

One of the commonly mentioned downsides of working remotely is the lack of casual conversations that happen in hallways or at the water cooler. Like the challenges that come with any change, we can either whine about our loss or be intentional about optimizing our new reality.

Here's one idea how to do that. You'll need to adapt it to your context and probably do some trial and error to make it work for your team. For some team members it might be a hard sell at first. But if you can get a core of people who are committed enough to work through the inevitable startup hurdles, you might find you've created a valuable culture-building tool.

### Creating a Virtual Water Cooler

I'll use Zoom<sup>1</sup> as an example, but other virtual meeting tools might also work.

1. Setup a recurring Zoom meeting that will always be available to serve as the "water cooler". Under *Advanced Options* check *Enable join before host*. Be sure the *Waiting Room* is not enabled. These settings let the meeting take place without a host present. Zoom provides options such as restricting access to authorized users and other security features if you need them.
2. Get your team to buy into the experiment and have each person commit to spending a minimum amount of time, perhaps 20 minutes each day, "at the water cooler". They can continue doing other things while they're connected, at least until someone else stops by for a conversation. They can also just pop by the water cooler to see who's there when they get a free minute between tasks. Like the in-person world, if you stick with it for a while people will begin to discover the best times when they're most likely to encounter others. With smaller teams you may need to encourage use at specific times to get multiple people together at once. Or use Slack or other communication tools to let others know when you'll be at the water cooler and invite them to join you. Or make it a game by giving points when someone catches you there.
3. Gather feedback and adjust until you dial it in to work for your team.



Option: You might consider having someone actually host this meeting space, at least during busy times. One advantage is that the host can facilitate sending subgroups of people into their own breakout rooms for private conversations. Just don't let the host control the conversation or bring an agenda. Keep the conversations casual.

### Why Bother?

High performance teams require trust. Trust is built through relationships. Relationships are strengthened when we see each other as human beings and not merely co-workers. Casual conversations expose us to each other's humanity.

If you try this, let me know how it goes by leaving a comment here. And please share other ways you've found to support relationship building among remote workers.

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<sup>1</sup> This example is based on the version of Zoom current as of this writing (5.2.1), so details may vary with future releases.