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Remote UX Work: The NN/g Case Study

Summary: Remote UX work is challenging, but using digital collaboration and communication tools can mitigate some of its difficulties. Our recommendations are based on NN/g's experience as a remote company.

By [Kate Moran](#) on July 7, 2019

Topics: [Remote UX Work](#), [UX Teams](#), [Ideation](#)

People often ask me, "Where's NN/g based?" They're always surprised when I respond, "Nowhere, really." Our [team](#) is completely remote, and we're scattered across the United States. And we've worked this way every year of the company's [21 years' history](#).

Challenges of Remote UX Work

Working remotely is a challenge for any team, but it can be especially difficult in the field of UX. If you're a manager or owner considering remote UX work (or an employee looking to convince your boss) here are some specific challenges and recommendations, based on our successful 100%-remote structure.

Ideation and Collaboration

UX design often requires collaboration to [generate ideas](#). In-person ideation workshops are much easier than the remote equivalent. When ideation participants are in the same room together, they have a shared context — it's easy to see what they're sketching on a sheet of paper and what sticky notes

they're posting on the walls. Also, when people can see each other face to face, the flow of information and emotion is easier to assess. If you've ever been on a conference call and rolled your eyes at a coworker, or awkwardly started talking at the same time as someone else, you'll know the difference.

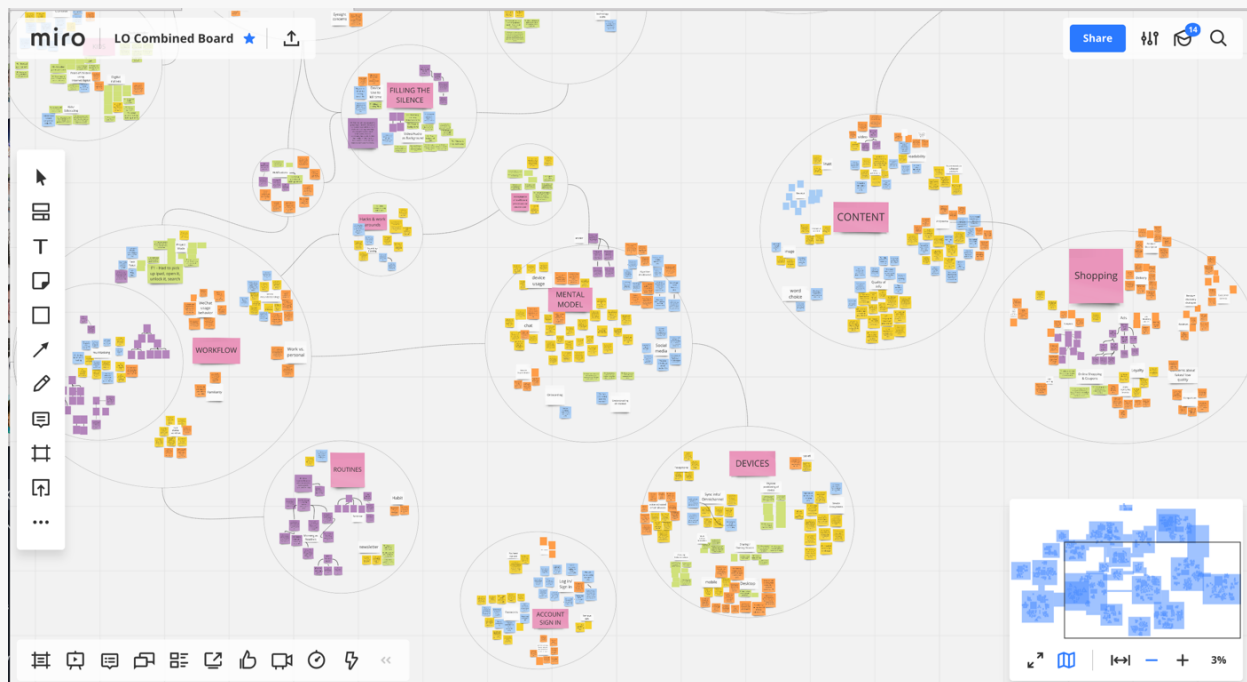
In a previous role at a different company, we had chronic problems with ineffective remote meetings — often, one or two people would dominate the conversation, while the rest would lurk without contributing.

A simple fix can avoid some of those issues: **share webcam video as well as audio as much as possible**. Just by being able to see the other people in the meeting, you'll:

- Encourage empathy and bonding
- Be able to see when someone is about to speak
- Assess body language and expressions to better perceive your coworkers' emotions

You'll likely get more engagement from participants if they're on video as well: it's obvious when someone has mentally checked out of the meeting or is busy sending unrelated emails.

At NN/g we often use multiple tools to achieve a smooth remote ideation workshop. For example, we might share webcam feeds and audio using Zoom or GoToMeeting, while we share ideas visually using a collaborative product like Google Docs, Miro, or Mural.



This screenshot shows the results of a remote affinity-diagramming exercise. In a video-conferencing meeting we used Miro, a whiteboard application, to cluster the findings from our Life Online research project and generate ideas for future articles and projects.

We tailor the tools to fit the needs of a particular meeting. For example, creating a [journey map remotely](#) may require different digital products than an ideation workshop.

Other remote teams have found success by using document cameras: each person in the meeting shares her video and audio streams, as well as her document camera that captures what she's writing or drawing.

Research

Just because you work remotely, it **doesn't mean you have to conduct all of your research remotely**. As much as possible, we conduct [usability tests](#), [field studies](#), [focus groups](#), and [interviews](#) in person. Often, we travel to where participants live. (In fact, not having an office encourages us to run studies in a broader range of locations.)

However, because we're distributed across the United States, we usually have someone who lives near the population we want to study. For example, I live in Raleigh, North Carolina. If we have a client based in Charlotte, I can easily and cheaply travel there to study the target users.

Developing New Talent

Remote work is a huge advantage for recruiting talent. If you accept remote workers, you can hire people from all over the country, with no restrictions on their location. You have a virtually unlimited talent pool, because you aren't limited to the circle of people in your area. And being able to work from their current location is a big benefit for any UX professional who doesn't want to live in a traditional UX-hub city like San Francisco or New York City.

But developing new UX talent is also a major challenge to remote work. New UX professionals often learn by closely shadowing or working alongside more experienced colleagues. Many people think that new UX employees shouldn't be remote: they'll feel disconnected from the organization, may be dissatisfied, and may not develop UX skills as quickly as they might in person.

That's a challenge to remote work. We've found a few useful solutions:

- **Mentorship:** In addition to new hires' formal managers, they're also assigned "mentors" — regardless of how much previous career experience they have had before joining. The mentor is a dedicated coworker to whom new hires can reach out with any questions they have (logistics, HR, UX-related, personal, etc.). Mentors are encouraged to check in frequently with their mentee, to make sure they're adjusting well and feel connected with their colleagues.
- **Shadowing:** In their first months, new hires are assigned to shadow their colleagues on a variety of projects. That can happen remotely (for example, calls with clients, remote ideation session, remote usability testing) or in person (usually on research-study trips).
- **Gifts & swag:** When people join the company, their manager usually sends a delicious, high-calorie welcome gift (I got a box of cookies). They might also

receive [NN/g swag](#), like a t-shirt, coffee mug, or stickers.

New hires also benefit from the team-building efforts we make to bring together everyone in the company as much as possible.

Team Building

When you don't see your coworkers every day, it's easy to slip into feeling disconnected from them.

We've found that having a company Slack workspace alleviates this feeling. In addition to having project- and topic-specific channels, we also have:

- **#nng-pets**: For sharing photos of our animal office mates
- **#the-office-today**: For sharing photos of where you happen to be working that day (a coffee shop, out on your deck, by a pool, etc.)
- **#feedback**: For requesting quick input on anything you're currently working on (an idea, a graphic, or an excerpt of writing)

Because we often travel for our [conferences](#), we do get to see our coworkers in person every month or so, at least for a few days. In that time, we conduct **a few meetings in person** and **go out to dinner** or a fun activity (comedy show, concert, etc.). Once a year, we also have a company retreat where everyone gets together in person for a few days to develop a new skill (for example, public speaking or visual design).

Evaluating Employees

You may be familiar with a common objection to remote work: "If my employees are remote, how will I judge their performance?" The answer is: in the same way you judge their performance in person.

I find that this concern is often rooted in a lack of trust in employees to do their work. It can stem from a fear that unless a manager can actually see the employees working, they won't. NN/g **evaluates employees based on their output and impact**, which can be determined just as well remotely as in person.

Choose the Right Structure for Your Team

NN/g is an unusual organization: we're a small training and consulting company. Our approach isn't the only way to do remote UX work, but it's certainly worked well for us.

If your situation is different (for example, if you have an in-house product team in a large corporation) our exact approach may not work as well for you. Instead, your team may benefit from a hybrid model, where some employees are remote and some are in person, or employees may have to split their time between remote and in-person work.

If you do adopt a hybrid approach though, I highly recommend enforcing an **equal communication rule** — if one person in a meeting is remote, *everyone* in the meeting should join remotely, even if some are actually in the same building. This might seem counter-intuitive, but it ensures that you won't end up with that one remote person being talked over and left out.

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