



REMOTE WORK, TEAMWORK

Asynchronous Communication: The Real Reason Remote Workers Are More Productive

Async isn't just for remote teams

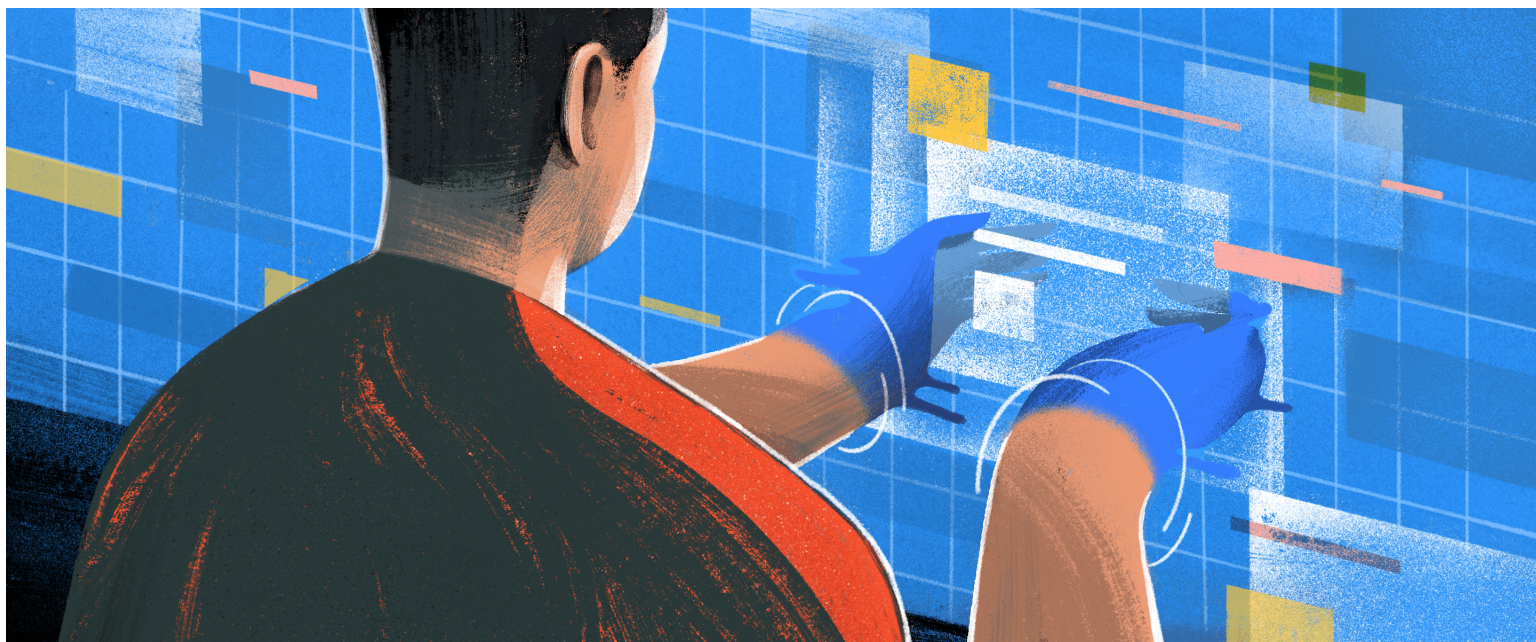


Illustration by Yin Weihung

Study after study after study into remote work has made one thing clear: Remote workers are more productive than their office-bound counterparts.

What's not entirely clear is why.

Yes, people gain back time (and sanity) by avoiding rush hour commutes. They avoid the distractions of the

office. They regain a sense of control over their workdays. They have more time to dedicate to family, friends, and hobbies.

But apart from the commute, all of those benefits aren't necessarily the result of location independence, but rather the byproduct of asynchronous communication — giving employees control over when they communicate with their teammates.

While I think remote work is the future, I believe that asynchronous communication is an even more important factor in team productivity, whether your team is remote or not.

Many company leaders are asking themselves if they should embrace remote work. Very few are asking themselves if they should embrace a more asynchronous workstyle. While I think remote work is the future, I believe that asynchronous communication (or async, for short) is an even more important factor in team productivity, whether your team is remote or not. Not only does async produce the best work results, but it also lets people do more meaningful work and live freer, more fulfilled lives.

Drawing on the experience of my own remote and largely async company, [Doist](#), this article will explain what asynchronous communication is, how it drives team productivity, and the concrete steps you can take to start building a more asynchronous workplace.

What is asynchronous communication?

Simply put, **asynchronous communication is when you send a message without expecting an immediate response.** For example, you send an email. I open and respond to the email several hours later.

In contrast, **synchronous communication is when you send a message and the recipient processes the information and responds immediately.** In-person communication, like meetings, are examples of purely synchronous communication. You say something, I receive the information as you say it, and respond to the information right away.

But digital forms of communication, like real-time chat messaging, can be synchronous too. You send a message, I get a notification and open up Slack to read the message and respond to what you said in near real-time. Even email is treated largely as a synchronous form of communication. A 2015 [study](#) conducted by Yahoo Labs found that the most common email response time was just 2 minutes.

Before we dig into the benefits of a more async approach to teamwork, let's take a look at why we should question our current, largely synchronous ways of working and communicating.

The problems with real-time-all-the-time communication

If employees are consistently more productive when working away from the office, there's something broken about the modern workplace.

According to the Harvard Business Review article "Collaborative Overload", the time employees spend on collaboration has increased by 50% over the past two decades. Researchers found it was not uncommon for workers to spend a full 80% of their workdays communicating with colleagues in the form of email (on which workers' spend an average of six hours a day); meetings (which fill up 15 percent of a company's time, on average); and more recently instant messaging apps (the average Slack user sends an average of 200 messages a day, though 1,000-message power users are "not the exception").

As one office worker told New York Magazine, "I used to wake up and turn off the alarm and check Tinder. Now I wake up and check

Slack.”

This trend toward near-constant communication means that the average knowledge worker must organize their workday around multiple meetings, with the time in between spent doing their work half-distractedly with one eye on email and Slack.

To make matters worse, the rise of mobile technology means that workplace communication is no longer limited to the physical workplace or work hours. We can, and do, check email and respond to messages at any time, day or night. As a result, we’re never fully off the clock. As one office worker told New York Magazine, “I used to wake up and turn off the alarm and check Tinder. Now I wake up and check Slack.”



**connected per
workday**



**of active usage
per workday**

Slack boasts that users spend 9+ hours per workday connected to the app. 90 minutes of active usage spread over 9 hours is a whole lot of interruptions.

This highly synchronous way of working would be understandable if it produced results, but there is more and more evidence that all the real-time communication overhead makes it hard to focus, drains employees' mental resources, and generally makes it more difficult to make meaningful progress on work.

I've written before about why we're betting against real-time team messaging apps, but it's worth summarizing the core problems and generalizing it to most forms of synchronous communication:


🔔 It leads to constant interruptions. Interruptions split people's attention and make it more difficult to make meaningful progress on work. High-value, cognitively-demanding activities — like coding, writing, designing, strategizing, and problem-solving — require long periods of deep, focused work. Synchronous communication makes creating large, uninterrupted chunks of time during the workday impossible.

Examples of Shallow Work	Examples of Deep Work
Processing the emails in your inbox	Drafting a launch plan for a new feature
Responding to colleagues on team chat tools like Slack	Programming
Making phone calls to arrange logistics	Preparing for an upcoming keynote presentation
Attending status update meetings	Researching information on a specific problem

The phrase “Deep Work” was coined by Georgetown University computer science professor and author [Cal Newport](#).

 **It prioritizes being connected over being productive.**

In real-time environments, you’re incentivized to stay connected and available at all times. If you disconnect, discussions will move on before you even had a chance to respond to, or even see, them. To avoid missing out on crucial decisions and discussions, people try to always be online and in as many meetings as possible, hurting both their wellbeing and productivity.

 **It creates unnecessary stress.** The expectation to be constantly available means that workers lack control over their schedules. They spend their workdays reactively responding to requests rather than proactively setting their own agenda. One study found that people compensate for the time lost to workplace interruptions by attempting to work faster, leading to “more stress, higher frustration, time pressure, and effort”. This type of synchronous culture can quickly


lead to burnout.


🙄 **It leads to lower quality discussions and suboptimal solutions.** When you have to respond immediately, people don't have time to think through key issues thoroughly and provide thoughtful responses. Your first response to any given situation is often not your best response.


The benefits of a more asynchronous workplace

Most people accept distractions and interruptions as just a part of doing business, but some companies — like Doist, [Gitlab](#), [Zapier](#), [Automattic](#), and [Buffer](#) — are embracing a more asynchronous approach to collaboration. Here are some of the core benefits of giving employees more control over when they connect to communicate with their team:

🕒 **Control over the workday = happier and more productive employees.** In an async environment, there are no set work hours. Employees have almost total control over how they structure their workdays to fit their lifestyles, biorhythms, and responsibilities (like childcare!). Some Doisters work during the night as it suits them the best. I spend an hour with my son every morning, and no one inside my async organization notices.

 **High-quality communication versus knee-jerk responses.** Async communication is admittedly slower, but it also tends to be of higher quality. People learn to communicate more clearly and thoroughly to avoid unnecessary back-and-forths. They have the time to think through a particular problem or idea and provide more thoughtful responses. Instead of knee-jerk responses, people can reply when they're ready. (As an added benefit, when people have the time to think through their responses, there tend to be fewer unthinking outbursts. Over the last 8 years, we didn't have a single serious HR issue.)

 **Better planning leads to less stress.** When last-minute, ASAP requests aren't an option, advanced planning is a must. People learn to plan their workloads and collaborations more carefully to give enough time for coworkers to see and respond to their requests. This leads to less stressful collaborations and ultimately higher quality work.

 **Deep work becomes the default.** Because employees don't have to stay on top of each message as it comes in, they can block off large chunks of uninterrupted time to do the work that creates the most value for your organization. They can come back to process their messages in batches 1-3 times a day instead of bouncing back and forth between work and messages or meetings.



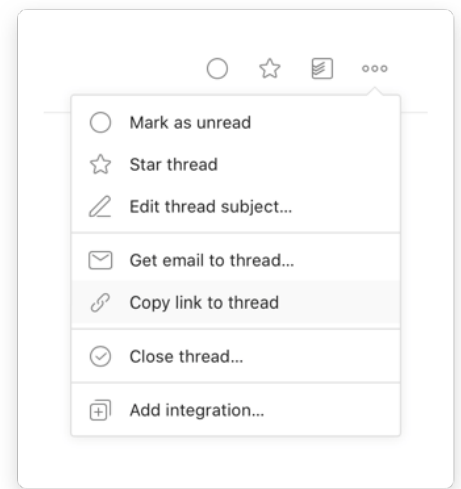
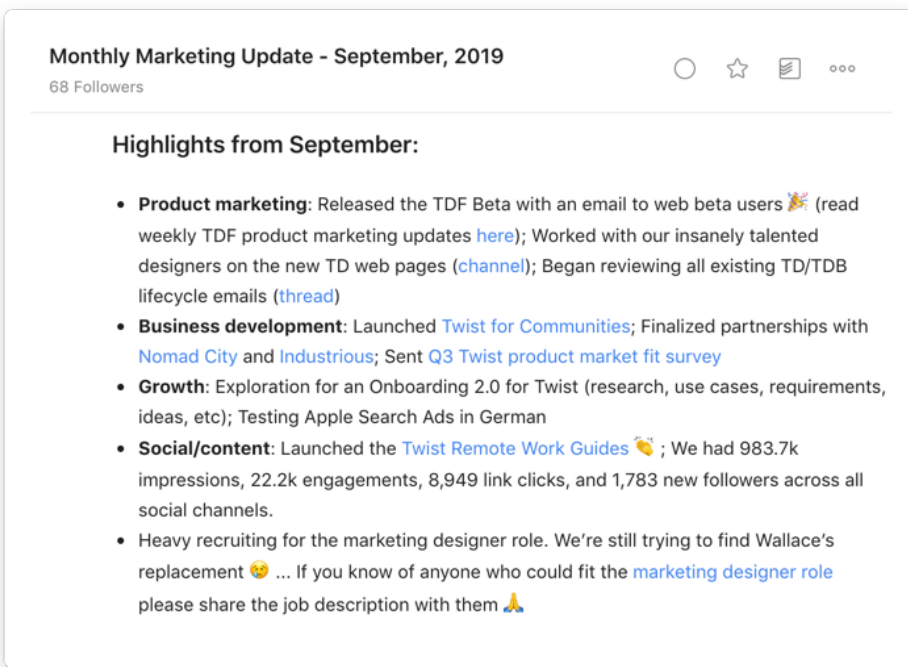
Making time to engage in interesting conversations with others and then retreating to deep work mode.




Attempting to simultaneously juggle conversations while working.

Automatic documentation and greater transparency.

Because most communication happens in writing, key discussions and important information are documented automatically, particularly if you use a more public tool than email. It's easier to share and reference those conversations later. For example, at Doist instead of asking for or explaining why a certain decision was made or the status of a particular project, we can search for and/or link to the relevant Twist threads.



In this monthly update, Brenna, our Head of Marketing, links to relevant threads so people can catch up on progress and follow along asynchronously.

 **Time zone equality.** Communication between time zones becomes smooth, No one is at an informational disadvantage because of the time zone they work in. That means you're not limiting your hiring pool to certain time zones. You can build a stellar and truly diverse team from anywhere in the world.

While employee retention is a bit of a vanity metric, we think the async culture is one of the core reasons why most of the people we've hired at Doist the past 5 years have stayed with us. Our employee retention is 90%+ — much higher than the overall tech industry. For example, even a company like Google — with its legendary campuses full of perks from free meals to free haircuts — has a median tenure of just 1.1 years. Freedom to work from anywhere at any time beats fun vanity perks any day, and it costs our company \$0 to

provide.


But! You still need synchronous communication too

As with most things in life, async culture has pros and cons. Doist has experienced them both.

At the beginning of our async journey, we blacklisted most meetings as we thought they were a waste of time. Most things could be done via written communication. But not so long into that experiment, Brenna, our Head of Marketing, started a candid thread about how we had lost the human element, how she felt disconnected and that she missed seeing other Doisters face-to-face.

Have we gone off the deep end? 🗨️ ☆ 📄 ⋮

19 Followers

 **Roman Imankulov** 06/19/2018 +😊 👤 13 ⋮

That's actually something we recently discussed in our 1-on-1's with Paul K. and others, but that was mostly related to work-related activities. The concern was that sometimes it takes too long to converge to the consensus in the async mode and sometimes the text doesn't convey very well intentions or ideas.

My suggestion was to use messages and video chats more freely and resort to real-time communications where it makes sense. I personally found myself using these ways of communication more actively, apparently to big satisfaction of all parties. Things where real time communications beat async, from my experience.

- 1-on-1's (of course!)
- Team meetings (of course!)
- Code reviews for big and difficult to grasp changes (or for that sake, I guess any work review)
- Explanation for complex technical topics
- "Firefighting" to coordinate work more efficiently


Needless to say that besides the obvious main effect (problem solved), these communications build bonds and empathy and leave a refreshing feeling of a solving a problem while having a nice chat with a like-minded person.


❤️ 9 +

We found that going too asynchronous is a problem too.

The lesson we learned was that you must mix in synchronous communication where it makes sense: for example, in 1-on-1 meetings or team retreats. It's hard to build rapport and personal relationships with only written communication. In the words of Daft Punk, "we are human after all".

Here are some of the things we do to build personal connections on the team:

 Everyone has at least one monthly 1-on-1 with their direct supervisor to touch base, discuss roadblocks, set professional development goals, etc.

 We're experimenting with casual team hangouts via Zoom where people from different teams can get together to chat about non-work things.



Andrew Gobran

@AndrewGobran

I had a blast catching up with @aboutboard, @odsamuels, and @jvalente about life and work.

We've got lots of casual hangouts happening this week at @doist! Little things like this help us feel connected to all the great people we work with! #remotework



30 1:38 PM - Oct 2, 2019

[See Andrew Gobran's other Tweets](#)

🌍 We organize yearly company and team retreats where people can connect on a personal level.



Doist Retreat, Azores 2019

✈️ We fly new team members out to spend a week working in-person with their team mentor. This helps new people feel more connected and comfortable asking questions right off the bat.

👛 We reimburse the cost of a coworking space so our people can get outside their homes and be in a more

office/community setting.

(If you're interested, I've written more on the very related topic of [remote work and mental health](#).)

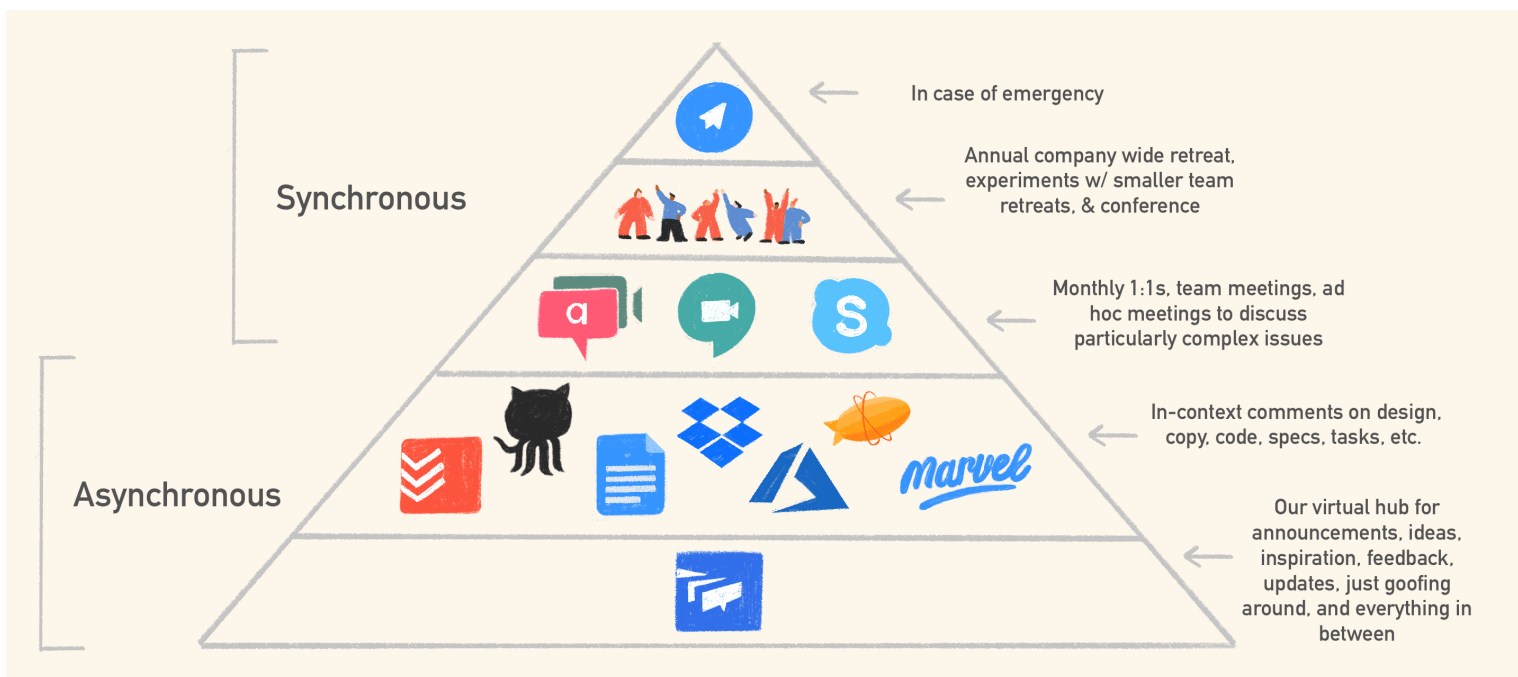
Today, we minimize the number of meetings we have, but we don't blacklist them. Our current communication stack looks something like this:

📧 70% async using Twist, Github, Paper

📞 25% sync using something like Zoom, Appear.in, or Google Meet

🌴 5% physical meetings, e.g., annual company or team retreats

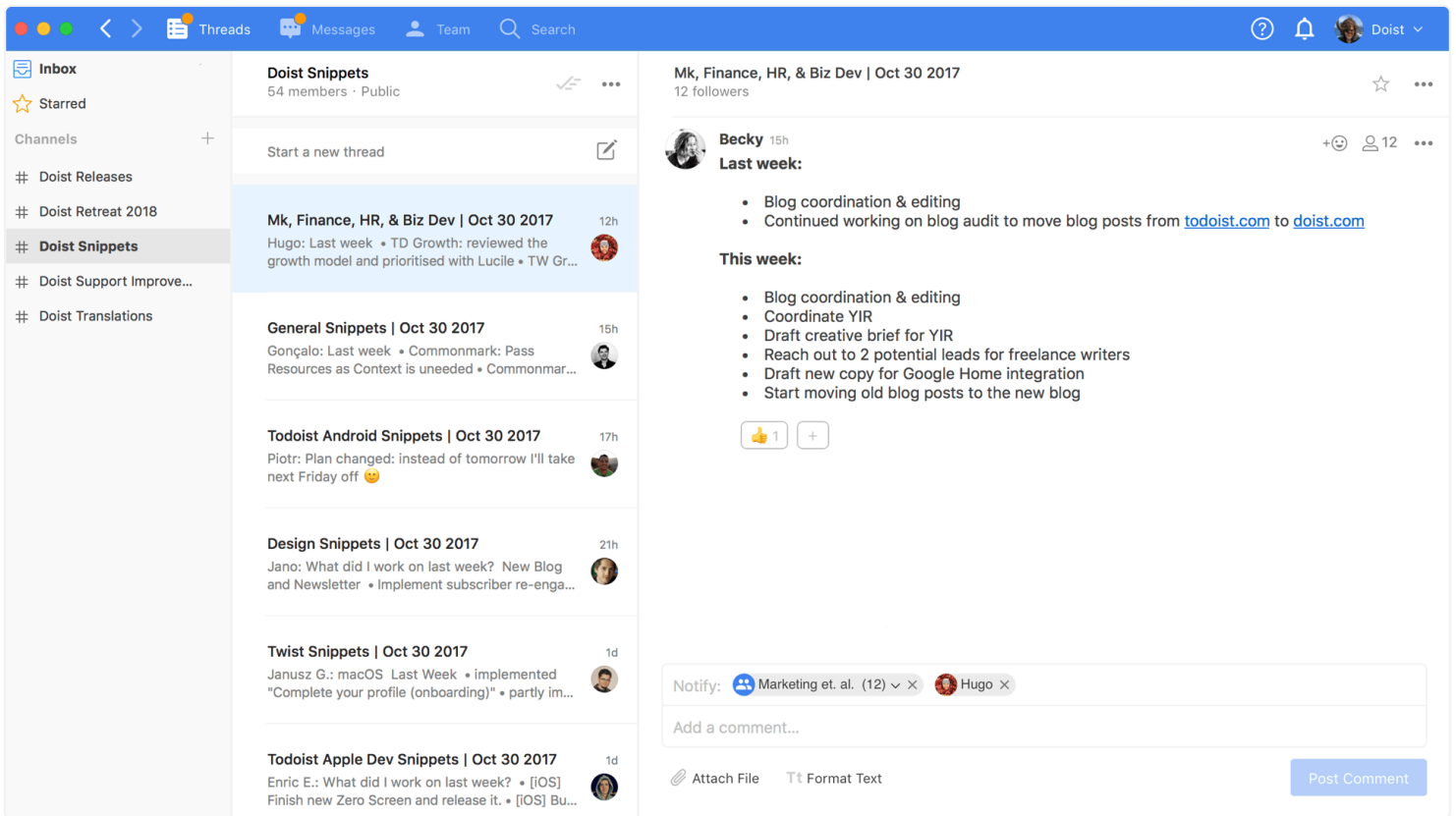
We've written a lot more about the tools we use and how we communicate in our [Pyramid of Remote Team Communication](#) post.



In general, use synchronous communication when the following is true:

- You want to build rapport with people (e.g., a 1-on-1 or team meeting).
- You need to provide critical feedback or discuss other sensitive topics.
- You have a lot of unknowns and you want to brainstorm different ideas and solutions.
- There are a lot of moving variables and you want to bring everyone on the same page quickly, e.g., via a project kickoff meeting.
- A crisis happens that requires immediate attention, e.g., a server crashes. We use Telegram with the notifications turned on at all times for emergency communications only.

Synchronous communication should be the exception, not the rule.




Instead of (and sometimes in addition to) doing weekly standup meetings, each team starts a thread on Monday to post what they accomplished last week and what they're working on this week. That way, everyone can see what everyone else is working on across teams.

How to build an async culture inside your team

Shifting from sync to async isn't going to happen overnight. It takes a profound shift in tools, processes, habits, and culture. Here are some concrete steps you can take, both individually and as a team leader, to get started.

Things you can do individually:

 **Overcommunicate.** When sending a message, include as much information as possible. Visualize things with screenshots or screencasts. Be clear about what you

need from the other person and what the deadline is. A few extra minutes adding details and editing for clarity on the front-end can save days of back-and-forths in an async environment.


Under Communication


Can you please provide me with reporting on content once you get a chance?


Overcommunication

Can you please provide me with a short report (~1 page) on our blog metrics, with data pulled from Google Analytics, for next Tuesday before 2PM EST? Make sure to include the following: Top posts, Unique page views, Bounce rate, Conversion rate, and Plans for future posts. You can find a good example of a report in a similar style here: [Content Report Template](#). Thanks!

Be as clear and thorough as possible when drafting messages.

 **Plan ahead to give people time to consider your message.** For example, “I want to finish this in 2 days and would love your input”, instead of “I need your feedback in the next hour.”

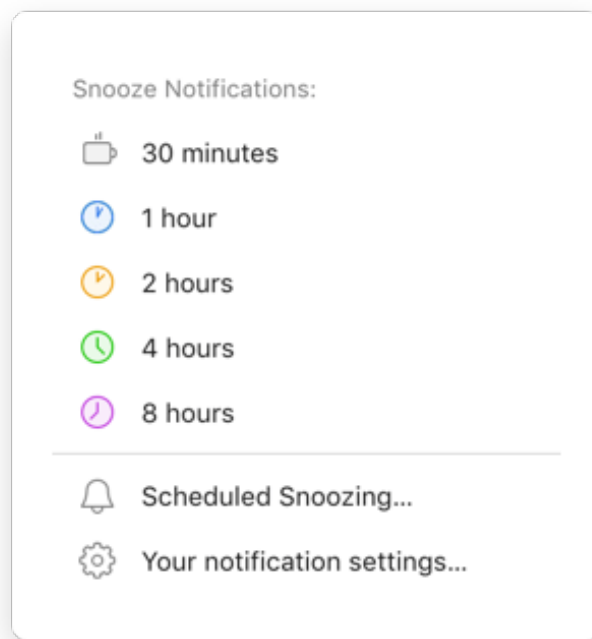
 **Always check your document sharing settings.** This seems like a small thing, but if someone needs to request access, it can lead to hours or even a full day of delay.

 **Before meetings, start a thread or document.** Share all relevant information and discuss key issues before the meeting so that everyone can come with a full understanding of the topic at hand.

 **After meetings, document discussions, and**

outcomes. Start, or continue, a thread or document so that people who weren't there can find that information. We've even started experimenting with recording the video of our meetings so that others can "attend" asynchronously.

🔔 **Turn off notifications.** Instead, set aside specific time blocks during the day for checking and responding to emails and messages.



😞 **Use waiting time productively.** We've found that waiting for a reply isn't a huge problem as there's always something else to work on.

Things you can do as a team leader:

✍️ **Promote writing and communication as core skills to master.** This will reduce back-and-forths and help people get to the core of things faster. Everyone needs to be a great writer in an async workplace.


👉 **Evaluate people based on their output and results,** not how responsive they are or the number of hours they work. We've written more on how to measure employee productivity.


🕒 **Abolish required work hours or the requirements to come into an office.** This will allow you to hire from anywhere in the world and will naturally move your organization towards more asynchronous communication when taps on the shoulder are no longer an option.

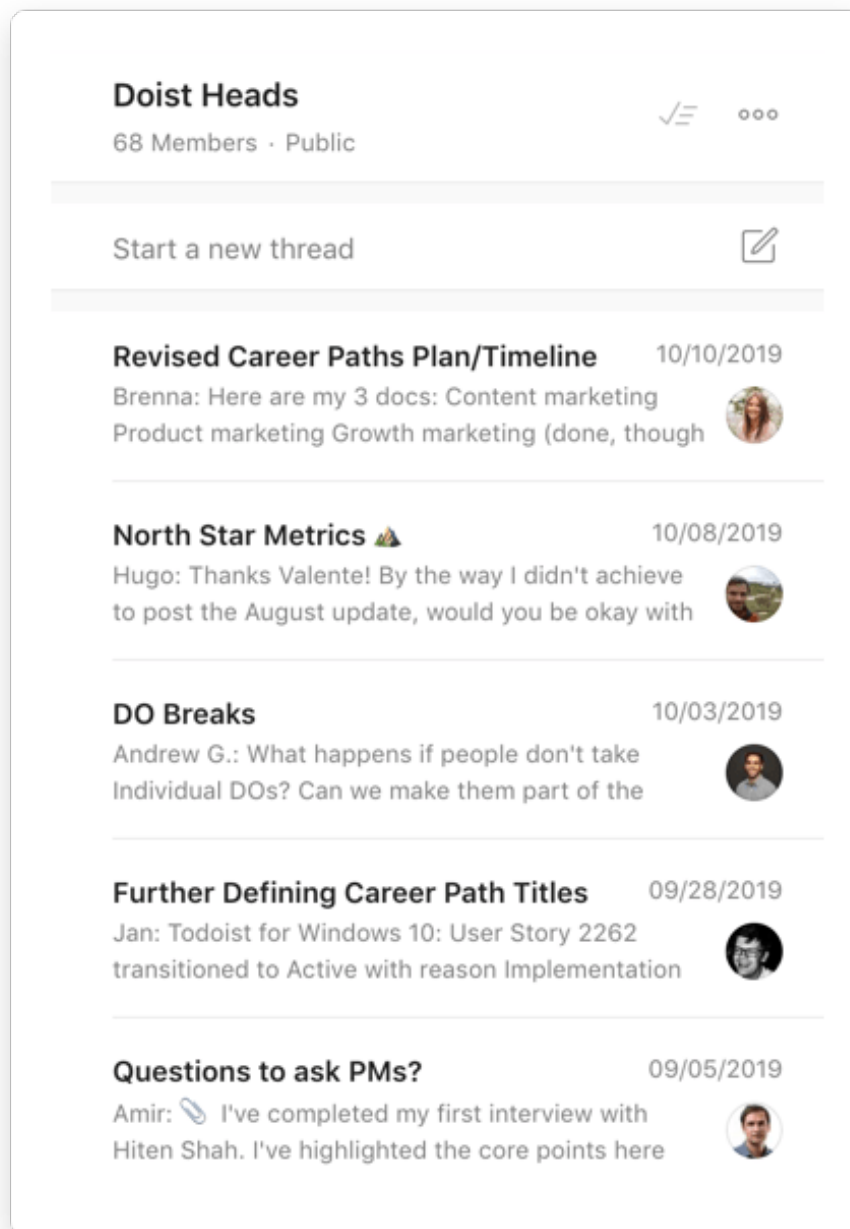
👉 **Emphasize trust, organization, independence, and accountability.** Without these values, asynchronous communication will never work. For example, one of Doist's core values states that others can trust that you'll deliver on time and your teammates don't need to worry about you keeping your word. Brenna Loury, our Head of Marketing, has written in more detail about how to build trust in a remote, primarily async "workplace".

👤 **Adopt a Direct Responsible Individual (DRI) model for management and decision-making.** Made popular by Apple, DRI means there is a single person responsible for any given area or project inside the company. That person doesn't do everything themselves, but rather organizes the team or project, makes key decisions, and generally owns the timeline and results. The more you can decrease the number of people involved in

decisions, decentralize authority, and increase individual accountability, the more efficient your team will be. This is true in any company but is especially crucial for success in an async environment.

 **Set reasonable, team-wide expectations for acceptable response times.** For example, at Doist we expect people to answer within 24 hours.


 **Make transparency a priority.** For example, everyone at Doist can read all of the core discussions regardless of which team it is. This includes leadership discussions. With transparency, people don't miss crucial conversations or decisions. They're able to work more efficiently and independently when they don't have to ask others for the information they need.



Everyone on the Doist team has access to all of the leadership conversations in our public “Doist Heads” channel.

🔧 Use tools that promote transparency, deep work, and async communication, e.g., Github pull requests, Basecamp conversations, and Twist threads. Don’t use email internally. While email can be used asynchronously, it also locks information inside people’s inboxes where no one else can find it. When people can’t find the information they need, collaboration becomes much less efficient. More on the pitfalls of

relying on email for team communication.

 **Have communication channels for emergencies.** Doist has Telegram rooms that we use as an emergency mechanism. We also have phone numbers of people. We use these a few times per year. Most things aren't urgent and don't require an instant response.

Async is an uphill battle that challenges the status quo

We know that we are challenging the status quo and that calm, asynchronous communication isn't the current norm. It's going to take a paradigm shift to change things.

We're betting that in the future, the most successful companies and teams will be the ones who make this shift. It will be the teams that don't require their employees to be always-on, prioritize asynchronous communication to create space for deep work, and allow employees to disconnect and recharge fully. We're excited to share our journey and invite you to explore this space as well.

I'd love your take on this. Reach out to me with questions or comments below.

Read more about building an asynchronous culture

on your team with our Twist remote guide [The Art of Async](#).

• • •



Amir Salihefendic

Amir is the founder and CEO of [Doist](#) – makers of Todoist and Twist.

ambition & balance by doist

Thoughts on more fulfilling ways to work and live.

Subscribe

Related reads



REMOTE WORK, TEAMWORK

No Kings: How Do You Make Good Decisions Efficiently in a Flat Organization?



REMOTE WORK

How to Ask to Work From Home (With Exact Scripts and Email Templates to Aid Your Negotiation)



TEAMWORK

Why We're Betting Against Real-Time Team Messaging Apps Like Slack

Practical thoughts from a ba
end team lead

Follow these 9 steps to secu
a remote work arrangement
even in the most skeptical of
organizations

Does faster communication
really mean better
communication?

Show comments (0) 

Finally, a messaging app that respects your team's time and attention.

Try Twist with your team for free.

[Learn More](#)

doist

[About Us](#)[Todoist](#)[Twist](#)[Privacy](#)