Communicating More, Less Frequently: Communication Fidelity Work in Remote Organising

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Introduction

Communication is essential for organisational success, enabling coordination, collaboration, and knowledge sharing. In traditional co-located organisations, communication tends to be frequent, in-person, and synchronous based on meetings and informal conversations. However, the rise of remote work challenges traditional forms of organisational communication (Allen et al., 2015; Bailey & Kurland, 1999). As opportunities for spontaneous face-to-face interaction are reduced, organisations rely more on asynchronous and digitally mediated communication over channels such as email, chat, and documents.

While digital and asynchronous communication enables flexibility, it can also create challenges. The absence of immediate, face-to-face interactions increases the risk of misalignment, feelings of isolation, and diminished psychological safety (Rhymer, 2022). Research has long shown that synchronicity and richness of the medium have important implications for communication effectiveness (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Dennis et al., 2008). While traditional organisations grapple with effective communication in the hybrid work environment, some entirely remote organisations—termed "all-remote"—excel despite the lack of synchronous and "rich" communication (Choudhury, 2020). This raises the question: *how do workers maintain effective communication in all-remote organisations?*

This question is critical, as remote work is rapidly expanding, and many organisations are now entirely remote (Choudhury, 2020). Inadequate communication and coordination within remote teams can result in diminished cohesion, decreased productivity, and stifled innovation (Rhymer, 2022). Yet research provides little insights into the communicative practices of remote teams, as most studies focus on hybrid rather than all-remote work.

This study examines communicative practices in all-remote organisations. Analysing interviews and archival materials from six case studies, we find that remote workers engage in purposeful, reflexive efforts to shape communication in the organisation and beyond. We term this phenomenon "communication fidelity work" and elaborate on four communicative practices that are involved in this effort.

With our communication fidelity work perspective, we offer new insights into organisational communication in remote settings that go beyond the current focus in the literature on communication medium and structure. For practitioners, our work provides guidance on how communication must adapt to enable organizational success in an increasingly remote world of work.

Remote Organising and Communication

Remote Organising

Remote work has become increasingly common in modern organisations, enabled by advancements in digital technologies that allow individuals to collaborate despite lacking physical proximity. Remote organising arrangements come in various forms ranging from companies that allow remote work for set number of days per week, hybrid organisations in which some employees work 100% of the time to "all-remote" organisations that do not maintain offices and work globally across many time zones (Allen et al., 2015).

This literature has revealed several key characteristics of remote work that pose challenges for effective organising. While early studies emphasised geographic distance as the key contributor to these challenges (Bailey & Kurland, 1999), more recent conceptualisations acknowledge additional factors such as time zone and cultural differences (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005) as well as the impact of subgroups on team dynamics (Pentland, 2012).

However, some organisations—especially all-remote ones—successfully utilise remote work designs and collaboration practices, suggesting there are approaches to mitigating these challenges (Choudhury, 2020). As remote organisations become more prevalent, further research is needed to understand the implications of these designs and practices for communication, knowledge sharing, and relationship building.

Effective Organisational Communication

Organisational communication is a prominent field of study in the management literature that examines how communication shapes, reflects, and influences the functioning of organisations (Cooren et al., 2011). Organisational communication covers both internal communication among members of the organisation and external communication with stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers, media, or the public. Communication holds a pivotal role in the success of any organisation, but it becomes even more critical in organisations that operate entirely remotely. Unlike hybrid organisations that maintain physical offices and allow for a blend of in-person and virtual interactions, all-remote organisations lack the natural opportunities for spontaneous, face-to-face communication that often lead to quick problem-solving, relationship building, and knowledge sharing.

Prominent theories that have guided this research suggest that communication is primarily influenced by the medium or mode of communication that workers use to collaborate with one another. Media richness theory argues task performance will improve when media capabilities match task equivocality (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Media synchronicity theory focuses on the extent media enable synchronized behaviour and shared focus (Dennis et al., 2008). However, this stream of research often treats communication as an outcome with

fixed characteristics (Cooren et al., 2011) and pays less attention to how communication is enacted in practice through purposeful, reflexive efforts of the workers.

Research Design and Analysis

To study how workers maintain effective communication practices in all-remote organisations (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, and Zeta), we use a qualitative, multi-case study research design (Eisenhardt, 2021). This approach allows the development of more robust insights by identifying communicative practices of all-remote organisations that go beyond the idiosyncrasies of individual cases (Eisenhardt, 2021). The data sources for the multi-case study included 27 interviews, ranging from three to five interviews per case, and 128 pages of archival materials such as blog articles, web pages, and company documents.

To take advantage of the multi-case study design, our qualitative data analysis followed an iterative process, borrowing techniques from grounded theory building (Charmaz, 2006), involving open coding, constant comparison, and an iterative process of abstracting open codes to higher-level theoretical categories, zooming back into single cases and corresponding quotes to confirm the emerging categories, and comparing with the existing literature. Grounded in this phenomenon-based theorising process, we offer the concept of *remote communication fidelity work*, which we explain below.

Making Remote Communication Work

Remote organisations such as Beta rely extensively on the written word to collaborate. However, writing is not taken for granted. Beta implemented several writing practices and guidelines to improve communication. For example, the CEO of Beta explained:

> "'If you write it down, it stays around.' In project management, writing stuff down is a big deal. But here's the thing – in emails, chats, and job tools, we often sacrifice proper formatting, style, and spelling for the sake of speed. And guess what? That can mess with the project's flow, efficiency, end results, and even the overall vibe in your team."

As a fully distributed company with team members dispersed globally, online fitness education provider Gamma relies heavily on a strategic mix of real-time and asynchronous communication. Their week kicks off with an all-hands video call each Monday at 8am Berlin time. After this synchronous alignment, the team shifts into asynchronous work mode. When needed, teams will also hop on Zoom or Slack calls for quick real-time chats:

> "Even at [Gamma], we can't do without video, but we decide when and how to use each tool!"

Delta is a software company that has emerged as a proponent of innovative work methodologies. Their software products are primarily centered around asynchronous communication and the development of distinctive productivity tools. Delta uses one of their own products as an asynchronous-first collaboration platform, but leaves room for individuals to choose a way of communicating that caters them and their preferences best:

"I am a writer and having a completely written communication approach in this company has made it easier for me to express my opinions. Writing is the easiest way for me to get thoughts across to other people."

Alpha is organising three company-wide "workations" every year, where all employees would gather in a, usually tropical, destination to work and vacation together. In 2018, Alpha flew all 42 employees to a villa in Kho Samui, Thailand for three weeks. Alpha's founder describes the intense three weeks as a strong contrast to everyday remote work:

"One extreme—you have very little social contact—with another extreme—you have a lot of contact. That's when we take these team trips three times a year, like the one happening in Cape Town right now."

As illustrated through the examples from our case studies, remote organisations rely heavily on written correspondence while also strategically integrating real-time meetings.

Theorising Communication Fidelity Work in Remote Organising

Our study offers an in-depth understanding grounded in cases of six all-remote organisations about how communication is purposefully shaped in everyday working and organising practices. We label this as *communication fidelity work*, by which we mean the work that is going on at any moment as organising practices are performed for the purpose of constructing effective communication. We identify four key interrelated practices involved in the performance of communication fidelity work.

Reemphasising written communication means realising the potential of clear and concise writing for communication. This practice involves not only the meticulous crafting of messages to ensure that they are easily understood but also the documentation and organisation of information in searchable knowledge systems such as wikis, chat logs, or project management tools. By doing so, remote organisations create a fluid albeit durable repository of institutional knowledge that can be referenced by team members at any time, effectively substituting for the "water cooler" conversations that occur naturally in the office.

Balancing communication modalities refers to reflexively leveraging asynchronous and synchronous modalities to balance convenience with expressiveness. Asynchronous communication, such as emails, chat messages, and shared documents, allows team members to contribute at their own pace, which is particularly beneficial for accommodating different time zones and work schedules. Synchronous communication, including video calls and real-time chats, provides the immediacy and dynamic interaction necessary for rapid decision-making, brainstorming, and fostering personal connections among team members.

Accommodating differences in communication preferences acknowledges the diversity in individual communication styles and the need to create an inclusive environment that respects these variances. In a remote setting, employees may have different preferences for

how they receive and process information, as well as how they express their thoughts and ideas. Some may excel with written communication, while others may prefer the immediacy and nuance of verbal exchanges in video or voice calls.

Maintaining intense co-located events refers to fostering high-touch human connection through rare but regular informal interactions. These events, often referred to as "workations," retreats, or offsites, are characterized by their immersive nature, combining work with social activities in a setting that is different from the employees' usual remote workspaces. The intensity of these co-located experiences arises from their condensed schedule, which is designed to maximize face-to-face interaction over a short period.

The preliminary analysis presented in this paper starts to unravel the puzzle of how, in all-remote organisations, high fidelity communication is made possible (Rhymer, 2022).

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