



How to create a company-wide, remote Open Space

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Distributed working is becoming the norm for many companies today, particularly in the tech field.

While the benefits are numerous (Such as focus, flexibility and efficiency), there are some real challenges. Communication, collaboration and human-connection are consistently [reported](#) as being difficult.

So how can remote organisations come together in healthy, organic ways? How can you gather everyone, in one place, to explore topics *they* care about, without the overhead of travel?

Welcome then to [Open Space](#) - a format which is truly inclusive and invites everyone's participation. And despite what you may think, it's something that can be held remotely too.



This year, eyeo held its first fully-remote, company-wide Open Space. Juggling time zones from Hawaii to Indonesia and finding remote collaboration tools that could handle an entire company were just a few factors that made the event complex.

But fun? Definitely. And we'll certainly be doing it all again.

As with most complex spaces, one can only plan and control so much, the rest is best understood through experimentation, feedback and iteration. Rather than keep our findings to ourselves, we want to share our learnings.

This guide is intended to help you get started. By the end, you'll discover:

1. How you can bring fresh energy and life to your distributed spaces.
2. What is needed to kick-off an Open Space remotely
3. What benefits Open Space can bring to you and your team

(Not got the time to read it all? Check out the TL;DR summary on the next page)



TL;DR: Questions to get your Open Space started:

Preparation is everything:

1. What question will spark passion and fuel discussion for a diverse group, spread across the world?
2. How can you identify unnecessary complexity and iterate towards simplicity?
3. How can you create energy and excitement for the event?

Navigating remote challenges:

4. How can you create an equal opportunity for everyone or contribute?
5. What can serve as an anchor for people?
6. How can you create an inclusive space for all timezones?
7. How can you leverage asynchronous collaboration in your Open Space?

Thinking about tooling:

8. What are the simplest tools you can use to achieve your purpose?
9. What backup plans can be put in place in case your tools encounter issues?
10. What might you be adding in the way of tools that creates more noise than value?
11. What instructions do people need in order to know how to navigate the tools?

Honouring the principles of Open Space:

12. What are you planning to do that might be something participants could do for themselves?
13. Where might chaos be helpful and where might it hurt?

Facilitation:

14. What virtual coffee cups can you find during the event?
15. How can you maintain energy and focus during the event in the simplest way?
16. What team is needed to make this event a success?

The work afterwards:

17. How can you create space for people to take responsibility?
18. What can you do when the event ends to bring the outcomes together?
19. How can you learn from the experience?
20. What do you need to do to take care of yourself and others after the event?

If you would like to see our artefacts, you can check them out here:

1. [Open Space Agenda](#) (zoom out to 50%)
2. [Our room posters](#)

If you find these tips useful, we'd love to hear from you. Tweet us at @eyeo to share your experiences.





Preparation is everything

The internet is rife with cliched, misattributed phrases. But one which stands out of relevance here is:

“Fail to prepare; prepare to fail.”

This is especially true when planning a remote Open Space. Ultimately, you’re inviting everyone you know to come to one place, and then to be engaged in discussions of their choosing.

There is a balance between preparation and leaving room for flexibility. However, we found that the remote aspects of this Open Space required a lot more upfront planning that a collocated event would.

Here are a few things to ask yourself, and how we thought about them.

What question will spark passion and fuel discussion for a diverse group, spread across the world?

- **Define and refine your purpose:** The first condition of an Open Space is that you have a meaningful and sufficiently complex problem to pursue. We spent a lot of time with our COO defining and refining a purpose that would bring this Open Space to life. This was especially relevant given our remote arrangement; when the potential for distraction and disconnection is high, a meaningful purpose brings everyone together.

How can you identify unnecessary complexity and iterate towards simplicity?



- **Test and iterate:** We went through many iterations of the basic mechanics (Such as the topic generation, idea marketplace and room posters). We would come up with something we loved, demo it to our colleagues, and get some brutal feedback that dashed our dreams (ok maybe not that dramatic, but sort of). Each time we demo-ed, our invisible assumptions became crystal clear. For example, we originally had five different time zones displayed in our agenda (in an attempt to bring awareness to different contexts); it turns out this was massively overwhelming to look at and created more confusion than anything. With each demo we stripped out complexity and refined the mechanics to their simplest essence.

How can you create energy and excitement for the event?

- **Over-communicate:** For events of this size, it's really important that people are aware and 'ready.' If someone arrives at work (virtually) and discovers that there is a two-day Open Space happening, it's unlikely they will be in the right mental space to participate. In distributed organisations this is particularly challenging as messages are easily missed. Our internal communications manager and C-suite helped us to spread the word. We sent emails, shared announcements in company meetings, created blog posts and spammed our internal chat tool channels starting about two months prior to this event.





Navigating remote challenges

So you're prepared and have a clear goal in mind. In the words of the great Bon Jovi: "We're halfway there."

Now comes the challenge of ensuring everyone, no matter where they are located, has an equal chance to participate in the Open Space.

Again, here are the questions we asked ourselves, and how we tackled these questions.

How can you create an equal opportunity for everyone or contribute?

- **Go fully remote:** For everyone to have a truly equal opportunity to contribute to a discussion, the setup of the space is crucial. And so, despite having some collocated colleagues, we decided to go fully remote.

One of our favourite things about this Open Space was what emerged as a result of being fully remote - people loved the inclusivity! As a company, we learned that being remote doesn't mean we can't feel connected and engaged, in fact many people said that this Open Space was one of the most engaging and high energy Open Spaces they've ever participated in.

What can serve as an anchor for people?

- **One home base:** Virtual collaboration can get messy because people can easily get lost without knowing where to go (as we witnessed during our demos). It was important that there was an anchor for people - somewhere they knew to return to that had everything they needed. As such, we put everything that was needed in our agenda and it became our homebase. This included:
 - Time Zone map
 - Room video-conferencing links
 - Room posters



- Homebase video-conferencing links (where we met to open, for news and to close)
- Homebase posters (where people could post their room posters once a session concluded)

How can you create an inclusive space for all timezones?

- **Timezones:** One of the first challenges we encountered in planning this Open Space was timezones. At eyeo, we have people working all over the world and we could not possibly ask people to work through the night just to participate. Our attempt to solve this proved mildly useful.

We experimented with an Open Space that followed the sun: once we opened the space, it was open for 48 hours and anyone could pitch a session at any time. We made this visible on the agenda and encouraged people to step outside their normal routine to interact with people they didn't usually get to. This happened to a small degree. We joined a few sessions in our pyjamas with cups of tea and we loved it. However, due to the fact that most of our staff live within Europe, the vast majority of sessions fell within very European timezones and we weren't able to bring our Western and Eastern colleagues in to the same degree.

How can you leverage asynchronous collaboration in your Open Space?

- **Asynchronicity:** Partially in response to timezone challenges, our Open Space experimented with holding asynchronous sessions: sessions which ran via text in a document for a prolonged period of time.

While we didn't do many of these, a few emerged and this was really interesting to observe. We even added a column to our agenda for 'async sessions.' While some parts of eyeo are very experienced in this style of communication, the Open Space was a chance for a broader group to experiment with it and leverage some of the benefits. The document trails from these sessions were fantastic!





Thinking about Tooling

Preparation - check. Remote coverage - check. Now it's time to get into tooling.

Here's what worked for us, and why we chose the paths we did.

What are the simplest tools you can use to achieve your purpose?

- **Tools should be invisible:** During our preparation, choosing the right tools seemed to be the main issue. Since there are many fancy remote collaboration tools out there, we experimented (and fell in love) with a whole bunch.

However, what we came to learn is that tools should actually just be the supporting act. They should blend into the background and be so smooth and simple that they go unnoticed.

What matters most is that people are able to do what they need to as seamlessly as possible. Every moment of friction or confusion with a tool detracts from the interaction at hand. So we decided to strip away all complexity and use tools we all know well: Google Documents. We used Google Sheets to build our agenda, Google Forms to submit topics, and our existing video-conferencing tool to manage rooms.

What backup plans can you put in place in case your tools encounter unexpected issues?

- **Limits and backup plans:** All tools have a limit, even if the very companies who create them say they do not. We thoroughly tested all our tools prior to the Open Space and worked with service providers to understand limits and still we encountered unforeseen limits (in the first 15 minutes of the Open Space). Luckily



we managed to self-organise and made a plan. However, these limits could have been a real problem.

A little more on how we chose tools:

- Before the time we knew that Google Sheets had a co-editing limit of 50 people. We chose Google Sheets as this limit is quite high compared to a lot of other tools (without any impact on performance).
- We used Google Forms for people to submit topics - the whole company was not able to co-edit the agenda due to Google Sheets limits. As each person created a topic, we added them individually as editors and from then on they were able to move things around on the agenda. We wish we could have given the entire group edit rights.
- Google Slides (which we used for room posters) has a co-editing limit of 100 people which is really important because we wanted everyone to feel that they could add their thoughts to posters and not be hindered in any way.

What might you be adding in the way of tools that creates more noise than value?

- **Visualising space:** We experimented with Sococo as a means for people to feel connected to a 'physical space' - an important aspect of an Open Space. However, partially due to the way we explained the tool, partially due to unforeseen room limitations, and partially due to the lack of necessity for this tool, it didn't add that much value. It allowed for some spontaneous moments of connection and it also created a lot of confusion for other people. We will definitely rethink it next time.

What instructions do people need in order to know how to navigate the tools?

- **The need for over-explaining:** Traditionally in an Open Space, the opening is simplified as much as possible to allow the group to get on with what they need to do. That means the facilitator sets the tone, explains the basics (Open Space principles and 1 law) and then gets out of the way.

However, we couldn't quite do that as the tooling aspect of being remote required more explanation. While we tried, we didn't quite communicate how to interact with the tools as well as we could have.

We briefly demo-ed each aspect of the interaction in the Opening: writing a topic,



putting in on the agenda, moving session, going to rooms and adding to posters. Even though this felt very boring to explain, it was not something that people would know how to navigate in the absence of instructions.

If you would like to see our artefacts, you can check them out here:

3. [Open Space Agenda](#) (zoom out to 50%)
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Honouring the Principles of Open Space

This was something that was super close to our hearts the whole way through. We (the facilitators) kept asking ourselves:

- Is what we're doing still true to Open Space?
- Are we adding this 'thing' because it's genuinely going to *open space* for people or do we risk *closing space* by doing this?

There are no right or wrong answers here, but here are our top tips.

What are you planning to do that might be something participants could do for themselves?

- **Allow self-organisation to emerge:** This feels scarier in a remote space because you can't see people in between sessions (and even during sessions depending on the tool you use, you only see a small cross-section of the whole).

"So hear this deeply: you (the facilitator) are not in control. Everything you do for the group is one less thing they know they can do for themselves." [Chris Corrigan](#).

As facilitators, we were very cautious of robbing people of the chance to self organise, of accidentally crowding the space. So we tried to strip out as much as possible. To name just two things we saw emerge

- **A "Q"ing system:** We knew managing talking order in big groups would be messy. We're facilitators by profession and have ideas for helping this. However, people can solve this too and so we left it unsolved and sure enough a "queuing mechanism" emerged in one session and organically, in a matter of hours, had spread throughout eyeo. Wow! Soon in almost every call, people were putting a "q" in the chat to say that they wanted to speak. Had we told people to do "X" it would never have spread in this way. People needed to experience the problem and the solution for themselves and they



did. No one can take this learning away from people now. Everyone at eyeo learned about facilitation in this Open Space

- **An Asynchronous Marketplace:** In a traditional Open Space, once topics have been shared and a basic agenda built - the group enters a “marketplace phase”, wherein they shuffle and negotiate the agenda to fit their needs. While we intended to do this marketplace in our Opening, we completely ran out of time: once topics had been pitched and added to the agenda, we did not have time for people to move the agenda around.

So we conducted the marketplace entirely asynchronously, and it actually worked well enough. We invited people to continue the discussion about which topics they would like to move and to when, via our company messaging tool. People self-organised offline and the agenda evolved into something that suited our needs well enough (throughout the Open Space it continued to shift). Had we done it synchronously (in the Opening), it might have felt a little tedious, or maybe it would have been better. However, whatever happens is the only thing that could and our asynchronous marketplace served our needs - we created an agenda.

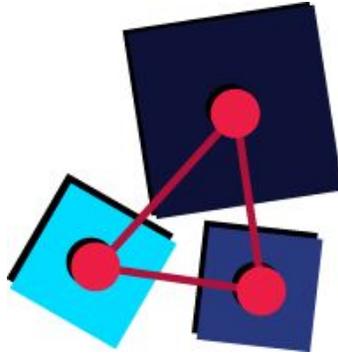
Where might chaos be helpful and where might it hurt?

- **Embrace chaos:** This is a tricky one and one that we personally battled with. Some of the wisdom of Open Space is that a little chaos is needed for new things to emerge. We cannot expect fresh ideas to blossom from stale forms (You can go deeper into this in [The Tao of Holding Space](#)).

That means we will encounter unexpected things, we need to prepare to be surprised. This is easy to say but really hard to live by and be truly comfortable with, especially in a remote space in which things can feel even more 'out of control.'

The level of chaos was just a bit too much for some people and we acknowledge that feeling. There's a balance to be struck between utter chaos and creative chaos. We chose to err on the side of leaving as much space as possible.





Facilitation

So what do you, as the facilitator, do in a Remote Open Space?

Here's a few things we did, and learned.

What virtual coffee cups can you find during the event?

- **Picking up virtual coffee cups:** In [Harrison Owen's writing on Open Space](#), he says the facilitator's primary role is to pick up coffee cups. This is literal and symbolic.

Our role was 100% to serve the needs of the group and to stay out of their way so that our presence in no way crowded the space. It's like when the teacher walked over to your desk in school, your behaviour changed. We didn't want our presence to affect people's behaviour in any way (even though we hopefully weren't seen in the same light as school teachers).

So we tried to preoccupy ourselves with picking up virtual coffee cups. And the space was flooded with them! From people needing access, losing links, struggling to find documents or needing a sounding board for a topic they wanted to pitch, you name it - we received all kinds of messages. And this kept us busy almost ALL day. It was not big or complex work, it was just picking up virtual coffee cups for the group.

How can you maintain energy and focus during the event in the simplest way?

- **Maintaining energy and focus:** The moments in which we intentionally stepped out of the shadows and took centre stage was to share announcements pertaining to the whole group. These were important announcements and beyond radiating



information, they kept the energy up. At the start of both days we shared a quick "What you can expect from today" write up and at the bottom restated all the important links (agenda etc.). Another such announcement was our evening news.

What team is needed to make this event a success?

- **Pairing:** We could not have done this alone. The complexity of facilitating a remote group of this size was far too much for one person to handle. So two of us did this together and we each held different aspects of space. I, Kirsten, cared for the psychological space in the opening and directed 100% of my attention to my language and the space I was creating. My friend Anna-Maria cared for the technical space and attended to all tooling and digital aspects. We also had an awesome backup team (including Greg, Frank, Ashley and Rikki) who were on standby to help where needed.





The Work Afterwards

Over the course of the Open Space, there were a lot of conversations, ideas thoughts to take away and internalize.

Here are the questions we asked ourselves when determining how to keep the post-Open Space energy high.

How can you create space for people to take responsibility?

- **Responsibility and passion:** Harrison Owen says, "Without passion nobody cares, and without responsibility nothing gets done." Our Open Space was built on this and so while we created a repository of all posters and outcomes, we trust that those who are passionate and feel responsible will drive actions forward. We've already seen some things come to life and actions were already taken even within the space.

What can you do when the event ends to bring the outcomes together?

- **Sharing outcomes:** We love the idea of publishing a newspaper after an Open Space and so we created our own Open Space Times with some of the highlights from the Open Space. This wasn't designed to re-articulate outcomes, but rather to serve as a final central home for all resources and to re-inspire people a little towards action.

How can you learn from the experience?

- **Feedback:** As we mentioned, everyone has different needs and perspectives and so we really wanted to get a sense for how people found the Open Space. We loved it



but that didn't mean everyone else did. So we sent out a simple survey asking people to share:

- Their experience from 1-10
- Something they loved
- Something they'd have liked to be different
- A moment that stood out
- Anything else they'd like to share

What do you need to do to take care of yourself and others after the event?

- **Sleeeeeeep!** We were exhausted after this. The work that goes into holding space open, both psychologically and physically (the virtual coffee cups) consumed us for 48 hours and when we were done, we all felt truly exhausted and in awe of the immense creativity and power of people.



And there you have it!

That's our rather long run through how we planned and executed our remote, company wide Open Space.

We hope you've got some food for thought on how you could run your own Open Space. Got comments, questions, stories or suggestions? Reach out to us on Twitter @eyeo.

