



**Work-from-home tips, best practices,
and insights about remote videogame creation**

Introduction

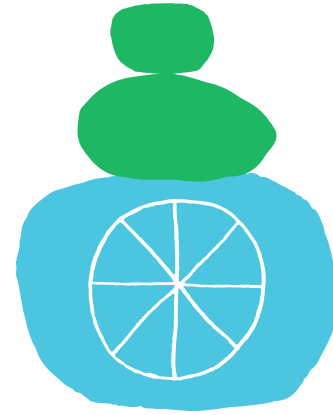
Isolation Nation emerged out of interviews and surveys with 70 game studios across Canada with the goal of sharing challenges, tips, and best practices for making games when working from home. We hope this document will serve as a practical resource for studios working remotely.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people are suddenly working from home, an option that has been available for decades but is only now being exercised en masse. Games were some of the first to transition and are arguably some of the best positioned to adapt. But like any significant cultural shift, we face new challenges and opportunities.

Most studios switched to remote work quickly and almost seamlessly, transitioning within a few days and solving problems as they emerged. Other studios with more complex playtesting needs like VR or local multiplayer are still struggling. While work patterns have changed, business strategies have largely remained the same. Many studios are still in the middle of producing projects that were planned in previous years, and continuing at nearly the same velocity they had in-office. A large number of the studios we spoke to have given up their physical office spaces temporarily, adopting a “wait-and-see” stance for the future.

The top work-from-home challenges surfaced in our interviews were feelings of isolation, struggles with communication, motivation, and focus, and difficulties related to meetings. These issues pre-date the pandemic, so they will probably outlast it too. We were surprised with the consistency of these topics, with over 80% of the interviewees mentioning these issues. Isolation Nation addresses each of these core challenges with tips and best practices sourced from game studios across Canada.

Attracting new players continues to be a shared challenge for almost all studios. Games are thriving, but the marketplace is oversaturated, making it challenging



to reach new players. Building audiences was a hot topic for almost every studio interviewed, with many studios curious about the tactics and techniques of their peers.

A final core challenge is financial investment. Despite the growing market, many investors are tightening their budgets, resulting in a narrowing of financial opportunities. Neither attracting players or finding financial investment are new problems, nor are they unique to work from home, but both are exacerbated by the current financial landscape.

Isolation Nation was created by Marie Claire LeBlanc Flanagan with the Game Arts International Network. GAIN is a not-for-profit that serves game arts organizers and curators in Los Angeles, Montreal, Buenos Aires, Vancouver, Madrid, Ottawa, Austin, Seattle, Tel Aviv, Halifax, New York, Berlin, Melbourne, Portland, Reykjavík, Pittsburgh, London, Boston, Copenhagen, Cape Town and Toronto. Prior to their work with GAIN, Marie worked with A MAZE Berlin on experience design, has taught game design with the School of Machines, Making, and Make-Believe, and founded Weird Canada.

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Thank you

Isolation Nation was created between March and December 2020 and was only possible thanks to people donating their time to do one-on-one interviews and surveys:

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20 BELOW GAMES	FLIPSIDE XR	OTHER OCEAN INTERACTIVE
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DUALRYAN	MOONRAY STUDIOS	VAGABOND DOG
DUNEWORLD GAMES	NECROPHONE GAMES	
FAIRVIEW GAMES	NEW WORLD INTERACTIVE	

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Surviving WFH: The top 10 challenges and top 10 benefits

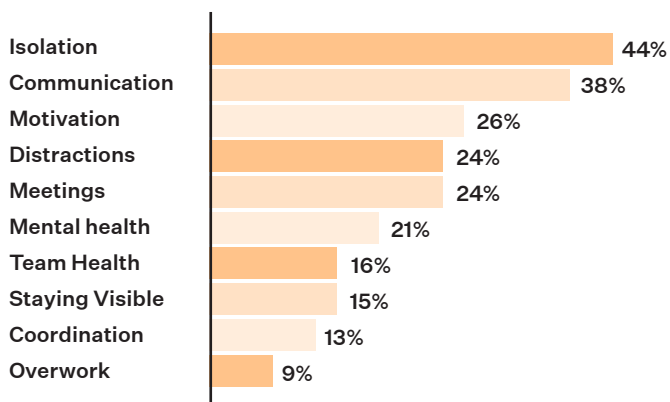


The top 10 challenges reported by game studios across Canada when working from home:

1. **Isolation.** Missing the energy and camaraderie of the office, studios reported extreme feelings of isolation.
2. **Communication.** Remote communication can be time-consuming and cumbersome. Quick in-person chats have been replaced by lengthy online back-and-forths or prolonged meetings.
3. **Motivation.** Without the activity, energy, and social pressure of a team environment, self-motivation has become an extra part-time job.
4. **Distractions.** Finally escaping the noise of the open office, workers find spouses or roommates shouting loudly in their own conference calls, as well as kids and pets vying for attention.
5. **Meetings.** Video meeting fatigue is rampant. Online meetings lack the natural energy of in-person connection. Instead of leaning over and bouncing an idea off someone, every little conversation becomes a meeting.
6. **Mental health.** Isolation, overwork, communication challenges, and the pandemic have exacerbated mental health challenges.

7. **Team health.** Individual work-from-home difficulties grow exponentially into problems at the team level. An increasing amount of emotional management is necessary to keep teams healthy.
8. **Staying visible.** Work-from-home is a constant battle against being forgotten, requiring a continuous reassessment of personal value.
9. **Coordination.** Disparate working hours can make work-from-home a scheduling nightmare and result in blocks on tasks.
10. **Overwork.** There are no clear boundaries between work and home and it's difficult to stop working.

The top 10 challenges

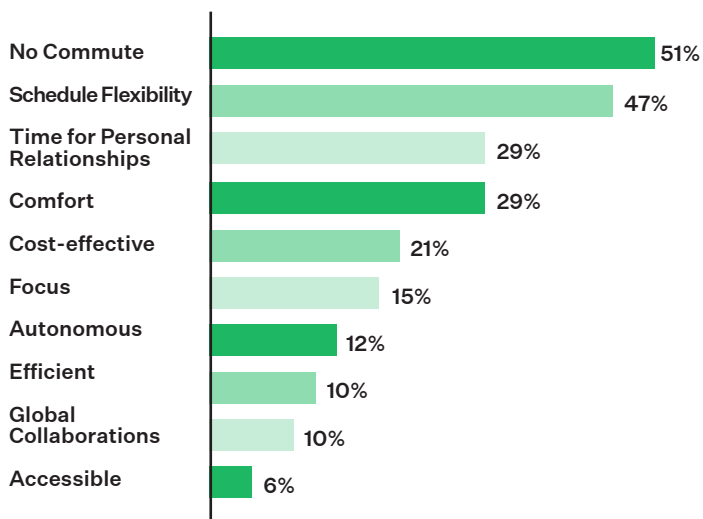


Note: in many of our surveys, the respondents chose multiple options resulting in percentage totals not adding up to 100%.

The top 10 benefits reported by game studios across Canada when working from home:

1. **No Commute.** Everyone's favourite benefit is losing the commute and reclaiming time and money. Well, everyone except people with small children who are now missing their only alone time.
2. **Schedule flexibility.** Work-from-home brings more autonomy and freedom to work at times that are personally convenient.
3. **Time for personal relationships.** Saved commuting time and meals can be spent with families, housemates, and pets.
4. **Comfort.** Work environments can be customized with ergonomic equipment, music, comfortable clothing, and great lighting.
5. **Focus.** Notifications can be turned off for a few hours to make space for the kind of deep focus

The top 10 benefits



6. **Cost-effective.** For people who run studios, work-from-home reduces all office costs including rent, electricity, heating, and in-office perks.
7. **Autonomous.** People can work on their own schedule and with their own rhythms in ways that work best for them.
8. **Efficient.** Work-from-home allows people to use resources in ways that are optimal and efficient.

9. **Global.** Working remotely widens the candidate pool and allows people to collaborate internationally (within geographical funding restrictions). International teams bring diversity, and with it a wealth of experience and knowledge.
10. **Accessible.** Work-from-home can allow people to accommodate their own accessibility needs in ways that are often difficult in an office.

We asked studios to sum up work from home in one word.



GameDev seeks Player: How to find players online



More people are playing games than ever before but it's still tremendously difficult to connect with players. Rising above the massive glut of content online and standing out is an extreme challenge. We interviewed 70 game studios across Canada, here are their top tips to find players for your game.

1. Stand out.

If your game plays like every other game you'll blend into the background. Find the games like yours, understand how you fit into the broader landscape, then identify and amplify the ways you are different.

2. Stand for something.

Build a strong brand that feels authentic to you. Find hooks and give people something they can be excited to engage with and talk about. Look for the moments where people's eyes light up.

3. Seed community early.

Start building your community early. Make a Discord, build your social media presence, then invite people to become part of your community.

4. Don't give up.

It can take time to find your fans, especially if you are making something niche or experimental. Stay consistent with your values and give people time to find you.

5. Be open.

Don't hide until everything is perfect. Be transparent and share your process. Early fans who become invested in your journey can help strengthen your game and can become your biggest evangelists.

6. Choose community platforms wisely.

Build your community on platforms where you have more control, like Discord, instead of on platforms like Facebook where an algorithmic tweak can bury your game in an instant.

7. Make space for people to connect.

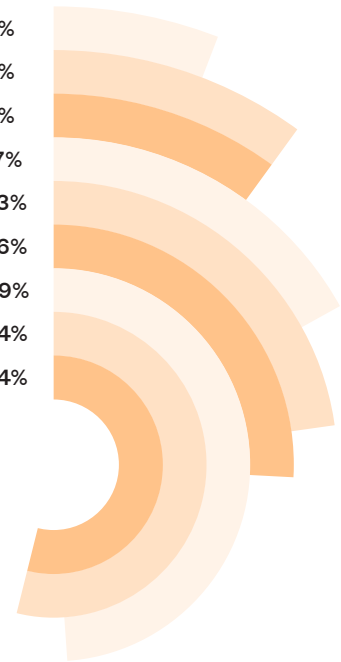
Create opportunities for people to connect and engage with each other inside your community. If you get a critical mass of people engaging, they can build a thriving and exciting community.

8. Manage community expectations.

Be mindful of expectations when shaping your early community. Be transparent about your bandwidth and be careful what you promise. The consequences of a horde of superfans with unbounded expectations can be perilous.

Where studios find new players

Facebook	6%
Online events	9%
Twitch	9%
Youtube	17%
Paid ads	23%
Press	26%
Discord	49%
Steam	54%
Twitter	54%



9. Maintain relationships.

Relationships take time. Show up consistently and bring genuine curiosity and openness to others. It's easier to be interesting when you are interested, so invest in relationships that excite you. Show appreciation, look for ways to give back to people, and boost the work of others in the community.

10. Be open to feedback.

Make space for fans to communicate with you and reply to feedback openly and honestly. If you feel defensive, wait a day to cool down. Consider your goals when replying to feedback.

11. Set and enforce boundaries.

Ban people who are making your community toxic. Growing your community requires pushing toxicity and abuse out, which makes space for healthy relationships to thrive. If you hire someone to do this work for you, thank them often and compensate them generously.

12. Invest in marketing.

Experiment with your marketing tactics. Try many small things to see what works. Let your successful experiments guide your resourcing decisions. Then invest in tactics that demonstrate measurable impact. Don't spread your budget everywhere. For example: only buy social media ads if they have measurable conversion rates.

13. Get it in the contract.

If you are working with a publisher, get everything in the contract. You can expressly request to be involved in marketing your game. They are working with many studios, help them make yours a priority.

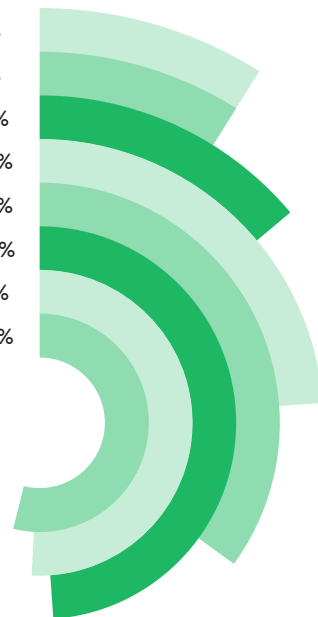
14. Get press.

Build a press list. If you have the budget, hire a publicist who knows how to reach your demographic. Don't blast the entire world with your presskit. Seek out streamers and media outlets who are covering games like yours, get introductions if you can, and write personalized messages. Make as big of a splash as you can on the first day and week. Platforms want to support games that are hot.

15. Prioritize punchy assets.

Sources for opportunities, contacts, and industry information

Newsletters	8%
LinkedIn	8%
Facebook groups	14%
Invite-only groups	24%
Discord communities	35%
Twitter	49%
Online festivals/events	51%
Industry organizations	54%



When you only have two seconds to catch someone's eye online, it helps to have an attention-grabbing title, a strong trailer, compelling images, and playful gifs.

16. Consider Steam.

Steam is where many of the players are. Make lots of Steam updates and be responsive. Always get people to wishlist your game. Try to cross-promote with other games. Steam forums can help cement support. If someone has a problem with the game and you fix it and reply to them, they will often write a glowing review.

17. Consider Discord.

Discord can be a central hub for engaging with players, creating community, and getting feedback. Build your own experimental bots and custom tools to engage your community!

18. Consider Twitch.

Build an audience by doing daily dev streams, monthly devlogs, playing games, or hosting interviews.

19. Experiment with social media.

Platforms change quickly. Where are your players? Be nimble and participate in trends. Schedule posts in advance so you can maintain a regular presence and sprinkle in real-time updates. Use social media to find people, but invite players back to platforms that are hopefully less nefarious and more in your control.

20. Consider a mailing list.

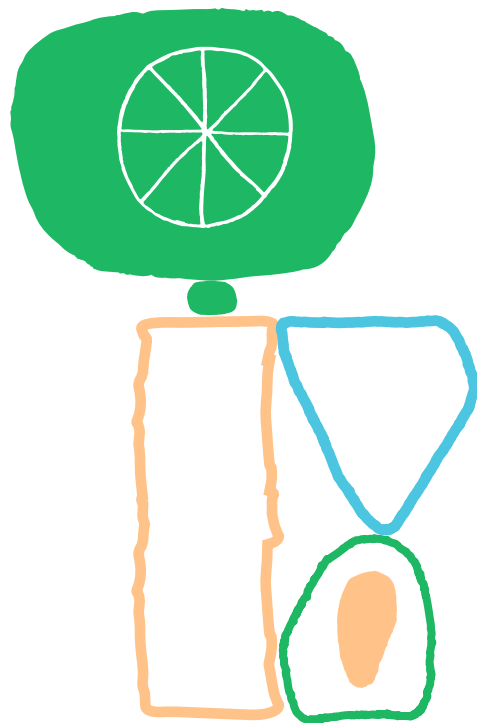
Having a direct line to people who love your work is invaluable. Invite people to sign up at events and on your site. Have a clear call to action in your emails: if you want people to buy your game, make it easy for them to buy it. If you want a wishlist, ask for it!

21. Use existing resources.

Find out about and access existing resources like industry organizations, industry Discords, and games events. These can be a great source of new relationships, community, resources, and support.

22. Keep learning.

Find and follow people who are giving tips and don't shy away from asking questions. Don't hesitate to build off the techniques of successful people.



How to make work-from-home work for you

Just like everything else in life, there's no one-size-fits-all solution when working remotely. Work-from-home in a tiny studio apartment is not like work-from-home in a rural farmhouse with bad internet. Making games with a toddler or puppy crawling all over you is completely unlike making games in a quiet room with the door tightly shut.

Your unique situation, skills, and challenges will shape what works for you. The best way to find a solution is to try new things. Follow your intuition about your needs and don't be afraid to experiment.

Revolutionize your workspace.

We often transpose office culture into the home. Throw out that idea. Take the time to figure out what could make your workspace excellent for you, and then try to make it happen.

One of the core advantages of work-from-home is comfort and customizability. Maybe you want to get a plant? Or maybe you want to get so many plants your office looks like a jungle? Maybe you want to do some of your meetings over the phone while you go for a walk? Maybe you have a recurring injury and are more comfortable working from a bed? Take advantage of the customizability of work-from-home to make a workspace that truly works for you.

Defend the line between work and play.

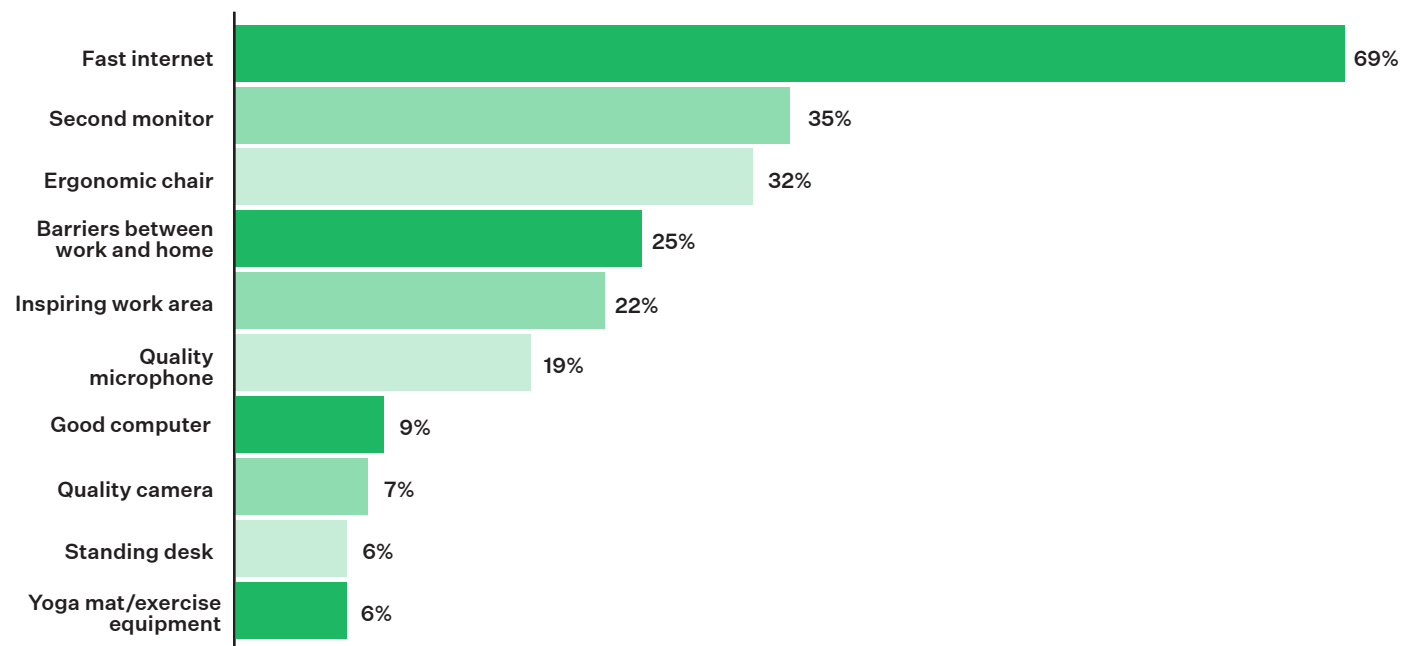
If your personal time and your work time are on the same computer in the same space, it's easy to feel like you are always at work. Even if you have the luxury of a home office, it can feel like it is haunting you every time you walk by the door. You are always just a few steps



and keystrokes away from fixing that bug or replying to that message.

Work-from-home shouldn't mean home becomes work. More separation is always better. Not everyone can afford to have a separate home office, but everyone can make a conceptual separation. Whether it's creating a separate user account for work with a different background image, or moving to a different work surface, or changing the lighting, find as many ways as possible to push work out of your personal life.

The most important things to have in your home office



Don't suffer bad equipment.

If the studio is saving money on office rent, it's helpful to invest in setting up home offices for everyone on the team.

The most expensive investment is technical equipment. You'll need a computer that can run a game engine and video call without sounding like a rocket taking off. Great internet is crucial for smooth meetings and file uploads. You'll want at least one external monitor, webcam, directional mic, headphones, and an ergonomic keyboard and mouse.

Adjustable desks that allow for standing and sitting and active chairs that engage your core can help you keep moving. Your future self begs you not to sit on an old stool with your laptop precariously perched on an ironing board.

You need a routine.

Almost everyone* and their doctors and therapists agree that routine is critical to work-from-home. This can be challenging if you have total freedom to work whenever you like. You aren't imagining it, total flexibility is more work. Without a routine, you have to

use willpower to work. With a routine the momentum carries you along, you just need to keep moving.

Work at times that work for you.

Use the flexibility of work-from-home to your advantage and build a routine that works for you. Maybe you like to code in 3-hour chunks with long breaks in between? Or perhaps you like to world-build in the morning before anyone else starts work? Or possibly you prefer to take mornings off and work on game design during afternoons and evenings? Find a schedule that works for you and try to be consistent. When there's no routine and no-one to be accountable to, it's easy to flop onto the couch and think "I'll make it up tomorrow."

A routine doesn't need to be only about the hard parts.

Your routine might include sitting down with a steaming cup of coffee every morning. Your routine could involve checking a daily webcomic as a reward for a few hours of solid work at 3 pm. Some people even take a walk around the block to get some air and mimic the perfect commute before they start their workday. Routine is just as much about morning rituals, regular breaks, and winding down as it is about the hours of work.

*86% of our survey respondents

Maybe tomorrow? Motivation and work from home



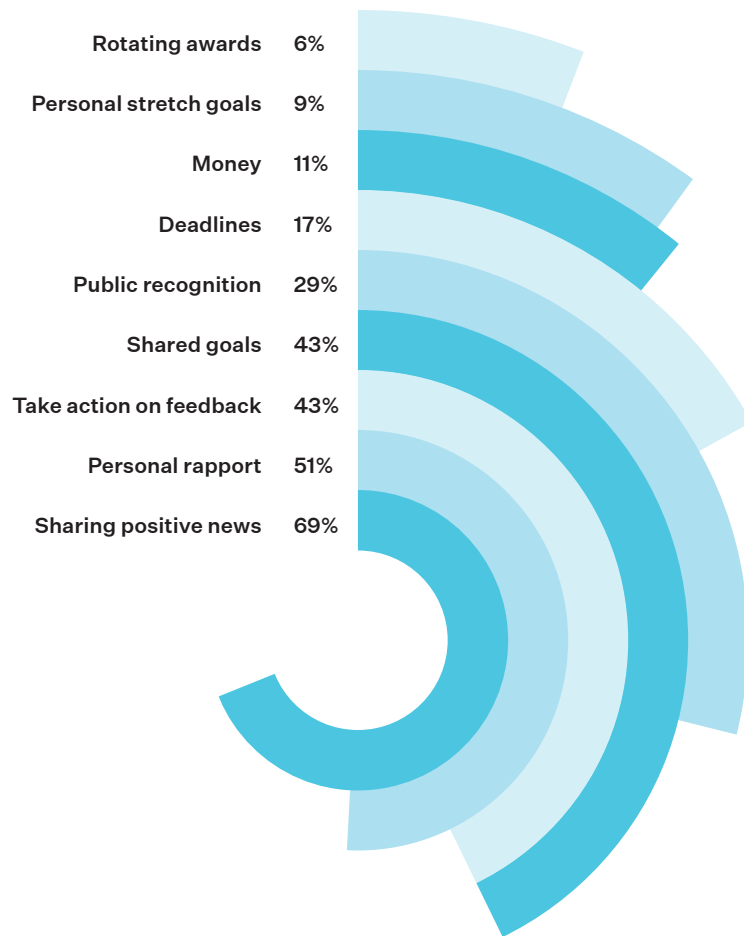
One of the core struggles for people working from home is motivation. But motivation isn't a single challenge, it encapsulates several different problems. As people who make games and think constantly about player motivation, this complexity should be obvious to us. But somehow it is harder to remember when you are the one struggling to reach the golden ring.

Motivation is much harder when working from home. In an office, we are surrounded by momentum and shared energy. The social pressure of being expected to be at your desk is a powerful thing, and when it's gone we need to find new tactics to stay motivated.

You might be struggling with motivation because you don't know how to get started, or because you don't have a clear goal. You might lack resources, feel blocked by an unsupportive manager, or have the wrong incentives. You might be blocked by feelings of stress or burnout. Or a dozen other reasons. Encapsulating all these very different situations under the banner of motivation isn't helpful — it blurs the problem and consequently blurs the solution.

In the following pages, we offer 16 tactics to try until you find the ones that work for you.

How studios motivate their employees



1. Have a tangible goal and keep your eye on it.

Set a specific goal like “finish the level” and put your goal in a prominent place where you can always see it. Clear goals are invaluable to motivation.

2. Break work into chunks.

It’s a rare person who can look at an overwhelmingly large project like “make a game” then confidently begin. Breaking work into small chunks makes it more manageable.

3. Start small.

Take one tiny step at a time. If you are struggling to get started, set a 5-minute timer and truthfully say to yourself: “I only need to do five minutes of work, unless I feel like continuing.” Getting started is often the hardest part.

4. Have a routine.

A work routine can carry you over smaller motivation humps. When you habitually do the work in the same way every time, it means that you can save your motivational muscles for the harder parts.

5. Process your feelings.

If you are feeling intense feelings when you think about your work, try to process those feelings before you sit down to work. Find a supportive ear (a therapist if you can afford it) and talk through your feelings.

6. Consider what intrinsically motivates you.

If you don’t know what intrinsically motivates you, think of a time in your life where you felt proud. Was it a moment where you learned something? When you were publicly recognized for your work? When you helped others?

7. Block distractions.

Use tools that temporarily block social media or distracting sites. It's complicated when your work involves checking social media, but even a single hour of blocking distractions can help. Similarly, try to negotiate with family or housemates for specific hours of deep focus.

8. Find accountability work-buddies.

Find friends who are also struggling with motivation and check-in hourly or daily to set small goals and celebrate successes. You don't need to be working on similar projects, but it helps if you find work-buddies that you want to impress.

9. Set up a playtest with supportive friends.

It's motivating to see people enjoying your game. And strangely motivating to see people struggling with bugs. Sometimes having a playtest to work towards can motivate you to get to work and squash a bug or build a new feature.

10. Use deadlines for their motivational power.

Deadlines are very powerful for getting things done, but they can lead to crunch or debilitating anxiety, especially for someone who is already struggling with motivation. Use them wisely.

11. Be forgiving.

Getting distracted is part of the process and part of being human. Entering a shame spiral isn't helpful for motivation. Don't underestimate how much work from home during a pandemic can affect motivation and output, especially if you haven't developed systems and resources yet.

12. Have shared team goals.

Knowing that other team members are relying on your work can be a powerful motivator. Schedule weekly meetings to share updates with your team, where everyone can see the pieces of the game coming together.

13. Take breaks.

It might sound counter-intuitive, but forcing yourself to stop can help with motivation. Do very different

things during the break. Set a timer, step away from your computer and get some fresh air. Make tea! Do stretches! Sometimes a micro-break of just closing your eyes and doing deep breathing for one minute can help you to reset and recalibrate.

14. Experiment with different rewards.

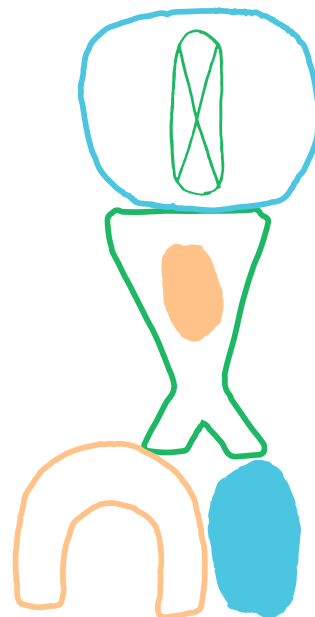
If you are struggling with an especially challenging task that has a clear deadline, try using extrinsic rewards to push you through it. There's some evidence that extrinsic rewards can interfere with intrinsic motivation, so use these sparingly.

15. Celebrate and highlight positive news.

Celebrate your success, and build a culture where you celebrate in general. Collect and share positive news about what's happening behind the scenes, conversations with publishers, positive social media feedback, fan art, news about the trailer, anything new and exciting.

16. Consider quitting.

It might sound strange, but seriously thinking about quitting can remind you why you are doing what you are doing. Or it can help you to realize that the situation isn't working and that you need to make a major change.



You only get one: Take care of your body before it breaks



If you are reading this hunched over a laptop, STOP!

It's a common human error to think you are invincible. Until one day your body loudly erupts in pain. If you're lucky you might get a warning in the form of some gentle tingling in your fingers. The next thing you know you have a pinched nerve that makes it impossible to type. It's no fun to code a game from the floor plastered in heating pads and howling in pain.

1. Invest in equipment.

The bare minimum of acceptable equipment is a cardboard box to raise your monitor and an external keyboard and mouse. Do more than the minimum. Search for “office ergonomics.” There are a wealth of diagrams and explanations to set up a variety of healthy workspaces.

2. Movement trumps the 90-90-90 rule.

For over a hundred years people have recommended the 90-90-90 rule, which instructs you to keep your elbows, hips, knees, and feet at 90 degrees. It isn't a bad rule to follow, but new ergonomic equipment prioritizes movement above all else.

3. Find furniture that encourages movement.

Active sitting chairs are designed to engage your core, helping to prevent the kinds of stiffness that contribute to repetitive stress injuries. Standing desks can keep you moving, especially adjustable ones that can be lowered for sitting or raised for standing throughout the day.

4. Listen to your body first.

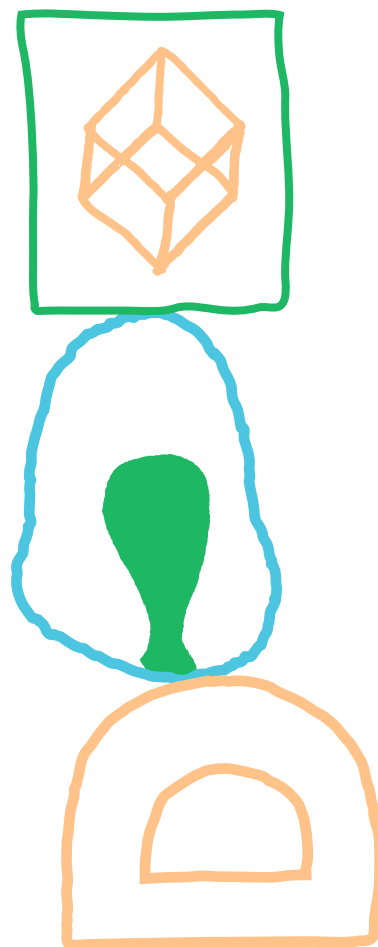
You only get one body, you can't buy a 32-pack of new bodies at Costco. Taking care of your body is the most important part of working from home. Trends in office furniture change frequently. When buying equipment, it's helpful to try it first if possible. Every person's body is different and above all, listen to yours.

5. Be vigilant about aches and tingling.

If you start to feel tingling or discomfort, deal with it right away. Don't wait for it to turn into pain. If you start to feel wrist or back pain, the damage has already begun. The physical impacts from injury compound, so you want to deal with any problems as soon as possible. Immediately stop doing what you are doing and change your setup.

6. Lighting and air quality matter.

Even and consistent lighting can help prevent eye strain. If you have headaches from looking at your monitor, you can get special computer glasses that help reduce glare and increase contrast. Fresh air can boost productivity and focus. If you are spending all your work time in a stuffy room without windows, consider investing in a portable air purifier or taking more walks outdoors.



7. Try multiple workspaces

People setting up home offices tend to focus on a single workspace, but it's great if you can change up your posture and switch positions. Most damage comes from being stuck in one position and never moving. Have a few different workspaces or postures that you rotate throughout the day.

8. Walk and talk

Frequent movement will prevent injuries as well as increase productivity and energy. Foster a culture where casual meetings can be attended on the phone while walking. It can be difficult if you are in a city and surrounded by honking horns, but in meetings where you are mostly listening or having casual catch-up chats, it's sometimes possible to walk and talk. If walking during meetings is impossible, you can set up a yoga mat in your office and stretch.

9. Keep moving after work

We lose a lot of movement when we stop travelling to work. Outside of work time, it's important to keep active physically. I know everyone says this and then it's a different thing to make it happen, but use any tricks you have at your disposal to make regular physical activity part of your life. Experiment with different options until you find one that works for you:

- Motivated by learning? Try dance classes, martial arts, or walking to a podcast.
- Motivated by solitude? Try a home rowing machine, or hiking in nature.
- Motivated by utility? Try cycling or walking for your errands.
- Motivated by social situations? After the pandemic ends, try intramural sports like soccer or baseball.
- Motivated by connection? Take a long walk with a friend and chat as you go.

10. Take breaks or be broken

People working from home are more likely to work longer hours than people working in an office. Be protective and vigilant about stopping work at a

specific time, taking real lunch breaks, and keeping your weekends for yourself.

Everyone is invincible to burnout until they aren't. You wake up one morning and realize that you have lost your passion, are irritated with everyone, and are exhausted to your bones. If you are financially trapped in a toxic crunch environment and find yourself unable to set boundaries, I'm so sorry. Try to take micro-breaks where you prepare herbal tea or 1-minute outdoor stretch breaks while the rest of us work to overthrow this broken system.

11. Prioritize your mental health

The prevailing tips on mental health haven't shifted much in the past twenty years:

- Find community and connection
- Sleep well, eat well, drink water
- Get exercise
- Meditate and journal
- Get professional help (if you can afford it)

If you can follow these tips, they do help. Yes, it is challenging. And the isolation of working from home can exacerbate existing issues with mental health.

Professional help is prohibitively expensive and we are increasingly disconnected from each other. And we interact constantly with a media cycle that manipulates our brain chemicals to make meditation and introspection extremely challenging.

Be compassionate with yourself. Online support groups can help with feelings of isolation, and the combination of routine and carefully built support networks can help you to climb through each day and into the next. If you figure out the secret to mental health, please do share it with the rest of us.

Can you hear me?

10 tips for keeping attention in online meetings

Work-from-home meetings have the same challenges as in-person meetings, only with increased intensity. The problem of people zoning out during meetings isn't new, it's just much worse online. Social pressure generally stops people from scrolling social media or answering emails during in-person meetings. Online, that pressure is gone. We've all seen the glazed eyes of someone scanning a social media feed during a 2-hour meeting. Below are 10 tips for keeping meetings relevant, engaging, and useful.

1. Have a shepherd or host to keep things on track.

The host is in charge of defining and communicating a clear purpose and agenda for the meeting. Also, they can assign clear actionable tasks at the end of the meeting. When the call ends, remote workers are very isolated, it's important to make everyone has everything they need.

2. Keep meetings brief and on time.

Work from home often requires more frequent meetings, we can compensate for this by making them shorter. Focus on items that need consensus or action, rather than trying to work through every line item. If you run out of time, use the last 5 minutes to schedule another meeting.

3. Protect the human moments.

When trying to keep a meeting brief, it's easy to accidentally cut the wrong parts. Protect the moments at the beginning and end of a meeting where people greet each other or build small social connections. These moments help foster team cohesion and trust.

4. Sometimes it doesn't need to be a meeting.

People rarely tune-out in useful, relevant meetings. Some communications are fine to do by message or email. That said, if an issue takes more than a few emails back and forth, it's probably best to jump on a call.

5. Keep mandatory attendance tight.

If an issue only requires a few people, don't make it a company-wide meeting. Extend invitations to anyone who is interested, but make sure people know the meeting is optional.

6. Don't stack 10 meetings in a row.

People new to work-from-home often stack meetings on top of each other until everything topples over. Stacking meetings can lead to extreme meeting fatigue. Instead, schedule time between meetings so you can allow for overflow, take a break, or catch up on small tasks that come out of the meetings.

7. Give everyone space to speak.

Avoid monologuing. One person doing all the talking is the quickest way to lose engagement in online meetings. Invite people to speak. Many people won't participate in online meetings if there isn't a direct and personal invitation to contribute.

8. Use visual props.

Don't make your mouth do all the work. One diagram can replace hours of talking. Having touchpoints like style bibles, visual references, and design documents can keep attention in the meeting and engage people.

9. Collaboratively document.

Take advantage of the collaborative features of online docs and invite people to take collaborative meeting notes. Collaborative note-taking can help people stay actively involved when they aren't speaking.

10. Experiment with multi-channel discussion.

In video meetings, only one person can talk at a time. Use emoji and chat to communicate in a low-pressure and collaborative way. Different people enjoy different ways of contributing to the conversation, so diverse tactics entice everyone to jump in.



One studio recreated their office space down to the seating arrangements and carpeting in online platform Gathertown. (Credit: Nichole Black, Get Set Games)

Types of meetings when working from home

Standups: many studios swear by doing rapid standup meetings once or twice daily to keep everyone synchronized and accountable.

One-on-ones: one-on-ones can fill the vital role of creating space for personal connection and resolving small issues.

Standard meetings: standard project-based meetings are useful for discussing specific issues or topics that are only relevant to a few team members.

Team syncs: weekly or biweekly team syncs help ensure timelines are on track and maintain team health. These meetings can include playtests.

Company-wide meetings: all-hands are great for sharing good news and discussing company-wide challenges or opportunities.

Impromptu: many studios have systems that allow for impromptu meetings, similar to the kind you might have in an office when swinging by someone's desk. Some studios are experimenting with an "always-on" video or voice meeting that people can drop into. Other studios have created online environments based on their physical offices where their avatars can hang out in the break room to signal they're open to chat.

What your manager secretly wants to tell you about WFH

In our interviews with game studios across the country, we heard the same issues over and over again from the people tasked with managing remote teams. Would you like to peek inside the mind of your manager? Managing up, or finding ways to manage your manager, can be a useful career skill. Understanding their point of view will come in handy!

“I can’t read your mind”

Despite advances in surveillance capitalism, I can’t read your mind. When you are working from home, I can’t see you and I have no idea how you are doing or what you are doing. All I see are the results. When you don’t meet a deadline, I don’t know if you missed it because the workload was unrealistic, or because you are having a major life crisis, or if it’s because you are binge-watching conspiracy videos. If you are overwhelmed with work while caretaking your toddler, I need you to tell me. If you are stuck, let me know!

“Please don’t go silent on me”

In the office, if you are unresponsive to a message I can glance over and see you deeply focusing on something else. But when you are unresponsive and working from home, I don’t have any clues as to what is happening. Be upfront with your communication style. If you can, keep your calendar up to date with blocks for your deep-focus work. I never want to break your focus with my non-urgent chat message.

“I can’t set goals without you”

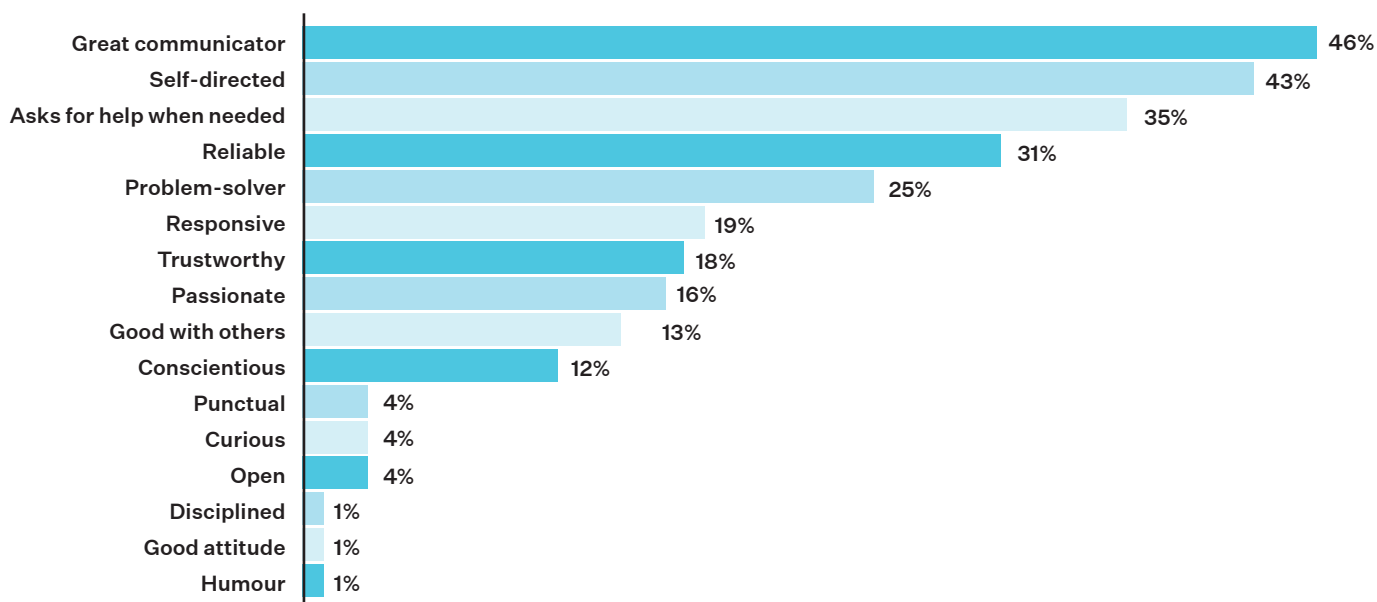
Team management is so much harder with work-from-home. It doesn’t matter how much research I do. Without your help, I’ll underestimate or overestimate how long tasks take. Help me set reasonable milestones. Consistently communicate your progress so I can set all the moving parts of the game launch in place without a thousand renegotiations or moved deadlines.



“Cheer loudly for yourself”

I have a lot of other things going on, and it’s easy for me to forget how much you are doing. Most work is invisible and this presents a huge challenge for a remote worker. It helps if you can be your own advocate and keep a written list of what you are working on and what you have achieved. Please share your contributions with me. I want to celebrate your achievements with you.

Most-desired skills in WFH employees



“Ask for help”

When you work from home, you have the additional job of managing yourself. I know, it’s not ideal. But the bright side is that micro-management is nearly impossible through a monitor. People who thrive at work-from-home are usually self-motivated and self-directed. But they also know when to run up a white flag and ask for help.

“We need to get better at communicating with each other”

When hiring someone for remote work, my first question after “can they do this job?” is “can they communicate well?” Poor communication is expensive. It increases the need for frequent meetings and endless back-and-forths. Communication difficulties sap morale, create conflict, and make unnecessary work for everyone. Communication is something that happens between people and we’re all collectively responsible for it.

“Set boundaries with me”

I don’t know what works for you. It’s part of my job to help you stretch and grow, and so I’ll probably keep asking for more until you give me some kind of signal that you have reached the perfect challenge level. I need you to set boundaries that are healthy for you.

I know that uneven power dynamics, lack of a safety net, and toxic work histories make boundary-setting difficult and sometimes even impossible. But if you don’t assert your boundaries I won’t have a chance to respect them. Give me a chance?

“I’m actively looking for ways to build team health — help?”

Game development is creative and collaborative. It’s impossible to be creative and collaborative without trust and rapport. But rapport is much harder to maintain or build online. Sure, we’ve experimented with playing games together over a video call, we’ve organized informal morning coffee sessions, and we do the occasional online escape room. I know you need more, so I’d welcome your help finding activities that work for you and make you feel excited about being part of the team.

Instructions not included: A guide to trust and conflict when working from home

Why is it so hard to work with people?

Theoretically, it should be easier to work with other people. Imagine, other people are doing some of the work so you don't have to do it all yourself. But working with others involves navigating the spaces between you and this is always challenging, especially when you are doing it remotely.

Team trust is built organically in person. People see each other every day in the office, have repeated positive interactions over time, and have the lived experience of having each other's backs when things are tough. When working from home, trust needs to be built more intentionally.

Trust is key when working from home.

Making games is deeply collaborative work. When a team doesn't have trust, the work takes longer, is arduous and draining, requires more meetings, and the results are of poorer quality.

When working from home, trust can erode silently.

People can avoid each other more easily and brush off resentments until conflict builds up to the point of explosion. The symptoms of eroding trust are uncomfortable meetings, misunderstandings, work taking longer, and steadily increasing friction over tiny issues.



8 tips on building trust with others

1. **Build social credit.** Trust doesn't appear magically. Social credit needs to be built over time. Start with a small commitment, then if it works well, agree to bigger commitments over time.
2. **Set and communicate expectations.** It's important to set and communicate expectations. It's a little awkward at first, but clear expectations are core to trust. Talk about what each person wants to get out of the collaboration, and what they expect. Revisit and refresh expectations along the way because they tend to shift.
3. **Be reliable.** Trust develops through demonstration. Small actions add up. Do the things you say you're going to do when you say you're going to do them. This includes meeting commitments on time, responding at a reasonable rate, and communicating as soon as you realize you can't meet a commitment.
4. **Cultivate sincere curiosity about others.** Ask questions and make space for people to express themselves. Trust requires openness, and people need to feel safe to open up. If people feel safe, they will ask for what they need.
5. **Be generous in your judgements.** When people do start sharing, try to be generous in your interpretation of their words and actions. People often communicate things poorly. If you assume the best from others they will sense it and will trust you in return. Note: This isn't always possible and obviously gets more complex when people are racialized and dealing with structural racism.
6. **You can ask people how they like to communicate.** It's ok if things get a little awkward sometimes. Social norms are collaboratively built and not necessarily known in advance or communicated. Social norms also tend to follow patterns of power that reinforce racism, sexism, and ableism. Make space for people to tell you when their world or minds work differently than yours by being curious and open.
7. **Make time to get together.** A core ingredient of trust is spending time together. If possible, arrange occasional in-person meetups. If you are in a

pandemic, make time to get together as intimately as possible.

8. **It's not enough to just play games or do escape rooms together.** Real trust is shaped by repeat interactions and strengthened in meaningful situations where we discover someone has our best interests at heart.

3 surprising facts about trust

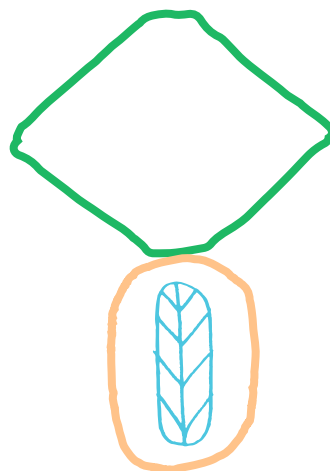
1. **Conflict can help build trust.** Figuring out how to solve conflict together is a necessary part of being a team. Don't run from conflict or negative feedback. Conflict is a major part of group cohesion and trust. As scary as it is, try to find gentle ways to bring issues out into the open and hear what people are saying to you.
2. **Saying no to people can help them to trust you.** Be flexible when you can, but be clear and firm in your boundaries. If you find yourself unable to say no to people, it's worth exploring why. Saying yes to everyone all the time can be a trauma response and can be worked on.
3. **Sharing fears and challenges can help build trust.** It's hard to trust someone who never has any self-doubt and never has any problems. Vulnerability fosters trust. Try not to info-dump your problems on people by ranting at them for an hour, but also don't hide them. Talk openly and constructively about the challenges you are facing.

4 tips on building trust when you are the boss

1. **Schedule one-on-ones.** One-on-one meetings between managers and employees are underused by indies. The primary determiner of productivity is work satisfaction. The primary factor that determines a person's work satisfaction is their relationship with their supervisor. One-on-ones are crucial to building a comfortable and supportive environment. And they allow people to make minor complaints in a safe and supportive environment.
 2. **Compensate people fairly.** Don't cut corners or try to squeeze value out of people. Of course, this is complicated by how much budget you have to spread around. But if people feel they are unfairly compensated, they will lose trust. And when working from home, any loss of trust is accelerated.
 3. **Recognize the power dynamic between bosses and employees.** Work at recalibrating the collective nervous system of work trauma that we have built up over the past. Hierarchical structures are socially complicated, and this structure shapes each relationship.
 4. **Assign occasional stretch tasks to help people grow.** Work with people to set occasional tasks that are slightly outside their comfort zone, where they are allowed to fail. Without those tasks, people will stagnate. Assigning stretch tasks and providing support reminds people that you trust them to stretch and grow.
4. **Choose a good forum for managing the conflict.** There is evidence that written communication is the worst for resolving conflict. A voice call helps both parties get context, tone, and nuanced subtext.
 5. **Listen with curiosity and care.** Start by asking questions, rather than making assumptions or accusations. Make a safe space for people to express their grievances. Try to understand their point of view before talking about your own.
 6. **Be specific and concrete.** Thoughtful use of techniques like nonviolent communication may help with communicating issues so they don't feel like an attack. For example, "When A happens, I feel B because I need C. Would you be willing to do X?"
 7. **Focus on finding a solution.** Find and continuously bring the common goal to the forefront.
 8. **Consider finding a third-party mediator.** Most conflicts aren't groundbreaking, some version of them has existed as long as there have been people working together. It can help to hire a specialist.
 9. **Know when to walk away.** Never compromise on your core values. If your values are clear and defined, it's easier to defend them more readily. If a situation is becoming abusive or toxic, it's time to accept sunk costs, settle outstanding bills, and part ways.

What to do when conflict is unavoidable

1. **Don't wing it.** Conflict is unavoidable. Every team will encounter conflict eventually. Have concrete policies for navigating conflict and make sure people know about them. You don't need a huge HR bible, start small and put together a simple document describing how you handle conflict.
2. **Trust your gut and take action.** If you are getting bad feelings and are starting to worry, don't minimize it, avoid it, or push back in passive-aggressive ways. Reach out to the person immediately and start a dialogue.
3. **Process and manage your own emotions first.** If you are in a headspace where you can't listen to the other person you aren't going to resolve anything.



What did you say to me?

Communicating with others online



Communication is one of the most challenging adjustments of work from home.

Online communication is narrow, energy-consuming, and difficult. People are drowning in notification exhaustion and extreme video-call fatigue. And it's astonishingly difficult to get a sense of people's emotional or mental state over the internet.

In the physical office, we survived with mediocre communication skills.

In the office, complex ideas could be communicated with the immediate feedback of body language. You could say "I need you to fix this" with your words while saying "I appreciate you" with your tone. Teams could graph ideas on whiteboards and quickly calibrate emotional alignment. A misunderstood message could be smoothed over with kind words in the break room.

The consequences of bad communication are enormous.

Poor communication directly leads to unnecessary meetings, tedious back-and-forths, and wasted work. Something as simple as “tone” can lead to expensive and exhausting conflict.

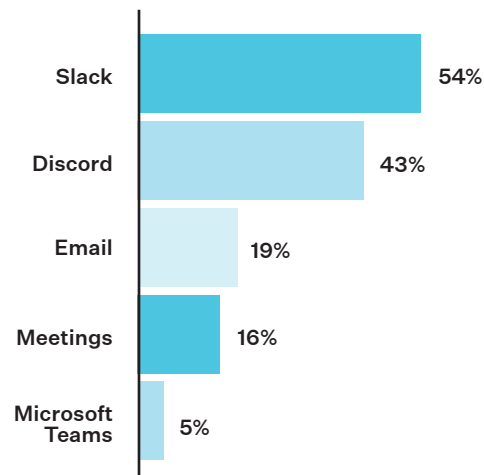
We need to do better now.

A lot of communication is lost over the internet, everyone needs to grow their communication skills and find new ways to work together. Investing in communication pays off in all other work.

15 tips on improving your communication

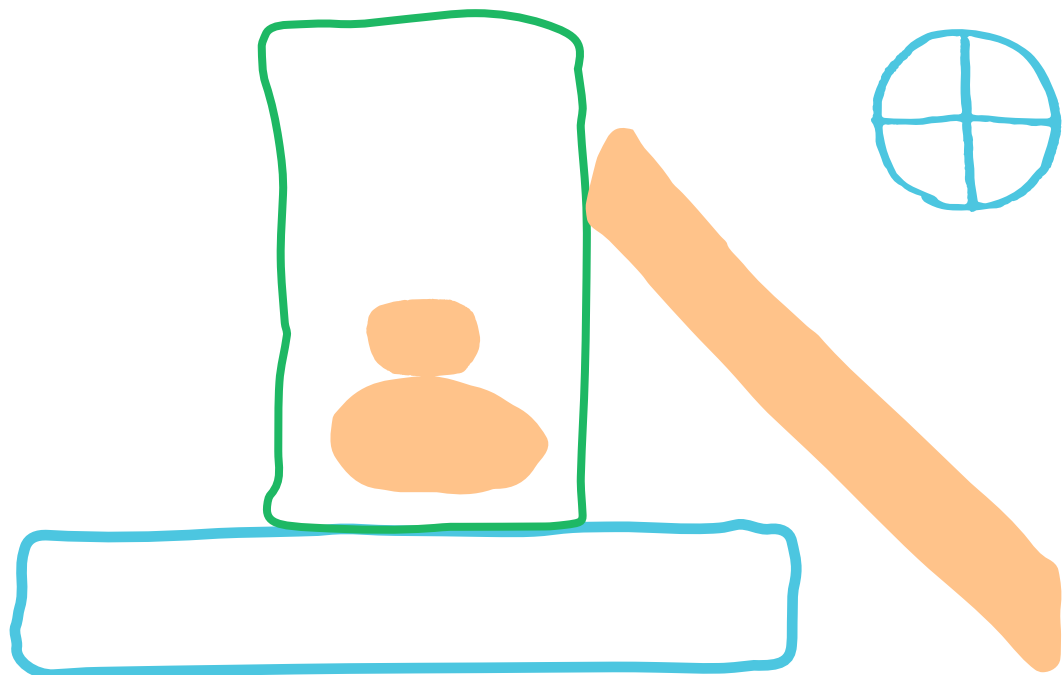
1. **Prioritize communication skills.** Good communication doesn’t just happen. Communication is a complex and specialized skill set and it takes practice to develop.
2. **Check-in individually with people regularly.** In larger teams, you can lose track of someone and not hear from them for a bit. Unless you have a system of scheduled check-ins people can fall off the radar.
3. **Be a generous listener: ask questions and draw information out of people.** Spend as much time listening and observing as you do talking. Avoid assuming that you know what someone is doing or why they are doing it. Ask questions instead.
4. **The technical aspects of communication matter.** Tiny lags in internet connections bring friction and can eventually lead to big misunderstandings. If your budget allows, invest in a good camera, good mic, and good internet.
5. **Ask individual people how they like to communicate.** It’s always better to communicate with people in a forum and style that feels great for them. Some people like long video calls, some people prefer quick Slack conversations.
6. **Experiment and find a communication strategy that works for your team.** Work together to find techniques and tools that work for you as a group.
7. **State the obvious.** When communicating online

Communication tools used

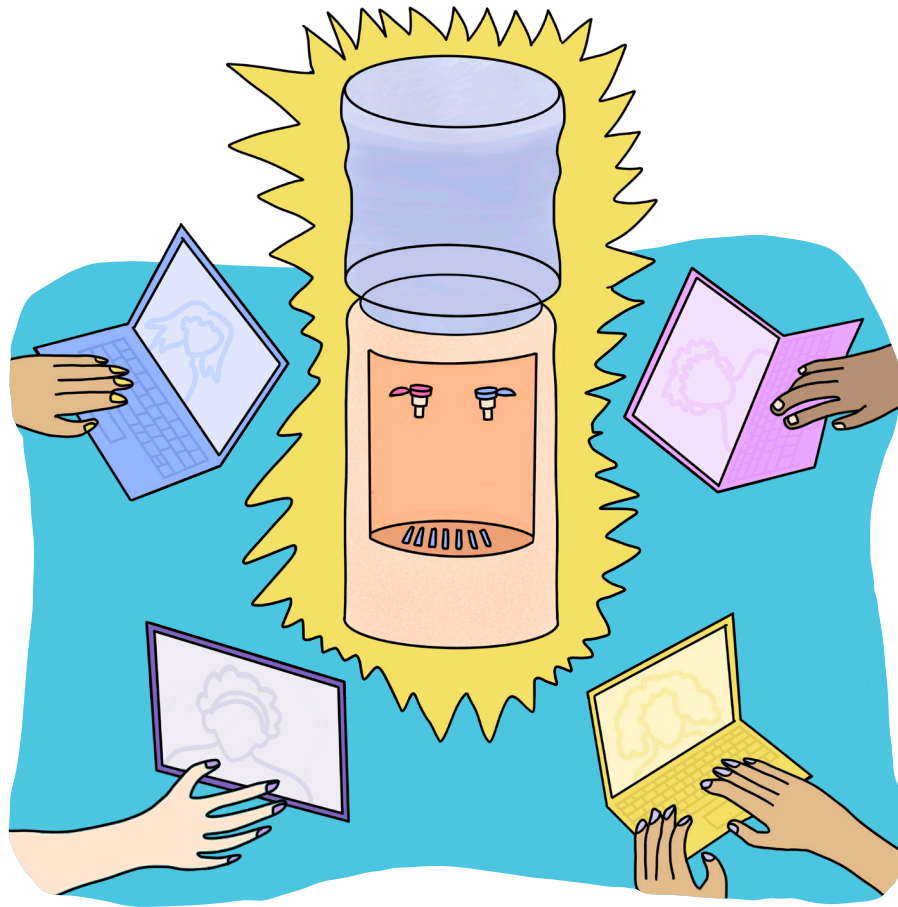


you need to be more precise and specific. When working in person you can nudge someone and say “what did you mean?” or give them a puzzled look. Over the internet, you need to be crystal clear about everything.

8. **Inject generosity and kindness into your written communications.** People tend to read neutral text as negative. Work to develop a tone of kindness in your writing.
9. **Be mindful of language barriers, time zone issues, and cultural barriers, especially when collaborating internationally.** If you are communicating in a second or third language, it may be helpful for teams to work with an accent coach. Communication is a team responsibility, everyone should work together to ensure everyone is heard.
10. **Make space for “water cooler” style communication.** Find ways to replace the invisible personal connection that buttresses professional connection.
11. **Actively solicit feedback.** It’s easy for tiny misunderstandings to grow and fester online. Intentionally create environments where people feel comfortable giving feedback. If people can give you hard-to-hear feedback in person you’ll often avoid larger conflicts.
12. **Give difficult feedback.** It’s not easy, but be real,
13. **Use the right tool for the job.** Video calls are often the most effective way to communicate, but they are the most invasive for some people. Use video or voice-only calls to communicate sensitive things or to share energy. Use email or messages to communicate things that people might need to reference.
14. **Keep it concise.** If messages are long or come in droves, people won’t pay attention to any of them. Editing content down is worth it. Be mindful of the ratio of how much you are writing and how much people are replying.
15. **There isn’t a single right answer.** This laser-focus on communication might seem like a nightmare for anyone who already spends anxious hours reworking a simple email. But there is no one correct communication style. If it feels good to you, and it feels good to the people you are communicating with, you are doing it right.



Isolation: Drinking alone at the water cooler



The “water cooler” is shorthand for the tiny social interactions that happen spontaneously in offices. It comes from the tradition of people chatting and hanging out around a physical water cooler but has grown to include many types of experiences.

When working from home, there are no spontaneous opportunities for connection. Studios are seeking ways to reconnect their teams, experimenting with morning tea, randomly-matched coffee hangs, and game nights.

When trying to replace in-person connective spaces online, it’s useful to explore a few different categories:

1. Tiny “water cooler” interactions while filling a water bottle, pouring coffee, or microwaving lunch.
2. Spontaneous connections like going for a coffee or eating lunch with a team member.
3. Semi-organized optional events like Taco Tuesdays or game nights.
4. Formally organized gatherings like team-building events or online escape rooms.

Why water cooler interactions are critical:

Spontaneous conversations and tiny, frequent interactions help coworkers feel connected to each other. We ask a lot of each other at work and these relationships are underpinned by a thick buffer of connection, trust, and goodwill. Without casual interactions, there is a decrease in team cohesiveness and morale. This has a drastic effect on how people feel and work together.

5 reasons it's challenging to reproduce water cooler spaces online

1. **You can't bump into someone online.** Water cooler interactions are often accidental or spontaneous. Online interactions are rarely accidental or serendipitous.
2. **Online replacements for social spaces can feel clunky and heavy-handed.** Eating lunch in a scheduled video meeting is not a fair replacement for casually eating lunch with a colleague in a park.
3. **Online video calls can feel sterile and interchangeable.** Each video call is identical to the last. The last thing many people want to do after a week of video calls is to have a Zoom happy hour.
4. **There is intense pressure to extract value from everything online.** For some people, "fun" team-building events are harder work than regular work.
5. **Scheduling is complicated.** It's challenging to work with a variety of schedules, as well as to budget for extra events inside already tight timelines.

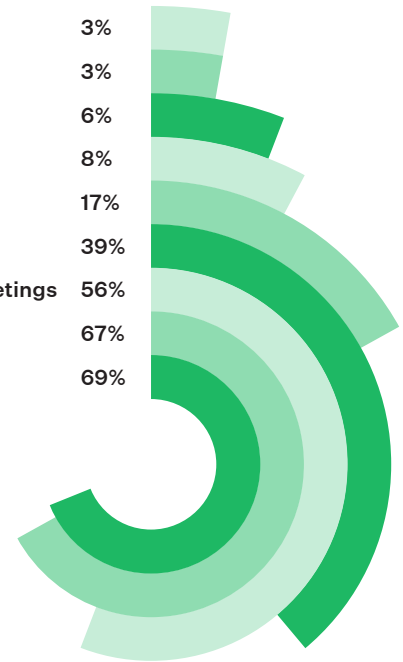
Tactics studios have tried:

- Game nights and movie nights
- Morning video calls with coffee
- Random coffee pairings for casual conversations
- Weekly hangouts (unstructured video calls)
- Video calls with personal trivia
- Video calls for co-learning presentations
- Slack or Discord channels for casual conversation
- Tea parties with cookies
- Lunch with coworkers
- Pizza delivery
- Drinks and snacks
- Socially distanced hikes with masks

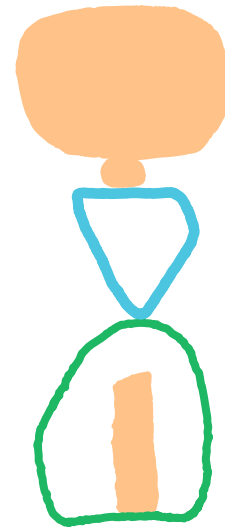
Creating space for online social interactions remains an open problem. Studios are curious and actively seeking new solutions.

How our interviewees build connection online

Pizza parties	3%
Celebrate success & give responsibility	3%
Lots of Slack	6%
Movie night	8%
Online happy hour	17%
Morning coffee together	39%
Regular one-on-one meetings	56%
Playing games together	67%
Weekly meetings	69%



Epilogue



The past year has seen unprecedented changes in the workplace for game studios. When the pandemic hit Canada in March 2020, every single game studio had to shift the way they worked. Within a few weeks everything needed to be moved online: business, conferences, hiring, design, development, collaboration, and game launch parties.

We believe that games have a lot to offer other industries when it comes to tackling the challenges of remote work. Game designers are obsessive about problem-solving and designing experiences to delight people. These problem-solving skills are directly translatable to other challenges, like shifting a workplace online during a pandemic. Games also have the advantage of a high baseline of technical ability. Most studios include technical experts who love playing with technologies to solve problems. With these assets, many studios are ahead of the curve with remote work solutions.

Our goal with Isolation Nation was to gather knowledge from small and mid-sized studios across Canada and compile it into a series of short, informally-written articles with best practices and tips about work-from-home. The topics we explored came directly out of the core challenges listed by the studios we interviewed, and the solutions were also crowd-sourced during the interview process. We were surprised to find that most of the problems people reported were non-technical:

isolation, communication, motivation, and maintaining focus after hours of video calls.

We have no idea how this report will age. This resource is a compilation of knowledge, it isn't a single perspective, and the landscape is shifting impossibly quickly. Some of the problems and solutions described by studios seem to be part of the human condition. But many challenges are seemingly exacerbated by an increasingly connected world and the productive pressure of late capitalism.

Isolation Nation aims to facilitate knowledge transfer at a time when gathering in-person to share knowledge has become impossible. Our findings from this research only solidified our suspicion that studios feel isolated and alone. We hope that this report will be an accessible resource and help studios to see that they are not actually alone in their struggles, as well as to share knowledge and current solutions to the most topical problems Canadian games studios are facing with work-from-home.



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