Work Anywhere

Managing effective remote engineering teams @ Airbnb

Jessica Tai • YOW! 2022

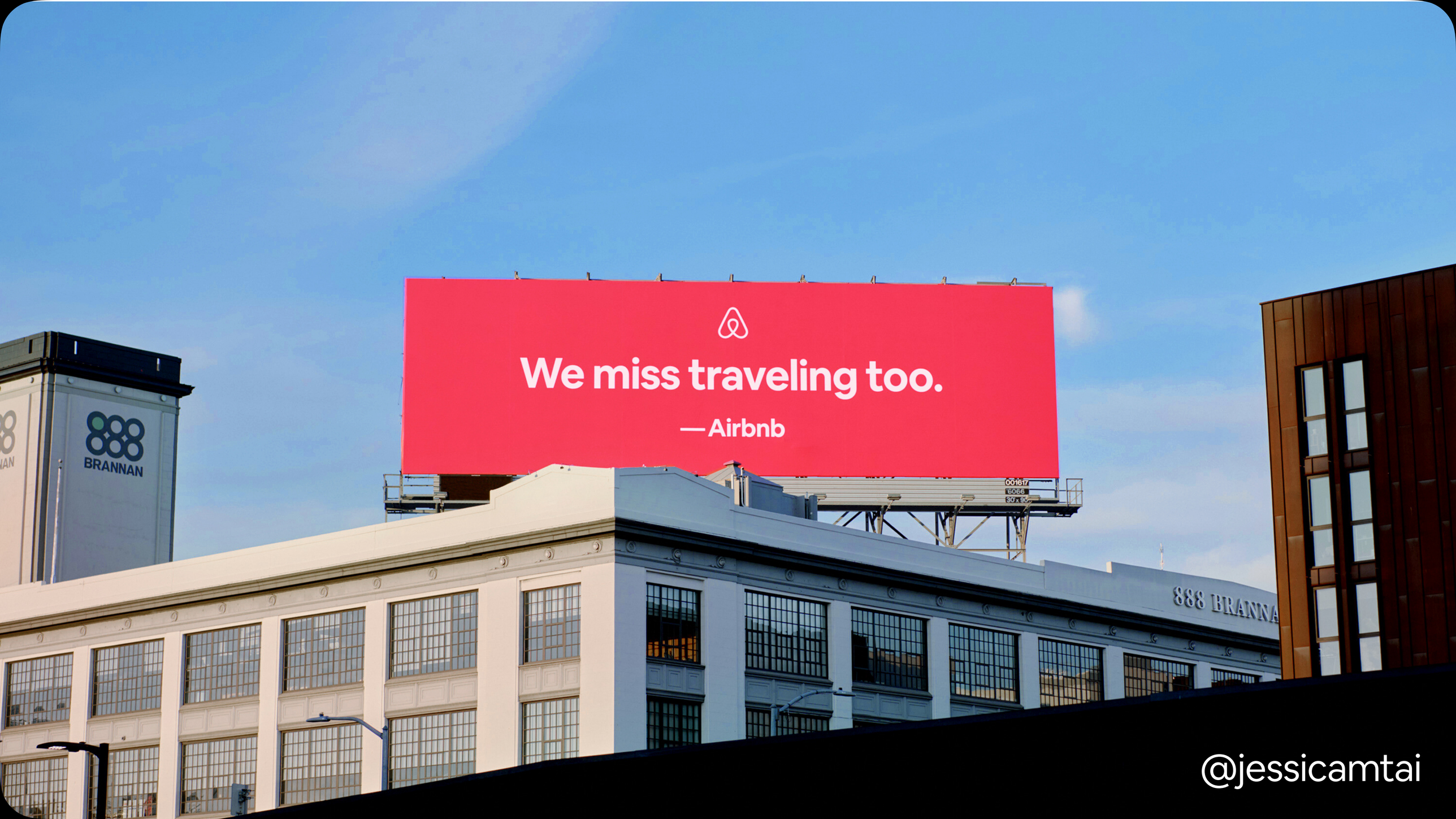

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DUBLIN
LONDON
PARIS
BERLIN
MILANO
BARCELONA
LONDON
2
Europe,
Middle East
& Africa
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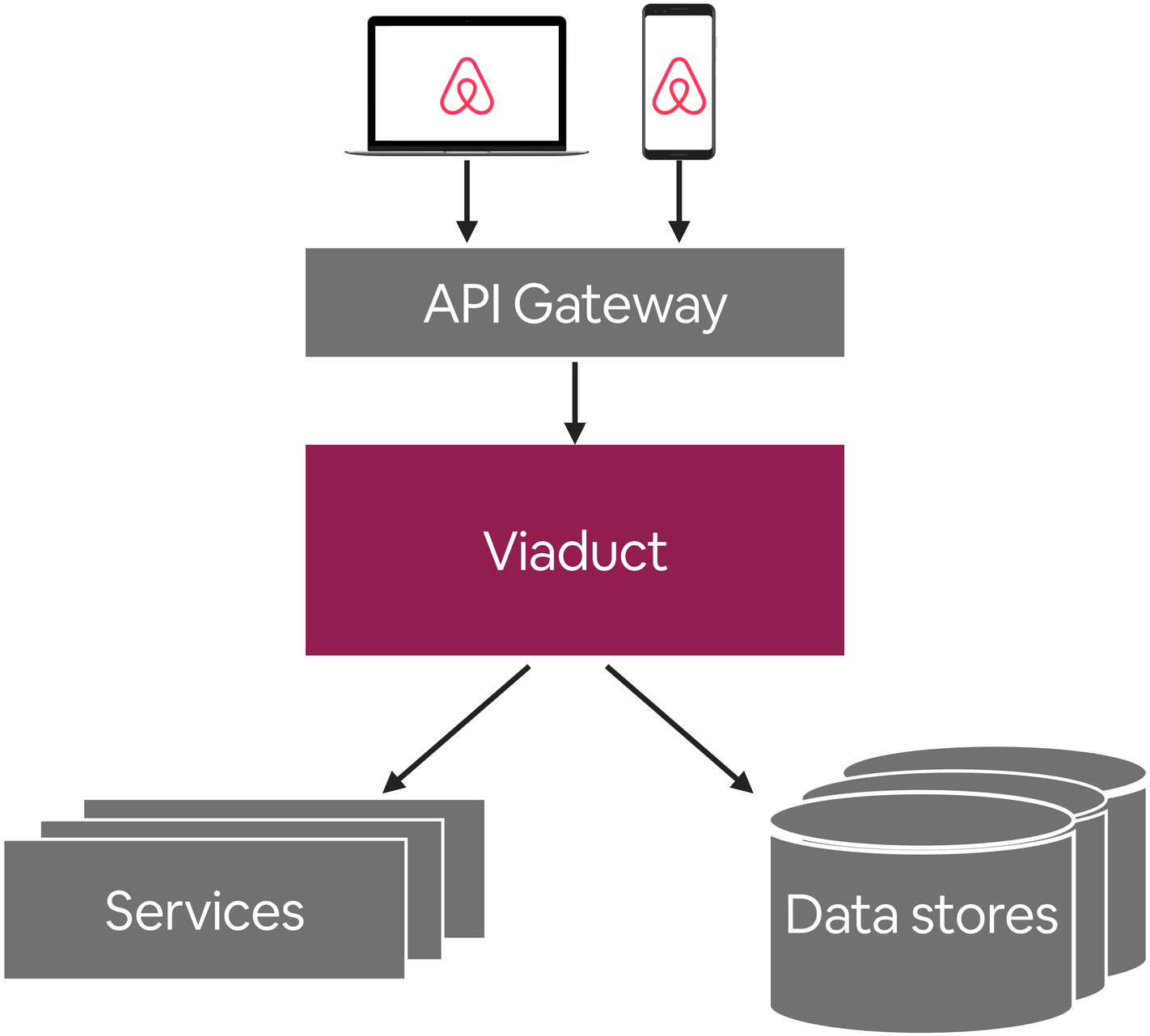


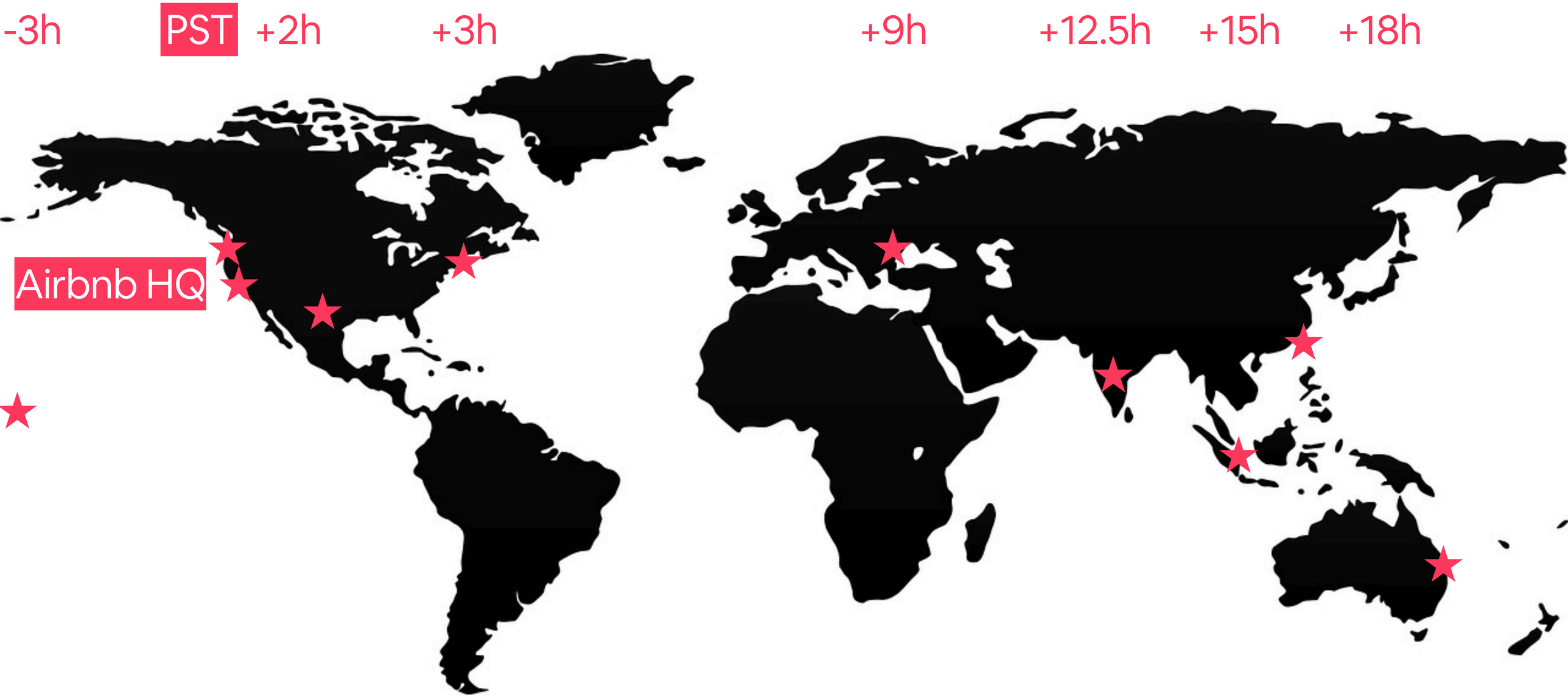
Pandemic closes offices

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We miss traveling too.
—Airbnb
BRANNAN
888 BRANNA
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airbnb
Hi, I’m Jessica
Jessica Tai (she/her)
@jessicamtai
Unmute
Stop Video
Security
Participants
1
Chat
Share Screen
Polls
Record
CC
Live Transcript
Breakout Rooms
Reactions
Apps
Whiteboards


API Gateway
Viaduct
Services
Data stores



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Raise your hand if...
You work at a remote or hybrid company
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Raise your hand if...
Your team spans more than one timezone
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Raise your hand if...
You find remote work to be challenging
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Remote manager responsibilities

Team norms

Intentional culture

What’s next

Remote manager responsibilities

Team norms

Intentional culture

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Intentional culture

What's next

Remote manager responsibilities

New ways of working

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In-person
manager
responsibilities

Team is impactful

Team is happy

Remote manager responsibilities

Team is impactful

Team is happy

Design team norms to improve developer productivity

Team is impactful

Design team norms to improve developer productivity

Team is impactful

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Design an intentional culture built upon trust, engagement, and recognition

Team is happy

Design an intentional culture built upon trust, engagement, and recognition

Team is happy



Team norms & intentional culture



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Feedback channels

Company engagement surveys (annually)

Team retrospectives (quarterly)

Oncall handoff + team meeting (weekly)

1:1s (weekly)

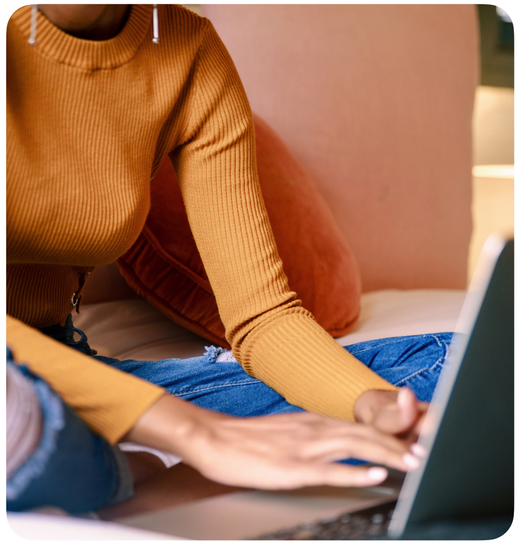


Team norms

New ways of working

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Team norm examples



Technical collaboration



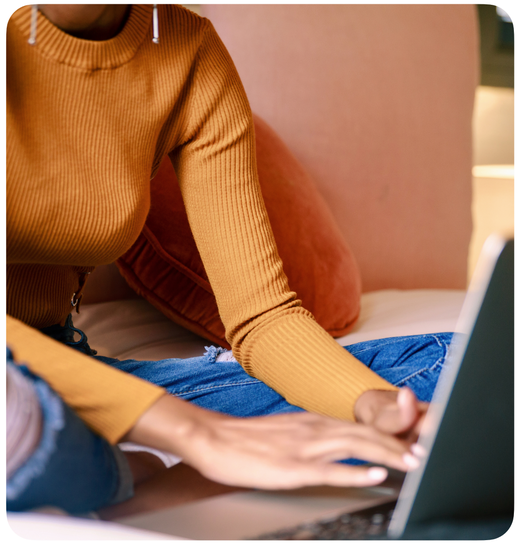
Intentional meetings



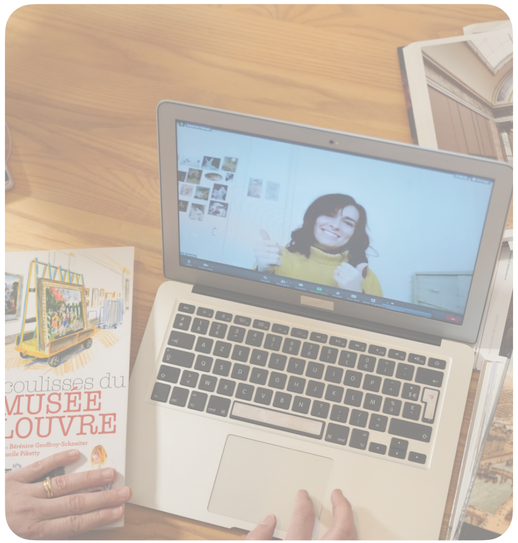
Timezone etiquette

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Team norm examples



Technical collaboration



Intentional meetings



Timezone etiquette

Remote technical collaboration challenges



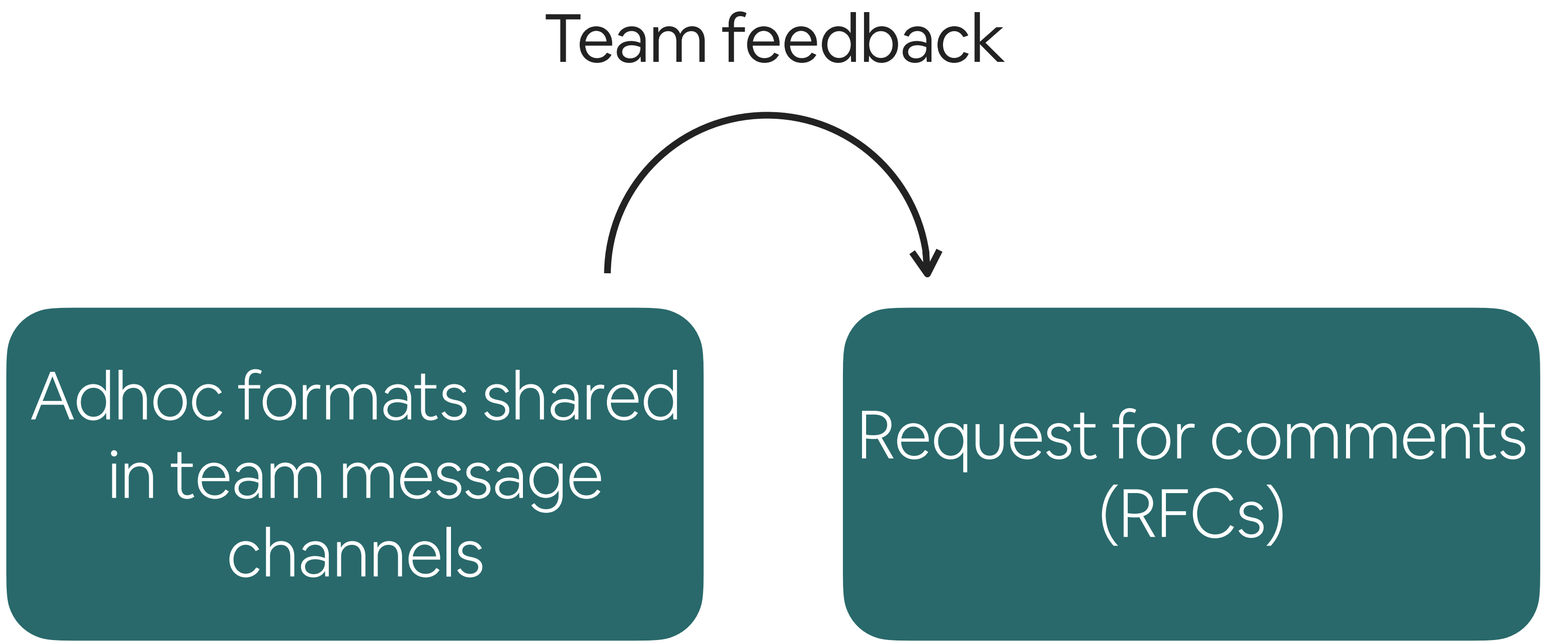
Complex architecture & diagrams

Unaccustomed to digital whiteboarding

Less organic knowledge sharing

Lack of cross-team exposure

Remote collaboration on design docs



Request for Comments (RFC)

Ideas working for us now

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Benefits of RFCs as our team norm

Organized async collaboration

Cross-team visibility

Onboarding of team members

Recruiting of new team members




Peer-reviewed documents
sequentially numbered
in single folder
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Eng: Viaduct > RFCs

Folders

Name

Drafts

Historical

Files



[RFC-000] RFCs for Viaduct



[RFC-001] Viaduct 12-18 Mo...



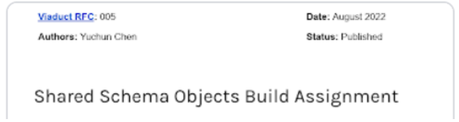
[RFC-002] Understanding Gr...



[RFC-003] Components Vers...



[RFC-004] Removing Viaduc...











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Eng: Viaduct > RFCs

Single public folder

Folders

Drafts

Historical

Files

RFCs for Viaduct

Viaduct is an ambitious project that will evolve substantially over the coming years. As a result,

Viaduct RFC: 001

Date: July, 2

Authors:

Status: Publ

Viaduct 12-18 Month Strategy Proposal

Viaduct RFC: 002

Date: July, 202

Author:

Status: Publish

Understanding GraphQL Execution

Component Que

Background

Component resolution happens at the roo

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Eng: Viaduct > RFCs

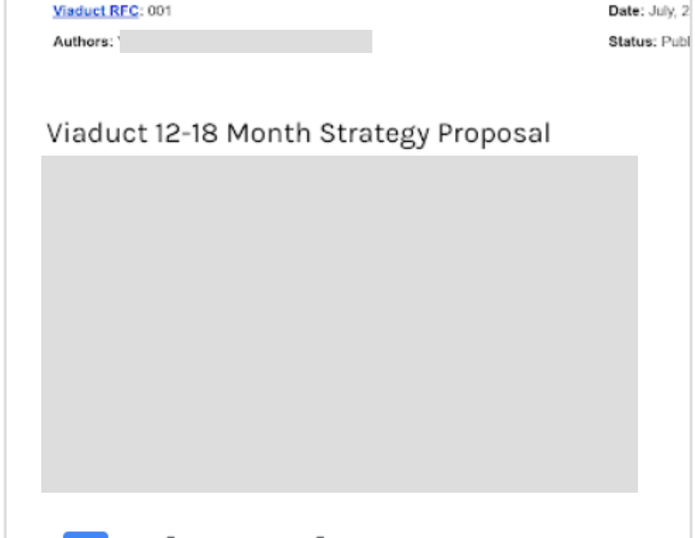
Folders

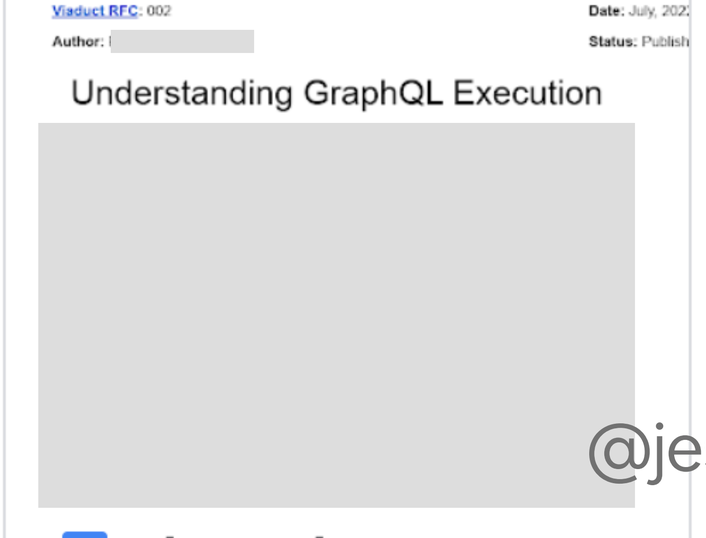
Drafts

Ready for review

Files









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Eng: Viaduct > RFCs

Folders

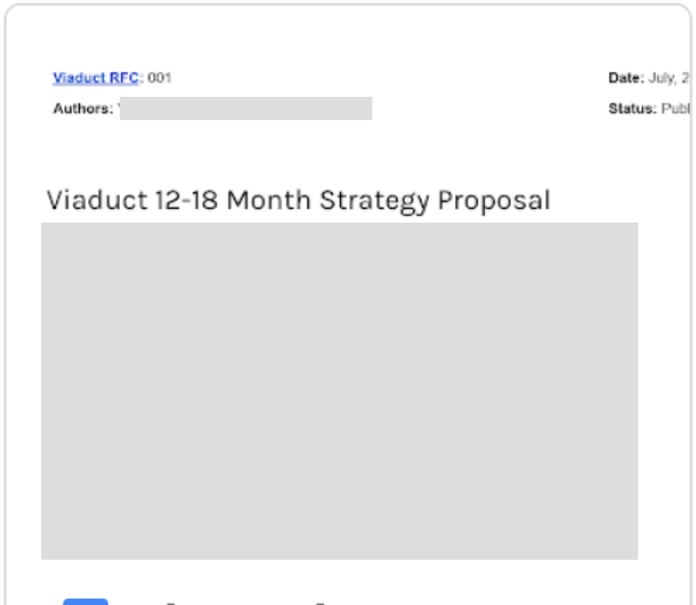
Drafts

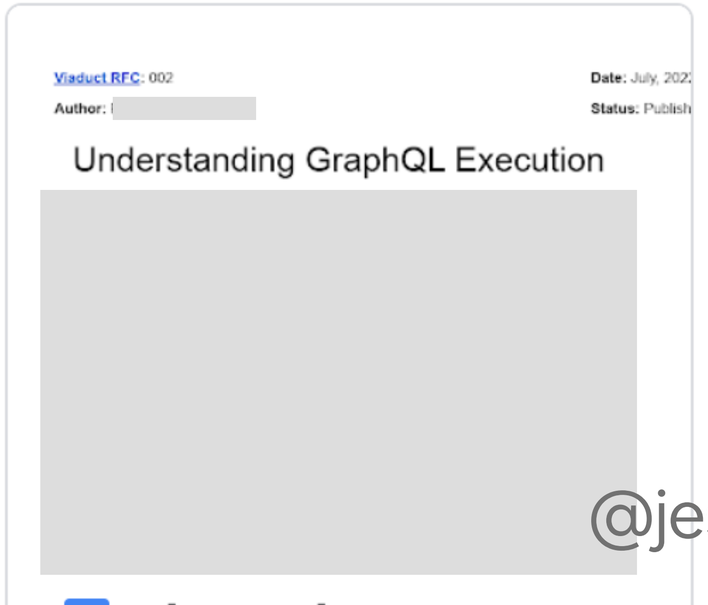
Historical

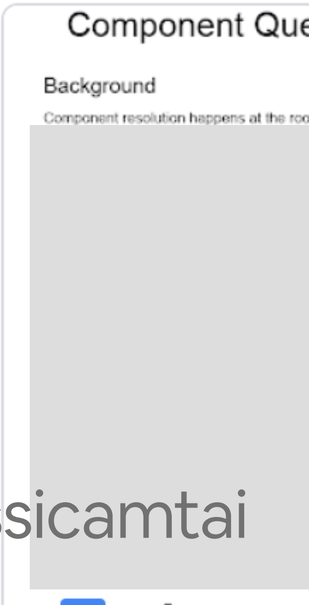
Predated RFCs

Files









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Simple header

Viaduct RFC: 001 **Date:** July, 2
Authors: **Status:** Publ

Viaduct 12-18 Month Strategy Proposal

[RFC-001] Viaduct 12-18 Mo...

Viaduct RFC: 002 **Date:** July, 202
Author: **Status:** Publish

Understanding GraphQL Execution

[RFC-002] Understanding Gr...

duct

st 2022

Viaduct RFC: 006 **Date:** August 2022

Viaduct RFC: 007 **Date:** Aug, 2022

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Status: Draft | Published

Viaduct RFC: 001

Authors:

Status: Publ

Viaduct 12-18 Month Strategy Proposal

[RFC-001] Viaduct 12-18 Mo...

02

Date: July, 202

Author:

Status: Publish

Understanding GraphQL Execution

[RFC-002] Understanding Gr...

duct

st 2022

Viaduct RFC: 006

Date: August 2022

Viaduct RFC: 007

Date: Aug, 2022

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Viaduct RFC: 001

Date: July, 2

Authors:

Status: Publ

Viaduct 12-18 Month Strategy Proposal

Sequential number

[RFC-001] Viaduct 12-18 Mo...

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Viaduct RFC: 006

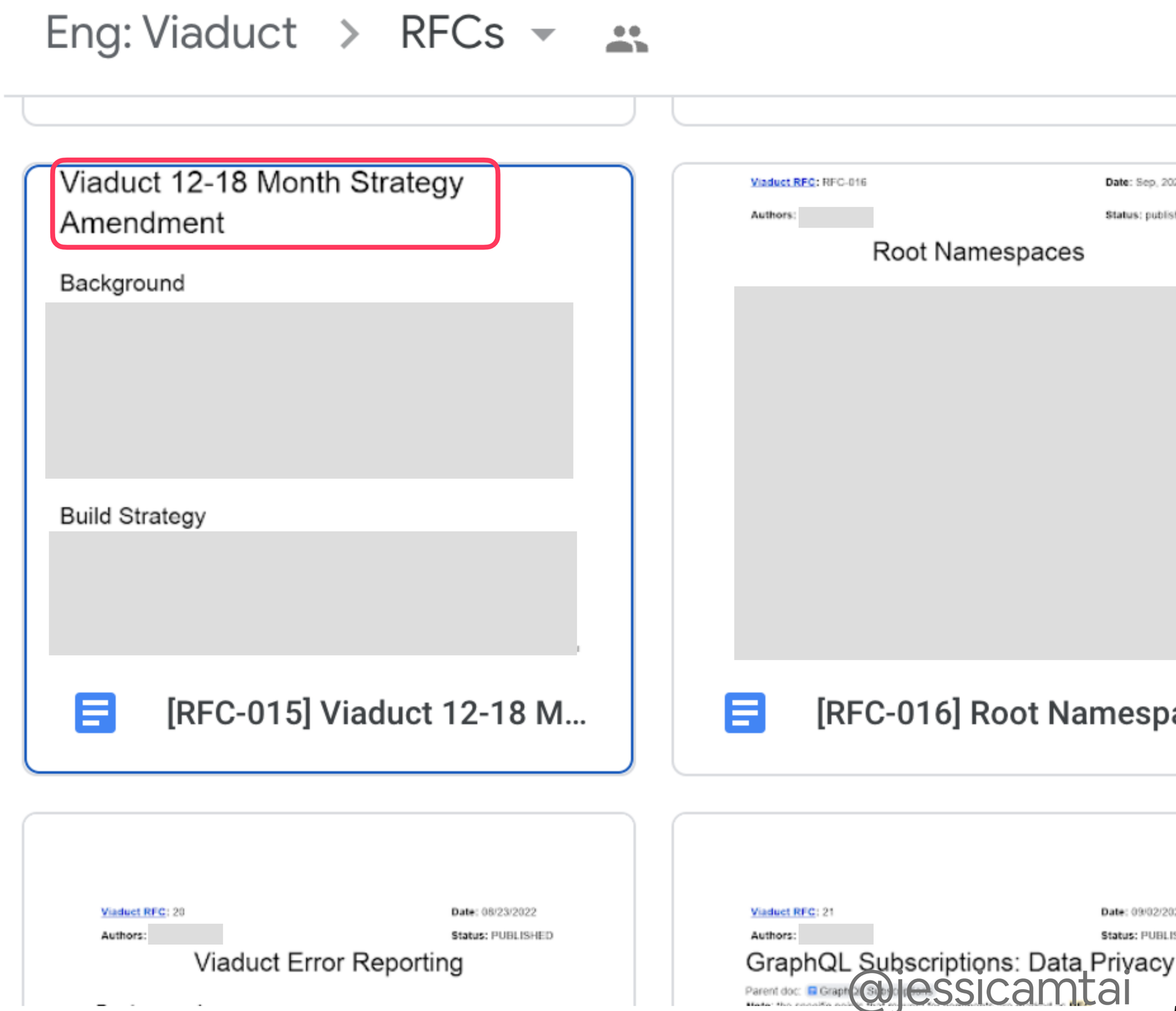
Date: August 2022

Viaduct RFC: 007

Date: Aug, 2022

Amendments after publish as new RFC

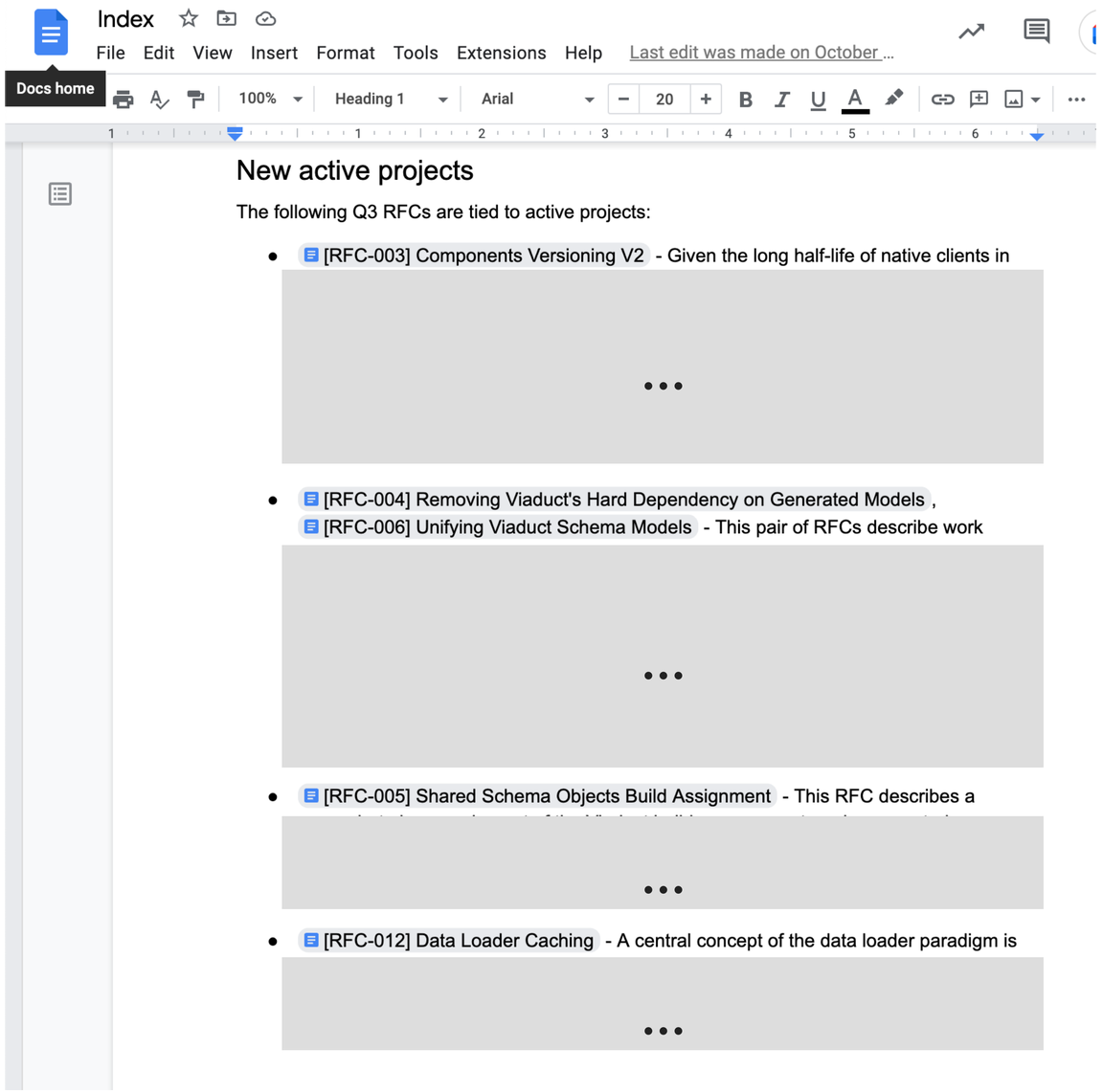
Long comment threads summarized in appendix



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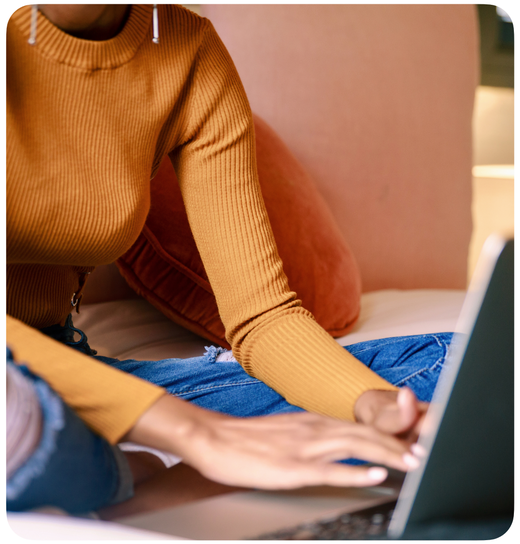
Index with reference to

active projects each quarter

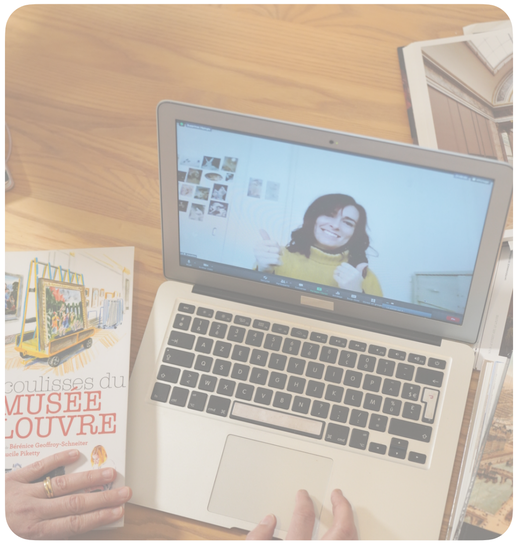


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Team norm examples



Technical collaboration

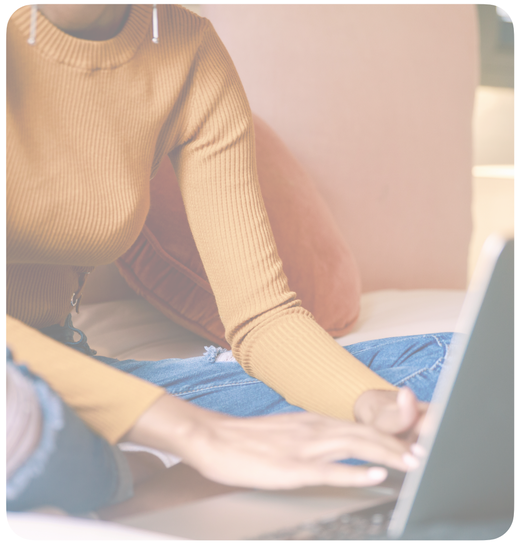


Intentional meetings



Timezone etiquette

Team norm examples



Technical collaboration



Intentional meetings



Timezone etiquette

Remote meeting challenges



Communication overhead

Meeting overload & fatigue

Disengagement

Burnout



Principles of meetings

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Define purpose
Decision making, soliciting feedback, knowledge sharing
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Setup agenda & live notes
Async prep & documentation
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Minimize attendees
Directly relevant participants
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Remote meeting ideas that lost momentum

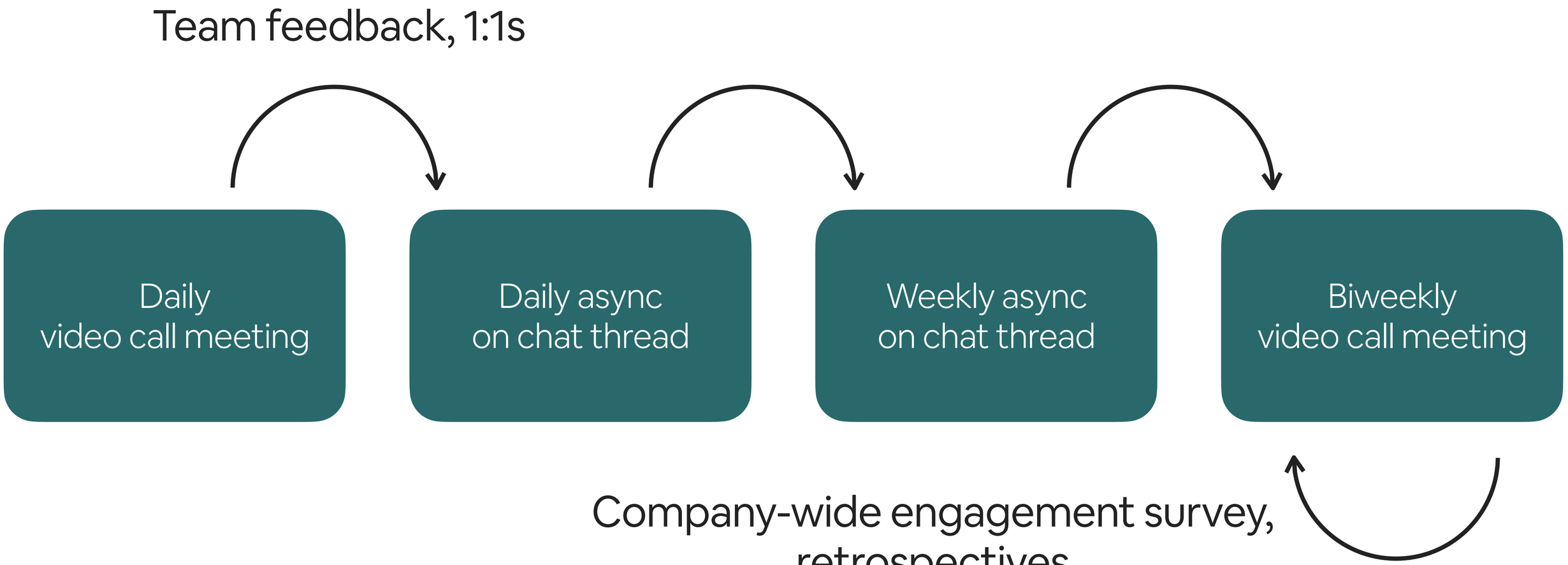


Open agenda drop-in meetings

Ending 5 minutes early

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Status updates



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My team's recurring meetings

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri

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My team's recurring meetings

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
Oncall hand-off Team weekly				
Oncall hand-off **Sprint review** + team weekly				

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My team's recurring meetings

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
Oncall hand-off Team weekly		Tech brainstorm		
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My team's recurring meetings

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Oncall hand-off Sprint review + team weekly		Tech brainstorm		Social 1/2 hour

Weekly 1:1s with all direct reports

Quarterly retro, all-hands

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My team's recurring meetings

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
Oncall hand-off Team weekly		Tech brainstorm	1.5 hours / weekly	
Oncall hand-off Sprint review + team weekly		Tech brainstorm		Social 1/2 hour

Weekly 1:1s with all direct reports

Quarterly **retro**, all-hands

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Why have a long, frequent technical brainstorm meeting ?

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Combined technical brainstorm benefits

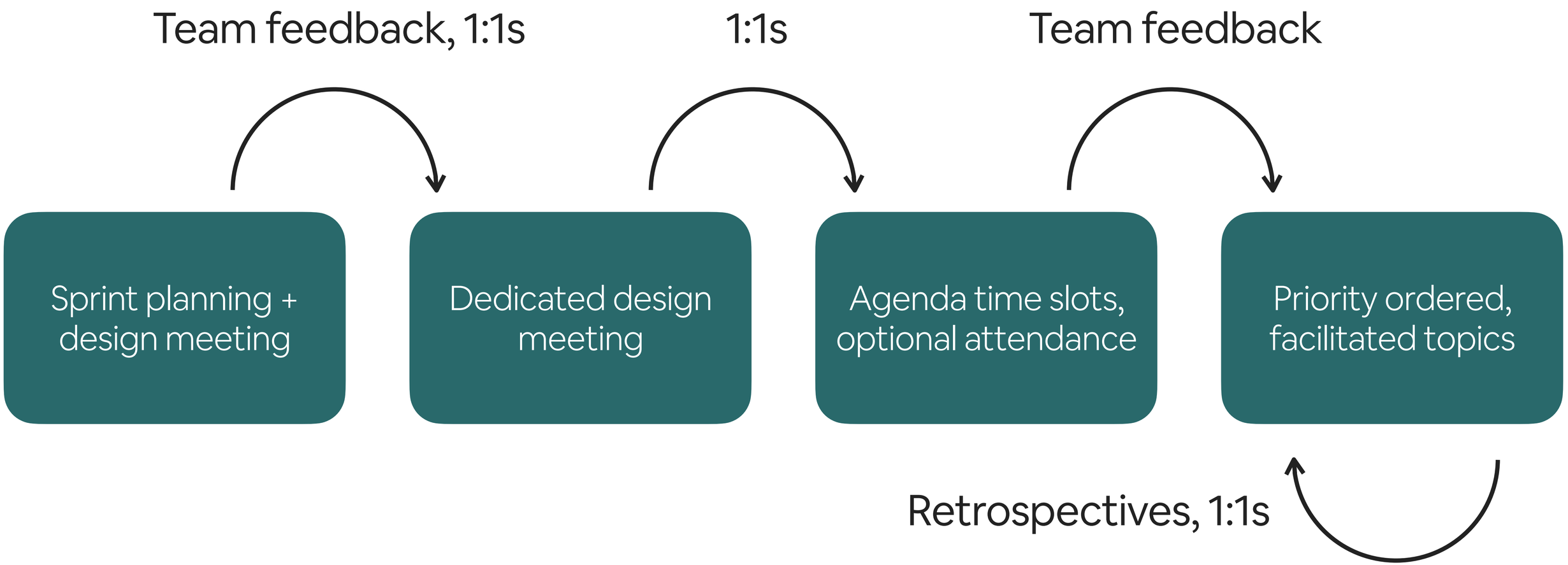
Single meeting to schedule

Less context switching

Flexibility for longer discussions



Technical brainstorm



Technical brainstorm meetings

1.5 HOURS WEEKLY

Backlog

- Raymie's RFCs — 3
- GraphQL Service client ownership — JO
- Viaduct AWS Cost Attribution & Optimization projects — VC — 1
- Error handling
- Mutation schema best practices

RFCs to review & open disc...

- Scope transform performance brainstorm — CS — 2 — 4
- RFC: Granularity of Mutations in UDS — Live in brainstorm meeting — 3
- Simple GraphQL AST classes — 3
- Data deprecation plan — Offline only

Upcoming Scheduled

- (Every week) Review metrics
- RFC: Entity Tenant, Schema, and Interaction — Live in brainstorm meeting — yu — Wednesday — 2
- Improved error tenant and field attribution in Watchpoint — hi — Wednesday
- Integration with online data stores (ES, Redis, Oyster etc) — Offline only

Discussion Complete

- Dataloader Cache Mutation Enhancement — Live in brainstorm meeting — 2
- Identify metrics for regular team review — Live in brainstorm meeting — JT — Oct 19 — 1
- Policy & permissions knowledge sharing — Live in brainstorm meeting — PZ — Oct 12 — 2

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How to get feedback in remote retrospectives?

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Digital sticky boards

Improved legibility

More detailed responses

Easier organization

Increased engagement

More anonymous

Simpler to save



Retrospective meetings

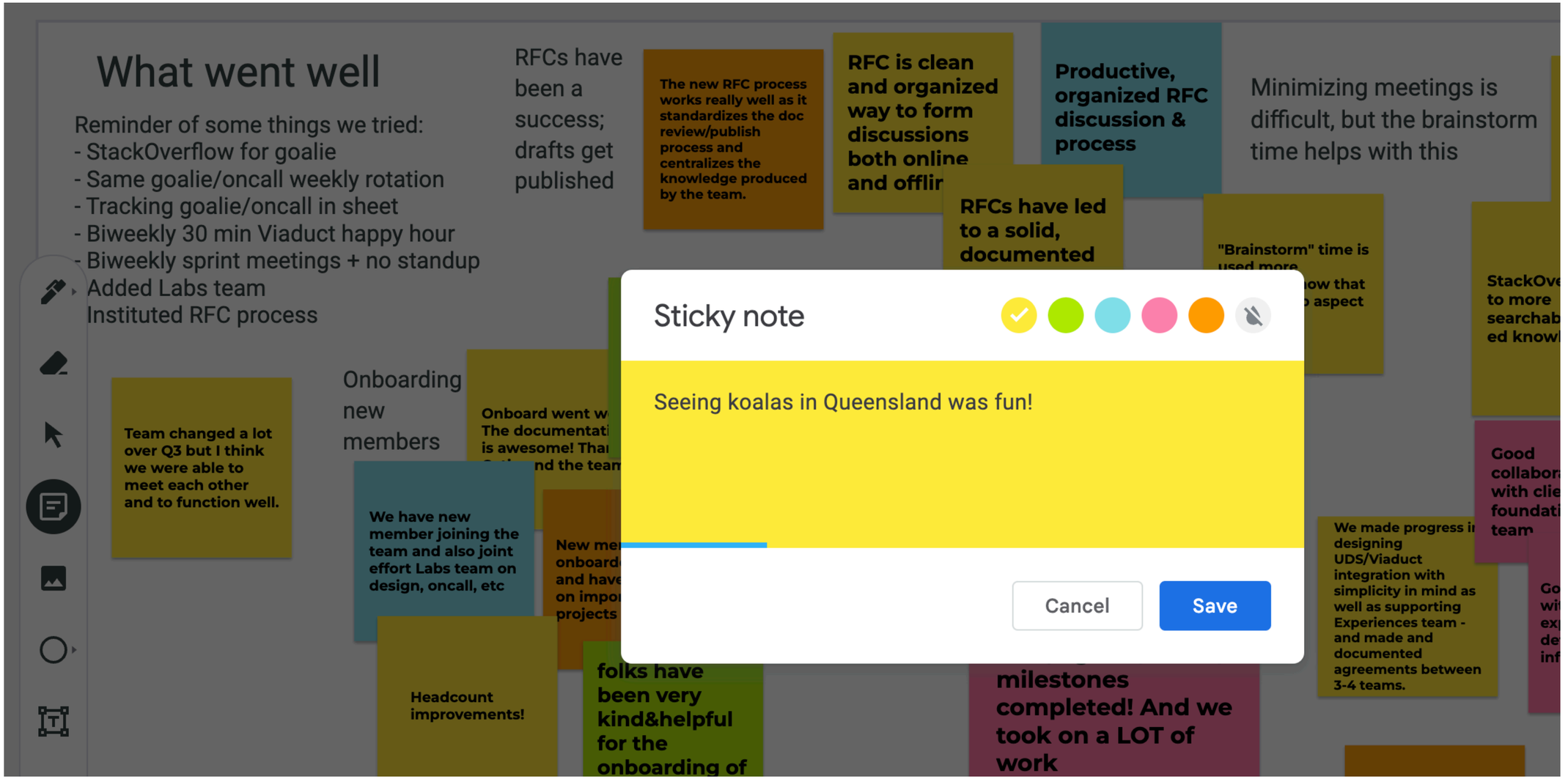
1 HOUR QUARTERLY



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Retrospective meetings

1 HOUR QUARTERLY



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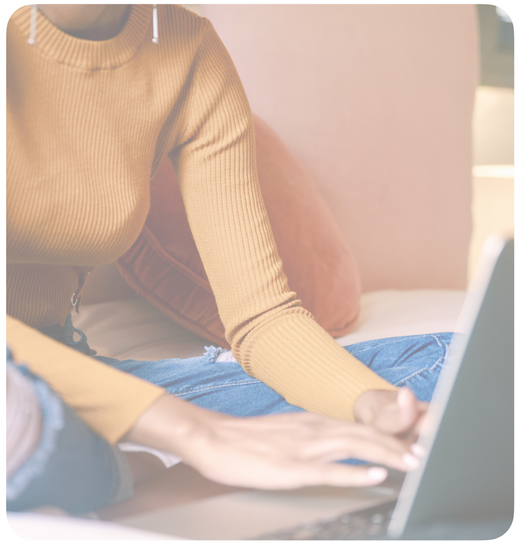
Retrospective meetings

1 HOUR QUARTERLY



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Team norm examples



Technical collaboration

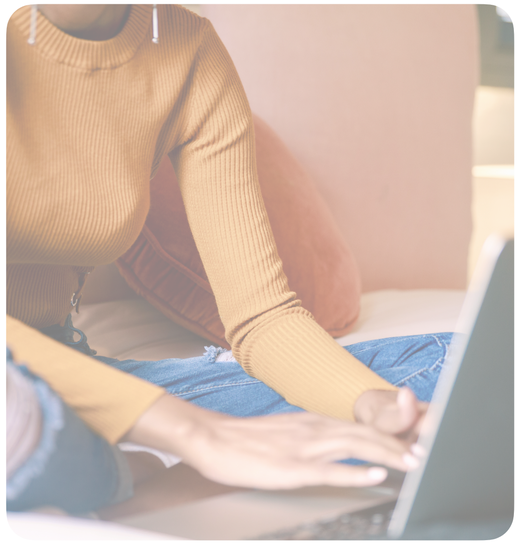


Intentional meetings

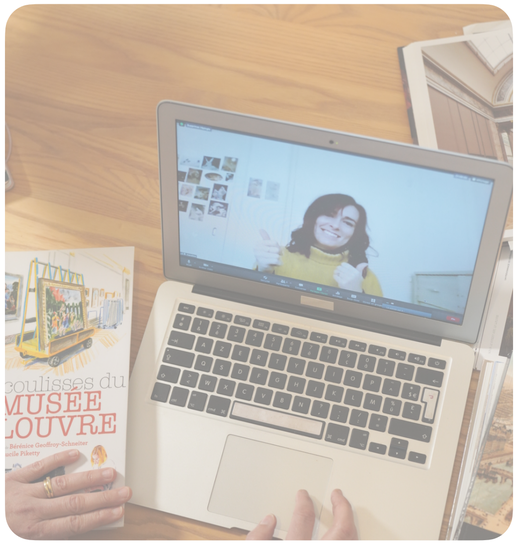


Timezone etiquette

Team norm examples



Technical collaboration



Intentional meetings



Timezone etiquette

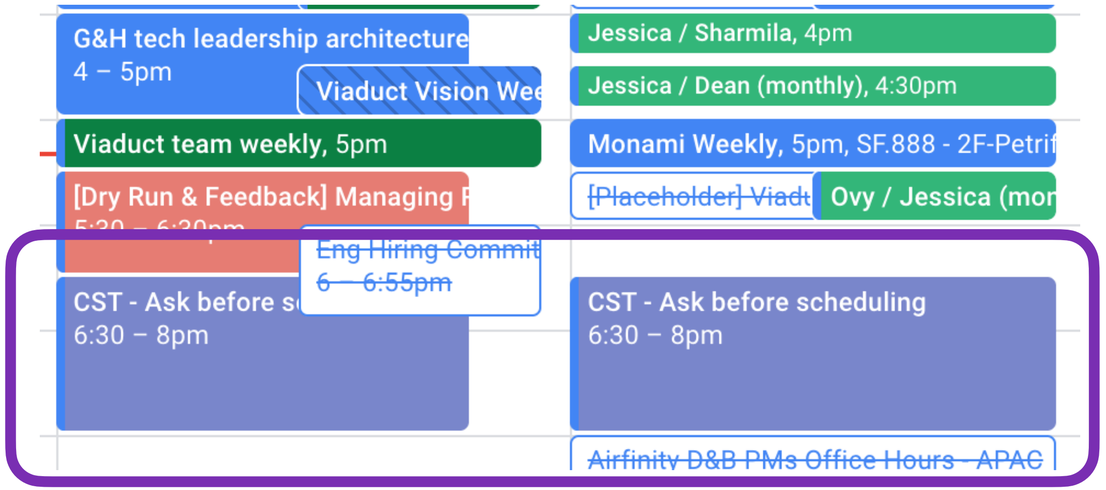
Timezone etiquette & transparency

Set working hours on calendar

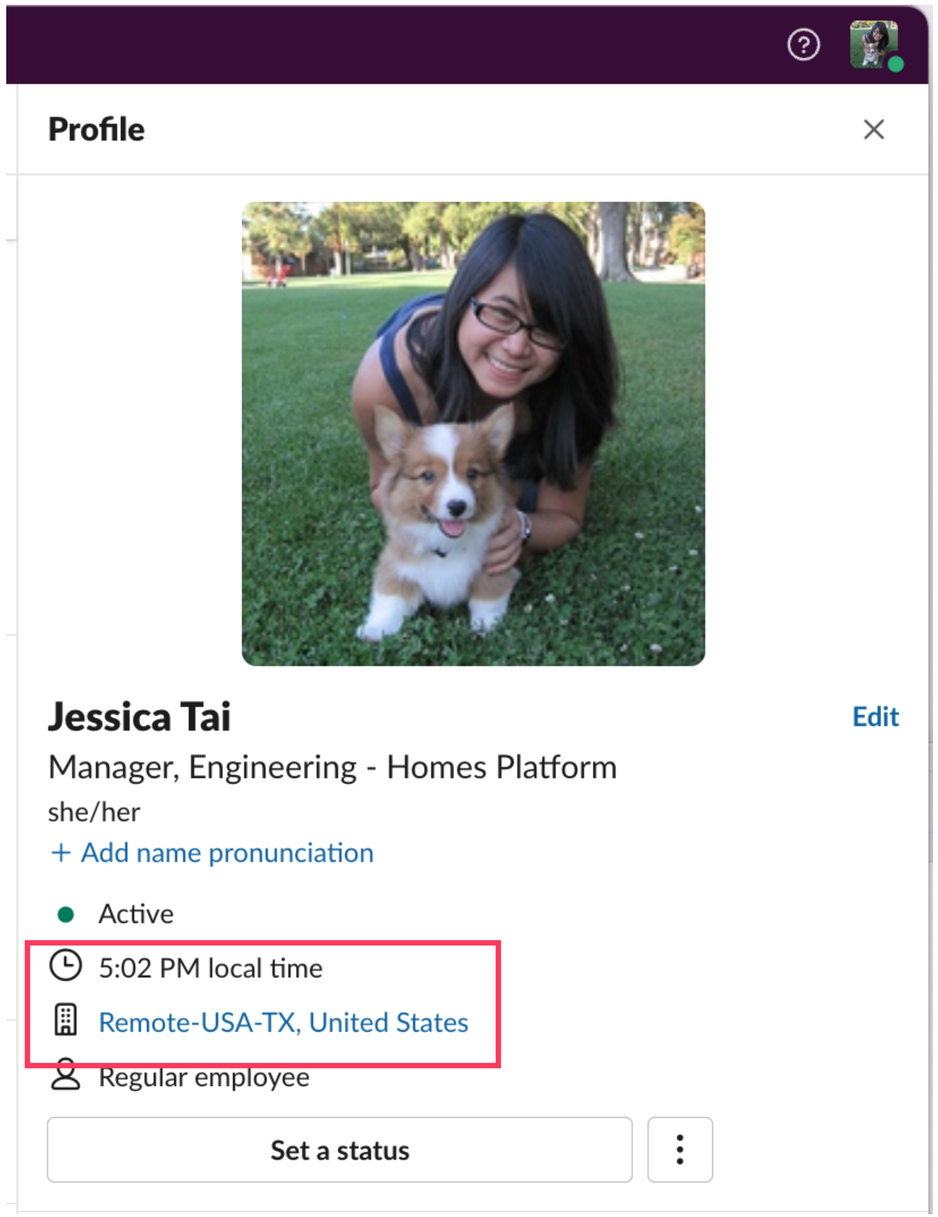
Block “if-need-be” hours

Available during ~4 core hours regardless of timezone

Set direct message expectations



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Ideas working for us now

Transparent local time

Scheduled messages & emails

Snoozed notifications during off-hours

Personal priorities

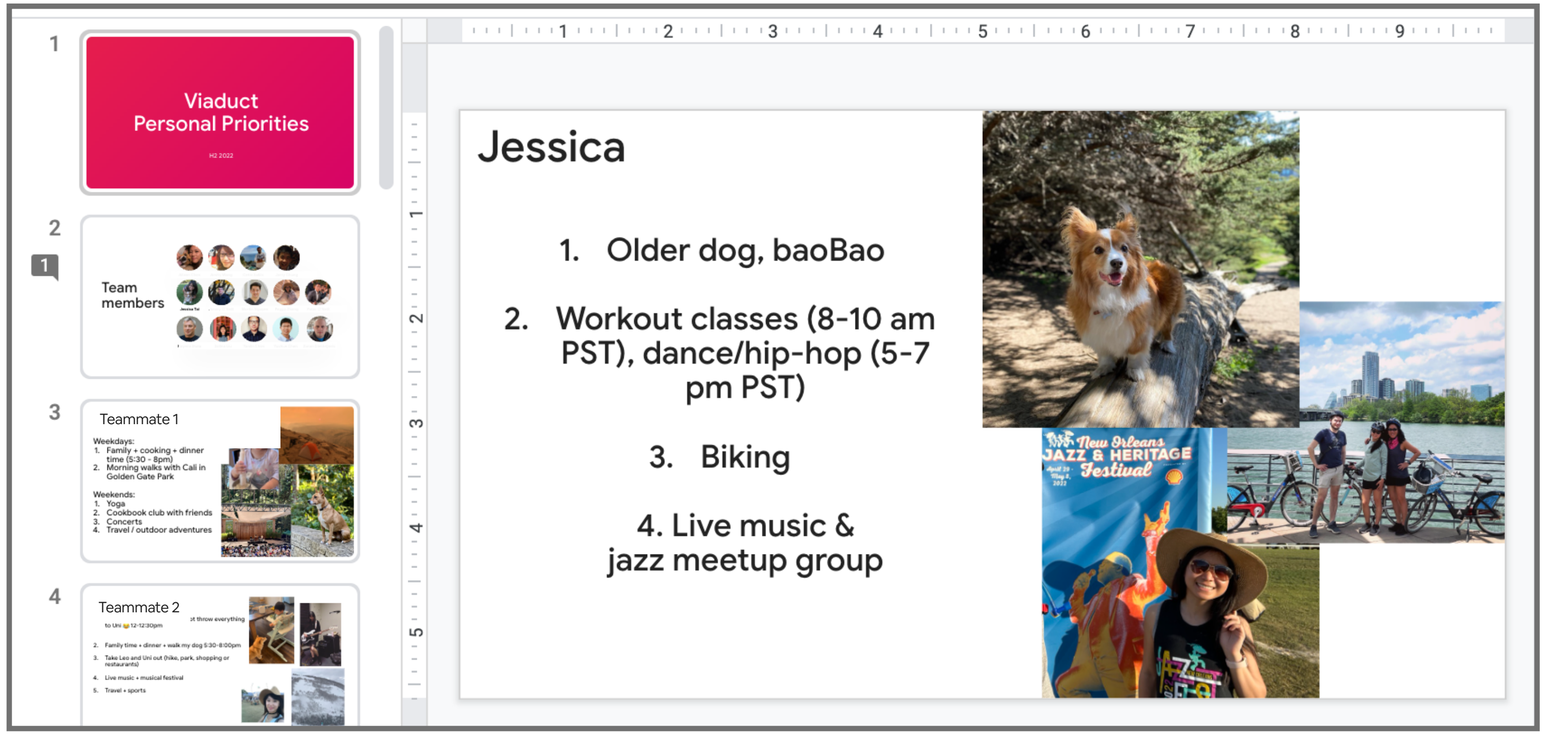
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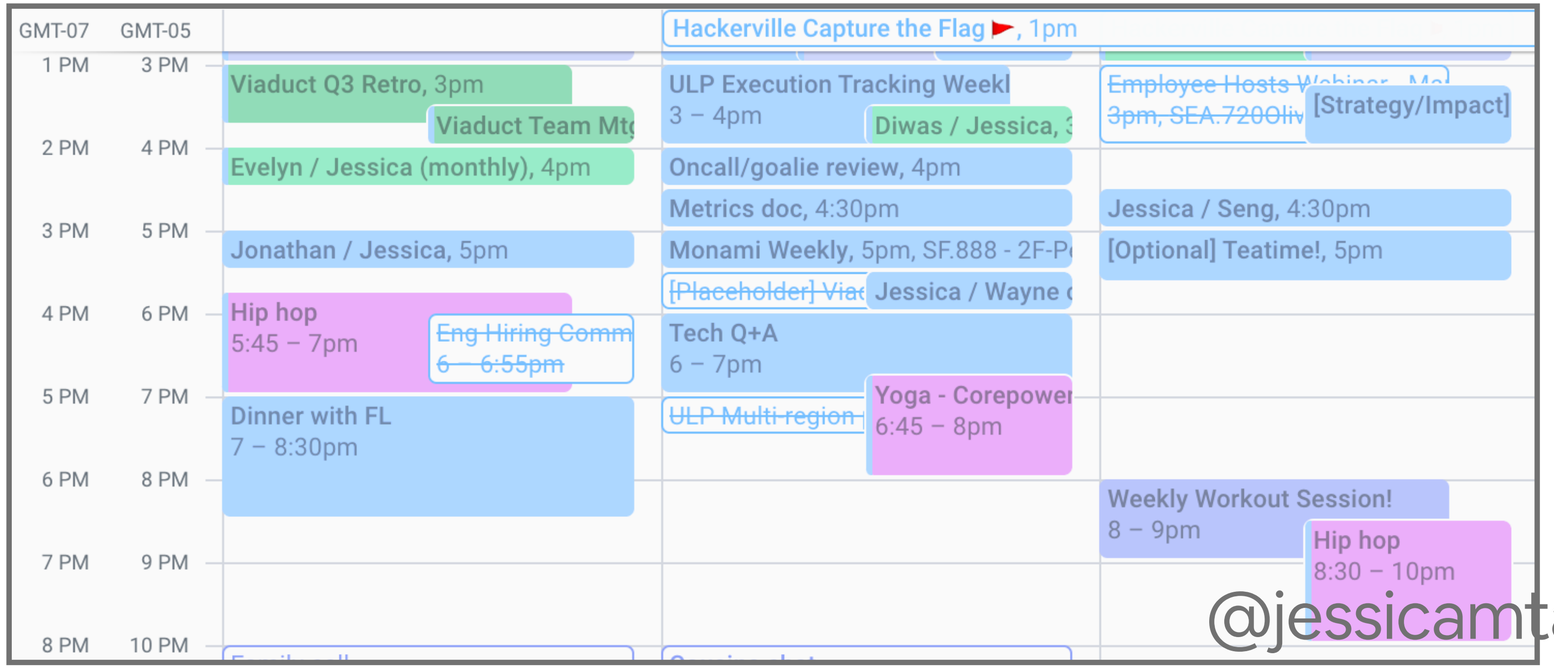
Personal priorities

Outside of work activities

Share with team

Block on calendar





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Imagine you set the
perfect
team norms ...

...You still must foster an intentional team culture

Intentional culture

New ways of working

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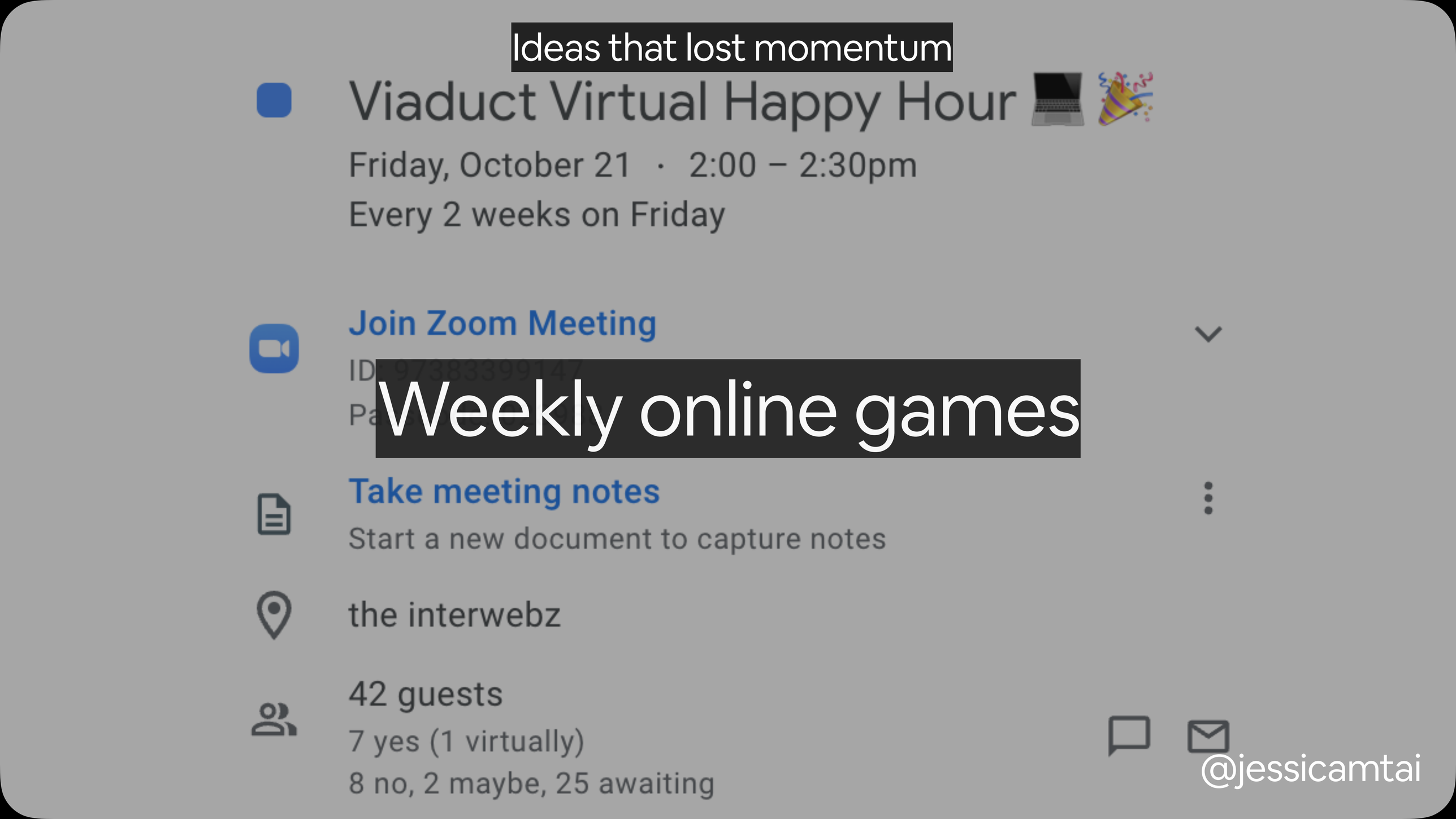

Raise your hand if...
Your team has ever tried a virtual happy hour
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Keep your hand raised if...
The virtual happy hour still has high attendance
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Even good ideas from in-person and remote work lose momentum
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Ideas that lost momentum
All-hand breakout sessions
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Ideas that lost momentum



Weekly online games

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A connected culture is harder to form in a remote-first environment

Data-backed from our engagement survey

Intentional culture ideas working now



Trust & connection



Engagement

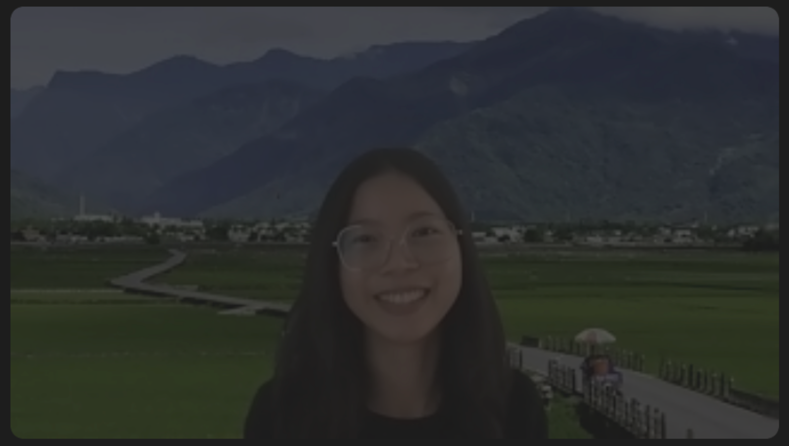


Recognition & appreciation

Building trust & connection

Ideas working for us now

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Question of the week

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Different approach per # participants

6 or less: dedicated session

10 or less: question or photo

15 or less: “A or B?” lightning question

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Weekly team meeting ritual

Question of the day

100% Normal text Proxima N... 9

Used

(Jerry) At what age do you want to retire?
(Zoran) Texting or talking?
(Yuchun) Nickname your parents used to call you?
(Selina) Last song you listened to / discovered?
(Yuchun) How long does it take you to get ready in the morning?
(Raymie) Scale of 1-10, how good of a driver are you?
(Peter) Favorite junk food?
(Jimmy) Place you most want to travel?
(Amity) Cake or pie?
(Selina) Do you snore?
(Aileen) Would you rather be able to speak every language in the world
to animals?
(Cetin) Dawn or dusk?
(Selina) What's the best age?
(Yan) What is your favorite car?
(Diwas) Favorite holiday?

Unused

- Favorite day of the week?
- Favorite city in U.S. besides the one you live in?
- Invisibility or super strength?
- Scale of 1-10, how good are you at keeping secrets?
- If you could travel back in time, what period would you go to?
- Favorite childhood TV show?
- Favorite season?
- Last Halloween costume?
- Cake or pie?
- Do you ever post inspirational quotes on social media?
- Favorite ice cream flavor?

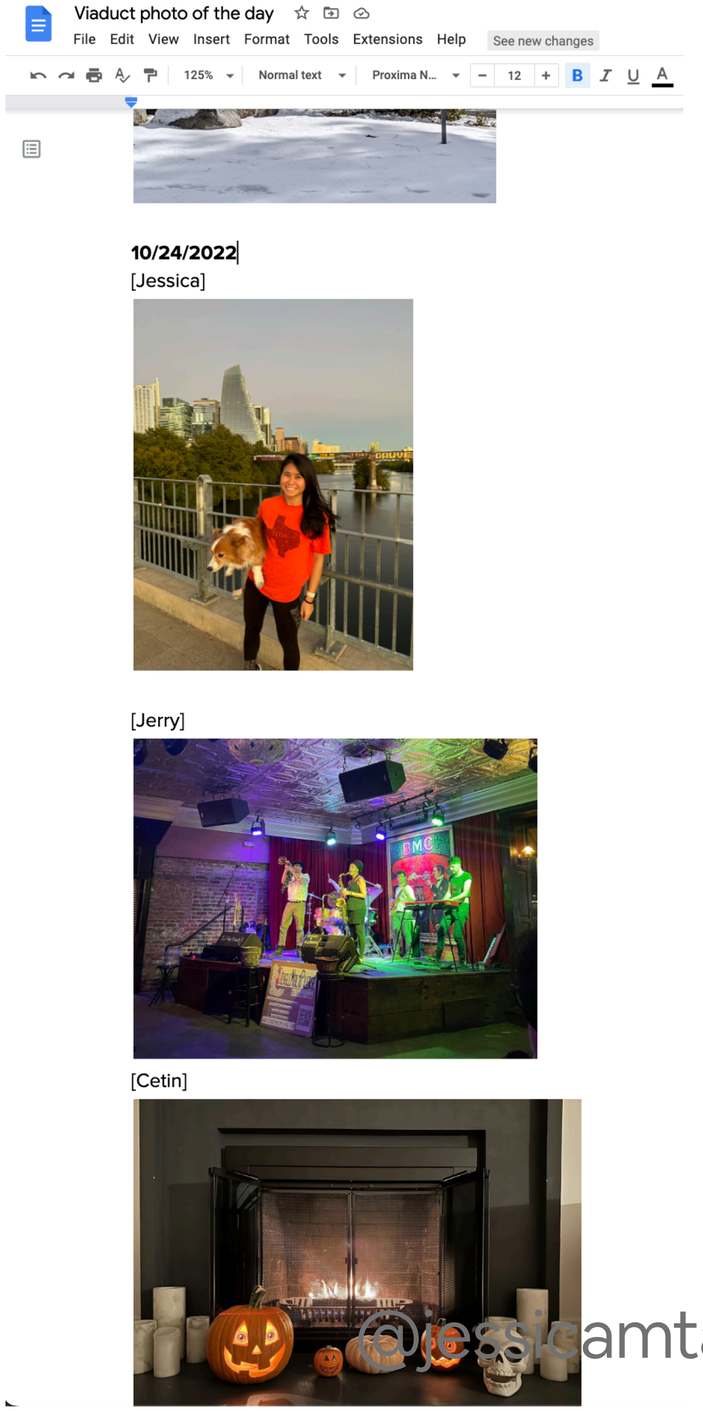
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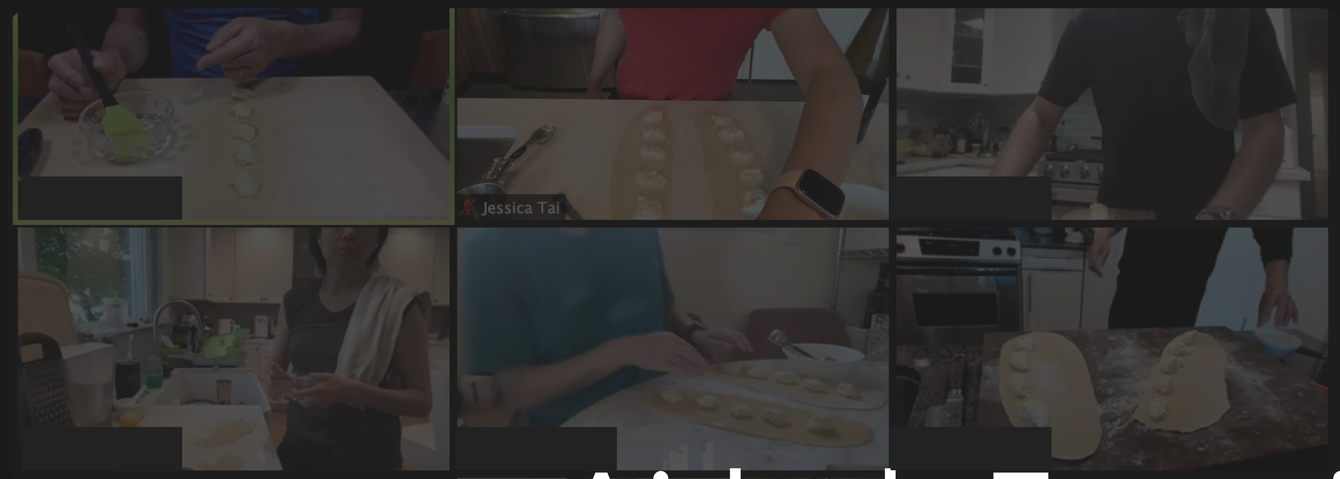
Weekly team meeting ritual

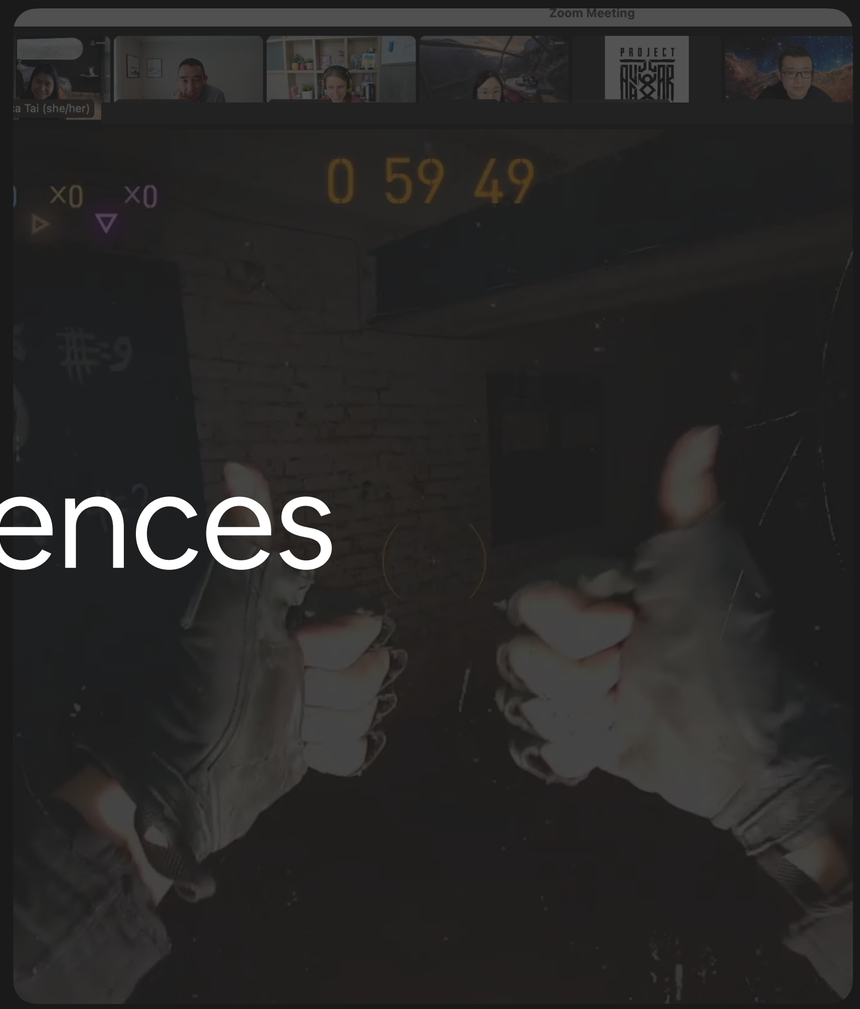
Team feedback

Question of the day

Photo of the day

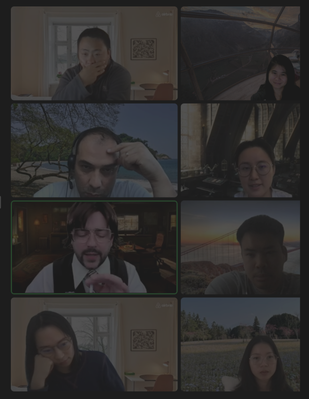


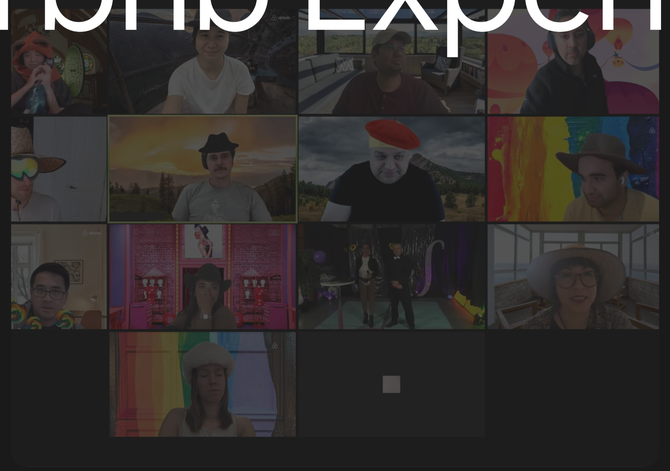




Airbnb Experiences

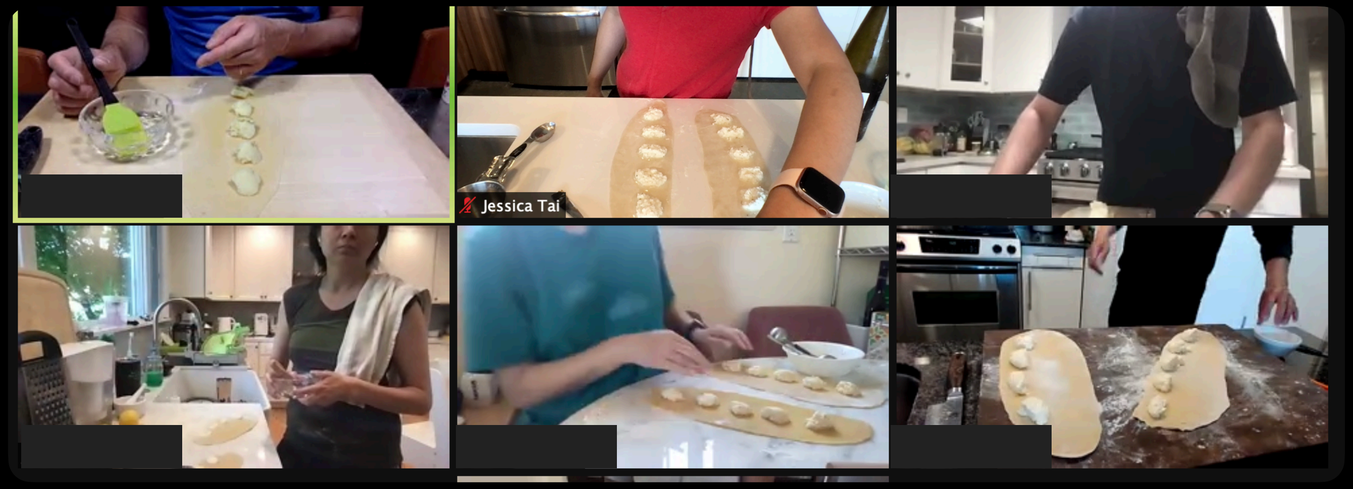


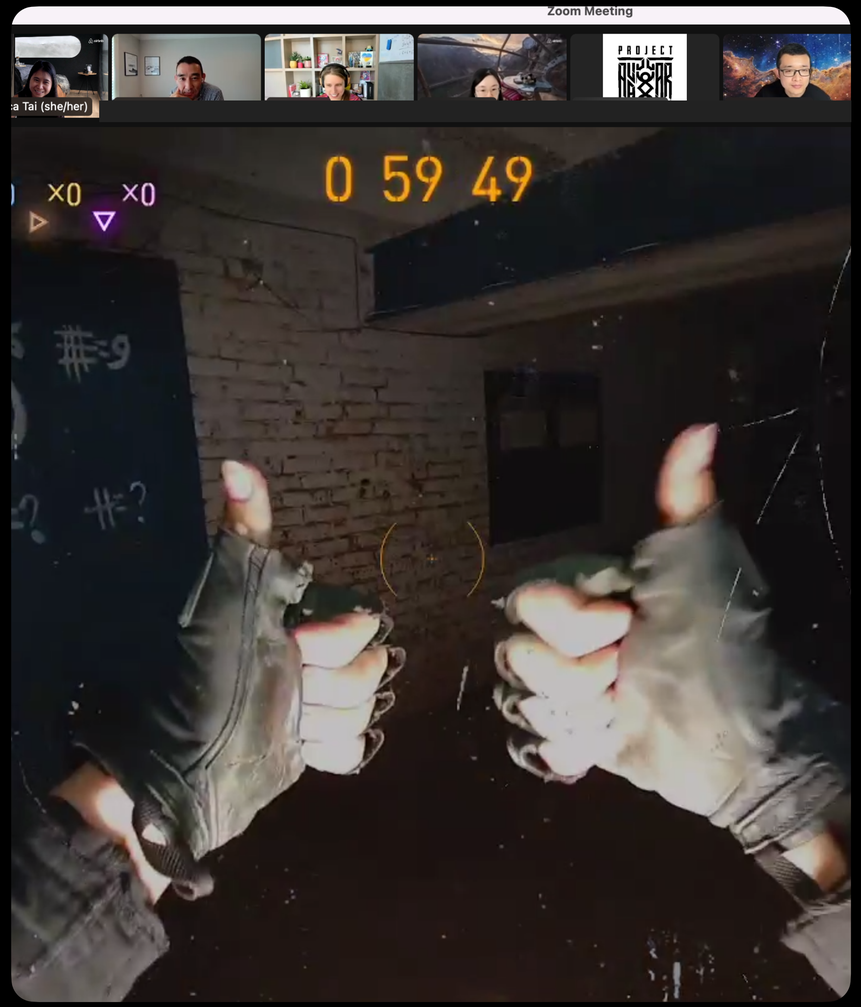


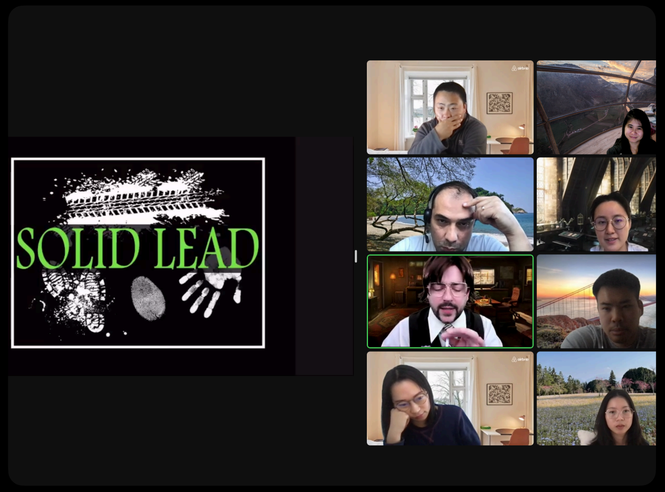


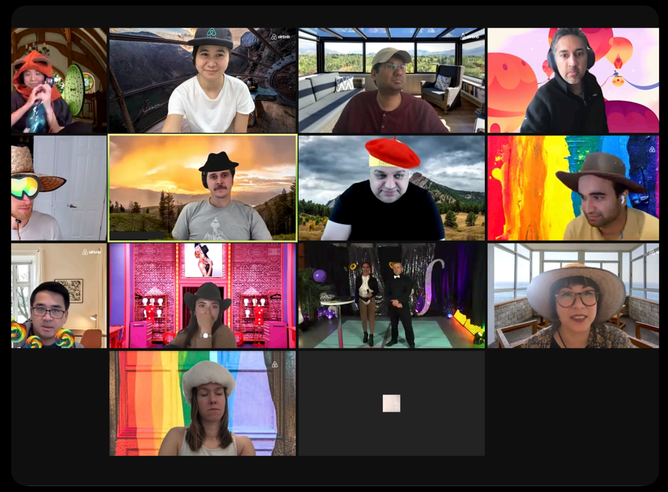
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Active collaboration & puzzle solving had highest engagement



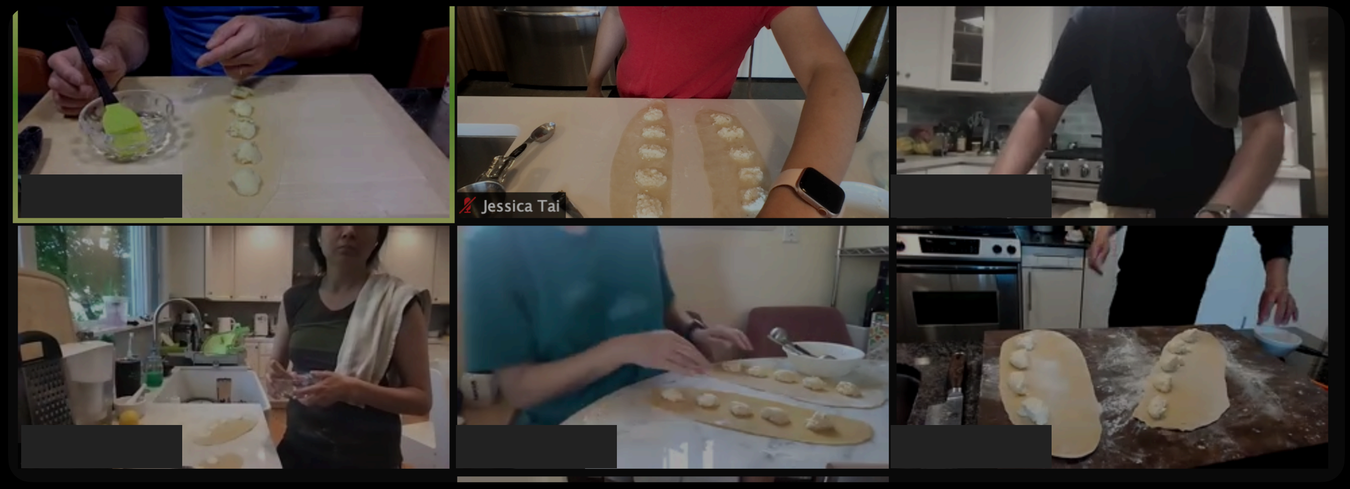




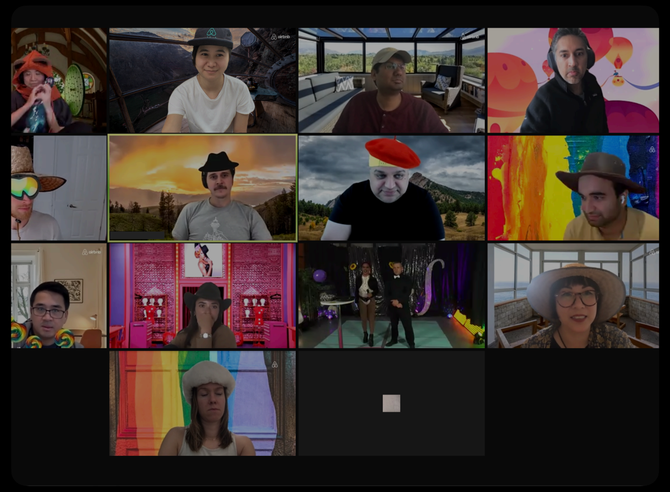


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Active collaboration & puzzle solving had highest engagement





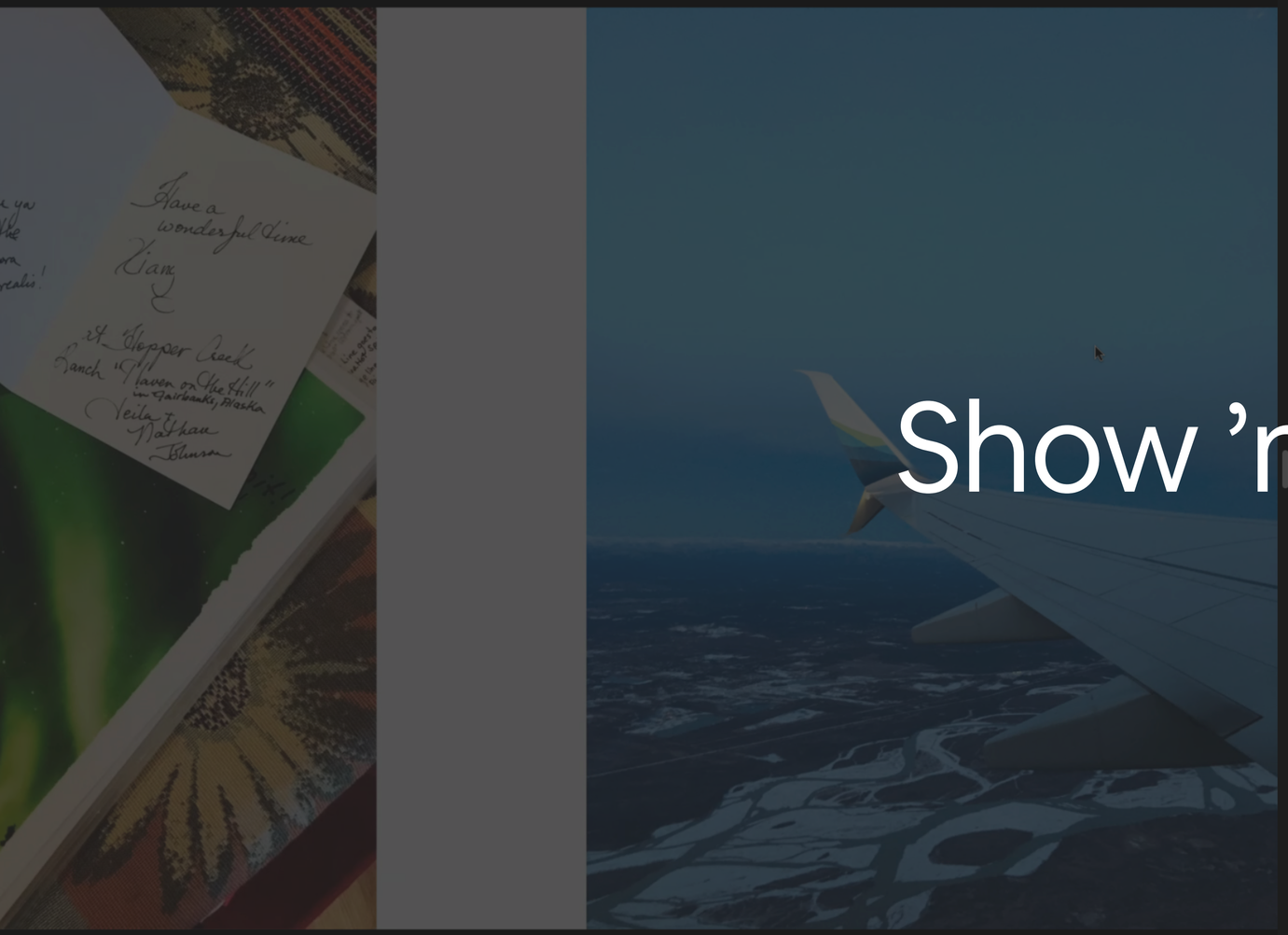


Murder mystery



Escape the room

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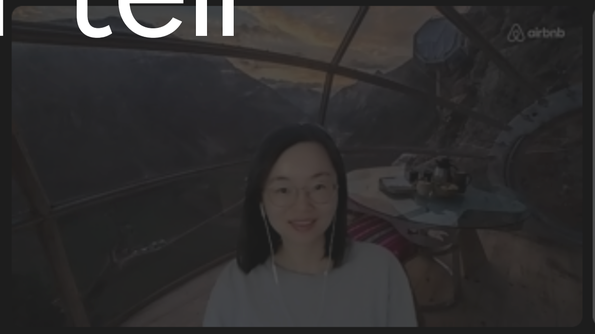
Show ’n’ tell

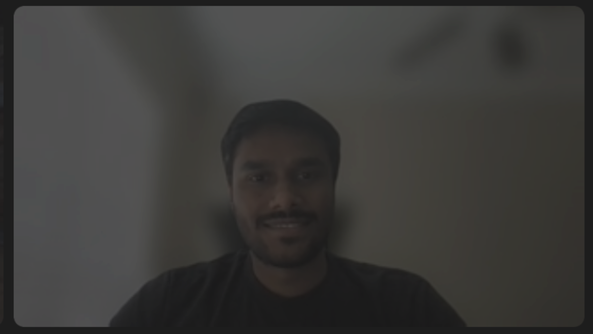


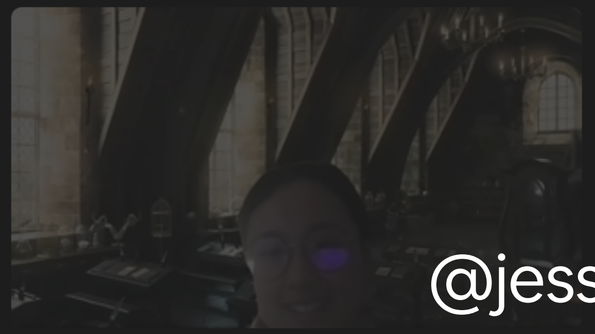




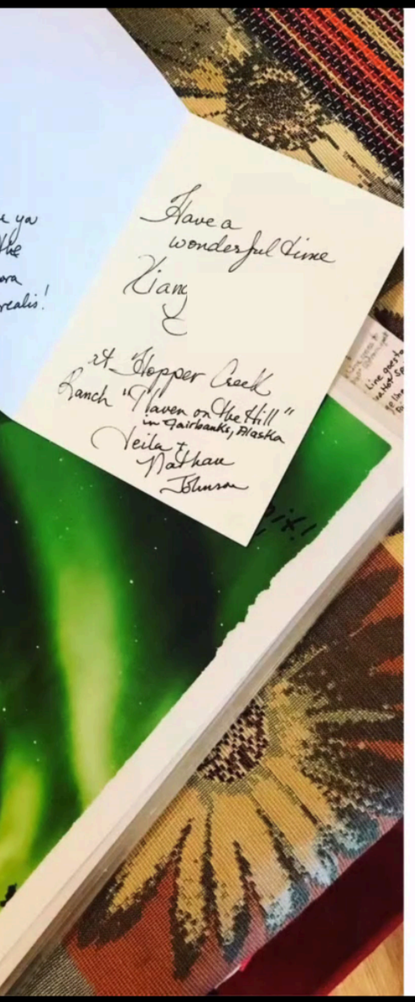


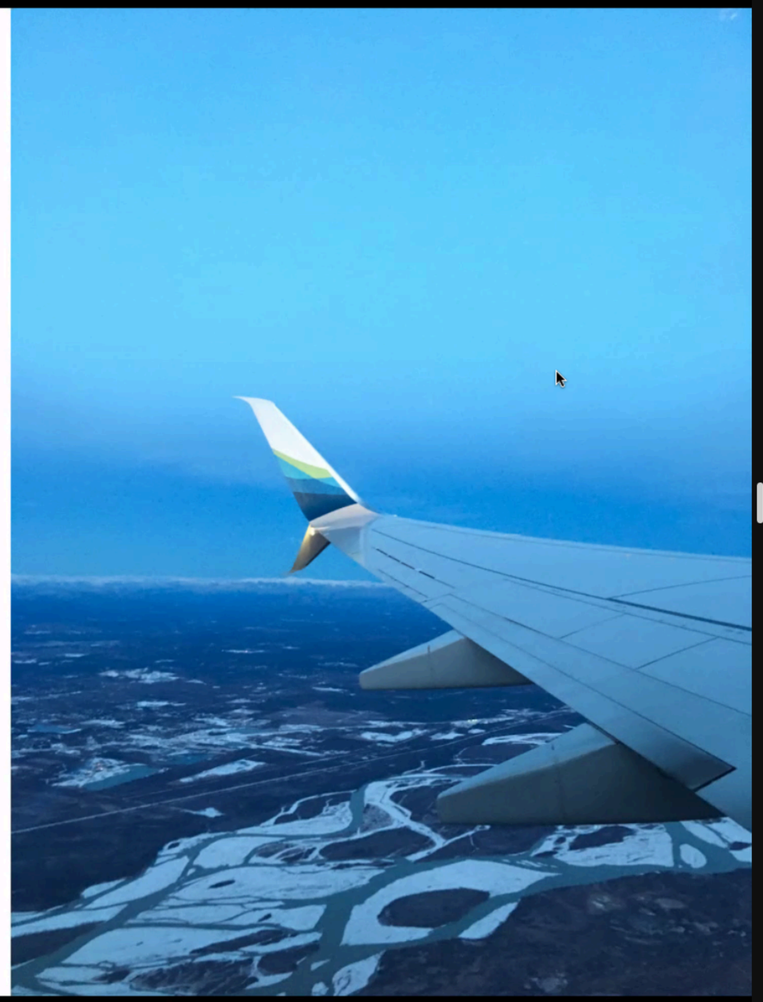






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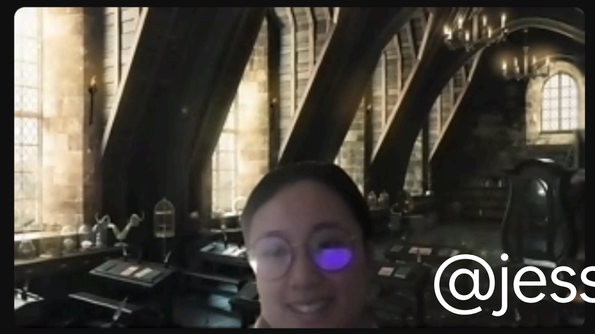












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Engagement

Ideas working for us now

Remote engagement is more difficult



Less body language signal



Only person can talk at a time



More environmental distractions



Multi-tasking is tempting



Remote engagement is more difficult






Less body language signal

Video-on culture

Remote engagement is more difficult





Only person can talk at a time





Facilitate ideas and participation from everyone

Remote engagement is more difficult







More environmental distractions

Transparent when distraction in room





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Remote engagement is more difficult









Multi-tasking is tempting

Video-on, effective meetings, feedback

Recognition & appreciation

Ideas working for us now

Praise in public, criticize in private

Set an example as the manager

Praise in public, criticize in private

Set an example as the manager

Weekly meetings

Template

MM/DD/22

Agenda

- Photo of the day → drop a photo you want to share this week in this doc!
- Appreciations
  - Alice for jun
  - Bob for add
  - Cathy for resolving 2 security tickets!
- Oncall/goalie highlights & lowlights
  - Viaduct Oncall Log
- Updates & blockers (biweekly)
  - Viaduct Roadmap 2022 Asana
- OKR updates (monthly) - Guest + Host level OKRs, Tech 2.0 OKRs

Team meetings

Project	Updates and blockers	Action items / notes

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Weekly meetings

Template

MM/DD/22

Agenda

- Photo of the day → drop a photo you want to share this week in this doc!
- Appreciations
  - Alice for jumping in on incident corrective actions!
  - Bob for adding debugging documentation to the portal!
  - Cathy for resolving 2 security tickets!
- Oncall/goalie highlights & lowlights
  - Viaduct Oncall Log
- Updates & blockers (biweekly)
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Project	Updates and blockers	Action items / notes

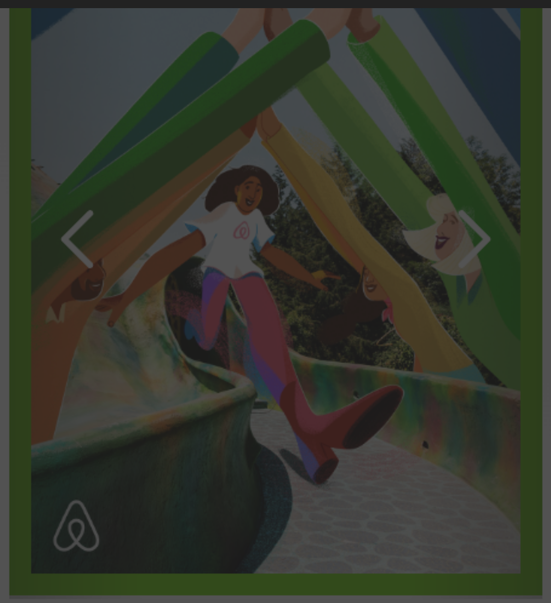
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Company People Culture News Growth & Careers Benefits & Rewards Tools Get Help

You're sending an appreciation to YOW!
Conference attendees.

TEXT CARD & TEXT

Internal appreciation tool & visibility



Thanks for attending my talk today!

- Jessica Tai · October 2022 Cancel Send

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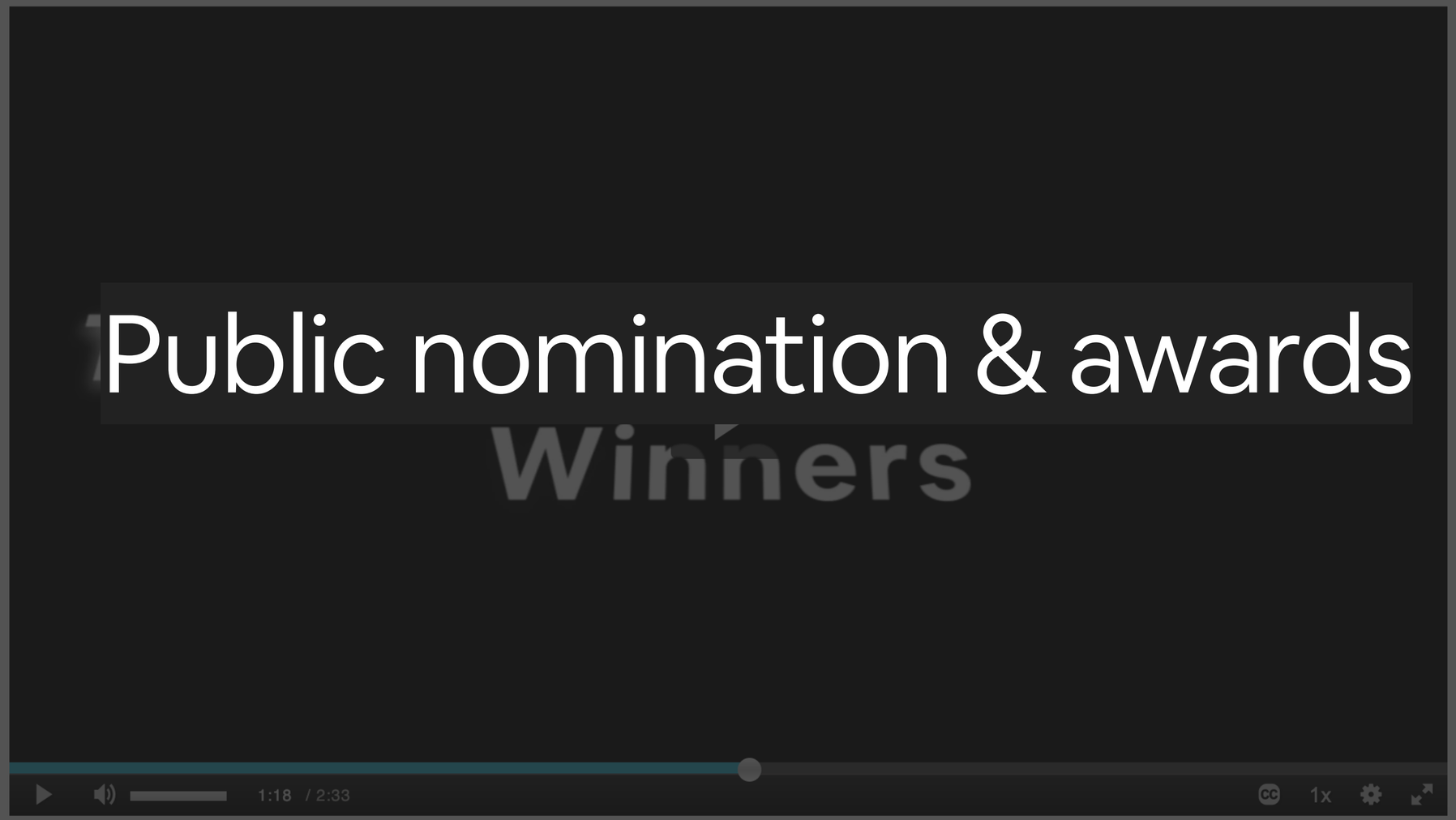
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Leadership Teams Programming Channels



Tech Excellence Awards.mp4

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Leadership Teams Programming Channels



Tech Excellence Awards.mp4

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What’s next?

New ways of working

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In every retrospective
about norms & culture,
all of my teams ask...

So... when can we meet up again in person?


Offsites foster trust & teamwork
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Takeaways

Design processes for team impact & happiness

Takeaways

Design processes for team impact & happiness

Structure norms for collaboration, meetings, timezones

Takeaways

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Structure norms for collaboration, meetings, timezones

Invest in intentional culture

Takeaways

Design processes for team impact & happiness

Structure norms for collaboration, meetings, timezones

Invest in intentional culture

Incorporate in-person gatherings


Solicit feedback and iterate
to shape norms & culture
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BELONG
ANYWHER
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