Abstract is focused on easing up “the work around the work” for its customers – that is, all the conversations, disparate tools, and streams of feedback that can bog down projects and get in the way of impactful work.

Internally, the focus is not much different. This year, Elizabeth and coworkers set out on a mission to improve the company's approach to meetings. The company has been at least partially remote for years now, and being intentional about how meetings are conducted – and what warrants a meeting – felt like an important piece of the remote-first puzzle to figure out as the company continued to grow.

Additionally, launching [Notebooks](#) (a tool to help design teams manage feedback and measure results) earlier in 2021 gave Abstract the unique opportunity to build their own tool into their communication process. If they could use Notebooks to prioritize cross-functional, asynchronous communication, they knew it would have a big impact on the way they approached meetings.

In carrying out this communications audit, Elizabeth's team looked at three main areas: their existing habits, their pain points, and research around what other companies were doing. From there, they put together a set of foundational beliefs around how Abstract should approach meetings.

Setting up foundational beliefs

Here's where iteration came in: Elizabeth and her team put the foundational beliefs they created in front of senior leadership, and then shared them with each leader's team to gather feedback.

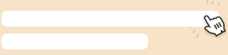
It was important that these beliefs were stress-tested before anything was set in stone.

“There are so many people here who are really interested in making the work around the work super impactful,” says Elizabeth, “And the only way a culture will adopt habits is if everyone is bought in.”

After making sure her team's proposition made sense in a real-world setting, these foundational beliefs were solidified:

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Ask yourself if it can be a Notebook instead

Introducing Notebooks allowed people at Abstract to rethink the instinct to book a meeting for any new project. Creating a Notebook and tagging the appropriate people in it allows for an asynchronous first step that lets people collaborate on projects, get approvals, and make decisions cross-functionally before a meeting is needed.

Always have an agenda

When it comes to meetings, winging it rarely goes well. "If you don't put in the prep work and give people context before, you're wasting time," says Elizabeth. She wanted to make it clear that creating and sharing a plan before any meeting takes place should be table stakes.

Respect time zones

Being a fully remote and increasingly global company, when a meeting is necessary, it needs to be at a time that works for everyone. This is harder to achieve the more Abstract grows geographically, which is another great reason why asynchronous communication should always be considered first.

Four day work week

After researching what other companies were doing, Abstract decided to adopt "Intermissions", their version of a four day work week. A trend that's gained popularity recently, especially as more workplaces have gone remote. By consolidating work into four days a week, people at Abstract can focus on being extremely intentional about their meetings and work and stave off [video fatigue](#).

Elizabeth is also quick to point out that none of these guidelines is set in stone. In fact, Abstract has adopted a bi-annual meeting audit, wherein each team is encouraged to look at their meetings and compare them against a set of criteria and considerations:

- Has this meeting always been there?
- Does this meeting *need* to be here?
- Can we shorten this meeting?
- Does it actually need to be longer?
- Should we add more people to the meeting?

According to Elizabeth, "We just want to make a conscious effort to really look at how we're working and whether or not we can improve."

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The outcome of iterating? Better meetings

Using an iterative approach to improve meetings across the organization has benefited each team at Abstract, but it's also made their company-wide All Hands meetings more effective. "We now have several different formats that we alternate for All Hands," says Elizabeth.

The first is a more formalized update from the Exec team, where they go over important company headlines and take questions from employees in a Q&A format. Another type of All Hands format is what Elizabeth likes to call a "Grab Bag," that is, an outside-the-box meeting (like the llama farm visit) that focuses more on team building and blowing off steam.

They never would have landed on this structure without iteration; without breaking the mold to try something new and see how it went over.

Overall, Elizabeth says that Abstract's company values will always inform the way they conduct meetings. "Three of our values are iteration, inclusivity, and curiosity," says Elizabeth. "People embodying those values have made us more open, and when somebody says, 'Actually, do we need this meeting?' or has a suggestion, it's been really beneficial."

As for how they'll continue to iterate in the future, Elizabeth is sure of one thing: "Our people are open and curious, and just care about how we're meeting and showing up the best way that we can." As long as that's true, Elizabeth is sure that Abstract will continue to make improvements to meetings that benefit everyone.

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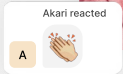
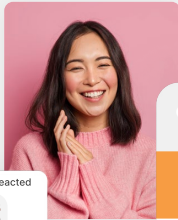
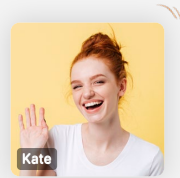
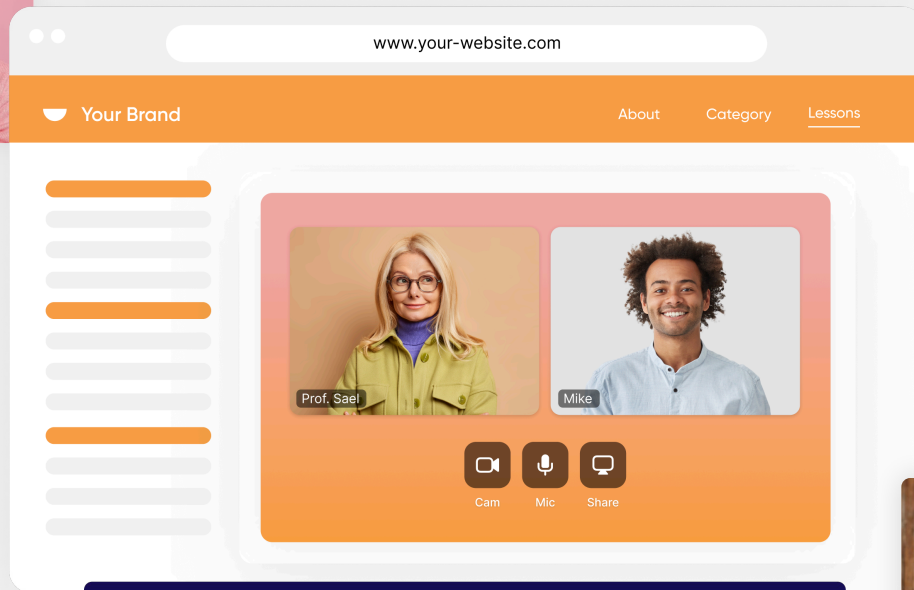
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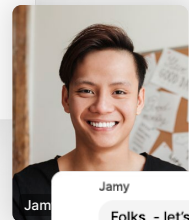


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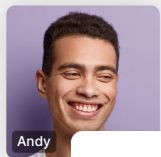


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