

How to Build a Rapport with Your Colleagues When Working Remotely

Career Development





As we enter the fifth (or is it the sixth?) month of working remotely, most employees have become so adept at working from home that stepping foot in an office now feels like a foreign concept. Working separately from our teams has taught us to develop more productive work routines and set

boundaries to prevent burnout. Despite these adjustments, employees are still adapting to this tremendous shift on professional, personal, and interpersonal levels.

The biggest challenge? Not regularly interacting with coworkers. Even with online communication tools (e.g., email, Slack, Zoom, etc.), creating genuine connections with coworkers is difficult when you can‘t go out for lunch or chit chat at their desk. Below, we compiled advice that will help foster a stronger rapport with colleagues, no matter their location or time zone.

Be authentic

> “’How are you doing?’ Why does it take a pandemic for us to step back and honestly ask one another such a simple question?”
>
> – Shannon Klinger, Group General Counsel, Novartis International AG

If someone starts an email or sends a Slack chat with “How have you been?” don't reply with the perfunctory “Fine. How about you?” Tell them about what's going on, no matter how mundane. Your day stuck at home might seem boring to you, but your quarantine life is different to someone else, and therefore, more interesting.

After all, these lockdowns have forced us to create new routines and a lot has changed since you last saw each other in person. Share some of your new hobbies or experiences, whether it’s landscaping your burgeoning garden, meditating each morning, or assembling a desk for your home office. You could exchange mindfulness techniques or delve into a tangent about squirrels’ love of birdfeeders. At the very least, it's an escape from your usual routine.

These conversations remind your colleagues, who haven’t seen you in months, that you’re more than a faceless email address — you’re a person with similar interests who’s also facing the same global crisis. It’s heartening to connect, regardless of how small the topic might be.

Work together

> “This isn't us pushing against you. This is just all of us trying to help the company achieve the same goals.”
>
> – Alan Fishel, Communication and Technology Practice Leader, Arent Fox

Working in separate locations can stifle collaboration. At the office, you can simply walk to a colleague’s desk to ask for their input on an idea. At home, however, it’s easy to think you’re a team of one when you haven’t been in the same room as a coworker for the past few months.

To shake yourself from this isolated mentality, check in with colleagues from other departments and see if they’re working on any projects where you can add value. For example, ping the HR lead to see what mental health programs and benefits your company is offering for employees struggling during the pandemic. Offer an idea and follow through with your legal expertise to help accomplish these goals.

Be empathetic

> “With empathy, we don’t need to know what occurred to be able to relate to the situation or even agree with the emotional response. We simply need to recognize and recall the emotion that the other person is feeling, including the severity.”
>
> – Amy Jacobson, Emotional Intelligence and Human Behavior Expert

Empathy has always been necessary — both inside and outside the office. Now it’s especially vital during these rare times. Has your coworker seemed distracted during Zoom meetings? They could be stressed about helping their child prepare for their next online class, concerned for an at-risk friend who’s showing symptoms of COVID-19, or worried about paying bills after their partner was laid off.

There’s no shortage of stressors during this pandemic. Having compassion and patience for your coworkers will help strengthen your team’s camaraderie and trust in each other. And considering how mercurial the world is these days, from soaring COVID-19 cases to lingering police brutality protests, you might need your colleagues’ empathy in the future.

Ask for help

> “One of the best things about in-house law is being surrounded by people with different skill sets than yours.”
>
> – Elizabeth A. Colombo, Senior Associate, Kroll

While we’re on the topic of facing problems, don’t be afraid to ask for help. It’s not easy to admit you don’t know the answer, but the benefits of turning to someone else outweigh the perceived dent in your ego.

First, enlisting a colleague’s help early will resolve the problem faster if you’re stuck. It also prevents backtracking on a mistake that could have been initially avoided.

Getting support also strengthens bonds. Whether you ask the marketing team how TikTok works (or even what it is) or ask a coworker to help you meet some deadlines, entrusting them to help you fix a problem shows that you value their expertise. In turn, they’ll know to rely on you for help with questions of their own.

Build a support system

> “Relationships with supportive, outgoing people can also help you make a good impression, stay poised and strong, and weather the most brutal storm.”
>
> – Olga V. Mack, CEO and GC, Parley Pro

Everybody gets lonely, including introverts, so it’s important to check in with teammates. Odds are, you’ve probably had a virtual lunch or happy hour with your work friends since the stay-at-home orders were first implemented. Be sure to regularly chat with them, but don't forget to reach out to a coworker you haven’t spoken to in a while.

If you're worried that asking “How are you?” in a Teams chat to a coworker out of the blue seems

insincere, send them a link about one of their interests. “Hey, I saw this article about indoor exercises, and I thought of you since you run races,” is a good start. From there, you can spark a conversation about new quarantine hobbies or other mutual interests.

Parting thoughts

While some might have mastered their quarantine work schedule, the truth is, no one is an expert at working remotely on such a large scale during a global crisis. It takes trial and error to see what works best — and of course — the help of our colleagues.

For more advice and resources on the pandemic, visit the ACC Coronavirus Resource page.

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