So if you have a remote team or flexible workplace, how do you keep everyone on the same page?

I’ve led a virtual company now for 5 years, and here are the tools that we use at Carey Nieuwhof Communications to keep our team connected, productive and motivated.

With this document, we’ll take you under the hood of my company as my team members and I show you what apps we use and how we use them.

A few notes before we dive into details.

First, great technology is no substitute for great emotional intelligence. People are still people. They need encouragement, motivation, clarity, communication, and accountability. Technology actually requires higher degrees of management and emotional intelligence because some of the nuance of face to face communication is missing.

To that end, using the 5 Questions Every Great Manager Asks template included in this course will help you lead with greater emotional intelligence. That will fuel your one-on-one meetings with your team.

Before my team shares which apps we use and why, a few rules with all this technology that can help:

**RULE 1:**
DEFAULT TO VIDEO WHENEVER POSSIBLE.

Human communication involves subtleties lost in emails, texts and other written communication. Whenever possible, use video chat. While we use Zoom most of the time, FaceTime, Skype or any other video platform will always work. When you see someone, you interact differently. If video is not available, choose a phone call.

**FOUR RULES**

1. DEFAULT TO VIDEO WHENEVER POSSIBLE.
2. NEVER HANDLE CONFLICT OVER EMAIL OR WRITTEN COMMUNICATION.
3. CHOOSE TRUST.
4. FIND THE SIMPLEST PATH.
RULE 2.
NEVER HANDLE CONFLICT OVER EMAIL OR WRITTEN COMMUNICATION.

As soon as the hint of conflict arises, jump on a Zoom call or, if you can’t do a video call for whatever reason, pick up the phone. Often conflict escalates and misunderstandings arise because written communication lacks the nuance that more personal interaction has. Pick up the phone, jump on video and begin the conversation with something like “Thanks for touching base. I just wasn’t sure about X so I thought we’d pick up the conversation in person...” Usually the problem is solved beautifully in minutes.

RULE 3.
CHOOSE TRUST

This should be the rule in any office because, left unchecked, you’ll default to suspicion. Whenever you’re not sure what’s happening in an interaction, ask yourself “Am I believing the best or assuming the worst about my co-worker?” Then, find the most charitable explanation possible and assume that’s what happened. If you need to deal with it further, see rule #2 and jump on a video call or a phone call.

RULE 4:
FIND THE SIMPLEST PATH

There are a lot of apps and tools listed below, and thousands more we don’t use. It can get complicated fast.

Even if you look at how most organizations that don’t use some of the tools below manage their teams, they default to managing by email. Hence the endless sea of “reply-alls” that clog up your day and your inbox. That’s not wise. Add a few other tools into the mix and it can be even more complicated. The key is to create the simplest path to clear communication and execution.

In the last six months in our company, Slack has replaced email for almost all internal written messaging. We only use email to connect with people outside the company. And despite all these tools, I still encourage staff to wait to bring everything non-urgent to meetings.

If you want more on reducing email and creating a simple path of clear communication (emails, texts, phone calls and time management), I have more in this post on my blog: 3 Simple Steps To Get You To Inbox Zero Today.

With all this in mind, here are 5 virtual tools that can help your team thrive.
Zoom is an online platform that offers “high-quality video conferencing with crisp audio and mobile screen sharing.”

It’s an online service that syncs with your browser, calendar, webcam, and microphone to allow users to host video meetings with up to 100 attendees.

As a company, we use it for our regular meetings (example to the left) and have it synced up with Google Calendar.

Any time we schedule a meeting on the calendar, we can easily make it a zoom meeting that anyone invited to that calendar event will get a link to.

We also have it saved as a shortcut within our browser, so that at any time we can quickly start a video conference. The picture on the right is an example of where it sits in my browser:

Zoom also allows us to share our screen during meetings so that everyone can look at the notes, numbers, and pages we are working on. We use this feature very often.

One of the primary struggles with working remotely is that it is a bit easier to become isolated and/or disconnected from your team members. When this happens, your team can begin to lose alignment and tasks can begin to be dropped or duplicated.

Neither of those things are good for your mission.

The solution to this is intentionally scheduling time to connect with your team members on a personal level. Since we can’t do these meetings in-person, a video call on zoom is the next best thing.

Remote work doesn’t have to be isolated work.

Every virtual team needs an online video meeting platform, whether it’s Zoom, Skype, Facetime, or another solution.

-Dillon Smith, Content Manager, Carey Nieuwhof Communications
Asana is an online work management tool that allows us to easily organize and plan work-flows, tasks, projects, and so much more. It helps our team stay on track and on time.

We use Asana for everything from managing routine daily and weekly tasks to managing the development and production of large projects.

We can group different areas of the organization – such as administration, podcasting or events – into “teams” (example: Accounting). Specific projects and routine responsibilities are captured within a team and assigned to specific team members. Everyone on the team can see the team tasks, responsibilities and progress.

What makes Asana great for remote work is the ability to:

- clarify who is responsible for what
- capture and manage important details about tasks and next steps
- manage personal workflow that easily integrates with the team

As a remote team, we have virtual meetings every week. Our team builds meeting agendas in Asana by adding items we are responsible for but need feedback or support on from the rest of the team. We can then capture notes around a specific task and next steps from a virtual team meeting, and follow up tasks can be assigned to specific team members live in the meeting.

When we are working on a large project, the project leader can create a project in Asana with the critical areas of the project, draw out a timeline, and assign areas and responsibilities to team members that the whole team can access and update.

With remote work, and different team members working in different time zones, Asana is accessible at any time and makes organization, teamwork and communication seamless.

-Sarah Piercy, Executive Assistant, Carey Nieuwhof Communications
Google Drive and Dropbox are the two key ways we share files and collaborate on documents. Google Drive we typically use for collaborative projects and DropBox is what we use primarily for file storage.

DropBox is a cloud-based file storage service that allows a team to share, sync and collaborate on files. A DropBox Business account allows your team to have a central location where all files are stored, while also giving everyone a space for their own files.

A few major benefits to using DropBox:
- Files are stored on the cloud, so there’s always a backup if something happens to your hard drive
- Access to folders can be restricted to certain people
- A business account allows the admin to add and remove members as necessary

While Google Drive is similar, we use DropBox to store any files or documents that are company-related. This allows team members to access files as needed without having to send them to one another.

We have folders and subfolders set up for our different ‘divisions’. Folders with confidential information (e.g. pay rate/salaries) have restricted access to only those who are required to see it.

Here’s an example of how our DropBox is laid out in the Web Version:
Here is an example of how our desktop version is laid out.

If you look at the desktop version, you’ll see either a green check or a grey cloud beside each folder or file. By default, our Dropbox will only download files (green check) when a member opens that specific file, saving hard drive space.

Dropbox also has a mobile app, making it easy to access files by phone.

Dropbox allows our team to have access to the files we need, when they’re needed. This reduces workflow inefficiencies by eliminating the need to wait for files from team members. Prior to using Dropbox Business, our team had to share files one-by-one, as needed (sending files by email or sharing files by link).

Dropbox also allows files to stay with the company after a team member leaves. Since everyone saves work-related files to our Dropbox, files are permanently saved there even after an individual is removed from the company account.

-Sam Nieuwhof, Finance + Marketing, Carey Nieuwhof Communications
Slack calls itself the “collaboration hub,” and it couldn’t be truer. I first heard about Slack in a podcast interview with Michael Hyatt about six years ago. He was using it as a communication tool internally with his own team.

Slack has really evolved over those years and, while there is so even more our team could do with the platform, we use it as a connection and productivity tool.

My encouragement to our team: If what you need to say can be sent in a Slack message (versus email), then use Slack. How many emails do you receive every day? As Carey mentioned earlier, so many emails and reply all messages can really clog up your inbox.

Of course, I love receiving the supportive, encouraging individual responses from our team (“Awesome!” “Go team!” “Thanks for sending!”), but I also get really distracted by those. And then days later, I realize I failed to respond to one of our partners or a podcast guest. Eek.

With Slack, you create conversation “channels” which organize your conversations by topic, a little like project management. If I have a quick question about the podcast, I choose #cnlp, and ask my question to my teammates inside that channel.

I can also direct message any teammate. For me, this is a vital part of our culture. Working remotely, our team can lose the camaraderie built when you’re physically together. We don’t get the normal watercooler chit chat (and Carey’s probably glad about that).

So, on any given day, I’ll use Slack to message a teammate. It’s fun to ask how he or she is doing or share a funny story from my weekend. I’ve never actually met any of my teammates in person, but I feel like I’ve known each of them for years because of this.

Slack also allows us to keep communication about work inside work hours. Now, I know that if I have an urgent need, I should call or text my teammates. But when it’s not an emergency, and it doesn’t have to go in an email, I use Slack. Slack offers a great app for your digital device. If I’m out and about, I can easily reply via my smartphone. Notifications can be turned on during work hours, and you can turn off notifications easily so you’re not interrupted while doing deep work. I have my notifications on during work hours, but when it’s outside my normal work hours, and it isn’t urgent, I can come back to the message and reply when I’m on the clock.

-Erin Ward, Podcast Manager, Carey Nieuwhof Communications
Since our team is spread across two countries and multiple time zones, utilizing shared internal calendars is one of the most powerful ways our team collaborates and communicates with each other about events, podcast interviews, course launches, and project due dates.

Whenever someone joins our team, they’re provided with a company Gmail email address which also grants Google calendar access specific to their email, as well as access to several of Carey’s calendars (personal, church, events, podcast, and family). Shared calendars are a huge help to virtual and non-virtual teams.

Having dates and events all in one place allows us to look ahead at how each week or month will look, and make clear, quick decisions about adding additional responsibilities to our or Carey’s schedule. With the swipe of a cursor, we can see that he can’t accept an invitation because he has 4 podcast interviews, a family day scheduled, and a sermon to write.

We will input all applicable information about an event or podcast interview in the calendar event time slot. This gives the team full information about the event or meeting and allows us to know, for example, when Carey can meet a friend while he’s in town for an event or when he can take a phone call on the road without having to pick up the phone and call another team-member to ask for specifics.

Finally, being able to forecast Carey’s schedule months or a year out allows us to also forecast Carey’s frame of mind for that season as well.

This is a huge bonus when we know we have a big decision to make as a team or need to find dates for a large project. For example, we know when a book draft is coming due to Carey’s publisher that the few weeks ahead are going to mean extreme focus from Carey on that subject and not to book him for large meetings or responsibilities (like an event).

If you don’t like the idea of letting your team know every detail of your personal life (i.e. you don’t want them to know when your medical appointments are), simply refrain from being specific for personal matters. A simple “Busy, don’t book” works great and you can mark your appointment in a private calendar.

Best of all, trusting and equipping a team or team member to manage the details of your calendar will create more freedom for you to do what you do best.

-Lauren Cardwell, Systems Manager, Carey Nieuwhof Communications
CONCLUSION

Digital tools will change as technology changes, but these are the ones we’re using along with thousands of other organizations to make remote work, well, work. The four rules are a little more timeless.

By the way, all of these tools work for people in the office as well as your remote team. Hope this helps you and your team thrive.

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