Communication Agreement for Virtual Work Employees/Teams

Due to the geographically dispersed nature of our team, communication is a critical component to our success. Our ability to maintain a strong team and to meet our goals is highly dependent on our ability to communicate effectively with each other and people outside the team such as clients or colleagues. While communication comes in many forms – and happens in many ways including formal and informal, the purpose of this agreement is to provide guidelines and expectations that can help facilitate effective communication throughout our team.

General Meeting Guidelines:

As a geographically dispersed group, it is essential that we keep certain things in mind as we schedule meetings. Please review and follow to these guidelines when possible:

- **Choosing meeting times** – in selecting a time for meetings, it is imperative that you take time zones into consideration. Do not plan meetings that will cause a fellow team member to participate during a time is too early or late for his/her time zone.
  As a team, we have agreed that the earliest acceptable time for meetings is **7:30 a.m.** and the latest time is **5:00 p.m.** (based on the time zone of the Western-most team member). If exceptions are to be made, they should be done with the express agreement of the furthest team member.
- **Use of agendas –** meeting agendas must be provided **at least 12 hour(s) in advance** of every meeting. This will not only ensure productive participation, but it will give meeting organizers the opportunity to fully think through their meeting goals, group expectations (e.g. what they group should bring with them to the meeting), and how to best manage the meeting time.
- **Commitment –** all regularly scheduled meetings (as outlined in the next section) should be held sacred, with rescheduling as an absolute last alternative. Only with full commitment can we hold fully productive meetings that are an effective use of our time.

Regularly Scheduled (Recurring) Meetings

Meetings that are scheduled in advance and run throughout an extended period are outlined below. It will be the responsibility of management to make the necessary arrangements (such as booking a room, arranging dial in numbers, securing virtual meeting/conferencing session, etc.) for these meetings unless otherwise agreed to.

Meeting Name	Frequency	Length	Mode of Participation	Organizer
EX: Team Meeting	Weekly	1 hour	In-person or teleconference	Bill Compton, Team Leader
EX: Sales Updates	Bi-weekly	90 minutes	Online web-meeting	Sarah Tancredi, Regional Sales VP

"As-Needed" Meetings

Meetings that are held on an as-needed basis may be organized by any member of the team. The following guidelines will help facilitate easy organization and conducting of these types of meetings.

- **Attendee availability** – the organizer of the meeting should use (company's online calendar system) to verify the availability of all attendees.
- **Meeting notification** – electronic notification is **required** for all meetings other than informal, ad-hoc meetings that happen spontaneously.
- **Facilities** – the organizer of the meeting should secure a physical location or alternative "virtual" facilities prior to sending out meeting notifications. Notifications should be complete and the use of "TBD" should be avoided whenever possible.
- **Audio/visual support** – as with facilities, the meeting organizer should be sure to obtain the necessary online meeting URLs, dial in numbers, or other information that will be needed in order for all meeting participants to easily attend. Such information should be included in the meeting notification.

Personal Online Calendars

Your online calendar must be kept up to date at all times. While it is not necessary for you to include personal appointments (before or after work), all other appointments or "busy times" must be logged. This will aid in organizing meetings and will help your team leader know you are unavailable should he or she need to contact you spontaneously.

Email Correspondence

Email is by far the easiest means through which to communicate with both onsite and remote/virtual team members. However, email does not always provide the expediency with which a response is sometimes needed. Please follow these guidelines when using email.

- **Recipients** – think carefully about who you include as the recipients of your email messages. Hundreds of thousands of messages are needlessly sent every business day, and time must be taken to read (even quickly) and act upon messages. Only include recipients that must absolutely be included in your email correspondence.
- **Brevity** – being brief is appreciated, but using slang, abbreviations, or emoticons (e.g. smiley faces) should not take the place of good business correspondence. When using instant messaging to "chat" with co-workers, a certain level of abbreviating is perfectly acceptable. However, email correspondence should be considered as formal as written correspondence and should include full words, punctuated sentences, etc.
- **Availability notification** – the use of "out of office" notifications is **absolutely required** in our team. Based on our geographically dispersed team, using these notifications should not just be limited to extended periods of absence (such as days off). Availability notification should be used as a way to notify email senders that you will not be able to provide immediate response. If, for example, you will be in a 90 minute phone conference and will be unable to respond to emails, you should activate your out of office notification and explain that you will not be available to respond to emails until after a particular time. This will help greatly in managing expectations.
- **Timeliness of responses** – it should be our general policy to reply to all emails within the same business day. However, if messages are time sensitive and need to be responded to within a specific period of time, it is imperative that you include that in the content of the email message. Opening or closing an email message with the words "PLEASE REPLY BEFORE 5PM ON TUESDAY, <DATE>," for example, will help the recipient manage the time needed to draft a response and still meet the deadline of the sender.
- **Frequency of checking email** – many employees, especially remote/virtual ones, make a habit of closing email during long spans of time during the day in order to better manage interruptions. In order to avoid providing

punctual responses, you must check email at least four to five times per day, with no more than two hours passing between log-ins.

While email is a tremendous business tool, it can be the source of great frustration since the sender doesn't always know;

> a) When the recipient has read the message

> b) If the recipient has even gotten the message

> c) Why the recipient hasn't responded, etc…

By adhering to the guidelines above we can all increase email's effectiveness while minimizing its frustrating side effects.

Instant Messaging

Using instant messaging is probably one of the best ways for our team to emulate being in the same location with each other. Instant messaging enables us to communicate in "an instant!" Especially for our remote team members, messaging certainly helps take the place of chatting with a colleague from over his or her cubicle wall. Follow these important guidelines.

- **Log in promptly** – instant messenger services are of no use if you're not logged on. Therefore, be sure to log in to our instant messenger as soon as you begin work.
- **Use status indicators** – one way that using instant messenger can be a big help is to notify others that you are either "available, " "stepped away," "at lunch," "on the phone," etc… If your status indicates that you are "available," but you do not respond to a message, it may raise questions. Therefore, think of your instant messenger status indicator as a sign on your desk; one that tells everyone whether or not you are available to speak with them.
- **Use with professionalism** – as with any other form of electronic communication, always remember that you are responsible for, and will be accountable for anything you "say" via instant messaging. As with all other work-related correspondence, it is important that you use this technology professionally. Unlike email correspondence however, if using abbreviations or other verbal shortcuts makes communicating easier, feel free to do so.

Telephone and Voicemail

The easiest way to have a real conversation with someone who is not co-located, is to pick up the phone and call them. That said, you can never be 100% sure you're going to find the person with whom you wish to speak on the other end. These next guidelines will help make telephone correspondence – and the use of voicemail – go smoothly and effectively.

- **Greeting** – regardless of where you work (home or in the office) you are required to use a professional greeting. If you are using a company-issued cellular phone, you should use the same greeting on that phone as you would while sitting at your desk. (If a remote employee is using his or her home phone as a work phone, a professional greeting should be used during standard business hours.)
- **Checking voicemail** – voicemail should be checked no less than once every 90 minutes. If you are using a remote voicemail system (one that does not provide a visual cue of messages that are waiting) you should be sure to have set intervals at which you check to see if you have any new messages. Similar to email, voicemail messages that require follow up on your part should be dealt with no later than one business day after the message has been received.

Overall Accessibility

Working in a remote location has numerous benefits such as shorter or no commute time, less interruptions than being in the office, ability to work at the time of day that you are most productive, etc. But from a manager's standpoint, not being able to walk down the hall and simply "drop in" on an employee can be somewhat challenging to get accustomed to. Therefore, it is imperative that you be accessible to your manager and colleagues during the course of your workday.

- **Notification of unavailability** – if you know that at some point in the day you will not be accessible, it is crucial that you notify your manager and/or colleagues. If an unavoidable daytime appointment means you'll be unreachable from 2pm to 3:30pm, be sure to let everyone know. This will avoid concern or having anyone wonder why you're not responding to emails or other forms of instant correspondence.
- **Use alternate means** – if you are on a conference call and a colleague or manager is trying to call you (assuming you can tell it is them), consider sending the person an instant message or quick email to let them know you're unavailable at the moment.
- **Get online** – the use of instant messaging as described above can only be effective if everyone on the team is signed on. For email, intranet, shared network, etc., please adhere to the same approach. As you get situated at the beginning of your workday, log on to all "synchronous" systems (i.e. those systems that enable you to communicate in real time) promptly and be sure your status reflects your whereabouts.
- **Updating contact info** – from time to time your personal contact information may change. It is your responsibility to update any and all contact information as it relates to your manager or colleagues being able to reach you for work purposes.