

The Washington Post

TECH AT WORK

Bosses say remote work kills culture. These companies disagree.

Some business leaders worry remote options could destroy their company culture. But companies that have operated remotely for years say culture doesn't come from a physical office.

By [Danielle Abril](#)

September 1, 2022 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

Julia Cummings, a Los Angeles-based remote worker for a software start-up, said that in her job, she has access to nearly anything she might need. She can check her company's financial performance, see co-workers' salaries and view shared notes from all meetings — even ones she didn't attend. She gets reimbursed for unlimited books and receives a \$1,000 annual stipend for development. The company's required minimum vacation policy of 15 days in addition to time off for mental health helps her avoid burnout. She has a "role buddy," who helped her navigate her position, and a buddy to keep her connected to the company culture. And her employer, Buffer, regularly welcomes worker discussions about what's happening outside of work.

"I was pleasantly surprised by how much support ... and resources there were," said Cummings, who six years ago was a little nervous to join a fully remote company. "It's some of the strongest culture I've seen, and we're not in an office."

Cummings is one of the many workers employed by companies that have been fully remote since inception. While many companies transitioned to hybrid work, about 36.5 million people in the United States worked remotely at least five days a week as of early August, according to the [Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey](#). As leaders develop post-pandemic policies, one concern about remote work commonly surfaces: Can a company build and maintain culture if workers are remote?

Companies that have been remote pre-pandemic say it's not only possible but also provides additional flexibility, increased productivity and a competitive edge in hiring. But creating a remote culture takes a shift in mentality, creativity and intentionality, remote companies say.

For social interaction, Buffer — which employs 84 people in 27 countries — provides a monthly stipend to work from co-working spaces or coffee shops. It offers a tone guide to ensure text doesn't get misinterpreted. And it pairs cross-functional workers for weekly 30-minute chats via the automated Donut app on Slack.

“It's possible in a remote setting to build that same [office] energy, but you do have to work harder,” said Jenny Terry, Buffer's director of business operations. “It's not as easy to bump into each other in the hallway — our hallways are Slack.”

The definition of culture varies. Some workers suggest it is a sense of organizational belonging and a strong connection to colleagues. Others say it is a set of shared values and beliefs that guide decisions. Some define it as an intangible asset described as the soul of the company. But what's clear is that culture plays a major role in a company's success, workers say.

Cultural impact is one reason some companies reject remote work. Leaders worry culture will immediately dissolve, employees will become disconnected, and work will suffer. They believe there is magic and creativity that comes only from working in person. And to be sure, not all companies can operate remotely given the nature of their jobs.

But since the pandemic, more companies have offered remote options. Twitter, Salesforce and Slack, the messaging app owned by Salesforce, now allow permanent remote work. Airbnb employees can work remote from [anywhere in the world](#).

GitLab, a software development platform with more than 1,700 employees in 65 countries, said remote work is here to stay so companies should embrace flexibility. To encourage in-person camaraderie, at the beginning of every quarter, GitLab offers employees a “get together grant,” which provides up to \$50 for meals, transportation or activities with co-workers. It also offers a visiting grant of up to \$1,000 for travel to events with four or more teammates. GitLab's first employee, Marin Jankovski, once used a grant to attend a colleague's wedding.

“It created a special connection with GitLab for me,” he said. “It was an intentional move ... to encourage relationships outside of work.”

To promote transparency, GitLab provides an evolving 2,000-page handbook, meant to serve as a searchable document for workers' questions. It includes resources for how workers should communicate — both in terms of medium and etiquette — departmental topics, and even what a worker might want to know about chief executive Sid Sijbrandij, including his communication style, flaws and how to meet with him. GitLab said it also documents everything from decisions to project updates and meeting discussions as a public reference for employees.

“There needs to be a single source of truth,” said Wendy Barnes, GitLab's chief people officer. “So there's no fear of missing out.”

But Jankovski, an Amsterdam resident, admits transparency doesn't come easily. In the days preceding GitLab, Jankovski and its co-founders teamed up remotely for a project and together documented the next steps.

“We had this moment of clarity of writing things down [to see] a person's understanding and [those of] others,” he said.

At Zapier, which employs more than 700 people in 41 countries, workers regularly chat about hobbies in the various “fun” Slack channels, and the company flies employees to retreats twice a year. Danny Schreiber, a senior business operations manager, said being intentional about getting to know colleagues in a remote environment helps with work.

“If I can learn a person's tone, the way they speak and their sense of humor, it increases productivity,” he said about meeting in person.

Matt Mullenweg, CEO of Automattic, known for content management system WordPress, has had a remote workforce for more than a decade. Automattic pairs people for video calls based on shared interests. And team meetings often start with a non-work-related question.

“Ultimately, we believe in giving teams autonomy to create a culture that works for them,” Mullenweg said.

Brandon Sammut, Zapier's chief people officer, said that for remote work to succeed, a company must develop systems to support employees.

“What got you here won't get you to where you're going,” he said.

For managers like Steph Donily, Zapier's head of corporate marketing, that has meant shifting to focus on results, regardless of whether someone needs to make a midday grocery run. She said she consistently overcommunicates expectations, feedback and context.

"Rather than [basing someone's] value on them sitting in their seat or saying the smart thing in the meeting, you have to manage differently," she said. "I have to make sure the team is delivering what they say they are delivering."

Some companies became remote after seeing the benefits to workers and its business. Christa Quarles, CEO of Canadian graphics software company Corel, said it took some adjustment.

"I had to change a lot of how I approached my leadership style," such as being intentional about checking in with people and creating opportunities, Quarles said.

That's why Corel is training middle managers to understand an outcomes-based model of leadership. She also said remote work has made her recognize the importance of clearly articulating processes and that meetings can be more equitable with tech features such as Zoom's chat and hand-raise functions.

While scaling culture remotely may have challenges, companies say it's worth it. Employees have more freedom, and employers can access a larger talent pool, including workers who want or need flexible work.

"Once you transition to ... remote work, you need to reimagine how you build culture," said Prithwiraj Choudhury, a Harvard Business School professor who studies the future of work.

Cummings of Buffer said now that she has worked remotely, she will never go back to a traditional office.

"Just because you're in person, doesn't mean it's positive culture," she said. "What really matters is how a company is making you feel — whether they're honoring their people as humans and trusting them to get things done."