

Forewords by *Martin Fowler and Darren Murph*



The **ASYNC-FIRST** **PLAYBOOK**

Remote Collaboration Techniques
for Agile Software Teams



SUMEET GAYATHRI MOGHE

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/>

The Async-First Playbook: Remote Collaboration Techniques for Agile Software Teams

Table of Contents

Cover

Half Title

Title Page

Copyright Page

Table of Contents

Foreword

Foreword

Preface

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Part I: Adapting to the New Normal

Chapter 1 There's Got to Be a Better Way to Work

Work Deserves a New Look

Complex Problems Need Smarter Collaboration

The Promise of Flexibility

Escaping the Shallows

A More Inclusive Workplace

Defaulting to Action

Improved Knowledge Sharing and Communication

A Better Work Environment for All of Us

Chapter 2 Foster a Mindset for Change

Table of Contents

Four Simple Ideas

- Focus on Value

- Make a Ulysses Pact

- Appreciate the Balance

- Visualize Change on a Spectrum

Go Far, Go Together

Ready for the First Steps

Part II: Prepare to go Async-First

Chapter 3 The Tools You Need

- With Tools, Less Is More

- Tools Are Everything; Tools Are Nothing

Chapter 4 The Biggest Async-First Superpower

- Writing Is a Practice; Documentation a Product

- Why Meetings Are the Last Resort, Not the First Option

- The Benefits of Writing

- What About the Agile Manifesto?

- How Do We Write Better?

- How Much More Effective Is Face-to-Face Communication?

- The Manifesto Deserves the Benefit of Doubt

- To Work Async-First, We Must Write

Chapter 5 Three More Async-First Superpowers

- What an Async-First Superhero Looks Like

- Block Distractions

- Read and Comprehend

- Work Independently

- Personal Productivity Leads to Team Productivity

Chapter 6 Calm Things Down with Collaboration Protocols

- Work Execution vs. Workflow

- Revisit Your Workflow Statuses and Transitions

- Make Email and IM Secondary Communication Tools

- Streamline Your Decision-Making Process

Table of Contents

Identify Channels and Their Response Times

Fundamentals, Fundamentals, Fundamentals

Part III: The Practitioners Guide

Chapter 7 Meetings as the Last Resort

Just. Too Many. Meetings

The ConveRel Quadrants

When You Meet, Make It Count

Account for Costs of Frequent CrossTime Zone Meetings

Stay Human

Async-First, with Small Shifts

Chapter 8 The Value of Being Face to Face

From URL to IRL

The Time-Zone Question

Face-to-Face Collaboration Isnt Free

The True Value of Being in Person

Camaraderie Has Dollar Value

Rethink the Onsite-Offsite

Be Conscious About Building Relationships

So Much for Meetings

Chapter 9 Micro-Moves to Shift Left

Small Shifts, Easy Wins

Personal Shifts: Broadcast Your Commitment

Team Shifts: Accelerate Leftward

Build Async-First Behavioral Cues

Chapter 10 Write a Team Handbook

Distributed Teams Need a Single Source of Truth

By Default, Start with Your Team

What Goes into a Handbook?

Tools You Can Use

Start Small, Own Collectively, Be Iterative

Go Deep with Your Documentation Triggers

Table of Contents

Aim for a Shared Reality

Chapter 11 Tame the Instant in Instant Messaging

Make Messaging Productive

- If Its Urgent, Use a Suitable Medium
- Choose Intuitive Names for Channels and Rooms
- Show Your Status, Respect Others Statuses
- Limit the Number of Messages
- Get to the Point
- Target Your Conversations
- React, Dont Respond
- Use Threads: One per Topic
- Slow Things Down, and Dont Argue on Chat
- Make Your IM Guidelines Visible

Messaging: Just Not Instant

Chapter 12 Standup Meetings: An Easy Shift Left

Distributed Standups Can Be Painful

- Use the Project Management Tools Features
- Automate the Ritual
- Keep It Relevant
- Make Peace with Lag

Standups = Conveyance/Strong Relationships

Chapter 13 Take Charge of Your Development Cycles

Sprint Ceremonies Can Hinder Async Work

- Approach 1: Embrace Continuous Flow
- Approach 2: Use Shape Up Cycles

The Key to Asynchrony Is a Strong Process

Chapter 14 Run Meaningful Retrospectives

Infrequent Retros Lead to Poor Team Health

- View Retrospectives as a Process and Not an Event
- Collect Inputs in Safety
- Voting Synchronously vs. Asynchronously

Table of Contents

Setting Up the Retrospective Environment

Retros as a Process, Not an Event

Scrum for the 2020s

Chapter 15 Kickoffs and Desk Checks: Reduce Ritualized Interruptions

How to Maintain Quality with Fewer Meetings?

Approach 1: Go Async with Kickoffs and Desk Checks

Approach 2: Keep the Sync Practices and Plan for Them

Make Your Feedback Loops Remote Native

Chapter 16 Questions to Reimagine Your Tech Huddles

The What and the Why

How Much Autonomy Exists in Your Teams?

How Necessary Is the Sync Up?

What If You Defaulted to Action?

If You Must Huddle, How Do You Make the Meeting Effective?

Oh, and About the Regular, Scheduled Huddles

Not a Zero-Sum Game

Chapter 17 Pair Programming: The Elephant in the Room

A Polarizing Topic

Lets Start with Why

Design for Flexibility

Use the Right Tools

Encourage Personal Discipline

Mix Pairing and Solo Work

If Its Fun for You, Pair by All Means

Chapter 18 Audit Trails from the Flow of Your Work

The Just Ask Pattern Breaks Down

Meeting Notes

Business Decision Records

Architectural Decision Records

Commit Messages

Table of Contents

Pull Requests

Trails as the Most Frequent Form of Documentation

Chapter 19 Communicate Tech and Functional Design

An Agile Approach to Design

Idea Papers

Feature Breakdown Documents

Technical Design Documents

Simplify Communication Complexity

Chapter 20 Two Stable Pieces of Handbook Documentation

Being Agile About Documentation

Your Ways of Working

Codebase README Files

Documenting Code? Think Twice

Good Documents Reduce Guesswork

Chapter 21 Craft an Efficient Onboarding Process

Write Once, Run Many Times

Preserve the Dumb Questions Budget with an FAQ

Build an Onboarding Checklist

Focus on Automation and Reusability

Find the New Hire a Buddy

Foster Strong Relationships

Onboarding Efficiency = Team Efficiency

Part IV: Async-First Leadership

Chapter 22 The Async Leadership Mindset

The Tyranny of The Way

How Can You Get the Most Out of Yourself?

How Can You Be an Example, Not a Bottleneck?

How Can You Avoid Busywork?

How Can You Champion Inclusion?

How Can You Make Your Team Resilient?

Make Time for the Essential Stuff

Table of Contents

Chapter 23 Manage Your People with Care

Corrections in the Right Direction

Manage Your Own Workload

Meet People One-on-One

Practice Radical Candor

Be the Bridge Between Your Team and Your Companys Culture

Chapter 24 Set Up Your Team for Success

Design for Success

Manage Team Cognitive Load Through Team Topologies

Revisit Your Teams Internal Structure

Reduce Pressure, Create Calm

Consciously Build a Team Culture

Align on a Common Purpose

Your Virtual Workplace Needs Configuring

Chapter 25 Farm Tacit Knowledge in Your Company

Beyond Handbooks: Into Communities

Create Porous Walls

Facilitate Flows While You Manage Stocks

From Team Knowledge to Company Knowledge

Part V: Navigate the Pitfalls

Chapter 26 The Great Hybrid Kerfuffle

Peoples Preferences Are Heading Remote

Hybrid Organization, Not Hybrid Employees

Avoid a Move Backward

Avoid New Costs for All Stakeholders

Embrace Science, Not Superstition

Dont Create a Perception of Asymmetry

Treat Everyone as Remote

Choice and Autonomy Are the Key Words

Chapter 27 The Async Island

Unpacking Organizational Inertia

Table of Contents

Forces for and Against Change

Async Work Is a New Sport

Help Your System Get Better

Protect and Extend the Island

While Being a Guerilla, Dont Forget Advocacy

Chapter 28 Toxicity in the Virtual Workplace

Toxicity Builds: One Benign Step at a Time

Celebrating the Hard Worker

Digital Presenteeism

Talking to the Document

Not Investing in Meaningful Synchrony

As a Leader, Stay Vigilant

Part VI: Bring it all Together

Chapter 29 The Async-First Starter Kit

Five Stages of Sensible Defaults

Stage 1: Align on Goals

Stage 2: Tabulate Baseline Data

Stage 3: Agree on the Fundamentals

Stage 4: Clean Up Your Calendars

Stage 5: Build the 30-Day Program and Beyond

A Team Shift, Owned by the Team

Chapter 30 A Brave New World of Work

Another World of Work Is Possible

Flexibility as a Desire and a Right

A Skills Economy

Digital Nomadism

The Four-Day Workweek

Gen Z and Their Sensibilities

A Shift for Autonomy

Its Time to Sign Off

Endnotes

Table of Contents

Index