

# Remote Working Tools Your Business Needs



Even before the COVID-19 novel coronavirus radically altered the working landscape for millions of people around the world, companies were exploring the possibilities that come with remote work.

Done effectively, supporting remote work can lower costs, improve agility, and introduce diversity of thought and experiences to your staff.

But to get the highest productivity from remote teams while still ensuring they can maintain a healthy work-life balance, companies need the right remote working tools.

No two organizations will take the same approach to remote work; a startup, for example, has very different needs than a well-established multinational corporation, and freelancers need a versatile toolkit that helps them work with multiple clients.

However, remote employees from all industries can benefit from access to a selection of tools designed to help them connect, collaborate, and communicate to get the job done.

# Why You Need Remote Working Tools

As with working in the office, working from home presents its own challenges and opportunities.

Finding efficient and effective ways to overcome the former while leveraging the latter is essential in the modern marketplace.

The coronavirus pandemic and other significant disruptions have created an immediate and pressing need for organizations to augment (and in some cases, create) business continuity plans based around not just strategic sourcing and effective financial management, but secure remote access and file sharing, intuitive communication tools, and real-time team collaboration.

The growing presence and importance of digital transformation in maintaining competitive strength has been something of a boon in this regard.

Properly applied, productivity tools and specialized software applications can make it easier to access, share, and work with information while promoting teamwork and productivity—and avoid the pitfalls of miscommunication, lost files, and frustrated team members.

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## Essential Remote Work Tools

### Team Communication and Collaboration

One of the biggest challenges for any remote team is team collaboration and communication.

In addition to video calls, video conferencing, and traditional text-based instant messaging, remote workers need to be able to work online the way they do in the office—including breaking off into dedicated teams, forming new sub-groups to address specific challenges, and sharing a space where they can joke around, blow off steam, and take a step back from work for a few moments.

Modern team chat apps and virtual meeting software are both available in a rainbow of possible choices. Some of the most widely used include:

- **Slack:** Combining intuitive, channel-based communication and virtual meetings with file sharing and full integration with data management tools such as DropBox and Google Drive, Slack is a flexible, scalable solution that starts at just \$3.20 per user. With its ability to create, divide, and sub-divide channels based on everything from projects to individual conversations, however, it feels like a much pricier application.
- **Zoom:** While its primary claim to fame is video calls, Zoom centers video as a tool for other methods of team interaction, including webinars and advanced video meetings that require screen-sharing, multi-user chat logs, polling, and more. The free plan supports up to a 100 users, after which you'll need to pay between \$14.99 and \$19.88 a month per host.
- **Skype:** It's a bit longer in the tooth than the competition, but Skype remains a popular platform for messaging, voice calls, and video chats. And because it's now owned by Microsoft, it has an advanced development platform that allows for the creation of custom bots and full integration with your office suite if you use the company's Office 365 software.
- **Other Options:** Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, and open source communication platforms like Riot, Wire, and Jitsi also offer online meetings, collaborative workspaces (including whiteboard and sharing tools), and support for text and voice chat.

## Online Office Software

Like many other applications, office software is migrating away from an onsite, hard media platform to a cloud-based, Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) model.

Shifting to the cloud effectively renders an office suite device-agnostic (provided the devices in use share supported operating systems) and allows for access from laptops, desktops, and mobile devices such as phones and tablets, too.

Sharing the same formats, working from shared templates, and interacting in a standardized software environment smooths communication and collaboration, reducing the chance of bottlenecks created by files that can't be shared or opened.

Two of the most commonly used cloud-based office suites—Microsoft’s Office 365 and Google’s G-Suite—offer remote workers a full complement of standard office functionality (including word processing, spreadsheets, presentation creation, etc.).

They also each have their own cloud-based file storage and sharing utilities: Microsoft Office integrates with the company’s OneDrive platform, while the G-Suite connects to Google Drive. Google also offers built-in conversion for its Google Docs, Slides, and Sheets to their corresponding Microsoft equivalents (Word, PowerPoint, and Excel).

Both platforms offer limited freebies but require a subscription to access the whole slew of features and additional storage space.

## Remote Work Utilities and Personal Productivity Software

Working from home provides different distractions than the office, and blessedly (or frustratingly, depending on your viewpoint) fewer meetings.

But the tasks workers are obliged to complete still require care and attention. Taking advantage of a few personal focus and productivity apps can help.

- **To-do list apps** such as Todoist, Google Tasks, or Microsoft To Do integrate with your preferred software environment and provide easy, intuitive task management. If you’re after a more whimsical approach, consider Habitica, an app based on the emerging “gamify your life” trend.
- **Note-taking apps** like Evernote, Microsoft’s OneNote, Google Keep, and Apple Notes are about more than just jotting down quick references. With support for clipping web snippets, capturing screenshots, and importing multiple kinds of audiovisual media, these apps make it easy to organize all the little details needed for everything from fleshing out project presentations to keeping track of essential documents and conversations. Some, like Evernote and OneNote, offer built-in scanning capabilities, as well as advanced integration capabilities to make it easy to share content to others across platforms and devices.
- **Time management apps** are designed to eliminate distractions so workers can avoid some of the common dangers of remote work,

including distracted browsing, relentless email checking, and media consumption while on the clock. Many are built around the Pomodoro Technique for time management, which staggers 25-minute bursts of focused productivity with 5-minute breaks to maximize efficiency, mental health, and the likelihood users will keep at it. Be Focused (for Mac OS X), Pomodor (Web-based), and PomoDoneApp (designed to integrate with other applications) are just a few of the options worth investigating if you want to lock out distractions and improve focus.

- **Remote desktop software** brings the office home to you—or at least the experience of working on your office PC. By providing a direct connection to another PC and mirroring its screen, remote desktop software such as Microsoft’s Remote Desktop Client (also available for Mac OS X) and Apple’s own Apple Remote Desktop make it easy to use the capabilities of a powerful desktop from a mobile device. Other options, such as Google’s Chrome Remote Desktop, are browser-based and ready to roll with just a few clicks.
- **Mobile hotspots** address another important area for remote employees: reliable, accessible Internet access. They’re commonly associated with working on the road or in locations that wouldn’t otherwise offer Internet access, but these hotspots can also be a lifeline for remote working teams doing their jobs from the living room rather than a hotel or conference center.

Home workers with high-speed Internet connections will likely rely on them for day-to-day access, but mobile hotspots provide a little much-needed insurance against disaster by ensuring everyone can still get online if the power or Internet fail.

Dedicated mobile hotspots like the Karma, AT&T’s NightHawk, or Verizon’s JetPack MiFi all connect to the cellular network to create localized Wi-Fi access for devices. Pricing varies, but is generally limited to the cost of each device and a usage fee, along with set prices for specific amounts of mobile data. However, some require a dedicated monthly plan and carry a heftier price tag as a result.

You don’t need a dedicated device to create a mobile hotspot, of course. As of Q4 2020, most new Android and iOS devices offer the ability to turn a user’s phone into a mobile hotspot using an app (Mobile Hotspot and Personal Hotspot, respectively). The caveat? Turning a phone into a hotspot in this way will definitely burn through battery life much more

quickly, and your provider may require users to have an additional “tethering” plan on top of their regular cellular service plan to activate their hotspots.

## Project Management Software

Basic checklists work great for individual use, but projects contain dozens or even hundreds of tasks of varying complexity.

Keeping track of deliverables, accountability, timelines, and budgets requires a dedicated project management tool.

Not only does using such a tool make it easier to organize and share information, but it provides team leaders with a valuable way to connect ongoing performance with projected budgets, targets for delivery, and other performance metrics.

Keep in mind that project management software is also *collaboration software*. The goal is to bring everyone on a distributed team together and make clear their purpose, responsibilities, and roles within the hierarchy of the project while simultaneously encouraging the development of shared purpose and dedication to putting team needs above those of the individual.

As a result, it’s important to pick not only the right solution for your team, but to leverage it as part of a larger remote team leadership strategy.

Options to consider:

- **Asana:** Collaborative, Web-based task management software with dedicated mobile app support.
- **Trello:** Web-based, Kanban-style task and project management app.
- **ClickUp:** Jack-of-all-trades project organization, remote team management, and collaboration tool.
- **Basecamp:** Purpose-built solution originally designed to help its inventors run an entirely remote company; a centralized, deep-dive concept prioritizing accountability and a comprehensive collaboration toolkit.

## Security Software

Working online offers convenience and comfort, but it can also increase your

team's exposure to potentially dangerous—and costly—cyberattacks, data loss, and other disasters.

Customer data, intellectual property, trade secrets and even control of your website and internal systems can all be at risk without the proper security precautions.

Effective cybersecurity is threefold: it standardizes; it secures; and it's scalable. Protecting your team and the information they use on a daily basis generally requires a suite of applications, including:

- **A Virtual Private Network (VPN):** Unsecured networks are tempting targets for hackers and other ne'er-do-wells of the 'net. Virtual private networks provide powerfully encrypted tunnels remote teams can use to share data or access Web-based content without excessive risk of compromise or attack. Some of the most popular options include Surfshark, ExpressVPN, and NordVPN.
- **File and Disk Encryption:** Securing sensitive data at the disk level provides stronger security than passwords alone. Full disk encryption using the tools that come with your operating system (e.g., Microsoft Windows' BitLocker or Mac OS X's FileVault) is the most secure, but securing individual files and folders is more user-friendly and still offers a strong level of data security. 7Zip and WinZip (Windows) and iZip (for Mac OS X) can all encrypt and password-protect files.
- **Password Management:** In a world where it seems like everyone is juggling dozens of passwords while trying to deal with increasingly sophisticated hacks and data breaches, a password manager is an essential tool. These applications allow you to create an encrypted "locker" for passwords users can unlock with a single password—instead of using the same password across multiple sites and opening themselves, and their organizations, up to needless risk. 1Password, LastPass, and Dashlane are popular options for personal password protection. Companies looking for scalable, enterprise-level password management should check out Meldium, Zoho Vault, or SimpleSafe.
- **Online Backups:** In a data-driven economy, protecting information is part of protecting your ability to compete and thrive. Depending on your company's data infrastructure, you may have a dedicated, onsite IT team maintaining a real-time backup of all data, in addition to redundant offsite

storage of business-critical data via cloud storage or physical backups. But an increasingly popular option for freelancers, small businesses, and large companies alike is to use offsite backups stored on remote servers. Operating on the same model as SaaS applications, remote online backups provide secure backups that can store just about anything you want to secure for a monthly fee (usually per user or per device). Commvault, Acronis, Rubrik, and others all offer scalable, enterprise-class backup services along with reporting, encryption, and application integration tools.

- **AntiVirus and Firewall:** Firewalls are used to control what traffic is allowed in and out of your company's servers and devices. AntiVirus applications detect, block, and cure infestations. Vendors including Avast!, BitDefender, Norton, McAfee, and Malwarebytes provide a wide range of options for securing your files and blocking unwanted intrusions at both the device and enterprise levels.

## Team Management Software

Leading and managing remote teams takes dedication, skill, and a set of tools that can help you transform a far-flung gang of freelancers, employees, and consultants into a cohesive whole working toward a shared goal.

Using an app such as Time Doctor, Harvest, and BigTime give team leaders access to:

- Time tracking and activity monitoring (including Web and app access)
- Distraction control.
- Attendance and payroll management.

Being able to see what your team is up to is critically important. This is especially true for teams spread across multiple different time zones, since scheduling may limit management's ability to engage effectively with the group as a whole and check-in with individuals on a daily basis.

Apps like these provide real-time visibility into what each team member is doing, when they're doing it, and whether they're on task or indulging in a distraction like gaming, social media, or movies and TV.

These applications also include reporting tools management can use to quickly

see who contributed what to which project, time spent by each individual on specific tasks in support of each project, and how much time was spent on specific sites and in specific apps.

This makes it easier to track payroll information and provide invaluable performance and compliance data for analysis and improvement. Some team management apps even offer user dashboards, so individuals can track their own performance and progress as they go.

## **Cloud-Based Procure-to-Pay and AP Automation Software**

Taking control of your purchasing workflows may not seem like a critical component of effective remote work management.

But the truth is, having a centralized, cloud-based, and mobile-friendly solution like PLANERGY procure-to-pay software in place can radically improve all areas of working life for remote team members and leaders alike.

Going to paperless invoice processing by using accounts payable software ensures invoices can be processed and paid while your finance team don't have to make it to the office.

Using robotic process automation, artificial intelligence, and advanced analytics, these applications provide invaluable support for teams that need transparent, complete, and accurate information for review and analysis in real time.

- Centralized, cloud-based and comprehensive data management makes file sharing a snap, regardless of time zones.
- Automating high-volume tasks (including approval workflows) eliminates human error and saves time and money through process optimization driven by continuous improvement.
- Integration with your company's existing software environment improves standardization and ensures everyone can access, analyze, and share role-appropriate information in approved formats.
- Fully transparent spend data improves project management via accurate cash flow management and budgeting; it also generates long-term value through actionable insights and the elimination of rogue spend and

invoice fraud.

- Best-in-class solutions such as PLANERGY integrate advanced security features such as multi-factor authentication to protect sensitive data across platforms and devices.

## **Remote Working Tools Help You Get the Job Done—Wherever You Are**

“The business of doing business” is even more challenging when your team is spread across time zones and juggling their home and work lives to stay productive—and sane.

By investing in the right remote work tools, you can provide your team members with the task management, office productivity, and communication tools they need to succeed.

Better still, leadership can ensure everyone on their teams has a shared sense of purpose, the right levels of accountability for their role, and secure access to clear, complete, and accurate information.

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