



# 2021 Remote Product Management & Collaboration Report

400+ product managers & leaders share insights on how their remote teams continued to build excellent products.

In partnership with **slalom**





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# Insights from a unique year

2020 was a year where everything changed. Less clear is how well product organizations responded to the upheaval and what long-term impact all the newly remote routines, processes, and tools will have on product discovery, development, and delivery.



Building excellent products continues to require a high-quality vision and strategy along with the ability to execute. But the ways in which teams achieve this has shifted so much over the past 12 months that we wanted to find out:

- Are newly distributed product teams still collaborating and communicating effectively with each other, the wider business, and customers?
- Which new ways of working will endure in a post-pandemic world?
- What fresh challenges have arisen and how can they be overcome?

We put these questions and many more to 400+ product managers and leaders across a range of industries and company sizes.

**Their insights provide a guide to how product teams will adapt, collaborate and build excellent products in 2021 and beyond.**





# 5 of our most fascinating findings...

1

**4 out of 5 people felt prepared for remote work**

Though that doesn't mean that there weren't challenges

2

**61% are spending more time in meetings**

But that doesn't always lead to better collaboration

3

**"Getting cross-functional buy-in for the roadmap"**

Is the biggest collaboration challenge for distributed product teams

4

**More teams extended roadmap timelines than shortened them**

In uncertain times, making plans can boost confidence

5

**Just 2% of the product community wants a full return to the office**

Have we said goodbye to the five-day commute?



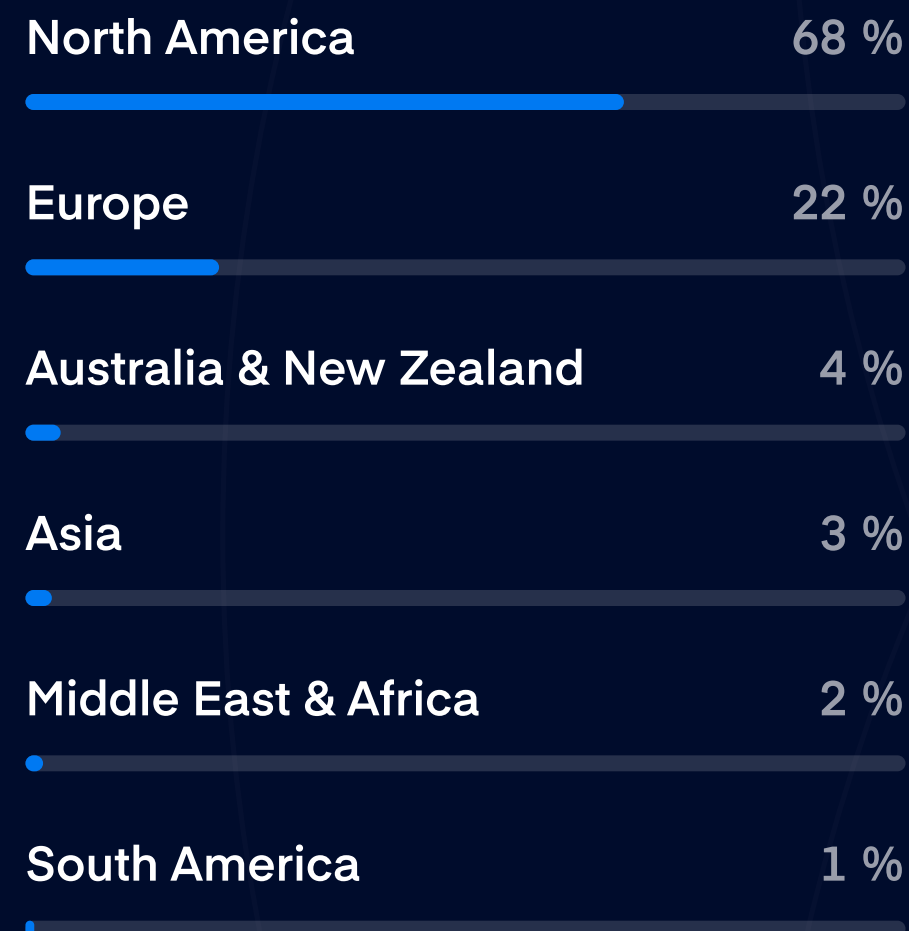
# Who we surveyed



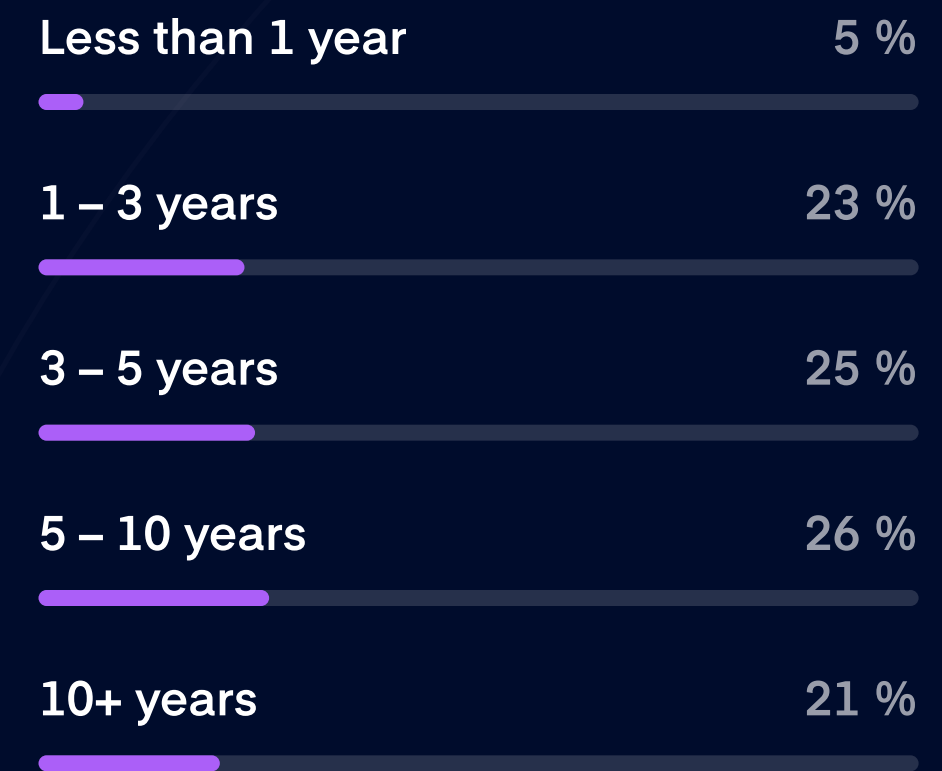
## Company Size



## Location



## Years of Experience





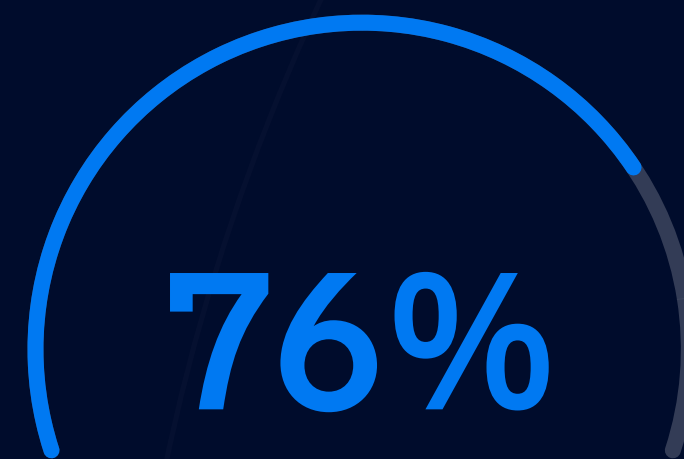
Key Finding #1

# No office? No problem.

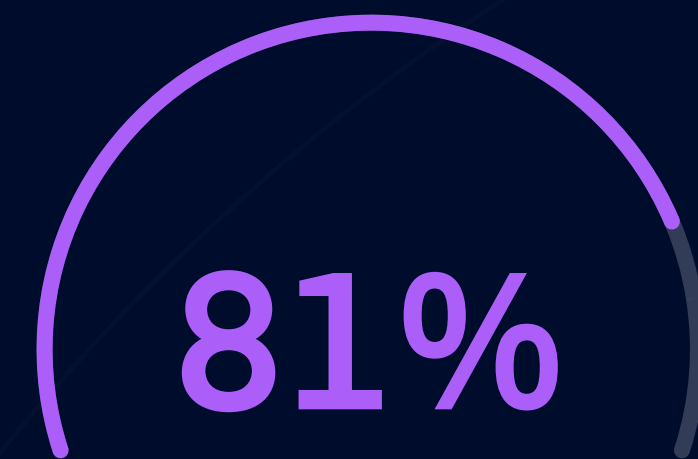
Why the sudden switch to working from home didn't discourage product teams.



**felt prepared** for  
remote work in  
March 2020



said their team was  
**distributed and  
comfortable** operating in  
a remote environment  
by March 2020



said **pivoting** their  
operating model  
and product  
strategy **was easy**



**“The team and organization were already distributed so we didn’t face any new challenges.”**

For many businesses, remote work was nothing new. With offices in multiple locations and talented people based wherever they were found, many product teams were already distributed before the pandemic.

Working from home didn’t require a major adjustment for these teams who had the required culture, processes, and technology in place. A number of respondents even told us that having everyone remote made things easier than when split between groups in the office and individuals at home.



Key Finding #2

# Loss of casual collaboration

More meetings can't make up for the lack of watercooler moments.



# A day spent in Zoom



of people say  
that they now  
**spend more  
time in meetings**

"I now spend more time on \_\_\_\_"

61 %

Meetings

14 %

Writing

6 %

Customer research

5 %

Design

4 %

Analytics

3 %

Securing budget

7 %

Other



**"Shoulder taps do not exist...  
it's harder to immediately  
collaborate with someone."**

When every conversation has to be scheduled, many product teams are missing the casual interactions that help build relationships and inspire new ideas. And though most people are attending more meetings, strategic thinking and in-the-moment brainstorms that may have taken place on a whiteboard in the office is much more difficult in a fully digital environment.

**"I spend more time on stakeholder  
communication now that day-to-day  
interactions do not take place."**

Many have also become acutely aware of how much communication with stakeholders outside the product team happened with a quick chat by the coffee machine rather than writing an email or creating slides.





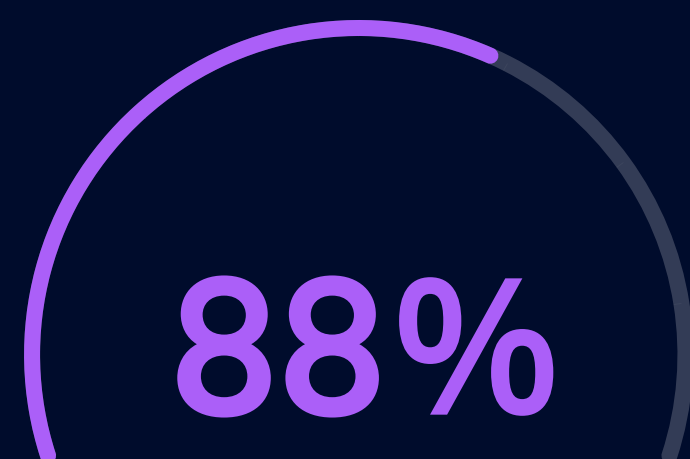
### Key Finding #3

# The future is hybrid

Few people want a full return to office life,  
but a hybrid approach will require fresh thinking.



# Goodbye to daily commutes



believe the  
future office  
is hybrid

What do you envision the future office to look like?

88 %

Hybrid

10 %

Fully remote

2 %

Full return to the office



**No one wants to go back to the relentless five-day grind of sitting in traffic, squeezing onto trains, and queuing at the sandwich shop. Nor is full remote working ideal for most people.**

The future of the office could be a more sustainable balance between the two that gives everyone freedom and flexibility. But it will need a new approach to how those gathered together in the office and those at home alone interact.

Long-term remote workers have noted that having everyone working from home improved collaboration. More information is documented centrally instead of just communicated casually, so they feel more in the loop.

**The hybrid office must adapt to the fact that more people will be dialing in:**

- Meeting rooms will require better video conferencing technology
- More booths so office workers can join video calls without disturbing others
- Centralized processes and tools to keep everyone aligned no matter where they are based



Key Finding #4

# The rise of product ops

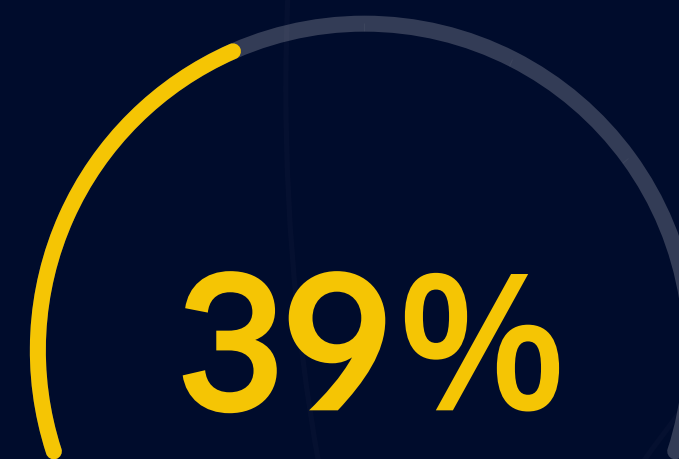
More product teams are making room for operations roles to make collaboration and communication more effective.



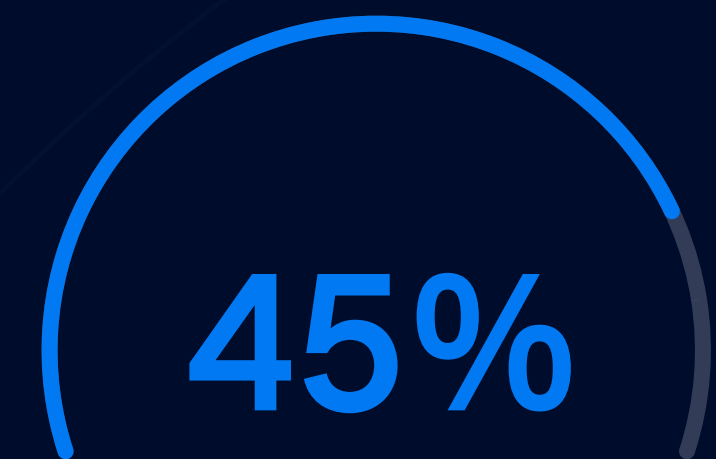
## All eyes on product ops

The past few years have seen an increasing number of product organizations create a product operations function.

Similar to how many engineering and design teams now rely on a dedicated ops function to run smoothly, product operations can keep complex product organizations aligned while giving product leaders more time to focus on strategy and innovation.



of teams  
now have  
a product ops  
function



of these teams with  
a product ops  
function created the  
role in the past year



## 3 benefits of product ops

1

### Create cross-organization alignment

Product operations acts as a bridge between specialist product teams so everyone has insight into the holistic product management process. The role can also be a primary point of contact for stakeholders outside the product team.

2

### Capture usable feedback

Product operations filters the often-overwhelming torrent of product data and insights. By managing, evaluating, and contextualizing feedback, ops makes it more strategically useful for product teams.

3

### Unite everyone with processes and tools

Product operations introduce and maintain standard processes and tools that give product organizations a shared language and perspective around roadmaps, communication, and customer feedback.



Key Finding #5

# Planning remains powerful

In a year defined by uncertainty, product teams found assurance and inspiration in their roadmaps.



# Roadmap planning in 2019 vs. 2021



How far into the future are you planning your 2021 roadmap?







**“Don't abandon having **goals and a strategy**. When something like a global pandemic happens, it's not worth it.”**

While 2020 may have felt like a relentless week-to-week scramble for survival, the reality for many product organizations is that strategic planning and forward thinking remained as important as ever.

It seems that a crisis characterized by uncertainty resulted in greater efforts to impose order on the future.



## Key Finding #6

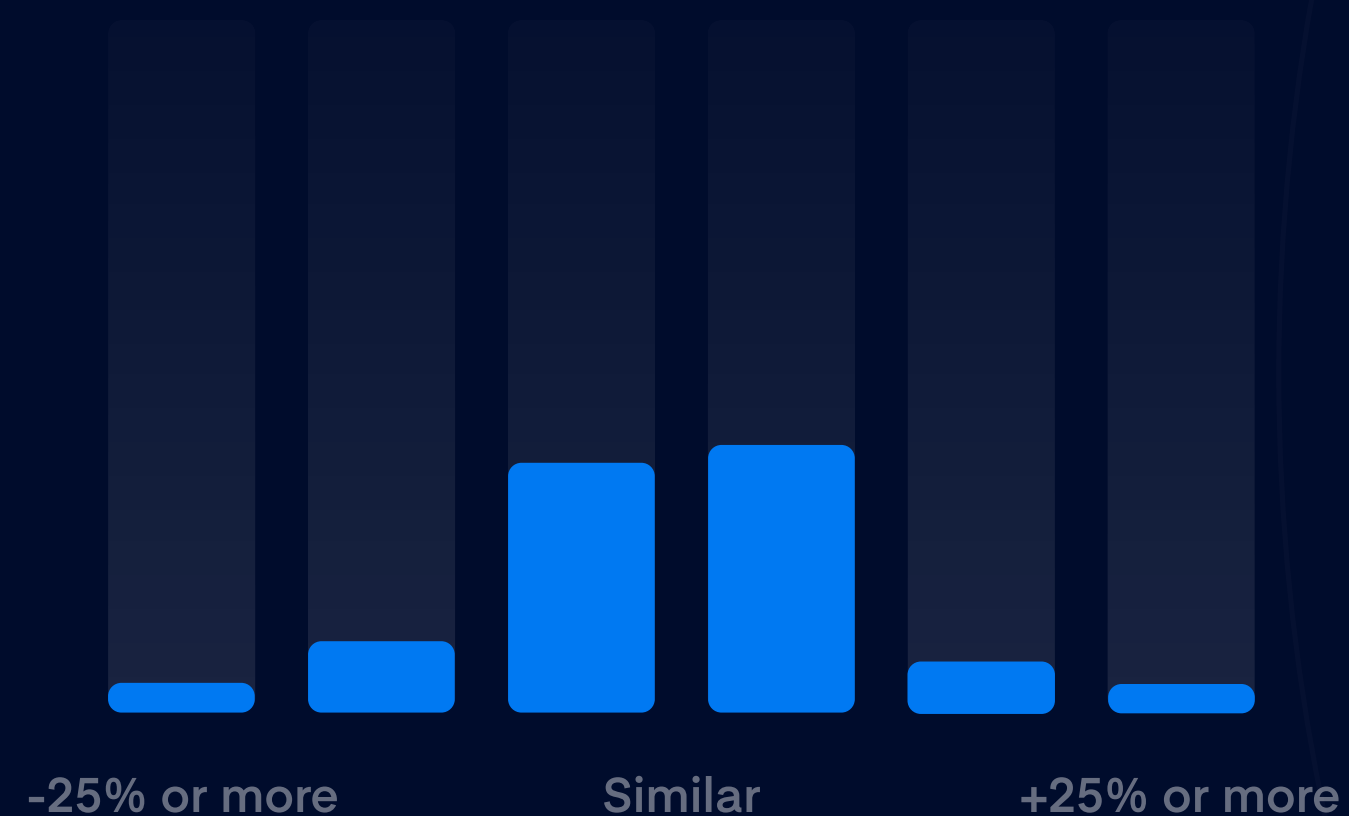
# The bond between product **discovery** and **delivery**

Product teams that did more discovery typically delivered more new features and updates.

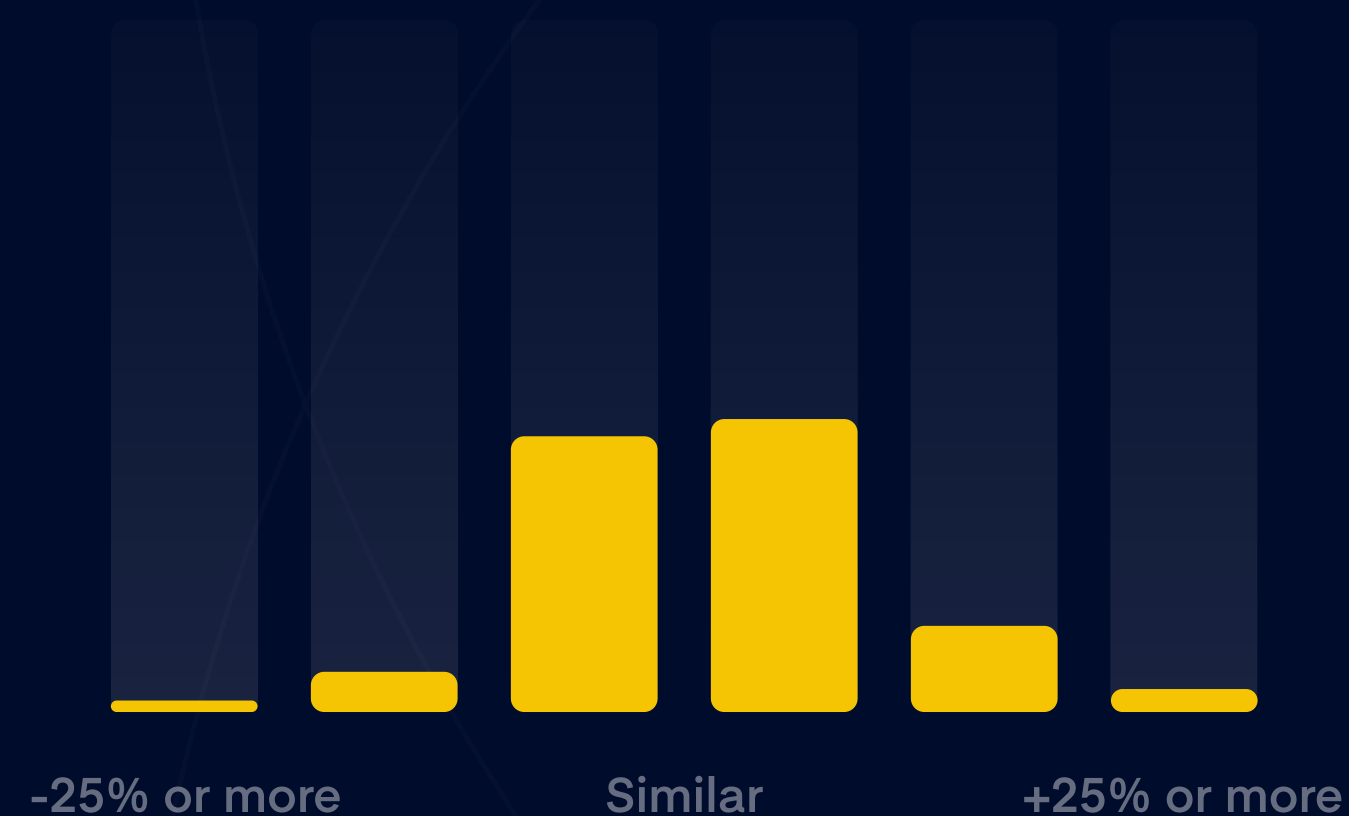


# Discovery channels delivery

Has the amount of time your product organization invests in **product discovery** been impacted by the shift to remote work?



How has remote work impacted the velocity of your **product delivery**?





## **"The most valuable lesson we learned was how to facilitate discovery when remote."**

While the majority of product teams reported doing similar amounts of discovery in 2020 as in the previous year, one-eighth reduced their level of discovery. Most of the respondents in this group also said that they delivered less this year, suggesting a correlation between discovery and delivery.

Of course, this discovery decrease may reflect that some businesses were forced to move slower as a result of the pandemic. Yet, the correlation goes the other way. Teams reporting an increase in discovery actually delivered more new features and updates.

Though product discovery was frequently cited as one of the more challenging tasks to carry out remotely, overcoming those issues delivered results.



Key Finding #7

# Engineers remain **vital**

Reduction in engineering leads to a decrease in product discovery and delivery.



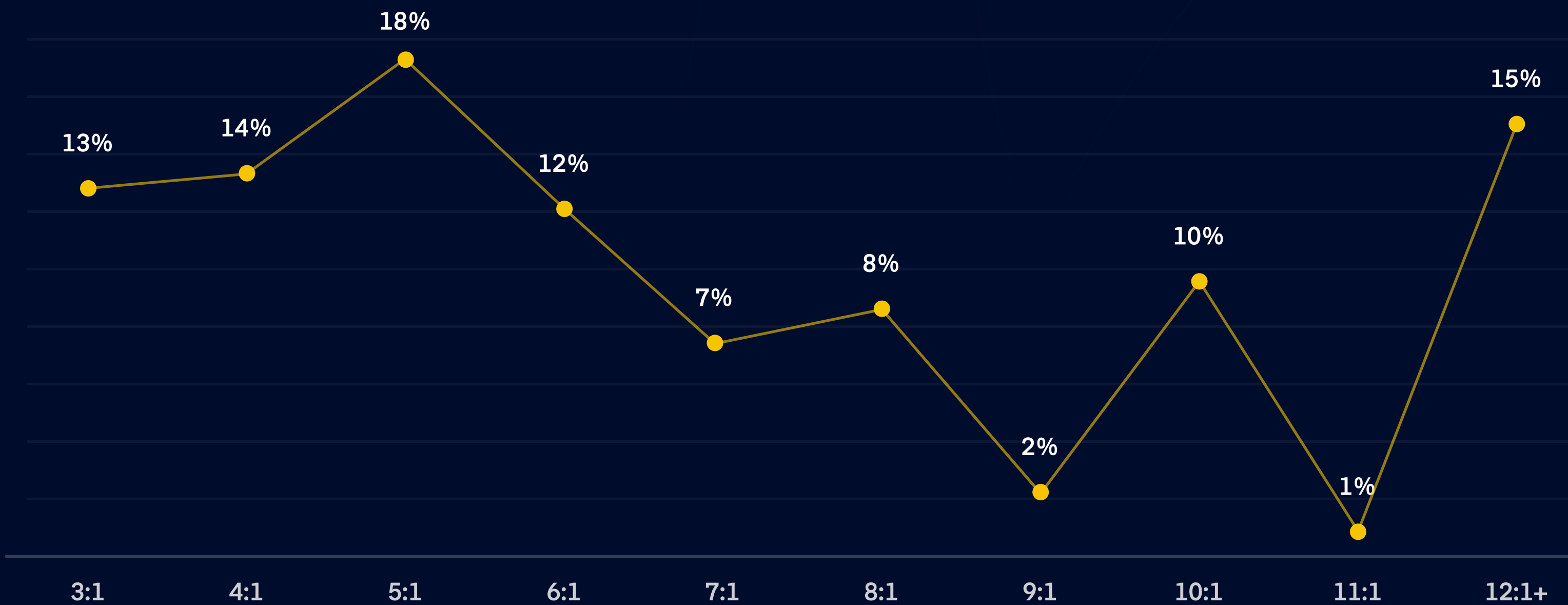
# Delivery drivers

Want to know how many engineers your product manager peers can call on to implement their ideas? Take this table to your next resources meeting if you're feeling understaffed.

## Ratio of engineers to product managers

6.8

The average number of engineers per product manager





## How has the engineer to product manager ratio changed with the shift to remote work?

Access to engineering resources didn't change a lot for most product teams in 2020, though already resource-rich PMs tended to get even more help.



Product organizations that lost resources in 2020 felt the impact in terms of reduced delivery. And due to the correlation between these activities, the rate of discovery also fell for these teams.



Key Finding #8

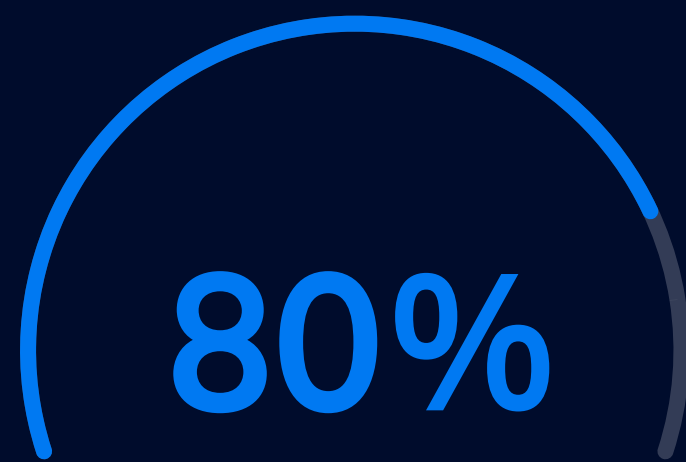
# New tools to the **rescue**

Most teams introduced at least one new tool to help them collaborate more effectively.





# Tools rush in



of product teams highlighted at least one new tool that helped them thrive at remote collaboration

**"We've been making more use out of the existing tools we have."**

Many teams who felt that the tools they already had were sufficient for remote working noted that they were now more reliant on these tools and had extended how they use them.



## Product teams also adopted new tools that have made a big impact in remote work:





A key remote challenge mentioned by a lot of product teams was replicating the strategy and brainstorming sessions that typically happened with all participants in one room around a whiteboard.

One solution was referenced so much, we asked the brains behind Miro to tell us how product teams were adapting to virtual whiteboards.

**“Don't try to replicate how we worked in the office. Treat remote as a different platform with its own unique aspects. Focus on asynchronous communication where possible, and try to make your synchronous communication outcome-driven with less discussion and more action.”**

— Anna Boyarkina, Head of Product Use Cases, Miro

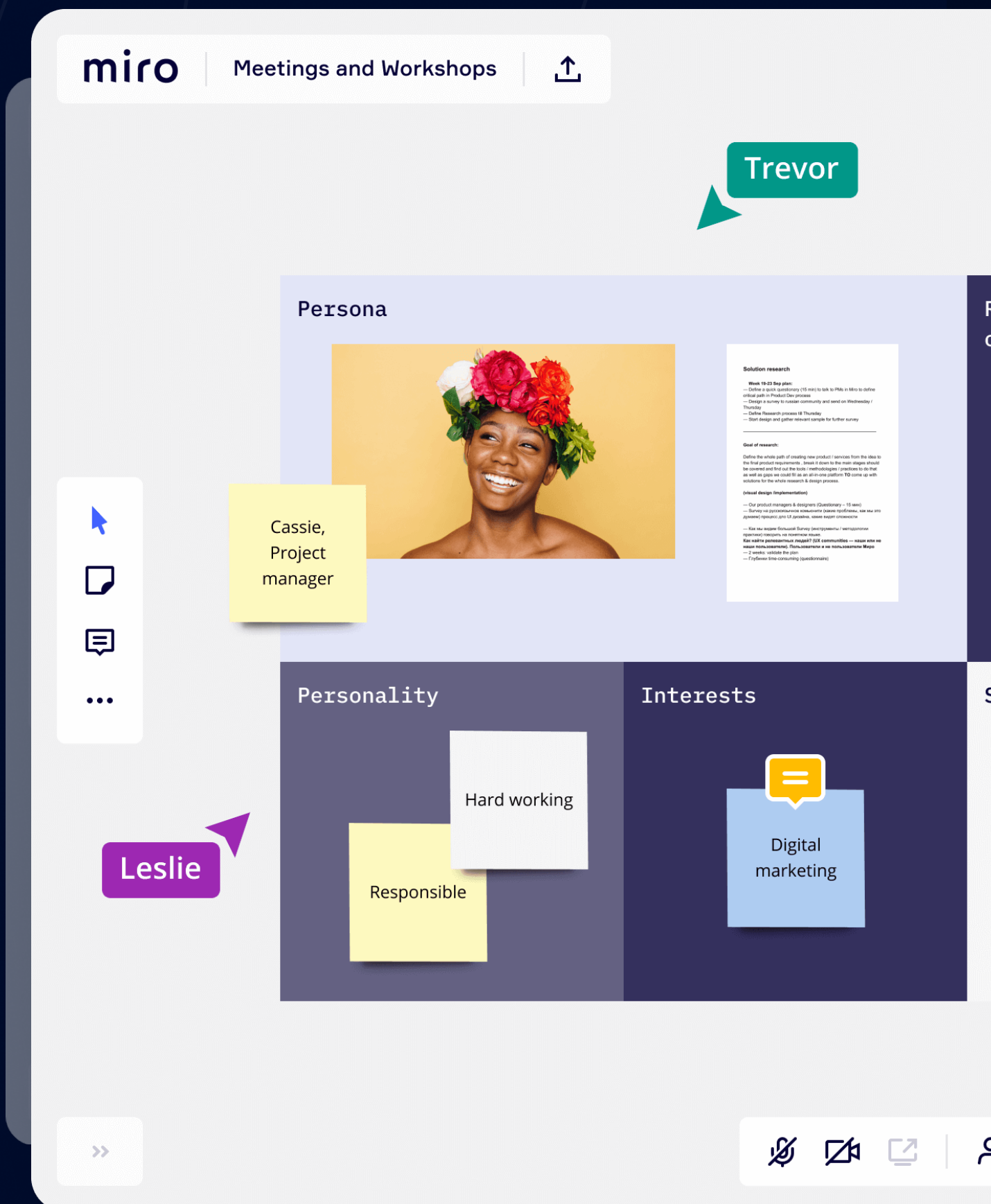


# miro

**Collaboration can be tough in normal times. Today, with the rise of remote work, it's uniquely difficult for product teams to brainstorm and create together.**

With everyone untethered from the in-person office environment, it's harder to establish a shared context about a problem space. This lack of context creates a need for an online whiteboard platform like Miro that enables and elevates team collaboration, no matter where in the world team members work.

From the Miro board, teams can bring about the “blue sky” thinking — brainstorming, ideating, facilitating workshops, prioritizing the feature backlog, running design sprints, etc. — that’s needed for product innovation. And because it’s all happening online, teams get one single source of truth to work from either in real time or async, depending on how they’re structured or located.





Key Finding #9

# New reality, new challenges

Turns out A LOT of group understanding comes from random conversations around the office.





# Socially — distant

- 1 Getting stakeholder buy-in
- 2 Aligning product teams
- 3 Managing customer feedback



## 1 Getting stakeholder buy-in

**“We struggled with transparency of the roadmap across all stakeholders.”**

With the number of meetings increasing for everyone, simply finding a slot in the calendar for useful (but not critical) conversations is difficult. And it's all too easy for some people outside the product organization to fall off the radar when there is no longer a visible reminder walking around the office.

Product managers were surprised at how much communication with the rest of the organization happened informally before the shift to remote. In a distributed business, a new approach is needed to replace shoulder-taps and water cooler conversations.



## 2 Aligning product teams

**“Our biggest challenge was aligning movement across product lines.”**

Without both formal and informal communication channels, silo forms and alignment between various product teams can start to slip. And if one team develops something that doesn't quite fit with the overall product experience, the person who really notices the cracks is the customer.

Aligning projects, processes, and product vision requires more rigor in a remote environment. Product managers need to document plans thoroughly and ensure other PMs can access them easily and, if necessary, initiate conversations about how everything gels. Product organizations can also consider hiring product ops roles to overcome these challenges.





### 3 Managing customer feedback

**“Performing voice of customer activity without being face to face is a major problem in vetting and verifying new product ideas.”**

The lack of face-to-face customer interactions has left product teams scrambling for different ways to get that critical feedback. They are also more reliant on sales and support to share problems, requests, and suggestions, especially with customers reevaluating what matters most.

More sources of feedback makes it harder for product managers to gather, manage, and make sense of what they're hearing. They need a seamless central repository (like Productboard!) where they can analyze feedback and ensure their organization continues to build products that customers need.



**"We've always known that informal communication contributes to group understanding. The body language, wisecracks, hallway conversations, lunch chats, and collisions at the coffee machine all contribute to high-functioning teams. The move to remote work made all that disappear almost overnight, leaving many product leaders and their teams in the dark. As remote-only teams have known for years, it's possible to compensate for the lack of physical interactions and even improve upon them. But it takes deliberate effort and creativity. You no longer get it for free."**



**Ken Norton**

Product leadership coach, former Google product leader, and founder of [Bring the Donuts](#)



Key Finding #10

# North star or ~~no~~ star?

Turns out A LOT of group understanding comes from random conversations around the office.



# Guiding lights



of respondents said their product organization didn't have a north star metric (or they didn't know what it was)

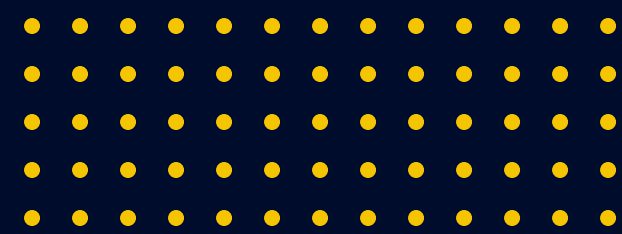
**"We don't have an agreed-upon north star metric, **which is a problem.**"**

A significant number of product teams are working without a key performance indicator to track their success and guide their efforts. Unsurprisingly we think that having a north star metric is essential for all product organizations and critical to becoming a product-led org.

While any north star is better than none, some metrics are more effective than others for product teams who want their new features and updates to have a real impact on the business.



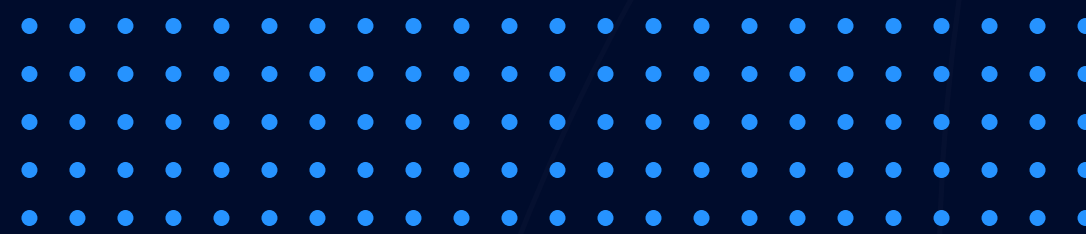
# Top North Star metric categories



26%

## Revenue

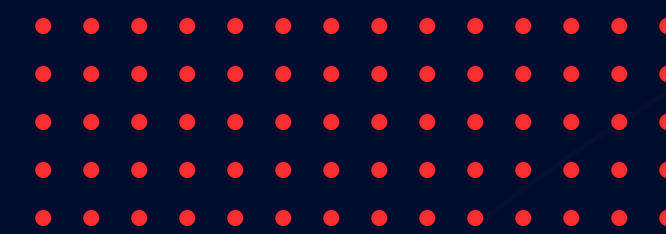
is the quintessential lagging indicator. While obviously an extremely important business metric, it takes too long for product teams to see the effect of product changes on revenue. Most would prefer to react to more dynamic indicators that they can test and change quickly.



46%

## Usage

is an easy-to-measure, product-centric metric, which is why daily, weekly, and monthly active users are the most popular north star category. Whether that usage is useful is less clear, as it doesn't tell product teams exactly what drives engagement and revenue.



28%

## Transactions

is a leading indicator that is harder to uncover and more complex to measure. But once a product organization hits on the right transaction metrics – specific targets we saw in the survey included “events booked”, “form submissions” and “commands sent” – it is a responsive and actionable way to understand and enhance user engagement as well as drive revenue.

**If your product team currently doesn't have a north star metric, revenue or usage as a goal is better than nothing. But as your ability to track and measure results matures, move from hard-to-improve lagging indicators to leading indicators that will improve your ability to build a successful product.**



**The team at Amplitude are big believers in product teams aligning their vision and strategy to a north star metric.**

## Weekly Learning Users (WLU)

AMPLITUDE'S NORTH STAR METRIC

Amplitude's north star metric is about understanding the relationship between users in their product. Essentially, a WLU is a user who is active and shares a learning that is consumed by at least two other people in the previous seven days. It represents the company's most valuable user persona — the Advocate — who shares context to drive decisions and take action in an organization.





## Three key attributes of a good north star metric

- 1 It measures the moment that a customer finds value from your product
- 2 It represents the core of your current product strategy
- 3 It is a leading (not lagging) indicator of a future business outcome that your company cares about

Amplitude created the north star metric to empower every company to turn their product vision into reality and grow by easily answering questions on what drives behavior and powers a better customer experience.

Within most companies, product teams are measured by how much they ship, not on the impact they have on the business. Without an impact-driven culture in product, you can't influence the destiny of your business. Without a north star, you can't have a product-led company.



Conclusion

# What we've learned

Communication is everything in remote working.





**Though we all dream about a return to normality once the impact of the pandemic subsides, in reality many of the changes that occurred over the past 12 months are here to stay.**

In a lot of cases, this is not a bad thing. No one will miss commuting five days a week, while the increasing digitization of our processes can make product discovery, development, and delivery more effective.

More may need to change. Some best practices of an office-based culture will no longer make sense. Others should have been scrapped or updated a long time ago. Experimenting with new approaches will help your organization evolve and grow in the new normal.

**Based on our survey results, here are eight things that product organizations can do to collaborate more effectively and be better placed to achieve Product Excellence, no matter where their teams are based.**



# 8 tips for better remote collaboration

1

## Integrate office and remote

A hybrid approach to location is the future, so think about how to ensure remote workers remain integrated once people start returning to the office.

2

## Have fewer meetings

Don't just default to a meeting when you need to share information. Written communication is often more efficient than taking up an hour of other people's time.

3

## Embrace asynchronous

Use chat services and product tools that let you tag anyone relevant into a conversation so they can catch up and contribute in their own time.

4

## Centralize information

Use shared repositories to store and organize all your documented information and insights so everyone can access it quickly and easily.



# 8 tips for better remote collaboration

5

## Retain useful tools

Use shared repositories to store and organize all your documented information and insights so everyone can access it quickly and easily.

6

## Schedule brainstorm sessions

The virtual whiteboards and specialist product tools that you use to enhance remote collaboration can still be beneficial after offices reopen.

7

## Stay social at a distance

Grab a video lunch with someone outside the product team. End-of-week virtual happy hours can build bonds, especially with newer team members.

8

## Create a product ops role

A product operations specialist can make collaboration run smoother and keep your products teams aligned wherever they are based.



# About Productboard

Productboard is a customer-driven product management system that empowers teams to get the right products to market, faster. It provides a complete solution for product teams to understand user needs, prioritize what to build next, align everyone on the roadmap, and engage with their customers. Productboard is easy to use, enables company-wide collaboration, and integrates into existing workflows. Over 3,000 organizations around the world use Productboard to build excellent products.

Learn more at [productboard.com](https://productboard.com)



# slalom

## About Slalom

Slalom is a modern consulting firm focused on strategy, technology, and business transformation. In 39 markets around the world, Slalom's teams have autonomy to move fast and do what's right. They are backed by regional innovation hubs, a global culture of collaboration, and partnerships with the world's top technology providers. Founded in 2001 and headquartered in Seattle, Slalom has organically grown to over 8,000 employees. Slalom has been named one of Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For five years running and is regularly recognized by employees as a best place to work.

Learn more at [slalom.com](https://www.slalom.com)