5 ICEBREAKERS FOR DISTRIBUTED TEAMS

Icebreakers help people get to know each other and become comfortable communicating with each other. Professional facilitators will use an ice breaker any time they bring together a new team or start a group on a new process.

When a group works together in the same location, most team leaders will skip icebreakers during meetings. With everyone in the same place, leaders assume the group will get to know each other outside of the meeting by chatting at their desks, in the halls, and on breaks.

When you run online meetings with people who are located in different parts of the world, though, it's even more crucial that you dedicate time to helping your team make a human connection.

Icebreakers are just the ticket: short team-building exercises conducted at the beginning of a meeting.

Because you don't have a physical way to get people moving around the same room, you have to adapt traditional icebreakers to work over distance.

This guide outlines five icebreakers designed to connect distributed teams to each other and their work together.
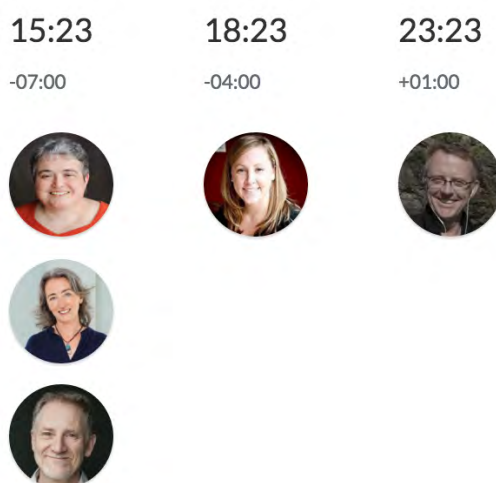
Icebreakers for Brand New Teams

Where are We?

If you have a geographically distributed team, find out the (approximate) locations of the team members beforehand, and make a map. Show the map during the meeting, and ask team members something simple, like how long they've lived in their current city.

A key benefit of visualizing the team's location this way is talking about time. Because your distributed team may span timezones, this is one very concrete way to understand how those timezones are laid out.

Tip: To quickly create a map for your team, enter each person's city location on Google Map or another online mapping service, then "print" the result to PDF. Alternatively, use a service like Timezone.io to visualize the time zones for a team.

You may also ask participants to do something simple and visual, like sharing a picture of their favorite local park, or taking a picture of what they see out the window. While this can lead to a discussion of, "Gee, what's the weather like where you are," you'll find that these pictures communicate more about what it's like to live and work from each location than you can get from just a dot on a map.

Gifts & Hooks

Michael Wilkinson, a Certified Master Facilitator, wrote up a strategy called Gifts and Hooks (PDF link). It's a brilliant way to bring together team members who may be suspicious of team-building activities — those folks who see such things as a waste of time.

In Gifts and Hooks, the facilitator explains that team members bring gifts to the table (their skills, knowledge, etc.), but they also need hooks — things the person needs in order to remain fully engaged. Team members write down both their gifts and their hooks, then the facilitator sets up a round-robin to discuss these. At the end, the big questions come: "What does this tell us about our team?" and "What do we need to keep in mind as we move forward?"

Icebreakers for Getting to Know Each Other Better

Take a Picture of … Your Shoes, Your Favorite Shirt, an Object in Your Work Area

Ask team members to take a picture of their shoes (or one of the alternate ideas above), then upload those pictures in the meeting. Ask each person to share a bit about the picture they chose. You'll be surprised at how much some people will want to discuss their shoes; these are tools they use every day!

What's Your Favorite Meal?

(Variation: "Tell us about a meal you enjoyed recently.")

This icebreaker gives the participant plenty of room to express his or her culinary interests and food culture. A common outcome of this activity is a request for photos of the meal, recipe sharing, or discussion of cooking.

Icebreakers for Improving How We Work Together

Remote Work Wins (& Fails)

If your team is fully distributed, ask each person to share a strategy or tool they've discovered that they've found particularly helpful in their remote work setup. Alternatively, ask people to share something they tried that turned out to be a bad idea.

Listening to each person's tips gives everyone else a sense of how that person works, and what helps them be productive. This question can also reveal some really useful remote work strategies that others on the team will adopt into their own routines.

Product, Team, Company Trivia Game

If your team works on a product or a long-running project, you can create a simple trivia game (multiple-choice is a good idea; it's easier for everybody). This requires some homework on the part of the organizer, as he or she needs to know the right answer! While the questions should be tailored to your situation, here are some broad categories to try:

- **Time:** Ask about which team member has been working on the project the longest, or the number of days since the project launched, or the date on which the first code check-in took place.

- **Quantity:** Especially in technical projects, there are lots of statistics you can gather from systems like version tracking and ticketing systems. Asking, "What's the oldest open ticket in the bug-tracker?" can induce groans, but it also can lead to a productive discussion and funny stories.

- **The Team:** If you know who has been with the company the longest, or who has closed (...or opened) the most tickets, or similar kinds of metrics, you may construct questions in order to basically congratulate these people. Try to find a way to represent as many team members as possible as "right answers".

MORE ICEBREAKERS & TEAM BUILDING RESOURCES FOR DISTRIBUTED TEAMS

Websites

- MindTools,
  Virtual Ice Breakers: Help Remote Teams Break the Ice
  https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/virtual-ice-breakers.htm

- Vorkspace,
  Best team building activities for REMOTE teams!
  http://vorkspace.com/blog/index.php/best-team-building-activities-for-remote-teams/

- When I Work,
  An Epic List of Great Team Building Games
  http://wheniwork.com/blog/team-building-games/

Books

- John Chen,
  "**50 Digital Team-Building Games: Fast, Fun Meeting Openers, Group Activities and Adventures using Social Media, Smart Phones, GPS, Tablets, and More**", 2012
  http://www.amazon.com/Digital-Team-Building-Games-Activities-Adventures/dp/1118180933/

- Mary Scannell, Michael Abrams, Mike Mulvihill,
  "**Big Book of Virtual Teambuilding Games**"
  http://www.amazon.com/Book-Virtual-Teambuilding-Games-Communication/dp/0071774351

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