The
ASYNC-FIRST
PLAYBOOK

Remote Collaboration Techniques for Agile Software Teams

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Praise for
The Async-First Playbook

"Async is the superpower the most successful distributed teams have already realized, so understanding the playbook for implementing async-first practices is a must-do for any leader moving into this type of operating system. Sumeet has done a phenomenal job outlining that here."

—Chase Warrington, Head of Remote, Doist

"Collaboration is going async. The advantages are just too great: global reach—which enables more inclusion—and time zone immunity. Sumeet excellently decomposes the issues. And by zeroing in on async leadership, he tackles the elephant in the async room: leadership. Yes, you can be an effective leader, asynchronously."

—Cliff Berg, Co-Founder and Managing Partner, Agile 2 Academy

"*The Async-First Playbook* is a must-read for anyone part of agile teams in today's fast-paced and distributed work environment. This insightful book shows how adopting an async-first approach can transform the way teams collaborate. The result—higher productivity, better inclusion, and most importantly, fun! The future of work is remote, and async-first collaboration is the key to unlocking its potential. Through concrete examples, this book provides a roadmap for embracing asynchronous communication, enabling teams to focus on deep work and stay in a state of flow. I recommend this book to anyone seeking to unlock the full potential of remote collaboration and achieve better outcomes for their team."

—Iwo Szapar, Co-founder & Head of Remote,
Remote-First Institute

"Asynchronous work, when implemented well, can help create a sustainable and calm way of working. It enables individuals to design their days around productivity and priorities, creating a happier and more human-centric workplace. *The Async-First Playbook* thoroughly examines effective asynchronous work practices' benefits (and the challenges, too). This playbook discusses fundamental prerequisites that should be in place before transitioning to an async-first approach, including leadership practices, potential challenges, and a starter kit to help you determine your next steps. If you seek to alleviate information overload and minimize meetings, *The Async-First Playbook* is a valuable resource."

—Lisette Sutherland, Director of Collaboration Superpowers
https://www.collaborationsuperpowers.com/

MICRO-MOVES TO SHIFT LEFT

You are what you do and not what you say you'll do. I'm going to adapt a James Clear quote, so I can make my point:

> *Every action you take is a vote for the type of team you want to become. No single instance will transform your beliefs, but as the votes build up, so does the evidence of your identity.*

The Ulysses pact of "meetings are the last resort" is the foundation of being an async-first team. We've got to get the fundamentals right. The entire team must vote with their behavior for that async-first work culture. Otherwise, it'll all feel like lip service.

SMALL SHIFTS, EASY WINS

Our goal is to shift left on the spectrum of synchronousness, in small steps. Some of these steps are personal, and some will be for the whole team. Scoring a few easy wins can help the team's morale when making this shift. That's what this chapter is all about: easy wins from small shifts. I have a grab-bag of eight ideas for you to implement: five for the individual and three for the team. Let's get into them now.

PERSONAL SHIFTS: BROADCAST YOUR COMMITMENT

As James Clear said, every behavior is a vote for your team's identity. The more consistently people practice a behavior, the more it becomes second nature. Activities that become second nature serve as evidence for the team's identity. Everyone broadcasts their commitment to the cause. The following are five simple things everyone on the team can do.

Change Your Chat Status

Regardless of the instant messaging tool you use, you can set your status. Set up your default status in a way that everyone knows you use the platform in an asynchronous manner. That way, you take the "instant" out of instant messaging. Here's an example:

🧠 *Deep work; will be slow to respond*

The more people see this, the more they'll get the message. Combine this with the communication protocols we discussed in Chapter 6. That way, people will know when they should just pick up the phone and get your attention for something urgent.

Use a Pro-Async Email Signature

Many of us work in global teams, and even if we don't, we may have colleagues who work different hours from us. Being async-first is all about flexibility and autonomy after all. You don't want to inadvertently pressure people into responding to your email the moment they see it. To pre-empt an unnecessary sense of urgency, I use the following email signature:

> **PS:** My work hours may not be your work hours. Please don't feel obliged to respond outside your normal schedule.
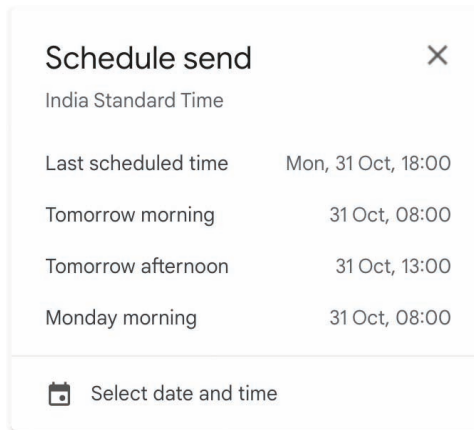
That way, even if people receive my email when they're getting on with their lives, they know I don't expect an immediate response.

Schedule Your Messages

Sometimes we have a brainwave in the middle of the night. You don't want to lose the thought, and you want to share it with someone right then. First things first, consider if you can make a note somewhere and follow up when it's a good time for other people. If you absolutely have to share immediately, then schedule the message to go out when you expect the recipients to be at work.

This approach comes in handy when you work across time zones. Your morning may mark the end of someone's day. Seeing a message at that time may keep them at work longer than is necessary. Since asynchronous communication can wait till their morning, schedule the message to go out at a reasonable time for them.

Most email and instant messaging tools provide this functionality, like Gmail does in Figure 9.1. So, you have no excuse. If you err on the side of thoughtfulness, your colleagues will appreciate you for it.
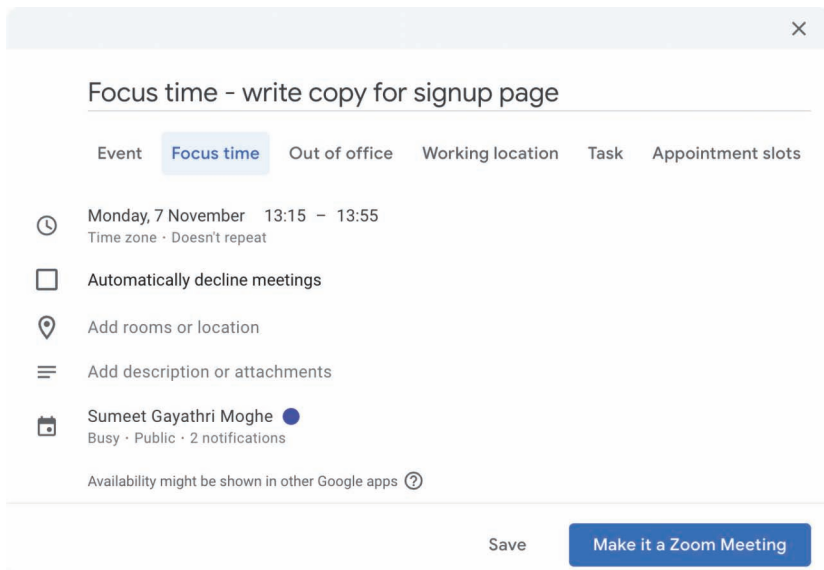
Schedule send   ✕

India Standard Time

Last scheduled time   Mon, 31 Oct, 18:00

Tomorrow morning   31 Oct, 08:00

Tomorrow afternoon   31 Oct, 13:00

Monday morning   31 Oct, 08:00

📅 Select date and time

Figure 9.1 **Scheduling an email on Gmail.**

Plan "Focus Time" for Deep Work

Both Outlook and Google Calendar (as in Figure 9.2) allow you to broadcast when you're in the middle of deep work, by helping you block out "focus time." The beauty of these calendar features is that they don't just visually show that you're "in the flow"; they also allow you to autodecline meetings during these times. Two benefits for the price of one—nifty, isn't it? If you use integrations like Clockwise, you can even sync your calendar availability onto instant messaging tools such as Slack so people know what you're up to.

✕

Focus time - write copy for signup page

Event   **Focus time**   Out of office   Working location   Task   Appointment slots

🕐 Monday, 7 November   13:15 – 13:55
    Time zone · Doesn't repeat

☐ Automatically decline meetings

📍 Add rooms or location

≡ Add description or attachments

📅 Sumeet Gayathri Moghe ●
    Busy · Public · 2 notifications

    Availability might be shown in other Google apps ⍰

                                        Save   **Make it a Zoom Meeting**

Figure 9.2 **Block "focus time" for deep work.**

Replace "Quick Syncs" with "Async"

I stole this one from Dropbox. How unoriginal! Let me explain why I added this to the list. Often, when you ask your colleague for a "quick sync," it's for what you think of as an immediate need. You and I can agree that in most cases it's not urgent. An answer to a set of questions, a search for a how-to, or someone's opinion on a certain idea—there are many such triggers. I empathize with that need. Now spare a thought for the person you interrupted. While you may get what you wanted by pulling them into a "quick sync" and you can just continue with what you were doing, the meeting you created interrupts their flow. Context switching comes at a cost to your colleagues, as Figure 9.3 illustrates.
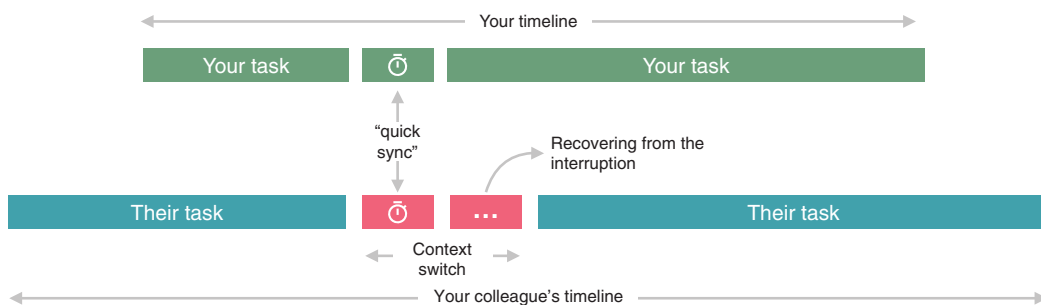

Figure 9.3 The quick sync may help you, but it interrupts your colleague.

Another world is possible.

- Why don't you write your questions in a document and ask your colleague to answer them inline, by a certain day or time?
- Why don't you record a video of where you're stuck and have your colleague comment on it to tell you what you may be doing wrong?
- Why don't you write up your idea in reasonable detail and give your colleague some time to process it and then give you feedback?
- Could a picture speak a thousand words? If a sketch or a diagram brings your questions to life, how about you add it for clarity?

Figure 9.4 illustrates this more deliberate approach. You won't get instant gratification, but in most cases, you'll get thoughtful inputs. Your colleagues will benefit from fewer interruptions, and you can perpetuate a virtuous cycle of deep work. The side effect? You also have a referenceable artifact for everyone else on the team. Remember, this advice is not for stuff that's truly urgent. If you need help to douse a fire or if you feel you're blocked for some reason, by all means get immediate help!
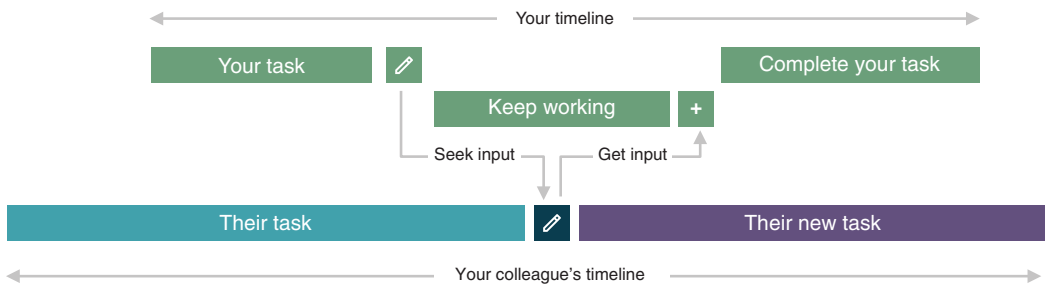
Figure 9.4 Slow down. Give your colleagues time for a thoughtful response.

How Much Do Context Switches Hurt Us?

A mere 20 minutes of interrupted performance can lead to higher stress, frustration, workload, effort, and pressure for individuals.

Asana's 2022 anatomy of work reports that we spend a lot of time context switching:

- 42 percent of people are spending more time on email than one year ago.
- 40 percent are spending more time on video calls than one year ago.
- 52 percent are multitasking during virtual meetings more than one year ago.
- 56 percent feel they need to respond immediately to notifications.

Add to this the staggering cost of ineffective meetings that we've addressed in Chapter 7.

TEAM SHIFTS: ACCELERATE LEFTWARD

Those first five ideas help you be a model asynchronous citizen at work. You can practice what you preach. The next three plays are for the whole team. I think of them as "gimmes"—things that are incredibly easy to do. The more you play these cards, though, the easier it is to keep the Ulysses pact.

Inviolate Half Days

You might remember Paul Graham's essay about a maker's schedule versus a manager's schedule from Chapter 1. Makers need long, uninterrupted blocks of time to achieve something meaningful.

> There's another way of using time that's common among people who make things, like programmers and writers. They generally prefer to use time in units of at least half a day. You can't write or program well in units of an hour. That's barely enough time to get started.

A straightforward way to give people a contiguous block of time back for work is to make one-half of the day "meeting free." For example, you could decide that from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. there are no meetings. If you have recurring meetings, move them to the other half of the day so that there are no exceptions. Here are a few tips to make this tick:

- **Make it predictable.** Decide which block of four hours is meeting-free and stay consistent with that practice. This will help make things predictable for the team, and everyone can settle into a routine.
- **Encourage productive behaviors.** Having meeting-free time is all nice and dandy, but if people face interruptions from chat, email, social media, or phone calls, you won't get much benefit out of this. So, people will have to employ their own productivity habits—for example, distraction blocking—to make the most of this time.
- **Sync your calendars.** You can cut off distractions from within the team, but it's no fun if you have distractions from outside the team. Set up your calendars so it's clear to everyone in the organization that this time is interruption-free. That way, no one will block your time for an interview or other company commitments during these hours. You can even set up calendars to autodecline invites during these hours.

No-Meeting Fridays (Or Any Other Day)

A few teams I know have designated a day of the week as "no-meetings" day. I love Friday as a no-meeting day for a bunch of reasons. Let's start at the end. Having a clear Friday allows me to end the week with a sense of accomplishment. If I don't get work done that day, I know I have only myself to blame. I can't tell you how happy it makes me feel to go into the weekend with the recency bias of having achieved something. The other little benefit of no-meeting Fridays is that it's something you all can look forward to as a team—an eight-hour reward to end the workweek.