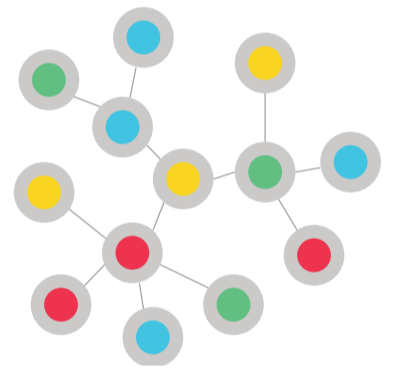
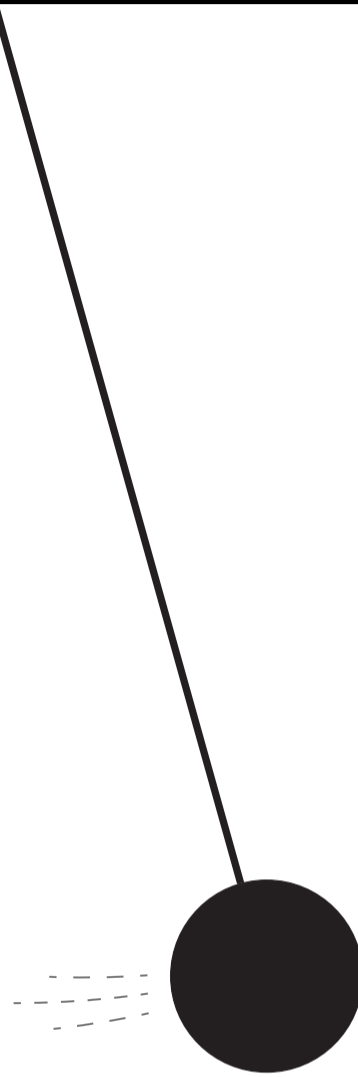
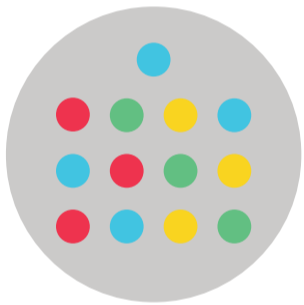


GOING REMOTE

A WHOLE BRAIN® GUIDE FOR REMOTE MANAGEMENT
& DISTRIBUTED PRODUCTIVITY





Although the pendulum has swung back and forth on remote work over the past few years, most companies are now working to prepare for the possibility that external “black swan” events, such as an outbreak of war or pandemic, might force them to adopt remote working across a much larger proportion of their population.

At Herrmann, our 2017 decision to shift our entire company to remote work stemmed from a moment of crisis, when our headquarters’ location was in the path of a wildfire (a story told [in this TEDx talk](#) by Ann Herrmann). Since transitioning to being a fully distributed organization, we’ve seen first-hand that remote work brings a lot of benefits, from allowing teams to better harness their

cognitive diversity to creating significant productivity gains. However, capturing these benefits requires a different approach to communication and work interactions, which may feel foreign in some corporate cultures. Without a mindful approach and concerted effort across the company, remote working can be incredibly challenging and result in lost productivity and engagement.

What can you do to ensure productivity and effective collaboration if you find yourself working from home? Obviously, a critical foundation is having the right technology to enable your team to collaborate from anywhere with an internet connection. But even with an ever-growing set of apps to enable remote collaboration, remote work can be difficult to get right. Tough problems require holistic solutions, so here are 5 tips that have worked well for us and our remote-work clients organized using the Whole Brain® framework to ensure a comprehensive approach.

DEFINE YOUR “SOURCES OF TRUTH” TO CREATE A SHARED REALITY

MAKE SURE YOU’RE PROVIDING ENOUGH CONTEXT

STRETCH YOUR THINKING TO ADAPT TO OTHERS’ PREFERENCES

BUILD STRUCTURED ROUTINES AROUND ENERGY-OPTIMIZED TIMEBOXES

OVERCOMMUNICATE & ASSUME POSITIVE INTENT

DEFINE YOUR “SOURCES OF TRUTH” TO CREATE A SHARED REALITY

Remote work leans heavily on a variety of apps for collaboration. Just looking at Herrmann’s daily operations, important data can crop up in email, Zoom calls, Slack, our shared office/document drives, intranet sites, or one of the various systems (CRM, marketing, our own database of users). Even when you’re co-located it can be easy to assume that you’re looking at the correct information, when each person could be looking at a different set of inputs and therefore arriving at a different conclusion. In a remote environment, where work and decision-making tend to be more autonomous and asynchronous, this can create significant friction in decision-making processes, duplication of efforts, and lots of unnecessary rework.

Instead, start the discussion about a new project by agreeing on the single source(s) of truth. What is a source of truth? It’s a linkable information resource or system that everyone working on the project has access to and can be sure has the latest, most accurate information on a topic. It should be written and

structured to make it easy for anyone in the know to understand and follow without implicit knowledge. It could be an article, a specific dataset, taxonomy, planning document or shared folder structure. Whatever it is, it should be accessible to all and have clearly assigned responsibilities for making sure it is up to date. In the words of our software engineering lead Andrew Swerlick, the source of truth is *“something where anyone on the team can go on vacation for 2 weeks in the middle of a project, and when they come back, they can visit this thing and instantly know at a high level where things are at.”*

When you introduce a single source of the truth, the central issue isn’t accuracy — it’s alignment and buy-in. As Jeanne Ross from MIT says: *“Getting to one version of the truth doesn’t have anything to do with accuracy, it has everything to do with declaring it.”* Even if the team members are thousands of miles apart, establishing this foundation of reliable, referenceable information enables the team to create a shared reality in their virtual workspace, resulting in greater alignment, engagement, and productivity.

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BUILD STRUCTURED ROUTINES AROUND ENERGY-OPTIMIZED TIMEBOXES

The many apps involved in remote work can quickly overwhelm you with endless notifications that increase your cognitive load and in turn decrease focus and productivity (not to mention potential distractions from the likes of Twitter, Facebook or Reddit). Chunking out specific work within defined time windows, known as “time-boxing,” and blocking specific times on your calendar to protect those time-boxes, ensures that you aren’t depleting your brain’s capacity for productive work.

Better still, categorizing your calendar time boxes based on the type of thinking that is required ([we recommend using the Whole Brain® color-coding scheme in your calendar app](#)) can help you align different types of thinking to the best times to do that type of work. For example, if you have the most energy in the mornings, you should do the work that requires the thinking you least prefer when you start your day. This is because the thinking you actually prefer will be relatively easier to do when you have less energy, and could even re-energize you. If you leave the work you least prefer to when you have least energy, chances are you won’t end up doing it (or will do it poorly).

Creating routines around the time-boxes helps make these times even more productive, as well as helping to eliminate decision fatigue and procrastination. If you always design in the morning and do meetings in the afternoon, there are 2 fewer decisions to make when you start your work day. Wake up, get coffee, and start designing. Eat lunch, come back

to your work space, and open up Zoom. At Herrmann, we also encourage [meetingless Mondays](#) or meetingless mornings to protect for time-boxed “deep work” that requires uninterrupted focus.

These methods are backed by growing research on the benefits of routines for flow states. One cognitive scientist’s [research on the routines of writing](#), for example, shows evidence that “environments, schedules, and rituals restructure the writing process and amplify performance... The principles of memory retrieval suggest that certain practices should amplify performance. These practices encourage a state of flow rather than one of anxiety or boredom.... The room, time of day, or ritual selected for working may enable or even induce intense concentration or a favorable motivational or emotional state.”

OVER- COMMUNICATE & ASSUME POSITIVE INTENT

The potential for misunderstanding is amplified in a remote environment, especially when you communicate via written language and can't hear vocal inflections, experience body language, or see facial expressions. To help with this, at Herrmann we require a "camera-on" approach to all meetings, but there is still a lot of information loss when communicating in a remote environment.

At a minimum, this means you can't make assumptions about what your team knows or what they understand. In fact, the only assumption you should make is that your colleagues are coming with positive intent; in all likelihood, they aren't trying to make your job any more difficult, but are looking at things in a different way.

In general, document more. Write down decisions, actions and key discussion points. In meetings, encourage questions and preemptively provide clarification. Afterwards, make sure to reiterate shared information and confirm understanding.

If something seems to be spiraling towards confusion, don't get sucked into an endless email back-and-forth; set up a quick video call. Calls don't have to be a big to-do. A 2-minute call to address a few questions or provide more information can prevent hours of wasted effort down the road.

Many of the team rituals that are central to Agile and Scrum methodologies are also great for making sure that you're communicating often enough when working remotely. Brief daily standups, regular team sprint planning, review and retro meetings all create regular opportunities to make sure that everyone on the team is on the same page. Even low-lift virtual efforts in Slack — for example, sharing your status or setting up a daily Slackbot reminder to have a chat-based stand-up — can go a long way. At the very minimum, try to over-communicate to the rest of the team what you're working on, this helps prevent duplication of effort and other frustrating outcomes.

MAKE SURE YOU'RE PROVIDING ENOUGH CONTEXT

**AS AN EXPERIMENT,
READ THIS PARAGRAPH
ONCE**

With hocked gems financing him, our hero bravely defied all scornful laughter that tried to prevent his scheme. "Your eyes deceive," he had said. "An egg, not a table, correctly typifies this unexplored planet." Now three sturdy sisters sought proof. Forging along, sometimes through calm vastness, yet more often very turbulent peaks and valleys, days became weeks as many doubters spread fearful rumors about the edge. At last from nowhere welcome winged creatures appeared, signifying momentous success.

Did the paragraph above make any sense? Probably not. The passage, from Robert Ornstein's book "The Right Mind," is actually about the first voyage of Christopher Columbus. Go back and read the paragraph again with this in mind. Makes more sense with context, doesn't it?

When you're working remotely, it can be easy to lose track of context, especially when your brain is worn out from the the [productivity costs of task-switching](#). Nevertheless, the brain craves context, so when a random email comes into your inbox without it, your brain is going to instantly jump to trying to fill in the blanks — not always successfully or accurately.

Instead, proactively set the tone by always providing context up front for your collaborators. One of the best things about working on a team is being able to combine your superpowers with those of others to produce something amazing — that is, harness your cognitive diversity for a whole (brain) that is greater than the sum of its parts. But that only works if you're willing to share context. Likewise, always seek to understand the context in a situation if it isn't clear to you. Always be asking questions — a lack of questions is one of the biggest red flags in a remote environment.

To start, try to pull yourself out of the details and think about the big picture considerations that you might take for granted, but that may not be top of mind for a collaborator. Try to keep track and share the different inputs you've considered, and keep a record of your decisions and the reasoning behind them. In short, help your team understand why you did what you did.

Last but not least, forcing yourself to stretch your thinking on a regular basis to adapt to the preferences of the people you collaborate with, and encouraging them to do the same, is a critical “golden rule” of remote work. It all boils down to empathy and trust. In a remote environment, it can be harder to earn and maintain the trust of your colleagues – so making sincere efforts to stretch your thinking and “meet them in their mindset” can keep them engaged and improve nearly every interaction.



STRETCH YOUR THINKING TO ADAPT TO OTHERS’ PREFERENCES

How do you stretch your thinking? It starts with understanding your own thinking preferences and how those might differ from those of the people you’re working with, which we refer to as cognitive diversity. If you haven’t already, [you can use the Herrmann platform to understand these differences](#). In the meantime, the first four tips in this ebook can provide a clue. Which of the tips resonate most with you?

In pulling together this list, we got input from different types of thinkers across our cognitively diverse team, and selected one practice to represent each of the primary cognitive systems decoded by the [Herrmann Whole Brain® Model](#):

- Defining sources of truth to create a shared reality particularly appeals to **analytical and fact-based thinkers**
- Building a routine around timeboxed activities is geared towards those with an inclination for **structural and organized thought**
- Over-communicating to make sure everyone on the team is in the know relates to the more **interpersonal, empathetic thinkers** among us
- Being sure to provide context makes sure you’re considering the needs of **holistic, integrative thinkers**

Stretching into others’ preferences, and asking your colleagues to do as well, can make all the difference in preventing a lot of frustrating interactions when working remotely. Embedding this simple action into our culture has been an essential driver of our achieving a 95% talent engagement rate as a fully remote organization (vs. Gallup’s latest benchmark of 35%). **If you’d like to learn more about how we’ve done this, please don’t hesitate to [reach out to us!](#)**



Learn more about remote work
and cognitive diversity at
thinkherrmann.com

