Trello

Teams thrive from anywhere:

How Trello built a thriving hybrid work culture at scale

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The Trello blueprint for building a thriving hybrid work culture

If there's one thing we've learned since 2020, it's that the concept of "remote work" is not only possible but also highly productive. Companies that have built upon years of in-person work have made a mass exodus to home offices and living rooms, tremendously shifting their corporate culture.

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, enterprises have shifted their workforce to a **permanent hybrid work model** – one that supports both in-office and remote workers. In fact, 79% of C-suite executives told WeWork they'd allow employees to "split their time between corporate offices and remote working" post-pandemic.

It's a model proven to work. Research from Atlassian found that "location does not determine team success – teams can thrive anywhere." Atlassian also discovered that team health in the U.S. and Australia remained consistent across remote, hybrid, and office work models. None

outperformed the other. Of course, transitioning to hybrid work can open up a Pandora's box of questions, concerns, and policy adjustments. But if you take the time to address those issues, your hybrid workplace can thrive.

Trello was an early leader in hybrid work, with the first team member going remote back in 2011. While face-to-face time in the office is still highly valued, the shift to remote work did not erase Trello's strong corporate culture. In fact, it created new opportunities where teams could build a strong, productive track record with virtual connections around the world.

What follows is a roundtable discussion with Trello's leaders about the creation of a successful hybrid work environment. The Trello team shares what they've learned over the past decade, as well as their best advice for sustaining a global team, while going from an incubating startup to an enterprise product with over 50 million users worldwide.

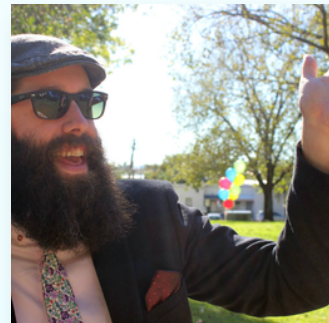# Meet the leadership roundtable
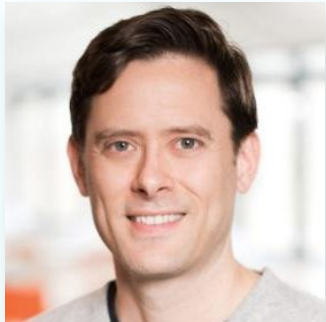
Michael Pryor

HEAD OF TRELLO

Barry Clark

HEAD OF
ENGINEERING

Leah Ryder

HEAD OF
MARKETING

Liam Greig

HEAD OF DESIGN

Offer flexibility for a better hiring strategy

The history of how remote work became an early part of Trello's culture is pretty simple: A valuable employee needed to relocate to Hawaii – five hours behind the rest of Trello's team. For the Trello leadership team, it became more important to retain them than to require them to work out of New York City headquarters.

"Then gradually, a couple more people went remote, and we saw it was working pretty well. There were phenomenal people available to work remotely who weren't in New York. So we kept doing it," explains Barry Clark, Trello Head of Engineering.

By 2014, the company started hiring remote employees, including marketing and sales leadership positions. Again, this was because the right people for these roles were available from anywhere, not just in New York.

> **"** If Trello was restricted to hiring from the NYC talent pool, the product would not be as successful as it is today.
>
> **BARRY CLARK, HEAD OF ENGINEERING, TRELLO**

Be intentional about why and for whom you want to hire in certain locations. Talent acquisition and retention can be vastly improved when you offer flexibility for your workforce.

Diversify the locations of your workforce

Trello was strategic with the flexibility they offered employees in where they worked – and your enterprise should be, too.

Building a hybrid work culture that can be sustained over nearly a decade isn't easy. But the element that makes it seem like a risky strategy for many businesses – the people – is the same one that can unlock its true potential.

In fact, Trello developed a unique way of working for in-office employees when it was part of Fog Creek Software with Trello co-founder **Joel Spolsky** at the helm. Unlike the typical tech company's open office layout, everyone had a private office.

"We were building Fog Creek and the idea was that the team could work in closed offices where they would not be interrupted. This came out of a similar thing Microsoft was doing," says Michael Pryor, Head of Trello. "At that time, in the late '90s, early 2000s, there was a movement to say that software development is important. So having an office just for software developers and being deliberate about the design was [essential]."

Trello wanted to reduce interruptions so the team could get in the zone during deep work like programming. But the company also knew that social interaction in an office was essential. So Trello had catered lunches at the office so employees could all spend a part of their day together. That way they had the best of both worlds.

"Part of the day was spent doing deep work in your office; part of the day was coming together and talking to each other," Michael says.

Don't overlook the potential of hybrid work because of inherent risks in diversifying the locations of your workforce. Because even though healthy in-office teams exist, Atlassian reports that "remote and hybrid teams are **more likely to be healthy**."

Find the ideal mix of remote and in-person connection

Humans long for social interaction, especially when they aren't around the people they work with regularly. While remote work still offers a lot of benefits for distributed teams, incorporating opportunities for face-to-face communication is still also important for **collaboration, innovation, acculturation, and dedication**.

In order to build rapport that keeps both remote and in-office team members on equal footing, Trello cultivates connections on their dispersed teams by not only using their own tool for virtual work, but also finding ways to bring teams together in-person for team bonding.

Be intentional about why and for whom you want to hire in certain locations. Talent acquisition and retention can be vastly improved when you offer flexibility for your workforce.

The mix for Trello is a "magnified version" of the work structure developed at Trello HQ that provided its developers with both closed-door, deep work time
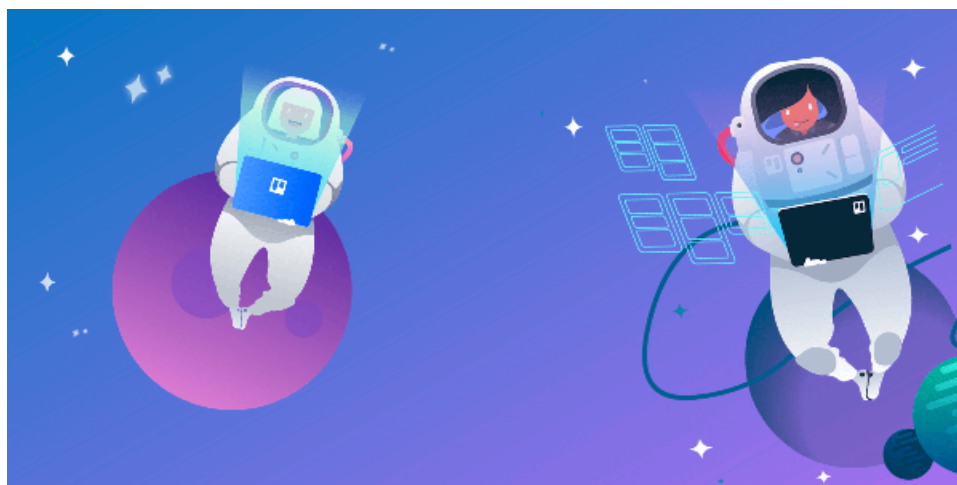

Image: Trello Blog, "How 10 Global Companies Are Approaching Remote Teamwork"

and organized social interaction. Part of the year is spent on work in private, focused spaces, and another part is spent socializing and collaborating in-person. If there's a clear business case, teams can plan ahead of time on how they can safely meet in-person for a few days to collaborate.

However, in times when it may not be possible to incorporate travel, consider alternatives to get your teams together. Since 2014, Trello has hosted an annual company-wide offsite where global employees could gather and connect in person. When COVID-19 hit, the leadership team quickly shifted the in-person company offsite and planned for a **virtual one**, where over 300 employees met and interacted in an immersive virtual reality environment via Oculus headsets or their computers.

> **"** We're at a stage now where the tools are fantastic. And working remotely, for most of the time, can be super effective. But it's also effective to get people together in-person. It's not that one or the other is the best way to run a company—both have many advantages. You need to ask, 'What is the mix that's needed, and how often do you need to connect to form the trust that allows you to do great work?'
>
> **MICHAEL PRYOR, HEAD OF TRELLO**

Use offsites to bridge the gap from remote to in-person

When employees can travel safely, Trello – which is part of Atlassian – has standardized a cadence of offsite and office events. That way, teams have the chance to get together in person and develop the trust needed to carry out effective collaboration back at their home offices.

Onboarding Week
Each new employee is flown to a selected Atlassian office for their first week, and their immediate team also flies in to join them. The week includes standard onboarding activities, as well as social events and planning and education sessions with the team. While the new hire is busy with logistics, the other teammates use it as a time to collaborate in person.

Team Offsites
A little bit of in-person interaction goes a long way in building connections. Three days of team-building can accomplish a lot of goals, and we ensure the entire team pitches in to plan the trip and book their travel. That way, it's inclusive and doesn't require additional staff to get involved. The cadence is personalized and left to be decided by each manager. It might be annual or quarterly, depending on the personality and needs of each team.

Trello Together
Once a year, everyone who works on Trello is invited to an all-product event. Most of the time is spent at a variety of team-building activities, free social time, and many great meals. And we always get everyone together for our one in-person **Town Hall meeting** of the year.

Remote Days
In between co-located events, we host remote-friendly holidays and ways to keep people connected. The right mix might be less high-cost travel and more shared remote experiences.

When you're co-located in an office, this balance happens on a day-to-day basis. In a remote or hybrid working environment, it scales to a quarterly or bi-annual cadence. How you invest in time and resources will change, but the ROI is the same.

Choose a hybrid mix that works for your enterprise

The mix is not something that is ever finished or perfected – especially if how you work together is derailed because of circumstances beyond your control. And what works for some enterprises may not work for others.

Work models may even vary across teams. According to Atlassian, remote employees are typically in teams that are primarily remote. Meanwhile, in-office and hybrid workers are more often in teams working mainly in-office. The variety of remote, hybrid, and in-office teams will shape how you keep employees connected.

Look at your existing corporate culture and see which parts can be evolved to serve connection and build trust in a hybrid work environment. The work you put into strengthening your hybrid work culture now will pay off later.
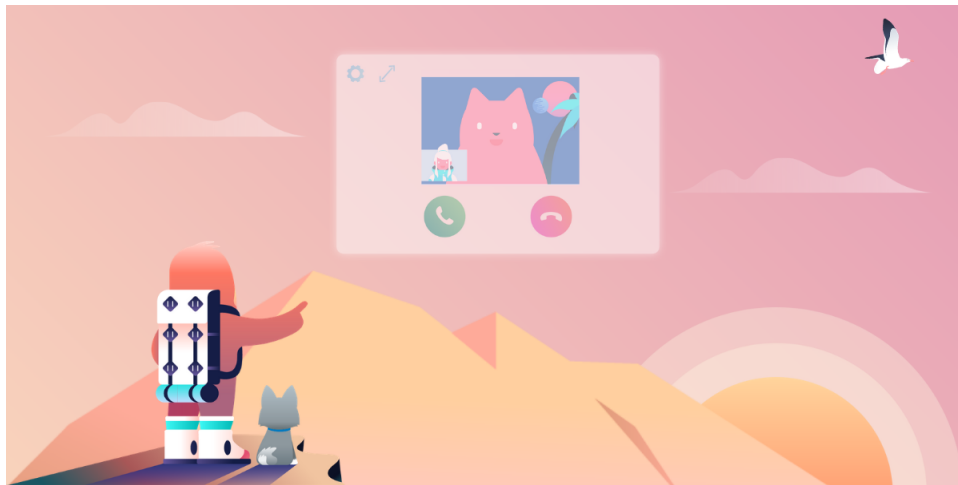

Image: Trello Blog, "The Secrets To Sustaining A Strong Remote Team"

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> [Meaningful connection] feeds into your work – it helps you engage and collaborate with each other.

ATLASSIAN TEAM MEMBER

Define productivity for your hybrid teams

Trello has gone from a small startup to a thriving enterprise. So leadership often looks at the ratio of remote to in-office employees at the company and considers how that split is affecting corporate culture and productivity.

Are there enough developers in the office to mentor interns? Is the talent pool limited because your current growth area is for teams that work in specific office locations? Despite the best attempts to plan, any company instituting a new, permanent remote work policy will see their teams adjust to their preferred location.
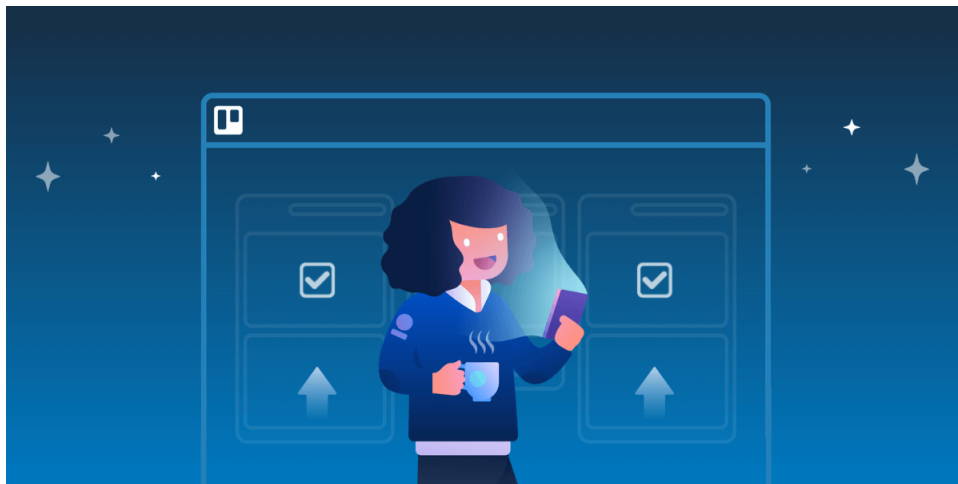

Image: Trello Blog, "5 Trello Features That Will Change The Way You Work"

Atlassian's report indicates that employee workplace preferences may even change as pandemic restrictions subside. This may be especially true for remote workers who would like to spend more time collaborating with on-site team members.

"When we began allowing a few folks to work remotely, we saw a trend of more in-office employees choosing to go remote as well. But as other companies experience this trend, they may be a bit shocked at just how many people will want to spend time in the office, too," Barry says. "One thing to recognize is that, just because co-located employees are excited to go remote,

doesn't mean they're fully prepared for it. The solution here could be a multi-week trial to test out their readiness and appetite for it."

During the trial period, establish criteria for a productive at-home workday and how teams are expected to work together.

"There are foundational things that you need," Liam says. "You don't want to be constructing highly collaborative teams with too many time zones of difference between them."

To resolve this, Trello set up a "time zone overlap" rule. Every employee must be available online from 1 to 4 p.m. ET. This creates a shared block of time to set up meetings, get timely responses in Slack, and have the feeling that people are "around" like they would be in an office.

Clear guidelines give each remote worker a sense that they still belong to an office and are not a free agent with no structure to their day. "In the beginning, it was very organic. But as we grew and hired more people, there had to be more structure and process. And then we grew even more as teams within Atlassian," says Leah Ryder, Head of Marketing. "Be explicit and have a policy so there's no ambiguity. It's about people feeling equitable. There should be a sense that everyone has the same opportunity to access information and connect to other people."

However, even the time zone rule has evolved as Trello has grown within the Atlassian organization and different departments have been set up.

"Individual teams now also have their own distinct remote cultures and processes depending on how those teams are staffed and spread out across time zones," Leah says.

Develop your own enterprise remote work guidelines

There are no nanny cams or clocks to punch, but management does need to provide a framework upon which teams can build and customize their collaboration guidelines and expectations.

"If you expect these practices to happen informally, they will only get you halfway there in terms of being a part of how the company works successfully," Michael says. "Formalizing is going to greatly help adoption across your team."

It's never too early to start developing guidelines around remote work and how remote workers should interact with their in-office counterparts. You can get inspired by other companies – including those featured in **Trello's free guide**, but it's important to test and evolve a process that works best for your unique culture.

"Early on, there were people who were interested in pursuing a digital nomad model, where they could travel and work remotely at the same time," Leah says. "We knew this wouldn't work well for the company given our guidelines and experience, so we encouraged people to take advantage of vacation time to disconnect rather than trying to work and be on vacation."

But that doesn't mean the policies stay static. In fact, hybrid models need more active input and experimentation because of the flexible nature of the system.

"As a leadership team, the key to our remote journey was listening. A million different problems will come up. They're different person to person, company to company," Barry says. "Hearing of every time remote workers feel treated differently than in-office, or vice versa, and making adjustments to ensure everyone knows that an equitable policy is a top priority – that's what has made it work for the long-term."

Adapt your infrastructure to support hybrid teams

When a company goes through digital transformation, they often try to recreate the physical world they know within their digital tools. New ways of working emerge from there, so long as organizations get comfortable with change.

"They [employees] need to be supported. There are a lot of considerations that are new in terms of really setting people up for environments where they can do serious, professional work at home," Liam says.

Atlassian's study concluded that "supportive organizational cultures determine team health." And engagement and performance are better in healthy teams.

All Atlassian employees receive a stipend to purchase office furniture and equipment. The company also offers ongoing stipends for fitness, self-directed learning, and online programs and events. At the team level, rituals are created so everyone feels engaged and connected, regardless of location.

Image: Trello Blog, "Struggling To Focus? How To Be Accountable While Working Remotely"

"When a team has the practice of checking in on chat when they arrive in the morning, or when they pop out for lunch, it's similar to walking by a teammate's office and seeing them with their door open or closed," Michael says. "You're reinventing the ritual of going to work, which is a separate place from your home. In the case of remote workers, it might mean the difference between your desk and your bed."

"

The ideal model for makers who need to do deep work is to have a dedicated space in their home where they can go and focus – and then spend dedicated time in person with their team in between that work.

LIAM GREIG
HEAD OF DESIGN

Build a supportive atmosphere for your hybrid workforce

The optimal working environment for your teams should be inclusive and supportive of all employees and their stages of life and circumstances.

For instance, Barry explains, "There's a social component that new grads and interns need and want for their careers to forge professional relationships. It's easier for them to be mentored in person, as they might be more encouraged to reach out for help if they're sitting next to their peers and manager."

But established workers have different needs, like resources for upskilling or even childcare.

"If you take your kids into the office every day, you'd expect to be able to drop them off at the provided childcare facility and then visit them at lunch," Michael adds. "At home, it should be the same expectation that you are not trying to watch your kids and work at the same time, all the time."

There are still many unsolved problems in the world of hybrid work. If the face-to-face model is what your company has historically found to be comfortable, it's a good starting point for building infrastructure. But keep an eye on the emergent successes that come from flexible and asynchronous working situations and see how these might improve the old ways. The best way to start with this is to upgrade the tools you use to work together.

Start documenting the "rules" your teams have adopted successfully to work together and adapt them for your new hybrid model. Here are **six hybrid work lessons** Trello learned and turned in teaching moments for new hires.

Decide how you'll use collaboration and communication tools

The Trello team had a distinct advantage when it came to going hybrid: digital tools. But without the infrastructure already in place, your team will miss out on the best aspects of those tools.

"We already had a culture of documentation that ensured information didn't get lost in meeting rooms and hallway conversations," Leah says. "That's where the toolset comes into play to build a digital workspace."

There are two components of building a tool stack that will become the shared workspace between remote and in-office employees: Choosing the types of tools needed and establishing how they will be used. The latter is arguably more important. For example, Trello focused on trying to preserve culture when collaborating digitally.

"From the very beginning, we were very intentional about the tool usage," Leah says. "We're also intentional about being human and being ourselves behind the tools. We thought about how to make the culture very evident through the tools we were using."
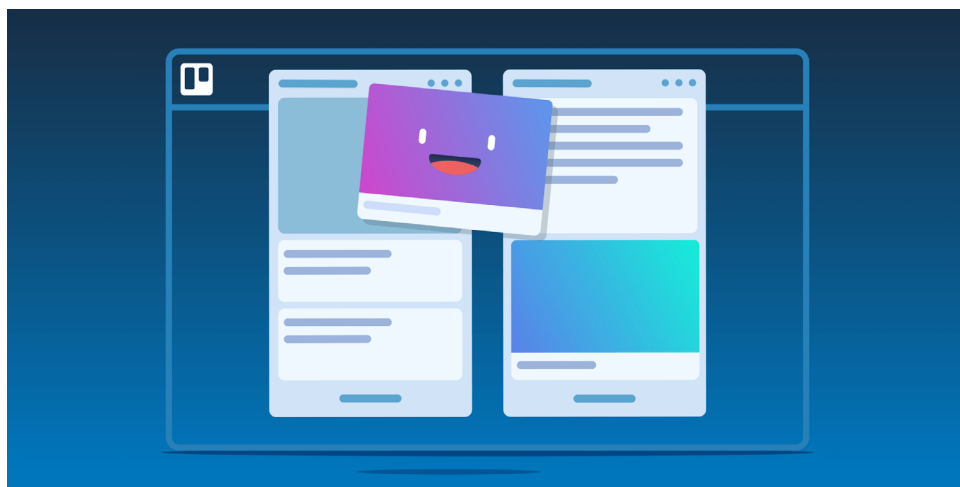

Image: Trello Blog, "Using Multiple Trello Boards for a Super-Flexible Workflow"

So if, for instance, your sales team is evaluating tools, they strategically map out integrations between a work management tool and their customer relationship management tool. Their goal would be to ensure team members will be able to track their leads in the pipeline and ask for support on the next steps to close the deal. By weighing the options, the team will find a tool that meets their specific needs.

"I think of these tools as proxies for a disappearing or digitizing workplace. They plug a hole that forms when people aren't physically working together," Liam says. "Eventually, these tools need to allow the full richness of human expression that happens face to face. That's already happening, and there will be more innovation on that side of things, but right now these tools are places to come together and work."

Naturally, Trello's own product formed the basis of their team's digital workspace.

"I think about how we shifted to remote – how we reinvented things that happened in the physical space – then evolved them in the digital space," Michael says. "Trello is flexible enough to create solutions for many different needs and can do so more easily than tools dedicated to solving a specific problem."

However, even as Trello has expanded and become part of the Atlassian family of collaboration products, the tool continues to be a core part of the team's tech stack. Features like Trello templates were developed to solve team collaboration needs across the board.

"Teams and enterprises are fluid, growing and changing all the time with new people joining and learning the hybrid work model. A big advantage to Trello is just how easy it is to adopt and use," Liam says. "We're the same as a lot of our customers, in that we have people who know how to use the tool already and those who don't. Getting teams to find value quickly with template solutions is another thing we're really focused on."

Scale your tech stack to your enterprise

When choosing the right tools, consider what's best for your teams and what will allow your company to scale and still manage that work successfully. Factors like information security, uptime, and user permissions management will matter to your IT administrators – while features like integrations, automation, and flexibility will keep your teams engaged. It's all about finding the right fit.

"What type of company personality do you have? How are you going to solve these needs in a way that feels unique to your team and use tools that share the identity of your group? " Michael asks. "Trello has filled that role for a lot of teams who have transitioned to remote and need a place for projects, and team meetings and 1:1s with their managers – all different types of collaboration."

It's important to research and select tools made for digital teamwork. Avoid falling back on the "tools" your teams already have. Email and Word docs are for documenting information and sharing it temporarily, but not for making it accessible over the long term or allowing it to become collaborative work.

"Having new designated tools used across all your different departments is really important for the fabric of your company's collaboration and communication," Leah says.

Your tech stack is now your digital office. Observe what your team needs to work productively and how they prefer to get the work done. Use that knowledge to find tools that can be used across departments to create a culture of documentation in shared workspaces.

# Build your hybrid teams with more guidance from Trello

So where do you start? The Trello team offers some advice for evolving your new remote experiences into a robust hybrid work policy for your company:

There are no clear 'five things to do' to ensure it will be a success. It's a continuous improvement cycle of listening to folks and understanding how to take action on those inputs. We were open to experimenting with different ideas. Some ideas stuck; others didn't. It's fun for everyone to be involved in doing that together.

Barry Clark

The biggest lesson for companies adopting distributed work for the long-term is that there's no default watercooler. If you're not proactive about it, your company culture is going to take a hit, so invest in the social side of work.
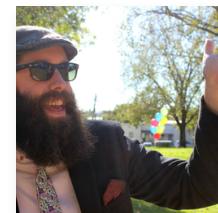
Liam Greig

Even though the work is primary, people are human. Research shows there has to be trust and a foundation of relationships for teams to excel. So if you want your people to do their best work, they have to feel like they can be themselves at work.

Leah Ryder

We're here to do a job that's important. There is a certain amount of humanity and trust that we need. That's the balance to build as we create great places to work, whether they're co-located in an office, housed in people's spare rooms, or otherwise.
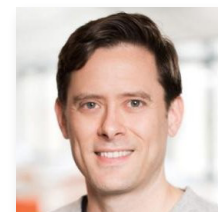
Michael Pryor

With nearly a decade of experience with hybrid work, Trello has several actionable resources to help you create a hybrid work company:

How To Embrace Remote Work
The complete guide to setting your team up for remote work success

Trello Templates
A curated gallery of workflows developed and tested by the Trello community, including sections for different departments, team management, and remote work

A Manager's Guide To Distributed Work
A seven-step practical guide to leading a hybrid team

The Trello Enterprise Whitepaper
In this whitepaper, take a tour of the top features and security measures of Trello Enterprise that can work for your distributed teams
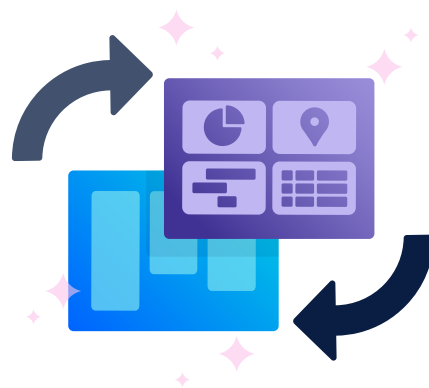
Trello Enterprise can help
keep your hybrid team on track

Use all this guidance and combine it with the right tool to help your hybrid workforce thrive. Trello Enterprise is a flexible work management tool that can scale with your hybrid teams across the world.

Request a **custom tour** for your company.

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