Buffer is Remote but not Async-First, Here’s Why

With so many years of being remote, we’ve experimented with communication a lot.

One conversation that often comes up for remote companies is asynchronous (async) communication. Async just means that a discussion happens when it is convenient for participants. For example, if I record a Loom video for a teammate in another time zone, they can watch it when they’re online – this is async communication at its best.

Some remote companies are async first. A few are even fully async with no live calls or in-person time at all.

However, this isn’t what we’ve chosen for our culture. We aren’t an async-first company. There are many cases where discussing something synchronously (on a live video call) is the best solution for us.

Here’s more about our communication style at Buffer, and how async fits into it.

Why Buffer isn’t an async-first company

It comes down to this – there are some real benefits to synchronous communication. Through iterating over time, we feel we’ve found the right balance for synchronous and asynchronous communication for us during this current season of Buffer.

Synchronous helps with moving quickly or complex problems

When there are projects or situations that arise that either

need to be resolved quickly or are quite complex and require input from several people, we've found it easier to jump on a Zoom call to hash it out. There's nothing worse than being in one of those situations and waiting for someone to write back to you when you feel pressure at that moment.

Video calls help create connections in a remote team

We love a long thread or a video update, but there is something about chatting via video that brings people slightly closer. (The same can be said about meeting up in person, which we still do as a remote company as well.) I've felt closer to many of my teammates after spending a few minutes talking about our pets, kids, or even the weather at the beginning of a call. It humanizes us and makes it easier to kick off that next conversation when we're working on something together again.

We also have many members of the team who haven't met in person before, and the face-to-face reality of video calls and the ability to see facial expressions goes a long way in developing relationships. We work hard to make sure our tone is super clear in written communication, but there's something about seeing someone's face when you're talking to them that can help you adjust while you're talking.

Additionally, a live call allows for conversation and real-time decision-making, problem-solving, and debating, something that async communication doesn't allow to the same level.

Sometimes, items come up in sync conversations that someone wouldn't write out or share async

Being in a live conversation is also just a different beast from writing updates or sharing a pre-recorded video. In live conversations, sometimes topics come up naturally that wouldn't have otherwise, and it's a great opportunity to talk over any more sensitive topics when all participants can hear each other's tone of voice.

Our approach and philosophy for async and sync at Buffer

Teammates are welcome to use their judgement about which tool to use depending on the needs of the communication, but here's a cheat sheet that we share with teammates to help them choose:

- If it's four sentences or fewer, and/or it's urgent, use Slack.
- If it's five sentences of more and/or it's not timely, use Threads.
- If it's complex and it's urgent, use Zoom or a phone call.

The tools we use for async communication

When async communication is the path to go, we use a few different tools. Primarily, we use a tool called Threads (not by Meta), for async discussions or for longer discussions. It's great for having transparent cross-team communication, weighing decisions with several people, or sending longer updates.

A lot of teammates also use video tools like Zight or Loom to record videos and share updates that way if they prefer a video format.

Generally, Slack is used for real-time discussion, but we've found that Slack can be an async tool as long as we're clear with expectations that we are not expecting people to reply immediately unless we explicitly say so or it's an urgent matter. (Read more about this in our 10 Slack agreements.)

Our philosophy: we're flexible

Ultimately, the idea for us is that we are a flexible team, and that includes how we meet and how we communicate. There are some meetings where I need to be up earlier or later to

attend – I need to be flexible. At the same time, there's so much inherent flexibility in my role at Buffer to create my schedule or hop on and offline when needed. We describe this as "give flexibility to get flexibility," and it is a great summary of our approach to sync and async. Here's how we describe it in our handbook:

> *We try to be flexible with each other when possible. When teammates are able, we ask that they be willing to move a meeting, get up early, or stay on late to make it easier for another teammate to participate in a synchronous discussion. In exchange, they will offer the same courtesy to you. This means that we try to make ourselves available for standing or scheduled meetings even beyond the "typical" workday hours.*

Note that this does not mean that we expect teammates at their computers or available on Slack for all hours of the day. That's rigidity, not flexibility. Batsirai, a former Bufferoo, summarized this well in this blog post:

> *Buffer emphasizes flexibility, so I do whatever it takes to get the job done, even if it means having late meetings with team members in different time zones. It's about treating us like owners in the company, balancing work and personal life. We're given great benefits and responsibility, and there's a lot of trust placed in us. So, we give back by being dedicated and managing ourselves effectively.*

Buffer is a small team, and every person should feel ownership over their work and results – we believe that offering flexibility is the best way to have everyone at Buffer operate at their best level.

Over to you

The same might not be right for every company, but this is what works well for our global team. Comment below and tell us

how your team handles async and sync communication, or ask any questions related to how we work at Buffer.

https://buffer.com/resources/remote-not-async-first/