

# The digital-first toolkit

Leading organizations share their tips for supporting workplace collaboration—no matter where or when that work happens



# Featuring insights from:



The New York Times



# Why we're embracing a digital-first approach to work

Over the past year, society has proven we can be effective, creative and productive working from anywhere—even amid a global pandemic.

We've adopted alternative working hours, we've relocated, we've welcomed unexpected Zoom cameos, and we've gotten to know our colleagues on a more human level. We know this new way of working *works*, and employees will expect this flexibility going forward. Research from the Future Forum shows 93% of knowledge workers want a flexible schedule, while 76% want flexibility in location.

Organizations of all sizes, across all industries, are embracing this moment to **reinvent the way we work**. Some will remain fully remote, some will anchor to an office, and many will employ a hybrid model. But the common denominator among those leading the charge is a “digital-first” approach.

“Digital first” doesn't mean “never in person.” It's about empowering people to work when and where it's best for them. Offices are just one of our tools for building relationships and creating space for focused work. The number of days or people in the office are no longer the metrics that matter; we should measure performance not by activity, but by outcomes.

As is common in times of change, we've leaned on our peers' advice through Slack's own digital-first transition. To help with yours,

we've curated their most successful tips into this short guide. Each tip reinforces one of three guiding principles:

## 1. Flexibility

Provide flexibility and freedom for people to do their best work. Embrace flexibility in where and when people work, and measure performance in terms of impact rather than attendance.

## 2. Inclusivity

Ensure equitable access to opportunity and build inclusive teams. Diverse hiring isn't enough; clear expectations and team habits and practices strengthen inclusion too.

## 3. Connection

Slack is the connective tissue that brings us together. The speed and agility that come with transparent communication in channels drive alignment, fuel collaboration and create connection—regardless of time zones.

This digital-first shift won't happen overnight, and it's going to look different globally and across teams. But I'm incredibly optimistic about the future we are building and how it will improve not only how we work, but how we live too.



**Nadia Rawlinson**  
*Chief People Officer*  
Slack



# Spread mindfulness, one emoji at a time



**Chris Burgess**  
*VP of Global IT*  
*Expedia Group*

## How we work

Mindfulness is threaded throughout Expedia Group's digital-first culture. Just as we're mindful of our employees' time (and block a few days per month as meeting-free), we're equally mindful of how those around us are passively signaling what their needs may be. In the absence of in-person verbal and visual cues, we lean on custom Slack statuses and emoji to foster that mindfulness.

These statuses can signal if someone is:

- Online but needs space to focus on a critical task
- Feeling sick or fatigued
- Caretaking
- Simply in need of a mental or emotional break

We encourage everyone to be receptive to these signals, limit or fully avoid after-hour alerting and take note of their audience's state of mind and location.

## How your team can do the same

Challenge your teams to create and promote emoji in Slack that push personal expression and mindfulness even further. For example, one of our employee communities created a custom emoji set to demonstrate what different energy levels could mean for folks with diagnosed mood disorders or mental/emotional health challenges:

 Low energy

 Medium energy

 Full energy

 Recharging

Similarly, to further support individual and group identity, our communities have created a whole collection of emoji to add richness to self-expression.



# Ensure every employee has the means to be heard



**Matt Quinn**  
Chief Operating Officer  
TIBCO

## How we work

In a virtual environment, it's easy to limit interaction to a few key team members who you work directly with day in and day out. This small circle comes with some efficiencies, but there's a major drawback: It narrows the vantage point of truly understanding employees' wants and needs. For example, when it came to returning to offices, we needed to take into account the opinions of all employees, not just those we worked with on a day-to-day basis. The senior employees in my circle, who have dedicated office space in their homes, may be less inclined to return to an office; whereas more junior team members living with multiple roommates may be eager to return.

To ensure we could listen to all employee voices and consider their unique needs, we leveraged Slack to continuously check in and gauge sentiment around returning to work. Uncovering ways to better understand the different opinions of our employee base, through things like surveys and polls, helped us develop a return-to-work strategy that met the needs of all.

## How your team can do the same

Developing open, honest communication with your employee base is achievable. Your team can be successful by implementing the following three steps:

1. Select a tool or platform that is easy for all employees to access and receive information from.
2. Identify a small handful of leaders who will deliver critical information companywide. This way, employees know whom to contact with questions and concerns.
3. Check in *frequently*. Establish a consistent cadence of communication on critical issues and provide an update, even if small. This kind of transparency can eliminate a lot of employee uncertainty.



# Empowering employees starts with up-to-date information



**Amit Shah**  
*President*  
1-800-Flowers.com

## How we work

In the absence of in-person celebrations, people have increasingly used gifts to connect with others, commemorate milestones and celebrate moments big and small. These moments of delight are meaningful to our customers, and when the rubber meets the road for our team, seconds matter. We need to ensure everyone, no matter their department or role, is on the same page, with the most up-to-date information on our merchandise and inventory.

By bringing everyone together in Slack channels, our employees have the information and context they need to make real-time decisions, regardless of their location or time zone. With [Slack's search functionality](#), the 1-800-Flowers.com brand team has a knowledge repository that allows employees to find information and subject-matter experts quickly.

## How your team can do the same

By connecting and collaborating in channels, teams can respond to external challenges,

like a disrupted supply chain, and internal opportunities, such as a new marketing campaign, without missing a beat:

1. **#lessons-learned:** Our repository for tactics that performed well (and those that didn't). This helps the team make data-informed decisions for the company's next important holiday or campaign.
2. **#team-merchandising:** This is where we keep the wider 1-800-Flowers.com team up to date on inventory. For example, if a particular product is running low, performance marketing is notified and can adjust to target other floral or plant offerings.
3. **#external-campaign:** We use Slack Connect, which extends channel-based messaging to external partners, to coordinate with agencies on our latest campaigns. Decisions that take days over email can be made in hours, and last-minute changes are handled instantaneously.



# Jump over the language barrier



**Hokuto Hoshi**  
*Head of Corporate Engineering*  
*Cookpad Inc.*

## How we work

Although Cookpad Inc. is based in Japan and the United Kingdom, our company has become increasingly global. Bringing everyone together in Slack has helped information flow across geographic borders, but some teams found themselves running into another kind of barrier: language. Japanese employees and those who primarily speak English or Spanish had to index on their limited understanding of a colleague's native tongue or lean on whatever machine-based translation tool they could find.

We knew there had to be a better, more comfortable way for employees all over the world to communicate, so we built that better way right into Slack, where everyone is already working. Today when a user posts a Slack message in their preferred language, it triggers a translation of that very message to post in a companion channel. For example, a Japanese update in **#project-new-website** will automatically appear in English in **#project-new-website-translated**, and vice versa. Or when a user posts a Spanish message in the main channel, the translation channel will show it in both Japanese and English. Everyone is able to read and write in their preferred language, right in Slack.

## How your team can do the same

In general, we recommend experimenting with third-party apps and APIs in areas where technology is rapidly evolving, such as machine learning. One of our developers was able to build this solution using [Slack's APIs](#) and Amazon Translate. There are no more than 200 lines of code, and it took only a few days. The moral of the story: If you're a global team that collaborates in Slack, you can build the same solution.



# Data governance and digital-first tools are not a zero-sum game



**Cindy Taibi**  
CIO  
*The New York Times*

## How we work

To ensure your employees can be productive and innovative from anywhere, their input into digital-tool selection is vital. But it's equally vital to make sure the tools they use are secure and compliant, not to mention cost-effective. For example, our team ran a scan and found that nearly 800 employees were using an unsanctioned digital productivity tool. Some were using a free consumer version, while others were using paid single-use licenses. They were actively using this tool—so it clearly offered value—but it wasn't necessarily secure or compliant. It was clear we needed a governance model to ensure our data and IP weren't at risk.

Digital-first is a whole new approach, and different teams have different requirements. The needs of our journalists, for example, are very different from other areas of the business, like our finance department. And the best way to empower each of those groups is with tools they like and want to use. Furthermore, we strongly value diversity in all its forms, and that includes accommodating different work styles. So instead of standardizing and consolidating our suite of digital productivity tools (the approach we were taking pre-pandemic), we shifted focus

to providing reasonable alternatives that were vetted for security and resiliency.

## How your team can do the same

Set up a team—we call ours the Enterprise Productivity team—that can support employees no matter where they're working, be it fully remote or office-based or somewhere in between. This group should craft your governance model, take stock of which departments use and pay for which tools, offer training and hold office hours to hear directly from employees. Also, assemble an internal review board, consisting of team members from Infosec, Legal, Finance and Tech, that can help with vetting and removing blockers around costs, security, legal and compliance requirements.

From there, build an internal network of champions and leverage your partnership with your vendors to help onboard peers and drive adoption of new digital tools. The earlier you include your employees, the more excited they will be to use the options you roll out.



# Embrace asynchronous work, so your employees can give their best



**Eckart Diepenhorst**  
*Chief People and  
Communications Officer*  
Free Now

## How we work

I'll be the first to admit that I hadn't totally bought into the idea of fully remote working. When the pandemic struck, we were forced into trialing it, and I was pleasantly surprised to be proven wrong. We found that employees were far better poised to balance their work and personal lives. It's a point of pride that we have 76 different nationalities working at Free Now from all around the globe, and we now know that we can attract the best possible talent without being constrained by the location of our offices.

Moving forward we're focused on creating a working environment where people can both bring their full selves to work and deliver to the highest possible standard. Embracing asynchronous work allows us to do just that. By accommodating different schedules and locations, our team members can work when and where they're most productive.

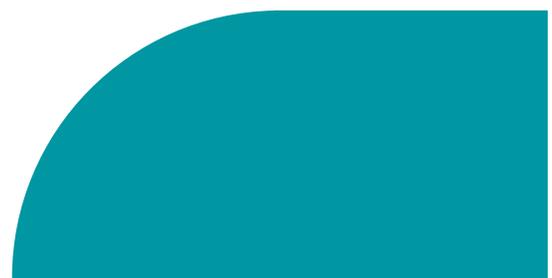
## How your team can do the same

We rely on Slack channels to facilitate conversations and decision-making around

the clock. These provide a space for people to engage and collaborate even when having radically different productive hours.

**To empower employees to take advantage of asynchronous work, however, it's critical for leaders to do the same—and to make it known too.** During lockdowns, I spent my afternoons taking care of my kids. In the past, that situation would have removed me from some crucial conversations. Now I'll log on in the evening, when it's more convenient, to catch up and move work forward.

Does this mean fewer meetings? Yes, and that's a positive side effect. We now share project updates and documentation in channels, so everyone can absorb the content when it best suits them. In turn, our "face-to-face" meetings are shorter and more efficient because they're focused specifically on answering questions and making key decisions.



# When working across time zones, prioritize equity and work-life balance



**Meghan Reibstein**  
*VP of Organizational Operations*  
*Zillow*

## How we work

We don't all need to be in the same place, or even the same time zone, to do great work together. The vast majority of Zillow employees can work from wherever they're most comfortable and productive, whether that's at home, in Zillow's workspaces or somewhere else. This flexibility comes from listening to our employees and letting their feedback guide our decisions about remote work. Because we regularly survey employees and communicate with them consistently through a variety of digital channels, they have the clarity to plan their lives and the support to collaborate effectively.

## How your team can do the same

Advance flexible-work policies and benefits that ensure equity for employees and their families and foster a workplace in which all employees thrive. To level the playing field, try the following:

- 1. Introduce core collaboration hours:** To optimize work across time zones, schedule meetings within a four-hour window (at Zillow, that's 10 a.m.–2 p.m. PT). This syncs calls around times that work for most, while reducing meeting fatigue and increasing opportunities for focused work.
- 2. Work asynchronously outside of core collaboration hours:** Embrace digital communication tools like shared documents and chat, and empower your employees to be flexible with their schedules while moving the work forward.
- 3. One Zoom, all Zoom:** To combat the politics of the office and support all workers equitably, have a “one Zoom, all Zoom” rule—that is, if one person is dialing into a meeting, everyone is.



# Design new-hire onboarding with belonging in mind



**Ryan Mahoney**  
*Director of Engineering*  
*Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority*

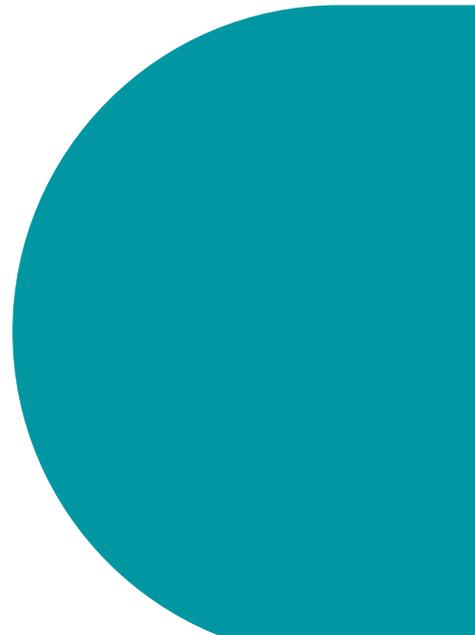
## How we work

Despite low ridership during the Covid-19 pandemic, the MBTA faced increased real-time data challenges. Public-transit riders wanted to know about vehicle crowding to understand the safety of a potential trip. To meet this and other needs, we needed to scale our technology teams *fast*.

Welcoming new hires and fostering a sense of belonging are essential to hybrid workplaces, especially when you can't meet your colleagues in person. For our team at the MBTA, that meant our onboarding had to change. Hiring managers provided varying experiences of whom new hires met, including when and how, and that simply wouldn't cut it. So we surveyed our historical approaches and standardized the best methods around a digital-first approach, anchored in Slack channels. Now we're hearing from new hires that our onboarding procedure, even when remote, is the best they've experienced to date.

## How your team can do the same

Before any new hire's start date, hold an official meeting dedicated to their onboarding. We use that time to consider all of the Slack channels a new hire will need to access to succeed in their work and also those that are important for our team culture. As a result, an engineer will get invited not only to dedicated team Slack channels but also to channels like **#tgif** and **#dei-discussion**, where they can connect with peers and join critical companywide conversations from the get-go.



# Automate it all, from healthy competition to hearty conversation



**Chris Aitchison**  
*Head of Technology*  
Up

## How we work

How many small tasks do you personally repeat in a day? What about your team? Once you start looking, they're everywhere in your business, and they cost you time, money and motivation.

At Up, Australia's biggest and fastest-growing digital bank, we're focusing on building custom digital-first solutions in Slack that automate grunt work and free up our employees to focus on what matters most—be it deep work or developing critical connections across the company. Here are just two examples:

1. Many banks deploy software updates once per month. Up does it several times per day. To streamline this, we built **Maestro, an app for Slack to coordinate myriad essential testing and risk management tasks**. Maestro also posts a deployment leaderboard to Slack, which adds some excitement and fun into what might otherwise be mundane.
2. To continue growing our culture while working remotely, we built **Cafe Bot, which automatically connects two people from across the company, schedules 15 minutes for them to meet, and suggests a topic of conversation**.

## How your team can do the same

Some of what we've automated in Slack, such as a deployment leaderboard or a randomized introduction schedule, could easily be tucked away in docs and spreadsheets. But because all of these automated processes are visible to everyone in Slack, there are fewer knowledge, data and process silos among teams.

And while visibility is one way to tear down silos, connection among teams is just as important. To that end, here are two of our favorite icebreaker questions. Use them with your own Cafe Bot or simply the next time you chat one-on-one with a new teammate:

1. **What have you found to be the most positive and negative things to come from this pandemic?** This question encourages people to open up about their personal lives.
2. **What achievement, personality trait or accomplishment are you most proud of and why?** This shines a light on what people value most.

P.S.: Want to test the digital-first watercooler before building your own custom tool?  
[Download the Donut app for Slack.](#)



# Where to go for more digital-first work tips

## Future Forum

A consortium launched by Slack to help companies reimagine work in the new digital-first workplace.

[futureforum.com](https://futureforum.com)

## Slack blog

Our blog, “Several People Are Typing,” covers stories and insights on collaboration, productivity and transformation.

[slack.com/blog](https://slack.com/blog)

## Slack Resources Library

All sorts of training guides customized to specific industries, as well as tips on how to improve your organization’s use of Slack.

[slack.com/resources](https://slack.com/resources)

