



FOM Hochschule für Oekonomie und Management

Hochschulzentrum Köln

Wirtschaftsinformatik

The great flexible work experiment

IT-Management, Jan Quatram, SS 20

Christian Frank (#473088)

July 21, 2020

ChilledCow: lofi hip hop radio - beats to relax/study to



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or
send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Table of contents

- Table of contents**II
- List of Figures**III
- List of Abbreviations** IV
- 1 Changes introduced by Corona**5
 - 1.1 Remote worker over night5
 - 1.2 Pronouns6
- 2 Existing all-remote companies**7
 - 2.1 Gitlab7
 - 2.2 Trello7
 - 2.3 Buffer8
 - 2.4 Creative Commons8
- 3 Best communication practices**9
 - 3.1 Communication!9
 - 3.2 Focus on Diversity & Inclusion9
 - 3.3 Flexible schedules9
 - 3.4 Right tooling9
- 4 Return strategy – do we need one?** 12
- 5 The future is remote** 14
- References** 16

List of Figures

Figure 1 – Slack Desktop..... 10

Figure 2 - Scrumlr 11

Figure 3 - Measures to avoid infection 13

Figure 4 - Airborne..... 15

List of Abbreviations

UN	United Nations
VPN	Virtual Private Network

1 Changes introduced by Corona

1.1 Remote worker over night

As the global Covid-19 pandemic broke out, everybody in IT and other desk-bound professions became a remote worker. Almost overnight, teams that were previously working together in the office were separated into single, autonomous units and communication was moved to virtual channels.

Of course, that led to network and bandwidth issues in the first weeks, as the corporate VPN solutions tried to cope with a massive rise of users and a huge increase in video traffic. A couple of months later, we can say that this is no longer a problem, the network infrastructure has caught up with the development and in most companies is able to maintain the current level of remote access.

The move to home office was not voluntary for some, and people might have experienced social isolation when staying at home full time, without personal contact and without the ritual of the daily commute.¹ Switching to full-time home office without preparation for some also brought the danger of a burnout, because they ended up working way too much. Or, equally damaging, for others it brought the danger of a boreout, when there was not enough to do during the workday.

What we can say for sure after a couple of months is that managing teams remotely requires a new and different mindset than before – a mindset based on trust and outcomes.

LinkedIn calls this “The great flexible work experiment”² and it is probably the biggest disruption event that we have experienced this century.

¹ See *Fowler, Damian* (BBC, 2020): Why you might be missing your commute

² *LinkedIn* (LinkedIn, 2020): The great flexible work experiment

Several tech companies have even announced that their offices will remain closed for most of the year and possibly beyond.³

Unfortunately, due to the limited nature of this essay, we will merely be able to scratch the surface of this change in IT, but I do hope you will find it interesting notwithstanding.

1.2 Pronouns

In time of a global pandemic, it is important to be mindful about hate speech and other forms of offensive communication – this includes taking care about gender inclusivity. "The universal singular they is inclusive of people who identify as male, female or nonbinary."⁴ Throughout this text, I will attempt to use gender neutral language. Or, as Jane Roper writes on WBUR, "They Is Here to Stay. Get Over It"⁵. If you ever misgender a person, One Medical has some simple advice: Apologize and correct theyself.⁶

Let us start with a look at companies that have been working remote full-time even before the pandemic.

³ See Heater, Brian (TechCrunch, 2020): Google confirms US offices will remain closed until at least September

⁴ Saguy, Abigail and Williams, Juliet (Scientific American, 2019) Why we should all use they/them pronouns

⁵ Roper, Jane (WBUR, 2019): They Is Here to Stay. Get Over It.

⁶ See One Medical (Instagram, 2020): Navigating Pronouns 101

2 Existing all-remote companies

2.1 Gitlab

[GitLab](#) is, according to their website, is the world's largest all-remote company, with 1,200 employees and no offices whatsoever.⁷ Gitlab does not require employees to work from home, it allows everybody to work from wherever they want.

To support this, Gitlab has the following recommendations for their employees:⁸

- Carve out a dedicated workspace (achieving focus)
- Separate work from life (preventing burnout)
- Do not stop engaging with people (avoiding loneliness)
- Respect the routine, but experiment with change (finding structure)
- Roll with the changes (embracing iteration)

2.2 Trello

[Atlassian](#), the company behind [Trello](#), is developing the application with remote teams and offers these recommendations:⁹

- Empathy Is Everything
- Treat Others with Transparency
- Asynchronous Is A-OK
- Expect Structure
- Different Yet Equal

⁷ See *GitLab* (GitLab, 2020): Why GitLab uses the term all-remote to describe its 100% remote workforce

⁸ *GitLab* (GitLab, 2020): Remote work starter guide for employees

⁹ *Trello* (Atlassian, 2020): So wirst du zum Profi für Remote-Arbeit

2.3 Buffer

[Buffer](#), the company behind the social media tool of the same name, puts a strong focus on asynchronous communication and the tools needed to support this.¹⁰

2.4 Creative Commons

[Creative Commons](#) is the non-profit organization behind the Creative Commons license that I use to enable open access for this essay. Creative Commons is a remote-first organization and has a focus on building an inclusive work environment for its employees.¹¹

¹⁰ See *Griffis, Hailley* (Buffer, 2020): Asynchronous Communication and Why It Matters for Remote Work

¹¹ See *Creative Commons* (Remoter Project, 2020): On building inclusive remote workplaces

3 Best communication practices

3.1 Communication!

As we have learned from the pioneers in all-remote work above, team communication is key, and a lot of work needs to go into defining the right toolset and mindset for your environment.

3.2 Focus on Diversity & Inclusion

As in any crisis, any person who does not conform to the majority, is at risk in this pandemic. For our field of work, that would be anyone who is not White¹², abled, cis male and straight. “One way businesses can demonstrate the leadership this moment requires is through a continued investment in their people and renewed commitments to safety, equity, diversity, and inclusion.”¹³ Unfortunately, the pandemic has encouraged people to discriminate more and has given rise to more hate speech – the UN has released in-depth guidance on how deal with it.¹⁴ Using mindful language is key to create an environment that welcomes and includes everybody.¹⁵

3.3 Flexible schedules

To enable distributed teams across different time zones and lifestyles, flexible schedules are a must. To manage, you will need to shift focus from controlling time to measuring outcomes and begin to trust your colleagues and employees.

3.4 Right tooling

The most used common tool for remote teamwork is [Slack](#)¹⁶, or its new rival [Teams](#) from Microsoft; there is also an open-source variant, [Mattermost](#).

¹² See *Ewing, Eve L.* (Zora, 2020): I’m a Black Scholar Who Studies Race. Here’s Why I Capitalize White

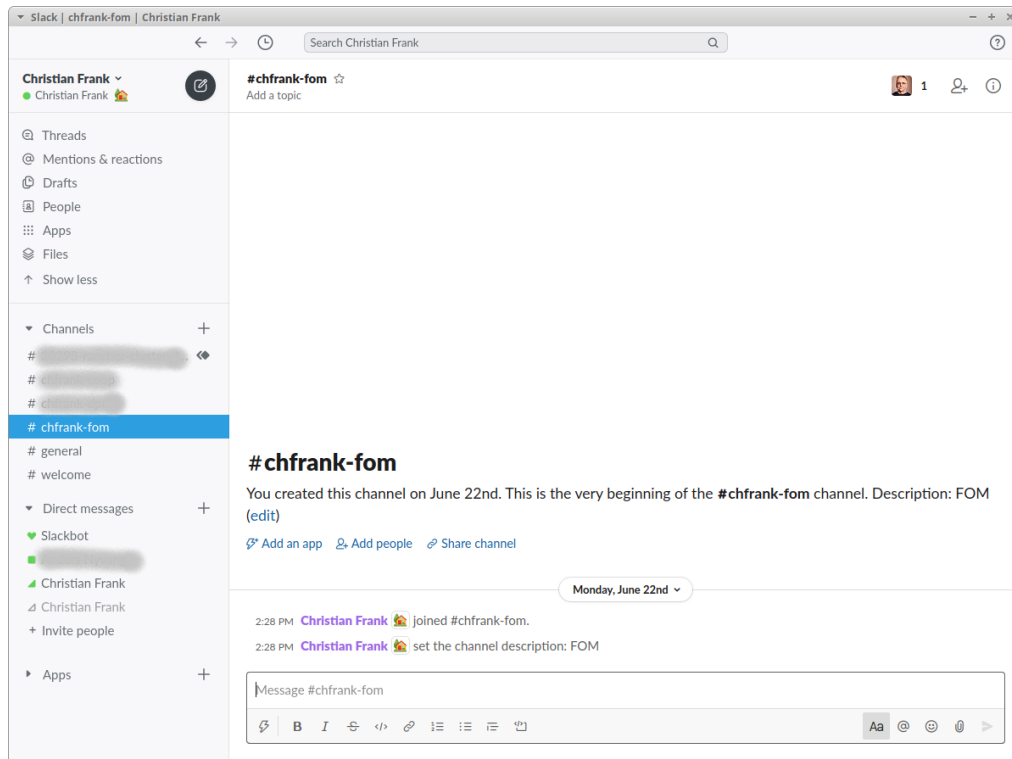
¹³ *Time’s Up* (Time’s Up Foundation, 2020): Guide to Equity and Inclusion During Crisis

¹⁴ *United Nations* (United Nations, 2020): Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech

¹⁵ See *Seitner, Courtney* (Buffer, 2018): An Incomplete Guide to Inclusive Language for Startups and Tech

¹⁶ See *Seitner, Courtney* (Buffer, 2015): 12 Remote Work Tools Buffer Cannot Live Without

Figure 1 – Slack Desktop



Slack and its brethren are being used across the world for asynchronous communication between distributed teams and have proven to be remarkably successful alternatives to Email.

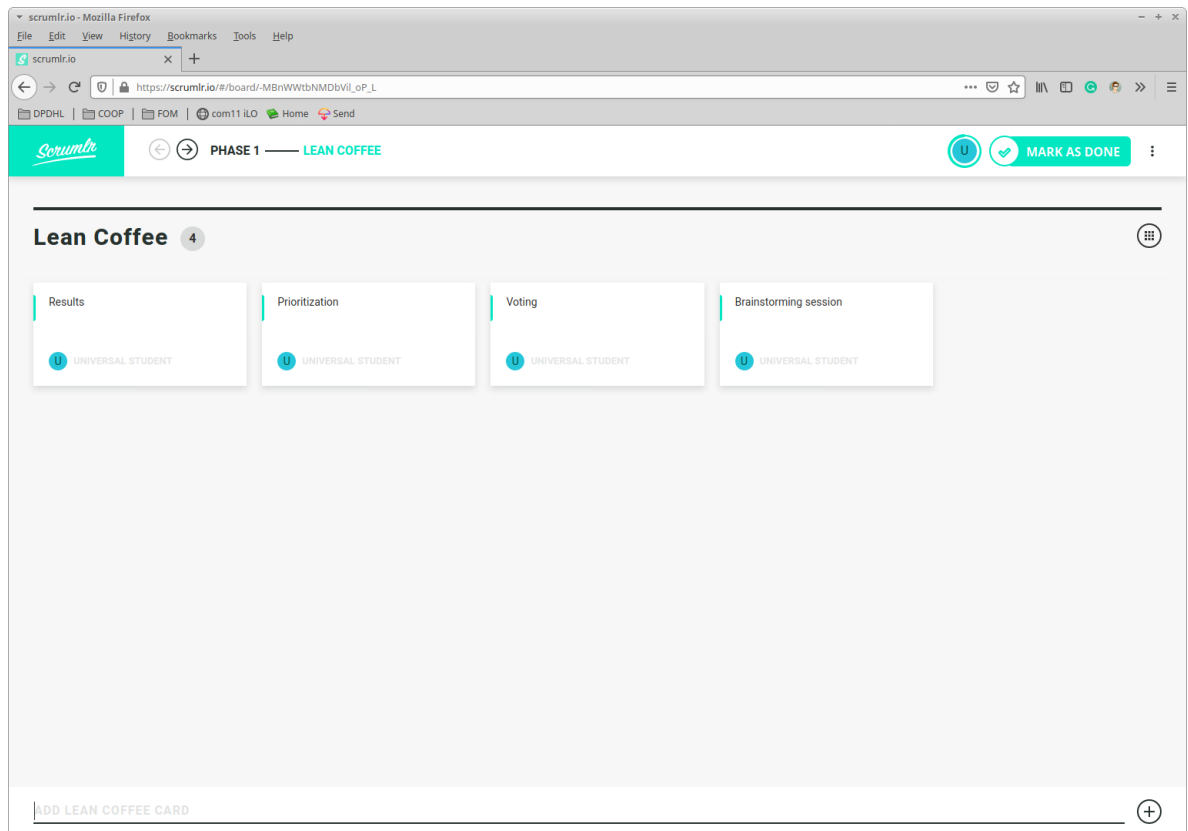
There are a lot of tools available for remote meetings and video conferences, too numerous to point out, but there's one interesting tool, [Threads](#), which enables completely asynchronous meetings and is top on my list to try out.¹⁷

To support distributed meetings, brainstorming or retrospectives you need something akin to a shared whiteboard, again there are too many tools around to mention, but I

¹⁷ See *Gonda, Victoria* (Buffer, 2019): What Happened When Our Team Switched to Only Asynchronous Meetings

would like to single out [Scrumlr](#) by [Inovex](#), which I have been using successfully in workshops on numerous occasions, mainly in the Lean Coffee variant.

Figure 2 - Scrumlr



4 Return strategy – do we need one?

As time progresses, we now need to look at the question on if and how we get back to the office.

Do we need a return strategy?

Do we want a return strategy?

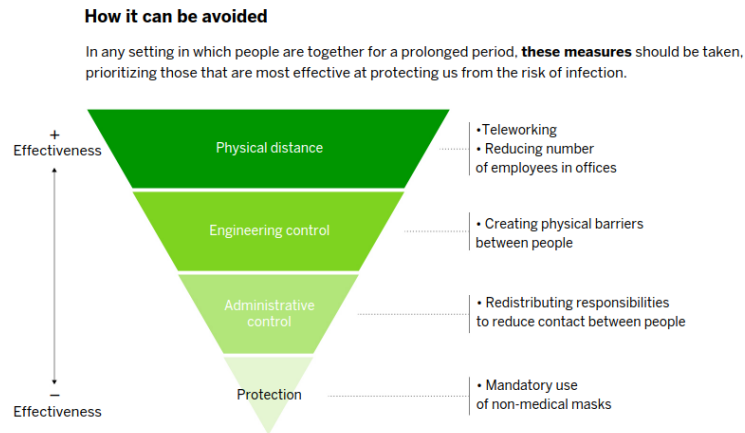
What we are currently experiencing could be a fundamental shift in how work will look like in the future. It could open us to a lot of new possibilities and setups as far as work and life is concerned – Telecommuting is a desire for many and has proven that it can work.¹⁸

If we look at a recent analysis conducted by El Pais¹⁹, Teleworking is top on the list of measures that will continue to help us to break the chain of Covid-19 infections in the workplace. No other measure in the workplace will be as effective in ensuring physical distance than not being in the same place but working from remote.

¹⁸ See *Bera, Mila* (Teachaeris, 2020): What is going to happen to remote work after COVID-19?

¹⁹ See *Salas, Javier and Zafra, Mariano* (El Pais, 2020): An analysis of three Covid-19 outbreaks - how they happened and how they can be avoided

Figure 3 - Measures to avoid infection



Sources: US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Guangzhou and Hangzhou, The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, the Spanish National Research Council's Institute of Environmental Assessment and Water Studies (IDAEA-CSIC), European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, International Laboratory for Air Quality & Health (WHO, Queensland), and the government of South Korea.

Developed by Belén Polo.

Source: El Pais²⁰

Looking at this study, it might well be a good idea not to look for a return strategy, but to focus instead on solidifying the status quo and spend our energy on digital collaboration and remote team setups.²¹

Eliminating commute time and distance will be good for the environment and help us reach the CO₂ reduction goals needed to combat global warming. Also, having less (or no) office space will greatly benefit the bottom line for most companies and reduce overall overhead costs; it will also ease building pressure on the major cities and enable us to re-introduce public spaces. Moreover, it will help IT companies to attract new talent from all over the world, without any regards for location or visa issues.

²⁰ See Salas, Javier and Zafra, Mariano (El Pais, 2020): An analysis of three Covid-19 outbreaks - how they happened and how they can be avoided

²¹ See Pardes, Arielle (Wired, 2020): Silicon Valley Rethinks the Home Office

5 The future is remote

From my point of view, home office is here to stay! We have the infrastructure in place; furthermore, we now have the proof that distributed work simply works.²²

So, the question to ask is why do people have to go to work, when work can come to them easily? They do not - this is especially true for our field of work.

We have seen that Diversity & Inclusion is key for managing distributed teams, that you will need a change of attitude for managers and employees alike, and exceptionally good tooling, of course; but we've also seen that it's entirely doable and well established practice for tech companies.

There is also an enormous chance in this: As work and location decouple, we gain a lot of freedom and flexibility. We could, for example, live in Europe, work in the US, and attend university classes in Asia – Covid-19, I believe, is pushing us to fully deliver the promise of digitalization and globalization and will lead us to a new way of working.²³

Stay safe!

²² See *Kosner, Anthony W.* (Dropbox, 2020): The crucial difference between remote work and distributed work

²³ See *Wingard, Jason* (Quartz, 2020): The future of work is here, thanks to Covid-19

Figure 4 - Airborne



Christian Frank

@chfrank_cgn

"And therefore, the possibility of airborne transmission in public settings, especially in very specific conditions crowded, closed, poorly ventilated settings that have been described cannot be ruled out" [@cnnhealth](#) [@WHO](#) [edition.cnn.com/2020/07/08/hea...](#) [#WearAMask](#) [#breakthechain](#) [#COVID](#)



WHO confirms there's 'emerging evidence' of airborne transmission of coronavirus
[edition.cnn.com](#)

References

Bera, Mila (Techaeris, 2020): What is going to happen to remote work after COVID-19? <<https://techaeris.com/2020/05/25/what-is-going-to-happen-to-remote-work-after-covid-19/>> (2020-05-25) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Creative Commons (Remoter Project, 2020): On building inclusive remote workplaces <<https://remoterproject.atavist.com/creative-commons>> (2020-01-15) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Ewing, Eve L. (Zora, 2020): I'm a Black Scholar Who Studies Race. Here's Why I Capitalize White. <<https://zora.medium.com/im-a-black-scholar-who-studies-race-here-s-why-i-capitalize-white-f94883aa2dd3>> (2020-07-02) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Fowler, Damian (BBC, 2020): Why you might be missing your commute <<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200519-why-you-might-be-missing-your-commute>> (2020-05-20) [Access: 2020-07-02]

GitLab (GitLab, 2020): Remote work starter guide for employees <<https://about.gitlab.com/company/culture/all-remote/remote-work-starter-guide/>> (2020) [Access: 2020-07-02]

GitLab (GitLab, 2020): Why GitLab uses the term all-remote to describe its 100% remote workforce <<https://about.gitlab.com/company/culture/all-remote/terminology/>> (2020) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Gonda, Victoria (Buffer, 2019): What Happened When Our Team Switched to Only Asynchronous Meetings <<https://buffer.com/resources/asynchronous-meetings/>> (2019-07-29) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Griffis, Hailley (Buffer, 2020): Asynchronous Communication and Why It Matters for Remote Work <<https://buffer.com/resources/asynchronous-communication/>> (2020-03-17) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Heater, Brian (TechCrunch, 2020): Google confirms US offices will remain closed until at least September <<https://techcrunch.com/2020/07/01/google-confirms-us-offices-will-remain-closed-until-at-least-september-as-covid-19-spikes/>> (2020-07-10) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Kosner, Anthony W. (Dropbox, 2020): The crucial difference between remote work and distributed work <<https://blog.dropbox.com/topics/work-culture/the-crucial-difference-between-remote-work-and-distributed-work>> (2020-04-03) [Access: 2020-07-02]

LinkedIn (LinkedIn, 2020): The great flexible work experiment <<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/news/4836108>> (2020) [Access: 2020-07-02]

One Medical (Instagram, 2020): Navigating Pronouns 101
<<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBqwZzmhKWQ/?igshid=1lc9nrdjplewq>> (2020-06-20) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Pardes, Arielle (Wired, 2020): Silicon Valley Rethinks the Home Office
<<https://www.wired.com/story/silicon-valley-rethinks-home-office-twitter-slack/>> (2020-05-15) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Roper, Jane (WBUR, 2019): They Is Here to Stay. Get Over It.
<<https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2019/08/13/gender-pronouns-jane-roper>> (2019-08-13) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Saguy, Abigail and Williams, Juliet (Scientific American, 2019): Why we should all use they/them pronouns <<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/why-we-should-all-use-they-them-pronouns/>> (2019-04-11) [Access: 2020-05-25]

Salas, Javier and Zafra, Mariano (El Pais, 2020): An analysis of three Covid-19 outbreaks - how they happened and how they can be avoided <https://english.elpais.com/spanish_news/2020-06-17/an-analysis-of-three-covid-19-outbreaks-how-they-happened-and-how-they-can-be-avoided.html> (2020-06-18) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Seitner, Courtney (Buffer, 2015): 12 Remote Work Tools Buffer Cannot Live Without
<<https://buffer.com/resources/remote-work-tools/>> (2015-09-28) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Seitner, Courtney (Buffer, 2018): An Incomplete Guide to Inclusive Language for Startups and Tech
<<https://open.buffer.com/inclusive-language-tech/>> (2018-06-06) [Access: 2020-07-02]

Time's Up (Time's Up Foundation, 2020): Guide to Equity and Inclusion During Crisis
<<https://timesupfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/TIMES-UP-Guide-to-Equity-and-Inclusion-During-Crisis.pdf>> (2020-05-01) [Access: 2020-05-27]

Trello (Atlassian, 2020): So wirst du zum Profi für Remote-Arbeit <<https://trello.com/de/remote-work-guide>> (2020) [Access: 2020-07-02]

United Nations (United Nations, 2020): Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech
<<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20related%20Hate%20Speech.pdf>> (2020-05-11) [Access: 2020-05-17]

Wingard, Jason (Quartz, 2020): The future of work is here, thanks to Covid-19
<<https://qz.com/work/1859984/the-future-of-work-is-here-thanks-to-covid-19/>> (2020-05-22) [Access: 2020-07-02]