SOAPBOX

The 2019
State of One-on-ones

A report on how managers approach one-on-one meetings.

Introduction

Managers are the unsung heroes in today's workforce. They're the main driver of an employee's happiness, performance and engagement at work. For the past 20 years, managers have accounted for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores[1]. On top of that, a study by TinyPulse found that 40% of employees who did not rate their manager's performance highly had interviewed for a new job in the last three months, compared to just 10% for those who rated their manager highly[2].

Managers have the most power to influence how engaged employees are at work. While there are many factors that determine what makes a great manager, we focused this study on the meetings where managers and employees spend the most time together: one-on-ones. For the purpose of this report, we solely focused on one-on-ones from the manager's perspective.

This report analyzes data from over 200 managers across multiple industries, with varying years of experience and offers in-depth insights on how managers approach one-on-one meetings. Some of the key aspects covered include:

- Purpose and goals of one-on-one meetings
- How remote managers have one-on-one meetings vs. onsite managers
- How different departments approach one-on-ones
- How organization size and industry affects one-on-ones

"Most managers start their people leadership journeys with zero training. Zero coaching, zero tools and zero experience. They're left to their own devices to figure out an entirely new set of skills: leading others.

After 10 years in the management space, we've learned that the biggest opportunity a manager has to impact the performance and engagement of an employee is during one-on-one meetings.

We've also learned that for many managers, this time is often disorganized and unproductive. But how can we help a group of under-serviced super-powerful people in today's workplace level-up their one-on-ones?

That's why we've put together this report. We believe the findings in this report are extremely important for new and existing managers looking to find their groove. We're aiming to understand the state of management through the one-on-one lens and hope that as a result, managers reading this can build on the patterns that have proven successful for others."

Brennan McEachran

CEO and Co-Founder, SoapBox

[1] https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/182792/managers-account-variance-employee-engagement.aspx

[2] https://www.inc.com/marcel-schwantes/why-do-people-quit-their-jobs-exactly-new-research-points-finger-at-5-common-reasons.html

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Executive Summary

Throughout the analysis of survey results, there are five overarching themes when it comes to how different managers approach one-on-one meetings.
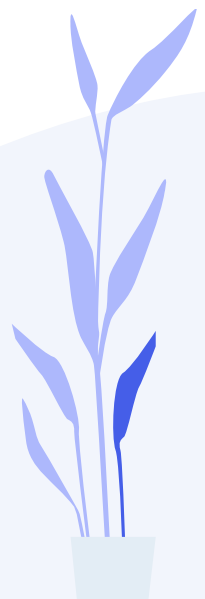
KEY INSIGHT #1

75% of managers discuss growth and development within their one-on-one meetings.

Conversations around growth and development are critical to understanding how a direct report is feeling about their role and how they would like to progress within an organization. One-on-ones give managers the opportunity to facilitate that growth, keeping direct reports more engaged within the workplace.

During your next one-on-one, try asking more questions related to growth and development. Below are a few to help get you started:

- What areas of the company would you like to learn more about?
- What skills would you like to develop right now?
- What professional goals would you like to accomplish in the next 6 to 12 months, and what makes you say that?
- Do you feel you're getting enough feedback on your work? If not, where would you like more feedback?
- Who in the company would you like to learn from? What do you want to learn from them?
- If I could improve one skill between this meeting and the next, which would you choose?

Remote managers experience more team-related challenges, whereas onsite managers experience more personal productivity challenges.

We compared the top challenges among remote and onsite managers against one another.

My top challenge as a manager is:

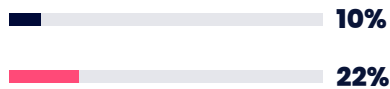● Onsite Managers　　● Remote Managers

Juggling managing my team with my other responsibilities.

72%

39%

SOLUTION

Build your team's skills up so that you're able to trust them with more tasks. And then actually trust them. This will allow you to delegate more of your work and can help ease this challenge.
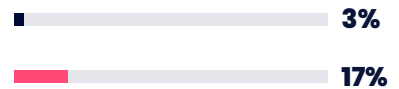
Getting my team to collaborate with one another.

10%

22%

SOLUTION

Focus on fostering a culture of communication and collaboration amongst your team. This can be done by having team-specific Slack channels, or by using other collaboration tools that focus on building products that promote better communication.

Retaining my employees.

3%

17%

SOLUTION

Be transparent with your employees. This will help build a more trusting relationship between you and your direct reports. Another proactive way to retain your employees is to meet frequently with your team in both one-on-one and team settings. This will allow you to continuously gauge how engaged your team is and how you can help keep them engaged.

Regardless of tenure, count of direct reports, company size, industry, or department, managers most commonly have one-on-ones on a weekly basis.

How frequently are you having one-on-ones?

From the 49% of managers having one-on-one meetings on a weekly basis, 59% have them for 30 minutes.

For the next month, if you're not already, try having your one-on-ones on a weekly cadence for 30 minutes. Let your direct reports own this meeting. After the month, adjust as you see fit.
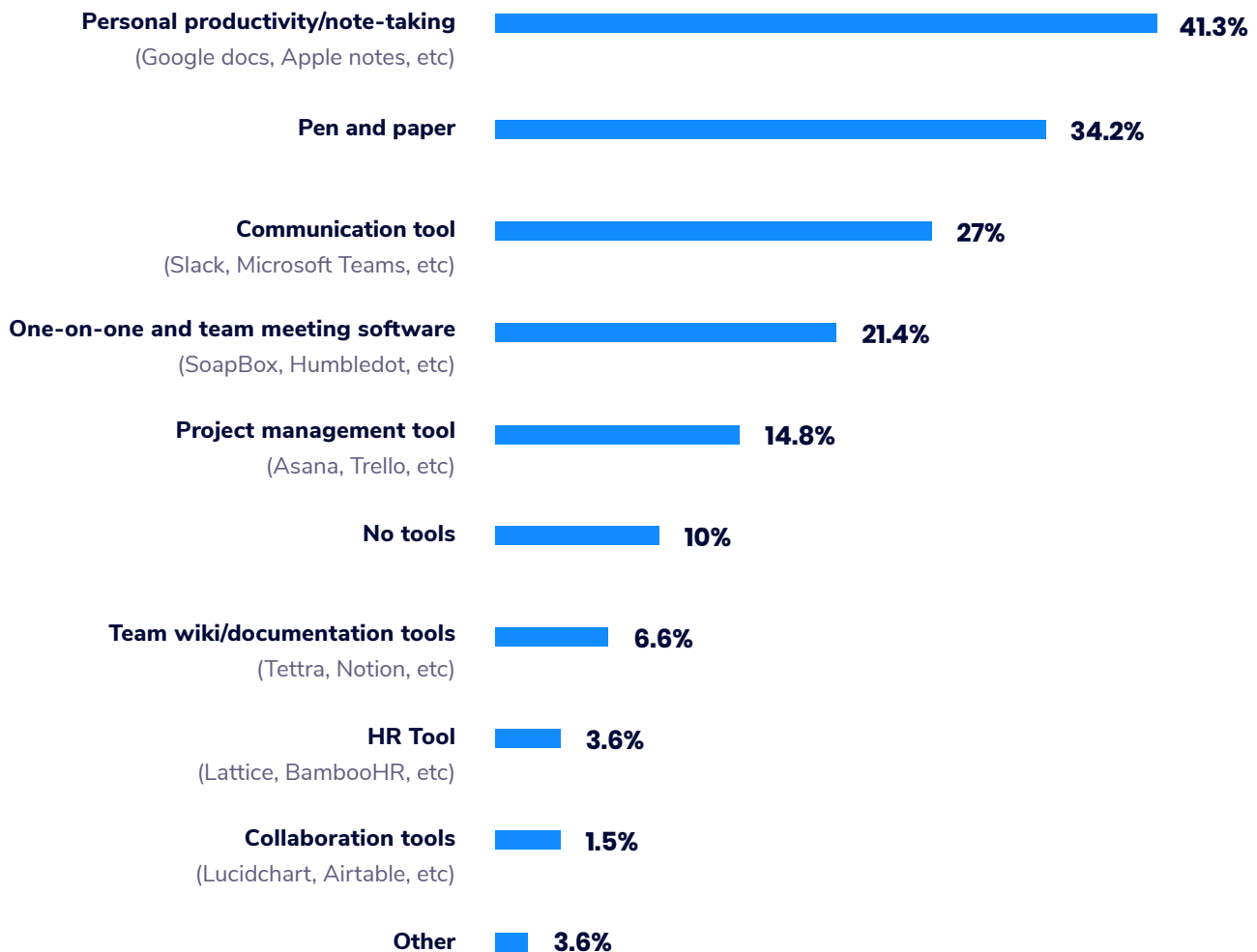
3%
Quarterly

15%
Monthly

49%
Weekly

33%
Bi-Weekly
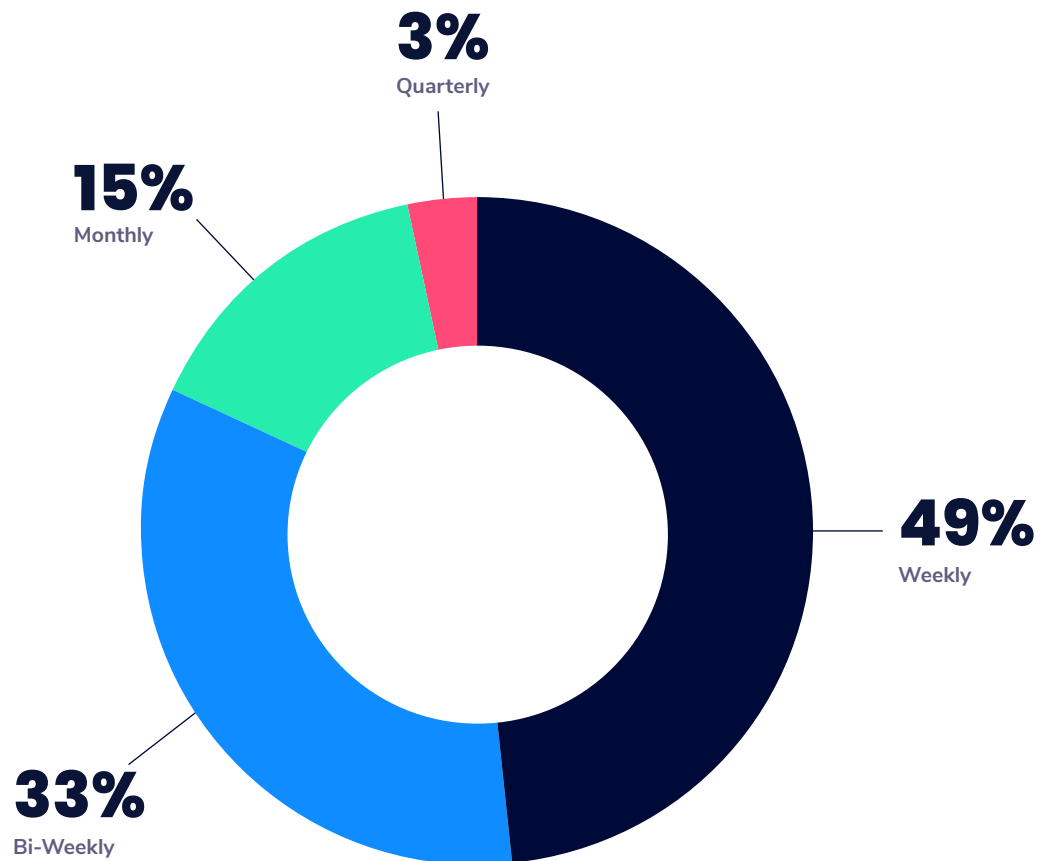
The majority of managers are using personal productivity tools to facilitate their one-on-one meetings.

What type of tool do you primarily use for agendas and notes for one-on-ones and team meetings?*

Survey respondents were able to select multiple answers.

21.4% of managers use a purpose-built tool for their one-on-one meetings. If you feel like your one-on-one meetings could be better, take some time to research what tools are available to you. Consider tools that integrate with your current tech-stack, so you're not adding more technology than needed to your day-to-day. Try at least one new tool out in the next month and adjust as you see fit.

Personal productivity/note-taking
(Google docs, Apple notes, etc)
41.3%

Pen and paper
34.2%

Communication tool
(Slack, Microsoft Teams, etc)
27%

One-on-one and team meeting software
(SoapBox, Humbledot, etc)
21.4%

Project management tool
(Asana, Trello, etc)
14.8%

No tools
10%

Team wiki/documentation tools
(Tettra, Notion, etc)
6.6%

HR Tool
(Lattice, BambooHR, etc)
3.6%

Collaboration tools
(Lucidchart, Airtable, etc)
1.5%

Other
3.6%

Overall, Slack is the most dominant tool that managers use to communicate with their teams.

As organizations grow in size, more people often come with more processes and procedures which means communication takes on a formal form of email. Email is great for documentation and important discussions, but can be cumbersome for making fast decisions and simple requests. If you're a manager in a large organization using email as a primary tool to communicate with your team, try shifting quick conversations for speed and efficiency to a team Slack or Microsoft Teams channel.

TOOL	1-50	51-500	501+
Email	13.4%	19.1%	**50.9%**
Slack	**74.6%**	**57.1%**	23.6%
Microsoft Teams	6%	15.5%	16.4%
Skype	1.5%	2.4%	5.5%
Zoom	3%	0%	0%
Facebook Workplace	1.5%	0%	3.6%
Other	0%	5.9%	0%
TOP TOOLS	slack	slack	Email

The 2019 State of One-on-ones Respondents

We surveyed more than 200 managers to learn about how they approach one-on-ones, their goals, challenges and more. We've grouped our findings into the following sections:

- **The State of One-on-ones**
- **The State of One-on-ones: The Comparisons**
- **Methodology**

Where does the data come from?

200+ managers

Across 30+ industries

Collectively managing 985 direct reports

Collectively 1280+ years of management experience

About the survey respondents

INDUSTRY

50%	Software and Tech
9%	Business Services/Consulting
6%	Education
6%	Financial Services & Insurance
5%	Healthcare
5%	Other
4%	Media
4%	Internet
3%	Retail
2%	Not-for-profit
1%	Legal services & Law

SENIORITY LEVEL

51%	Manager or Team Lead
29%	Director or Head
8%	Vice President
7%	C-Suite
3%	Associate
2%	Analyst

DEPARTMENT

33%	Operations, HR, People & Finance
38%	Marketing, Sales & Customer Success/Support
23%	Engineering, Product & Design
6%	Other

MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE

33%	0-2 years
32%	3-5 years
18%	6-10 years
17%	11+ years

 # OF DIRECT REPORTS

39%	1-3
37%	4-6
24%	7+

COMPANY SIZE

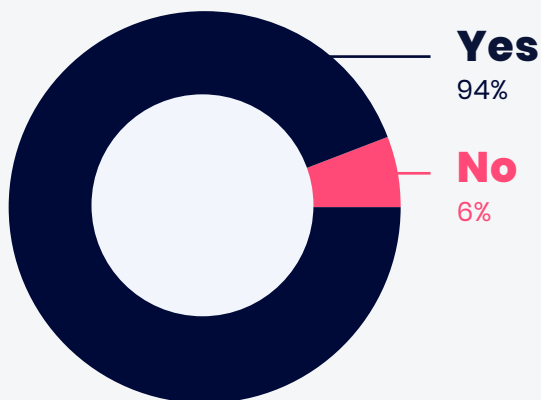|	
32%	1-50
41%	51-500
27%	501+

The State
of One-on-ones
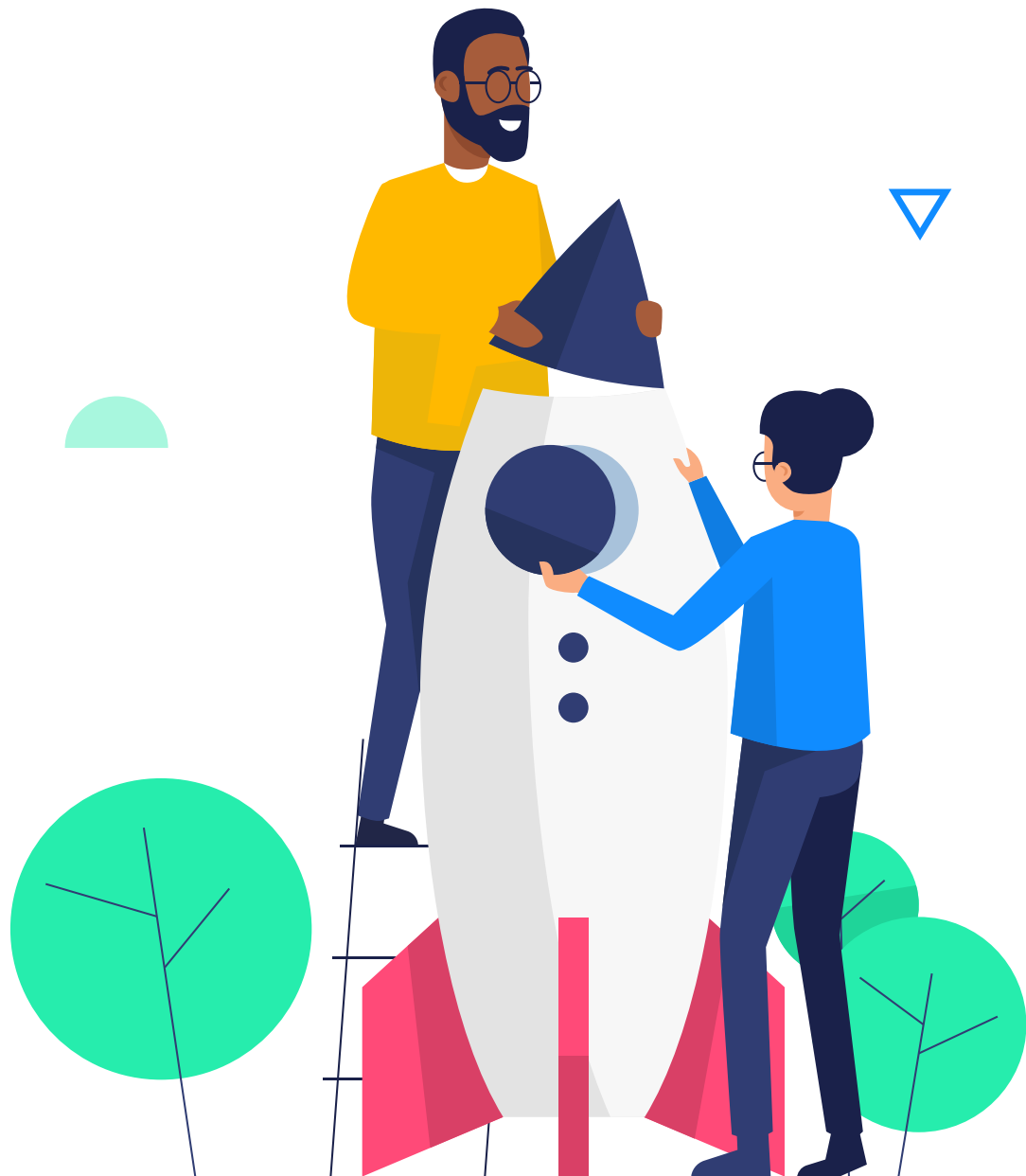
The State of
One-on-ones
Overview

This section outlines the basic understanding of who is having one-on-one meetings, how frequently and for how long.

Yes
94%

No
6%

Are managers having one-on-ones?

Of the 6% who said they aren't having one-on-one meetings, the most common responses for not having them were:

- I don't have time
- The line of communication is always open
- If my direct reports want time with me they can just book it

One-on-ones are an 'intimate' space between managers and employees

"It's intimate. It's dedicated to just you and the other person. It's super high bandwidth for complex and uncertain content, especially emotions, hopes, and fears."

Mark Rabkin

Vice President,
AR/VR Experiences, Facebook[3]

[3] **https://medium.com/@mrabkin/the-art-of-the-awkward-1-1-f4e1dcbd1c5c**

How frequently do these meetings occur?

The majority (28.6%) of managers have 30 minute weekly one-on-one meetings.

14%
Monthly

3%
Quarterly

34%
Bi-Weekly

49%
Weekly

How frequently are you having one-on-ones?

10%
15 minutes

1%
More than 1 hour

14%
45 minutes

19%
1 hour

57%
30 minutes

How long are your one-on-one meetings?
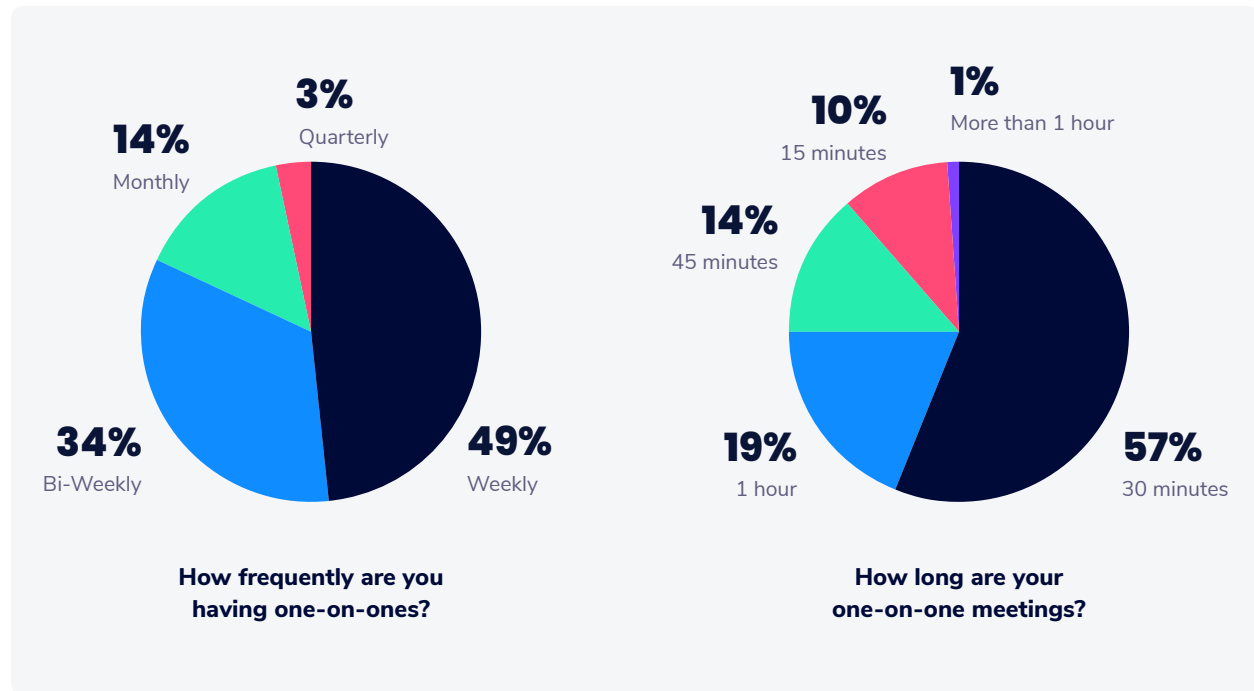
"My one-on-ones are scheduled for 30 minutes. Sometimes they run a bit longer, particularly with my direct reports who have people management responsibilities."

Lindsay Holmwood
Engineering Manager at Envato[4]

"This depends on the frequency, the person and the need. At least 30 minutes, but can be more based on the needs of the person that week. If the conversation is on career development, I will book at least an hour."

Bronwyn Smith
VP of Business Operations at Influitive[5]

[4] https://soapboxhq.com/blog/meetings/how-envato-does-remote-one-on-ones-meetings
[5] https://soapboxhq.com/blog/meetings/influitive-one-on-one-meetings

Who owns the meeting agenda?

Many management authorities believe that it's the role of the employee to dictate the meeting agenda as it's their dedicated time with their manager. However, 48.5% of managers polled state that that responsibility is shared equally.
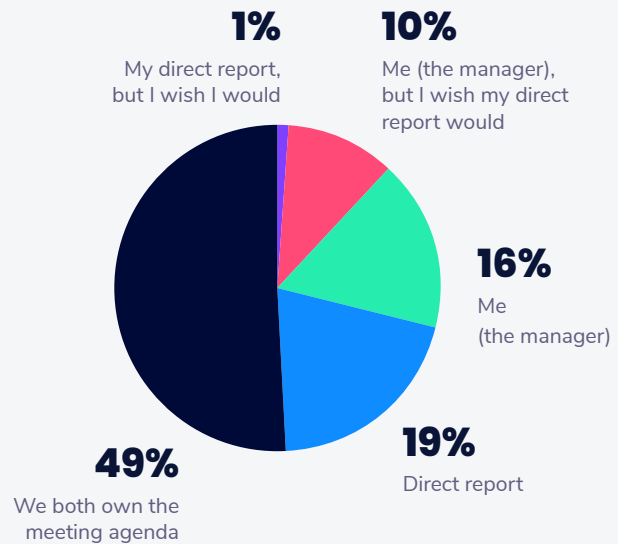
1%
My direct report, but I wish I would

10%
Me (the manager), but I wish my direct report would

16%
Me (the manager)

19%
Direct report

49%
We both own the meeting agenda

"I want my direct reports to really understand that my job is to help them be successful and to meet their own goals and dreams. By spending time learning about what matters to them and showing them that I really care about that, they trust me enough to tell me when things aren't going well for them, giving me the chance to help them."

Kara McNair
former Engineering Manager at Buffer[6]

For managers struggling to get employees to contribute to the meeting agenda, try:

- Letting them know that this is their time with you and to come prepared with things they'd like to talk about during the meeting
- Being vulnerable and transparent
- Having a shared agenda that will allow them (and you) to prepare in advance for the meeting

[6] https://soapboxhq.com/blog/meetings/how-envato-does-remote-one-on-ones-meetings

One-on-ones: Goals

According to Gallup's State of The American Manager report, "managers who want to build stronger relationships with their employees should make regular meetings a priority, but they should also strive to communicate, in some way, with each team member every day[7]."

One-on-ones are one of the greatest opportunities managers have to build rapport with their team, and keep employees focused, productive and engaged. They're also a great time to give and receive feedback in an environment where employees can feel more comfortable and safe to do so (so long as you make it safe!). But, just because one-on-ones are important, doesn't mean they're easy.

"My actions and behaviours set the boundaries for what you think is acceptable during our 1:1s. If I want you to be vulnerable, I have to be vulnerable first."

Lindsay Holmwood
Engineering Manager at Envato[4]

[7] **https://www.gallup.com/services/182138/state-american-manager.aspx**

One-on-ones: What's the goal?

For most managers, there are multiple reasons to have one-on-one meetings.
Here are the most important to them:

70%

Understand and eliminate roadblocks

61%

Pulse check (i.e. Are they engaged, happy, upset?)

54%

Status update (i.e. How are specific projects coming along?)

50%

Talk about career growth (i.e. Where their career going and how to get there)

35%

The goal isn't set by the manager, but by the direct report

4%

Other

At SoapBox, we advocate that managers avoid using one-on-ones as a time for status updates. It's hard not to turn these meetings into status updates, we know. In fact, it's a common challenge that managers experience when it comes to the conversation within a one-on-one meeting.

This can be even more challenging during one-on-ones with employees that cling to status updates as a way to avoid more personal topics. You don't want to force them out of their comfort zone.

Try reminding them (and yourself) the goal of the meeting and how it can benefit them to move away from status updates on a frequent basis.

> *"If you are not careful, 1:1s can end up being status updates. Or the manager can take over the meeting. This isn't their purpose. It's important to make sure the employee and their needs stay front and centre."*

Bronwyn Smith

VP of Business Operations at Influitive[5]

What's being discussed in one-on-ones?

The most discussed topics are growth and development and performance.

The least discussed topic is a direct report's alignment to the company vision.

75%
of managers discuss **growth and development**

25%
Don't

56%
of managers discuss **performance**

42%
Don't

49%
discuss employee **motivation**

51%
Don't

47%
talk about an **employee's connection to the people and work within the company**

53%
Don't

45%
discuss topics related to **autonomy** and **accountability**

55%
Don't

23%
discuss an **employee's alignment to the company mission and vision**

77%
Don't

One-on-ones: Challenges

In this section, we will cover the challenges that managers face collectively when it comes to their roles as managers and their one-on-one meetings.

What do managers find challenging?

4%
Other

10%
Understanding how my direct report is feeling overall

34%
Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct reports

13%
Making time for one-on-ones

22%
Getting my direct reports to contribute to the agenda

16%
Having meaningful, productive conversations

One-on-one challenges

Other challenges include:

- Setting follow-ups and near-term objectives that stem from the conversation (and keeping track of them)
- Getting direct reports excited about one-on-ones
- Providing direct reports with hard feedback

Making time for one-on-ones means you'll have more time for everything else!

8. https://hbr.org/2015/03/cancelling-one-on-one-meetings-destroys-your-productivity

Top challenges when it comes to being a manager

4%
Retaining my employees

3%
Other

11%
Getting my team to collaborate with one another

68%
Juggling managing my team with my other responsibilities

14%
Hitting team goals

Top manager challenges

Other challenges include:

- Handling constantly changing priorities in a way that doesn't overwhelm the team
- Hiring the right people
- Keeping direct reports engaged

"Most managers start as great individual contributors, then get promoted and given a team of people to manage which requires an entirely different set of skills. It's something most of us learn by trial and error, which unfortunately is at the detriment of our teams until we get it right."

Shannon Maloney
Senior Digital Marketing Manager, SoapBox

One-on-ones: Meeting Tech Stack

From project management tools to video conferencing apps, there's a lot of technology out there to help managers and their teams be more productive. Considering that most managers find juggling both managing their team with their other responsibilities as one of the most challenging parts of their job, it's important to understand what tools are at their disposal to help address this.

Communication tools

Below is a breakdown of the tools that managers use most often to communicate with their team:

Slack	**54%**
Email	**27%**
Microsoft Teams	**13%**
Skype	**3%**
Facebook Workplace	**1%**
Zoom	**1%**
Other	**1%**
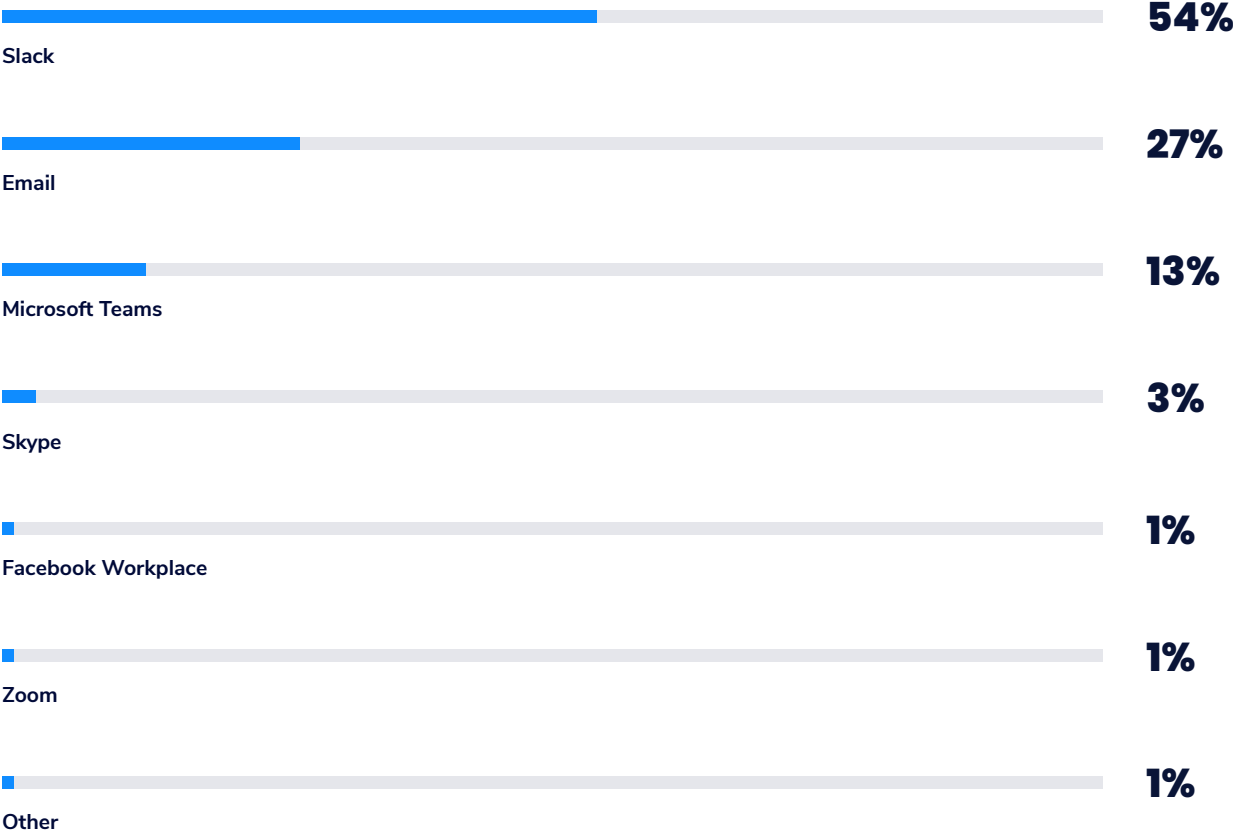
slack

Slack is the most used communication tool by managers.
However, as an organization size grows, more managers move towards using email as their primary communication tool.

Communication tools:
Onsite managers vs. remote managers

In breaking down technology usage by remote vs. on-site managers we discovered:

Slack — **54%**

Email — **27%**

Microsoft Teams — **13%**

Skype — **3%**

Facebook Workplace — **1%**

Zoom — **1%**

Other — **1%**
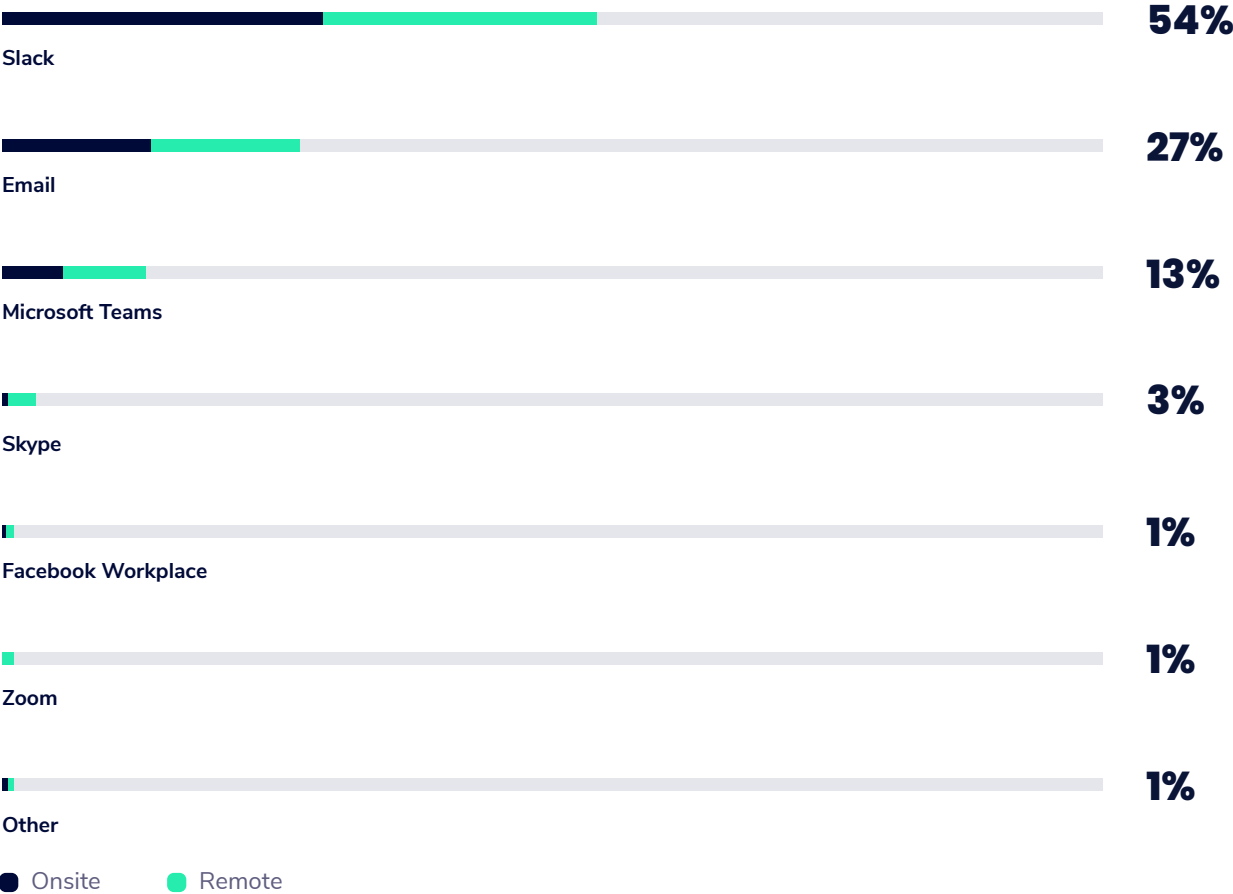
● Onsite   ● Remote

Of survey respondents that said Zoom was a communication tool used often with their team, 100% were remote managers

83% of respondents saying Skype was a primary communication tool were remote managers

Both on-site and remote managers equally use email as a primary tool for communicating with their teams

Communication tools: Usage by department

Slack is the most used communication tool across every department.

Slack usage by department*

68%
Customer Success/Support

60%
Marketing

87%
Engineering

39%
HR + People

38%
Operations

65%
Product

46%
Sales
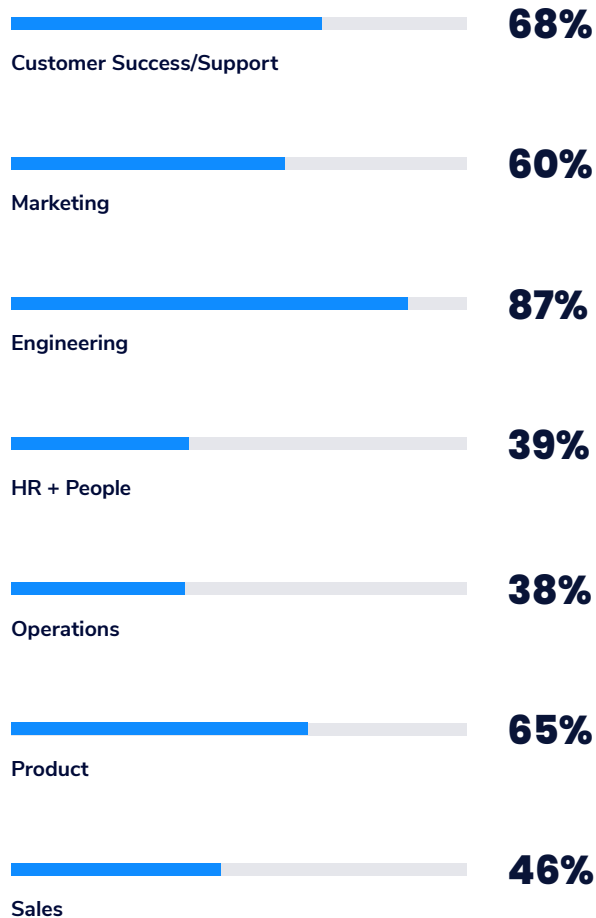
* There were other departments that responded to the survey including design, leadership and finance. However, there wasn't enough sufficient data to include them in this specific chart.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Managers who use Slack rely it on as their primary communication tool over email (57.5% average across all departments prefer Slack vs. 25.3% who prefer email)

- Of all department polled, more than 50% of managers in CS, Marketing, Product and Engineering use Slack as their primary communication tool. While still responding that Slack was their primary tool, email was a closer second for HR, Ops and Sales managers, second.

"Slack's success is driven by the fact that even when corporate IT departments offer Microsoft Teams to all employees, they also have to accommodate users who insist on using Slack as well."

Tom Hadfield
CEO, Mio[9]

[9.] https://dispatch.m.io/mio-workplace-messaging-report/

One-on-one meeting tools

When it comes to one-on-one meetings specifically, we uncovered what tools and technology managers are using.
Tools that managers use in one-on-one meetings:

41%
Personal productivity/note-taking
(Google docs, Apple notes, etc)

34%
Pen and paper

21%
One-on-one and team
meeting software
(SoapBox, Humbledot etc)

10%
No tools

27%
Communication tool
(Slack, Microsoft Teams, etc)

15%
Project management tool
(Asana, Trello, etc)

7%
Team wiki/documentation
tools (Tettra, Notion, etc)

4%
Other

2%
Collaboration tools
(Lucidchart, Airtable, etc)

4%
HR Tool
(Lattice, BambooHR, etc)

One-on-one meeting software benefits

Managers who use one-on-one and team software have a better understanding of how direct reports are feeling overall

↓

Of the managers that said that their biggest challenge was "understanding how my direct report is feeling overall", 100% of don't use one-on-one and team meeting software.

Managers who use one-on-one and team software don't stress as much about making time for one-on-ones

↓

For managers whose biggest challenge is "making time for one-on-ones", 92% don't use one-on-one and team meeting software.

One-on-one conversations are better with one-on-one and team meeting software

↓

Of the managers whose biggest challenge was "having meaningful, productive conversations", 82% of these managers don't use one-on-one and team meeting software.

Direct reports are more likely to contribute to the agenda when using one-on-one and team meeting software

↓

Of the managers whose biggest challenge is getting direct reports to contribute to the agenda, we see that it's less of a challenge for managers who use one-on-one and team meeting software. *Of the managers experiencing this challenge, 57% don't use one-on-one meeting software.*

Managers who use one-on-one and team meeting software feel less challenged when it comes to providing value to their direct reports

↓

The biggest challenge that managers face when it comes to their jobs is ensuring that they're providing value to their direct reports.

81% of managers who feel this way don't use one-on-one and team meeting software.

> *"When you think about the day-to-day of a people leader, they have a million tools and tech at their disposal. There are tools for project management, for ordering team lunches, to-do-lists, expenses- the list goes on. Yet, when it comes to one-on-one meetings, which is the most important time a manager has with their direct reports… managers are whipping out a pen and paper, and at best—a google doc. It's mind-boggling! To rip an old phrase, there are apps for that."*

Brennan McEachran

CEO and Co-Founder, SoapBox

The State of
One-on-ones:
The Comparisons

Remote vs. Onsite Managers

70% of people around the world work remotely at least once per week[10]. With the rise of cloud computing, collaboration tools and better connectivity, onsite work isn't as necessary as it used to be when it comes to being productive.

However, without the constant face-to-face interaction that individuals get within an office environment, how can managers build positive relationships with their direct reports? How does working remotely affect one-on-ones and a manager's ability to do their jobs well?

The criteria used for remote managers is any manager that has at least 1 remote direct report.

10. https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/30/70-percent-of-people-globally-work-remotely-at-least-once-a-week-iwg-study.html

Direct reports

About half of managers have at least 1 remote direct report

49.5%
all employees are onsite

50.5%
have at least one remote employee
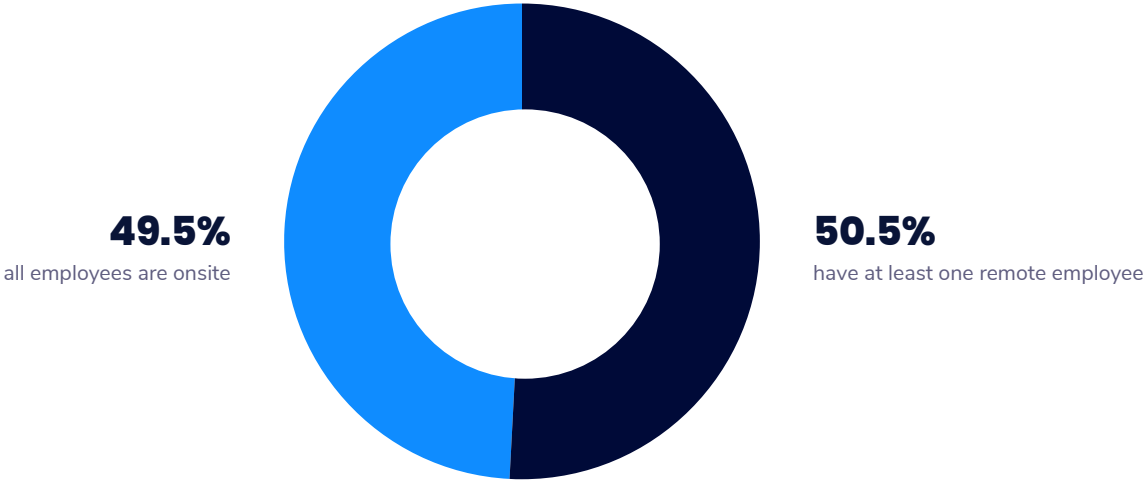
On average, remote managers have 20.9% more direct reports than onsite managers.

Remote manager
5.2 direct reports

Onsite manager
4.3 direct reports
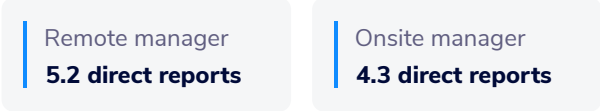
In a recent interview with Kara McNair, former Engineering Manager at Buffer (an entirely remote workforce) we learned more about how she managed 11 direct reports across 3 teams.

"[11 is] really more than we believe to be ideal for a manager, but for a variety of reasons, it makes sense for us to keep this structure for now. In the last four months, I have had six new hires join and we want to make sure that their onboarding/relationship-building is consistent and excellent! What this means is that I balance trade-offs with other responsibilities (project management, interviewing, etc.) with my peers and teammates to make sure that I don't burn out but we also don't shortchange Buffer's priorities."

Kara McNair

former Engineer Manager at Buffer[6]

Top manager challenges

REMOTE MANAGERS
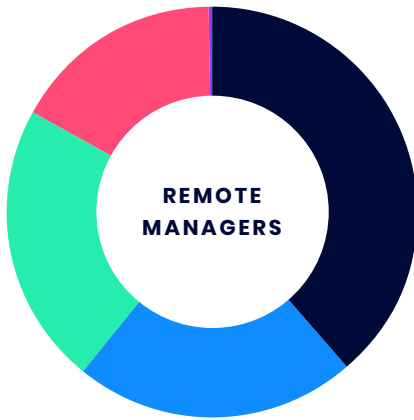
- **39%**
  Juggling managing my team with my other responsibilities

- **22%**
  Getting my team to collaborate with one another

- **22%**
  Hitting team goals

- **17%**
  Retaining my employees

- **0%**
  Other
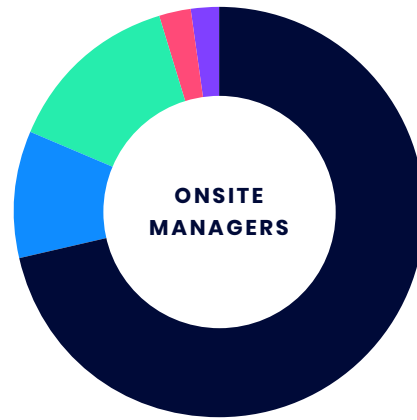
ONSITE MANAGERS

- **72%**
  Juggling managing my team with my other responsibilities

- **10%**
  Getting my team to collaborate with one another

- **14%**
  Hitting team goals

- **3%**
  Retaining my employees

- **2%**
  Other

Remote managers

- Experience retention challenges 6 times more than onsite managers
- Find hitting team goals almost twice as challenging than onsite managers
- Have more than twice as hard of a time getting their team to collaborate with one another

Onsite managers

- Find that juggling managing their team with other responsibilities almost twice as challenging than remote managers

In other words, being a remote manager can be **tough.** However, there are many remote managers who are able to tackle each of these challenges directly within their one-on-one meetings. Check out some tips from experienced managers from entirely remote companies like Buffer, Zapier, and other awesome remote managers.

BUILD RAPPORT TO HELP THEM OPEN UP

"I try to build a good rapport with [my direct reports]. Sometimes this is sharing an interesting/funny story about something that happened while I was in their position, or illustrating a specific challenge I had that I believe everyone faces. I also have several resources on hand to fall back on to get them to open up better. Radical Candor also has some specific advice to help "challenge directly" to address uncomfortable issues."

James Carr

Infrastructure Engineering Lead at Zapier[11]

SPEND TIME LEARNING ABOUT WHAT YOUR DIRECT REPORTS NEED

"Building a relationship. I want my direct reports to really understand that my job is to help them be successful and to meet their own goals and dreams. By spending time learning about what matters to them and showing them that I really care about that, they trust me enough to tell me when things aren't going well for them and giving me the chance to help them."

Kara McNair

Former Engineering Manager at Buffer[6]

SHOW UP TO EVERY MEETING PREPARED

"Not meeting face to face, or at an actual venue, is not an excuse for not having everything you need. It's no good starting a 30-minute session about the latest marketing metrics if you don't have those stats at hand. Don't waste time looking for the data that is needed to drive the conversation."

Dominic Kent

Director of Content Marketing and Communications at Mio[12]

[11.] https://soapboxhq.com/blog/meetings/how-zapier-does-remote-one-on-one-meetings

[12.] https://soapboxhq.com/blog/management-skills/1-on-1-meeting-tips-remote-managers

"Not doing them! Either at all, or infrequently, or unpredictably. 1:1s are your most important feedback loop to understand what is happening in your organization. If you're not doing them regularly and predictably, you're ignoring a really high quality source of information about what is actually happening on the ground.

1:1s help leaders close the gap between how we imagine work is done and how it is actually done."

Lindsay Holmwood

Engineering Manager at Envato[4]

VIDEO CALLS HELP YOU COMMUNICATE MORE EFFECTIVELY

"Video is key because it makes both parties take the call more seriously and come fully prepared. During the call, we discussed the previous day's work, the current day's agenda, and any questions or things the individual was blocked on. The video component and the fact that this meeting occurred daily made my reports feel like they were fully part of the onsite team."

Priyanka Prakash

Lending and Credit Expert at Fundera[13]

[13.] https://www.cmswire.com/digital-workplace/8-tips-for-effectively-m...ng-remote-workers/

One-on-ones

Who's having them?

ONSITE MANAGERS

7%

93%

REMOTE MANAGERS

5%

95%
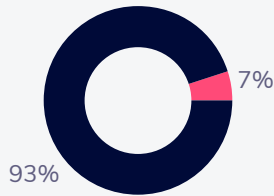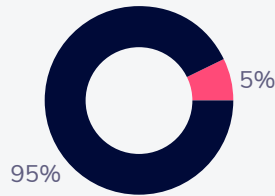
- Yes
- No

One-on-one meeting frequency

ONSITE MANAGERS

47%   28%   22%   3%

REMOTE MANAGERS

8%

50%   39%   3%
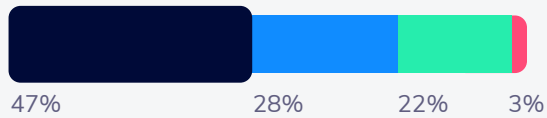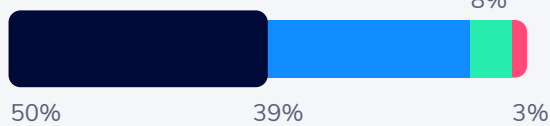
- Weekly
- Bi-Weekly
- Monthly
- Quarterly

Regardless of location, the most common meeting frequency for one-on-ones is weekly.

Most discussed topics

For this question, we allowed respondents to select multiple topics that they discuss within their one-on-one meetings.

ONSITE MANAGERS

17%   27%   21%   13%   15%   7%

REMOTE MANAGERS

16%   24%   18%   19%   15%   8%
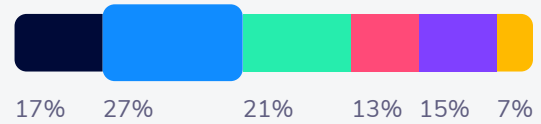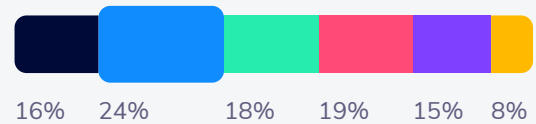
- Employee motivation
- Growth and development
- Performance
- Connection to people and/or work
- Autonomy and accountability
- Alignment to company mission

Regardless of a manager or their team's physical location, the **most discussed** topic in one-on-ones is **growth and development**.

For **remote managers**, the second-most discussed topic is connection to people and/or work. Whereas, for **onsite managers**, the second-most discussed topic is performance.

One-one-one challenges

- Managers with less than 50% of direct reports working remotely struggle most with providing value to employees in meetings.
- Managers with more than 50% of their team remote, struggle most with making time for one-on-one meetings.

Some common responses that fell in the 'other' section for **onsite managers** include:
- Giving hard feedback
- Not all of their direct reports want a 1:1 meeting

Some common responses that fell in the 'other' section for **remote managers** include:
- Setting follow-ups and next steps after each meeting
- Tracking performance of the meeting over time

Key findings on top one-on-one challenges include:
- Both onsite and remote managers expressed that their biggest challenge is ensuring that they're providing value to their direct reports. However, more onsite managers experience this challenge when compared to remote managers.

- Onsite managers also have a harder time getting their direct reports to contribute to the agenda than remote managers.
- Remote managers on the other hand, find it more 1.5 times more challenging to make time for one-on-ones.

These numbers don't come as a surprise to us and here are a few assumptions we have that could have lead to this:

1. Remote managers have to deal with multiple factors when planning for one-on-one meetings, including time zone differences, more flexible schedules and more. We assume that finding a time is the real challenge here, rather than an un-equal workload.
2. For onsite managers, our assumption as to why it may be more challenging for them to get direct reports to contribute to the agenda when compared to remote managers is because employees have more access to an onsite manager. This could be in passing, waiting to make a coffee or more. Direct reports may feel like they've discussed enough of what they want to before the meeting even happens.

REMOTE WORKERS NEED TO BE FLEXIBLE WITH MEETING TIMES

"Any remote worker knows you have to be flexible, so I feel time zone differences don't impact your remote work life too much. I'd quite happily sacrifice staying a little later or getting up a little earlier to avoid the stresses of a morning commute in rush hour traffic."

Lindsay Brand

Support at Zapier[14]

MANAGERS SHOULD SET THE EXPECTATION THAT DIRECT REPORTS SHOULD ADD AGENDA ITEMS

"The best way to get your employees to contribute to your one-on-one meetings? Take them out of your calendar invites, out of your google docs. Put your agenda in a place where you can both easily add to it, ask questions, and discuss things before your meeting. How can you expect your report to add the meeting agenda if you're hiding it in a calendar invite?"
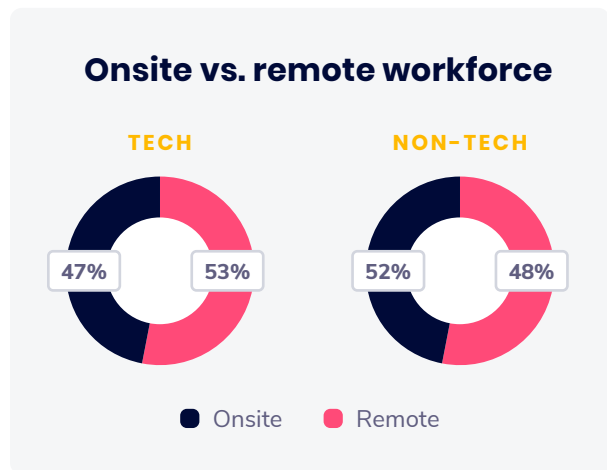
Brennan McEachran

CEO and Co-Founder, SoapBox

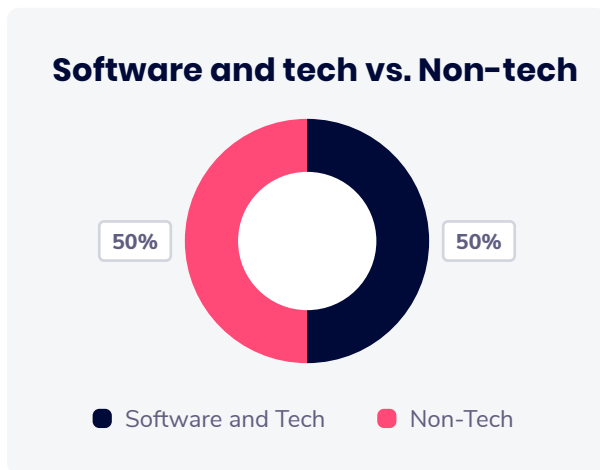[14.] https://zapier.com/learn/remote-work/remote-work-time-shift/#be-flexible
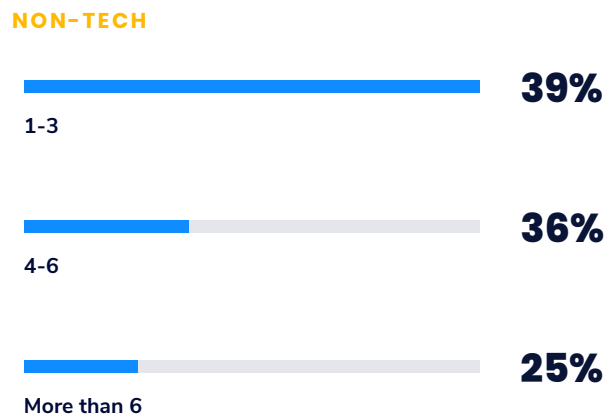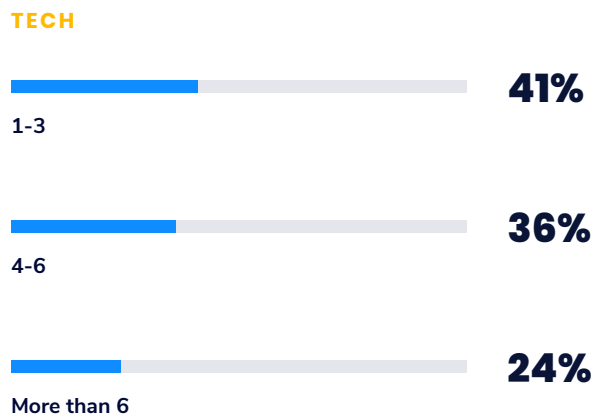
Tech vs. Non-Tech Organizations

With an even 50/50 split between software and technology companies versus other organizations, we wanted to better understand how an industry affects several factors including: one-on-ones, tools used within teams, and challenges that managers face.

Demographic breakdown

Software and tech vs. Non-tech

50% 50%

● Software and Tech ● Non-Tech

Onsite vs. remote workforce

TECH

47% 53%

NON-TECH

52% 48%

● Onsite ● Remote

Count of direct reports

TECH

41%
1-3

36%
4-6

24%
More than 6

NON-TECH

39%
1-3

36%
4-6

25%
More than 6

It's more common for a manager within the tech industry to have 1-3 direct reports (41%), whereas the average is 4-6 direct reports (39%) for non-tech managers.

Communication tools

We asked survey respondents:

What primary tool do you use to communicate with your team?
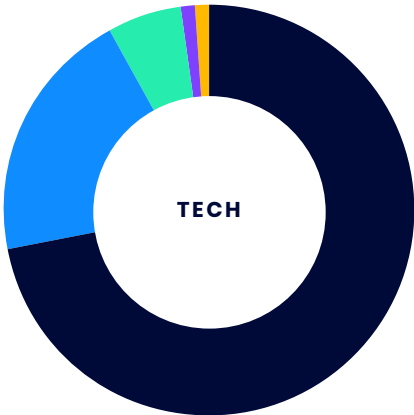
TECH

- **Slack**
  72%
- **Email**
  20%
- **Teams**
  6%
- **Skype**
  0%
- **Workplace**
  2%
- **Zoom**
  1%
- **Other**
  0%
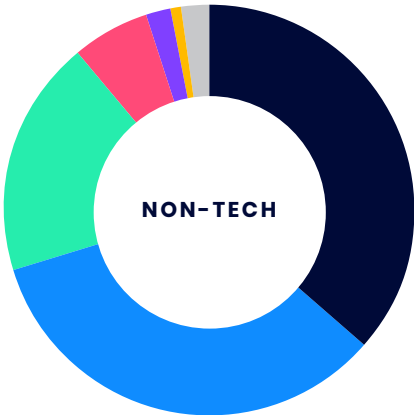
NON-TECH

- **Slack**
  37%
- **Email**
  34%
- **Teams**
  19%
- **Skype**
  6%
- **Workplace**
  2%
- **Zoom**
  1%
- **Other**
  2%

Most managers working in tech organizations use Slack as their primary tool to communicate with their team. Whereas managers at non-tech organizations are mostly split between using Slack or Email.

One-on-ones

One-on-one meeting frequency

Regardless of industry, the most common one-on-one meeting frequency is weekly.

TECH

- **Weekly** 51%
- **Bi-weekly** 34%
- **Monthly** 14%
- **Quarterly** 1%

NON-TECH

- **Weekly** 46%
- **Bi-weekly** 33%
- **Monthly** 16%
- **Quarterly** 5%

One-on-one challenges

TECH

- **Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct report** 37%
- **Getting my direct reports to contribute to the agenda** 31%
- **Having meaningful, productive conversations** 15%

NON-TECH

- **Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct report** 32%
- **Making time for one-on-ones** 20%
- **Having meaningful, productive conversations** 19%
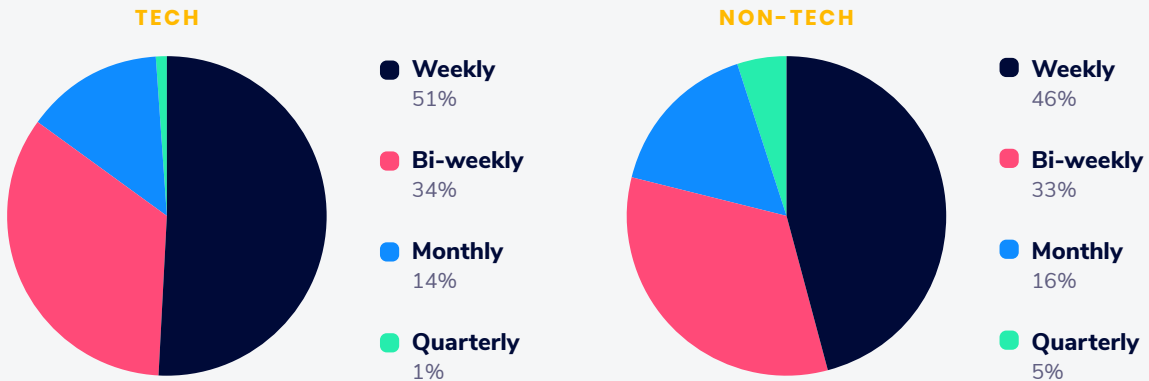
Regardless of industry, the **top challenge for managers** when it comes to their one-on-ones is **providing value to their direct reports**. Where they differ is with their second biggest challenge:

Tech managers are more challenged with getting direct reports to contribute to the agenda.

Non-tech managers are more challenged with making time for one-on-ones.

One-on-one discussion topics

Employee motivation

Tech | Non-tech
49% | 51%

Growth and development

Tech | Non-tech
53% | 47%

Employee performance

Tech | Non-tech
51% | 49%
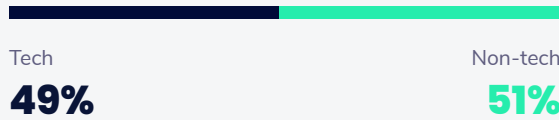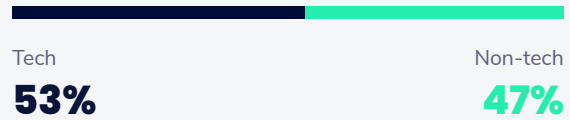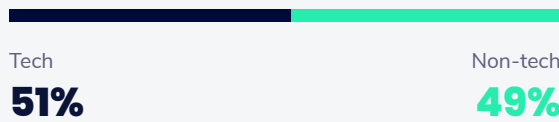
Employee's connection to people and work

Tech | Non-tech
50% | 50%
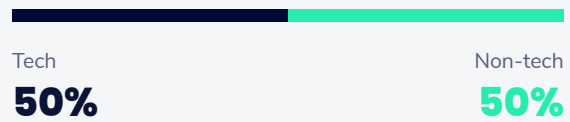
Alignment with company and mission

Tech | Non-tech
56% | 44%

Accountability and autonomy

Tech | Non-tech
53% | 47%
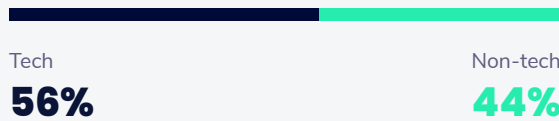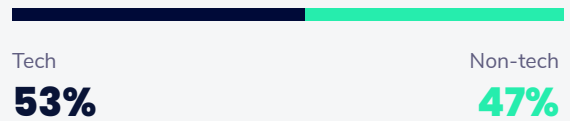
Regardless of industry, the **most discussed topics** in one-on-one meetings are **growth and development and performance.**

Regardless of industry, the least discussed topics in one-on-one meetings are direct reports connection to the work and people and alignment with company mission.

We also found that, on average, managers working in technology and software have more variety in discussion topics within their one-on-one meetings in comparison to managers in other industries.

Small vs. Large Organizations

As organizations grow, it can become increasingly more difficult to be agile, and to maintain a close connection between leadership and employees. When organizations reach a certain number of employees, it typically comes with things like: having more processes defined, a higher number of specialized employees versus generalists, and more levels of approval are required. On the other hand, smaller organizations can be a lot more disorganized and can constantly redefine processes within their organization. However, this is not to say all organizations that fall under the "large" or "small" categories experience this.

Spotify is a great example of a large organization that has successfully scaled their process as they've scaled their team. They were able to remove several layers of approval that would otherwise be required at other organizations of similar size by reorganizing their team structure[15].

This section aims to better understand how managers within large and small organizations differ when it comes to goals, challenges and their approach to one-on-ones.

> *"Companies will inevitably slow down as they grow larger, no matter how hard they try to keep their startup mojo."*
>
> **Paul Graham**
> Co-Founder YCombintor[16]

15. https://medium.com/@achardypm/agile-team-organisation-squads-chapters-tribes-and-guilds-80932ace0fdc
16. http://www.paulgraham.com/boss.html

Demographic breakdown

MANAGERS BY COMPANY SIZE

- **1-50 employees**
  32%

- **51-500 employees**
  41%

- **501+ employees**
  27%

REMOTE VS. ONSITE

1-50 employees

Onsite
49%

Remote
51%

51-500 employees

Onsite
58%

Remote
42%

501+ employees
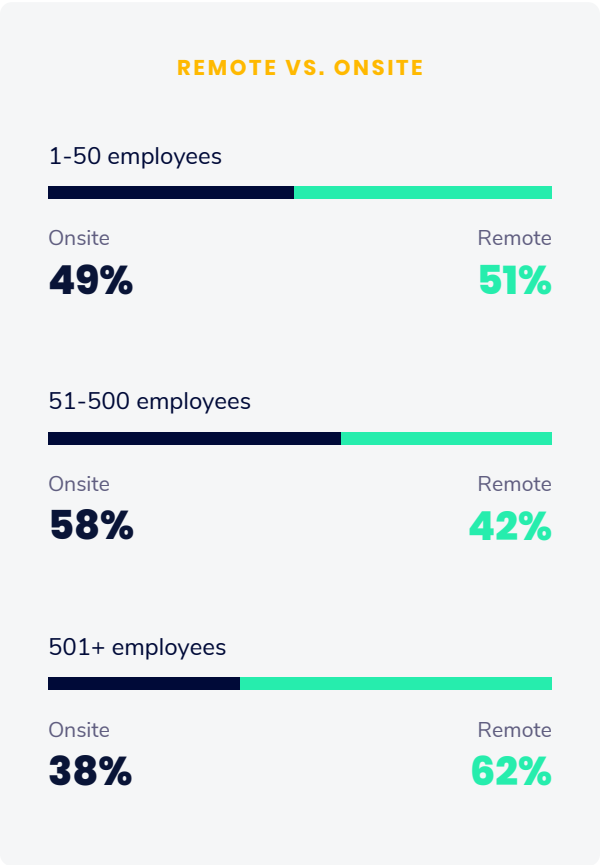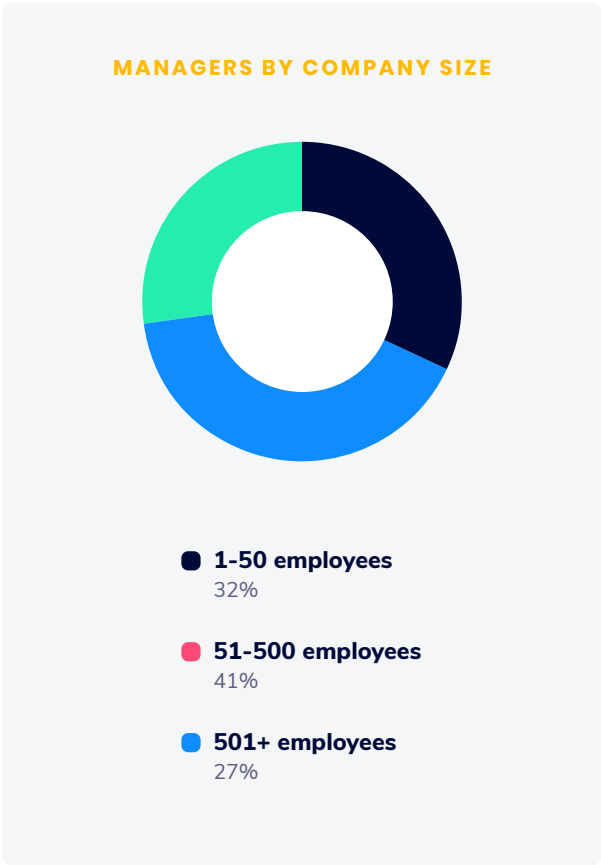
Onsite
38%

Remote
62%

Organizations with **501+ employees**, on average, **have more remote employees** than onsite when compared to smaller organizations.

Organizations with **51-500 employees**, on average, **have more onsite employees** than remote when compared to other organization sizes.

Role of the manager

We asked respondents

What do you feel is the most important part of your role as a manager?

1-50 EMPLOYEES

| 12% | 48% | 22% | 18% |

51-500 EMPLOYEES

| 14% | 31% | 25% | 26% | 4% |

501+ EMPLOYEES

| 15% | 33% | 31% | 18% | 3% |
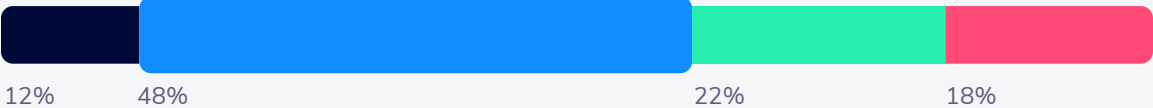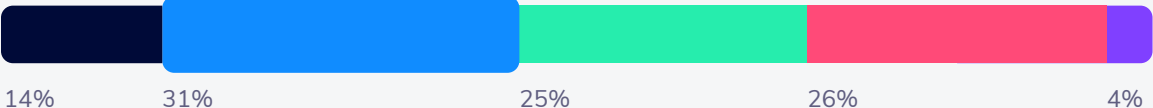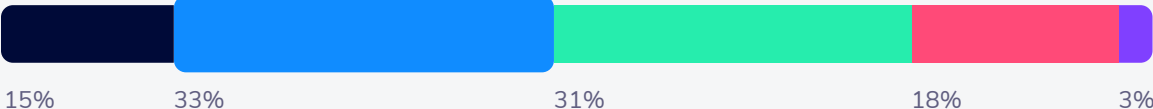
- Create a safe working environment for my team
- Keep the team on track to achieve goals
- Provide direct reports with growth and development opportunities
- Remove any blockers from my team
- Other

KEY FINDINGS

A manager's **top priorities shift more towards providing growth and development opportunities** as the organization grows.

Across all organization sizes, **managers prioritize creating a safe work environment for their team the least.**

Across all organization sizes, **managers consider keeping the team on track to achieve goals as the most important** part of their role.

One-on-ones

Who's having them?

Does organization size matter when it comes to whether or not managers have one-on-ones? The answer is **no.**

1-50 EMPLOYEES

- Yes 94%
- No 6%

51-500 EMPLOYEES

- Yes 94%
- No 6%

501+ EMPLOYEES

- Yes 96%
- No 4%

One-on-one meeting frequency

1-50 EMPLOYEES

| 42% | 37% | 18% | 3% |

51-500 EMPLOYEES

| 56% | 32% | 10% | 2% |

501+ EMPLOYEES

| 43% | 34% | 19% | 4% |
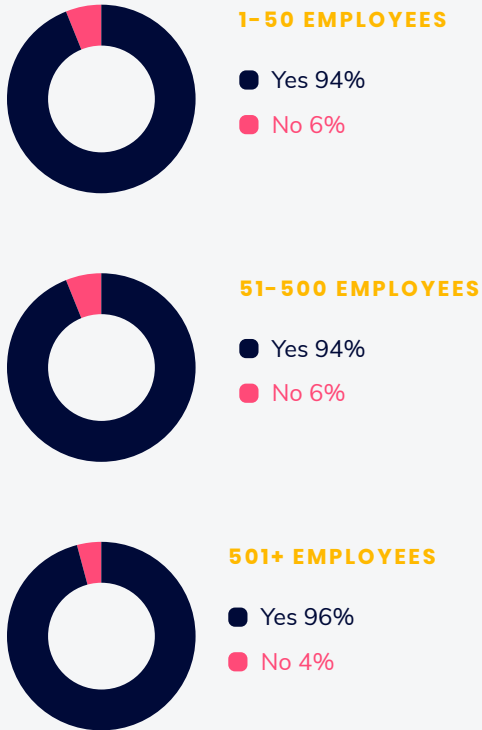
- Weekly
- Bi-Weekly
- Monthly
- Quarterly
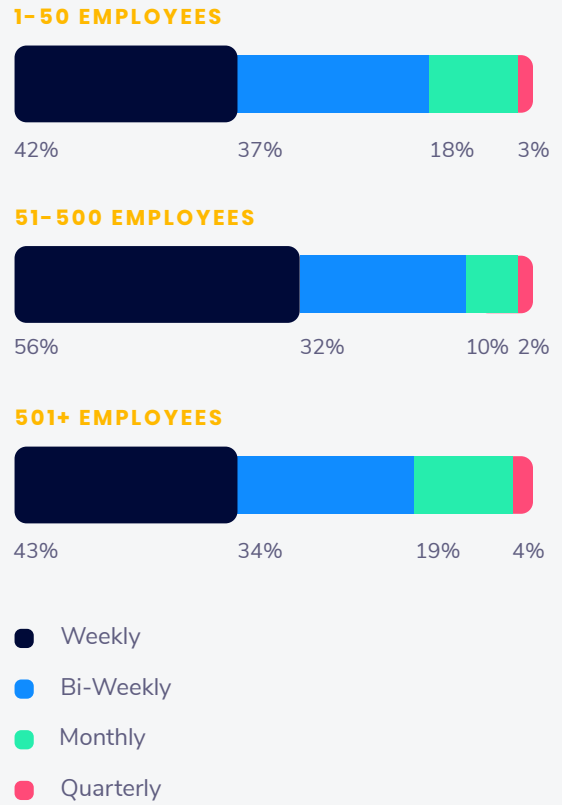
Across all organization sizes, managers have one-on-ones most often on a weekly cadence.

Goal and purpose of one-on-ones

For this section, respondents were asked to select one or multiple goals that they have when approaching one-on-ones.

● 1-50 employees   ● 51-500 employees   ● 501+ employees

Status update

1-50	49%
51-500	44%
501+	64%
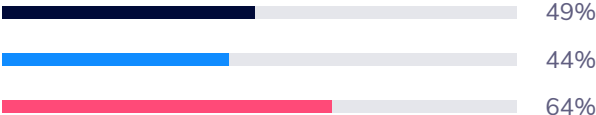
Understanding and removing roadblocks

1-50	70%
51-500	63%
501+	71%

Pulse Check

1-50	58%
51-500	55%
501+	62%
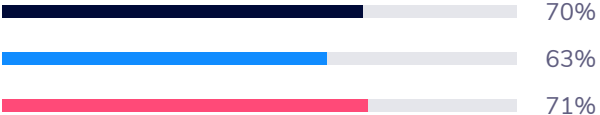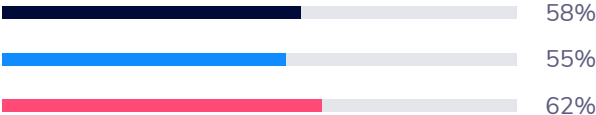
The goal is set by the direct report

1-50	39%
51-500	28%
501+	36%

Talk about career growth

1-50	55%
51-500	44%
501+	47%
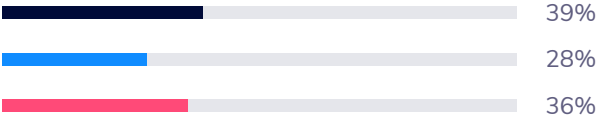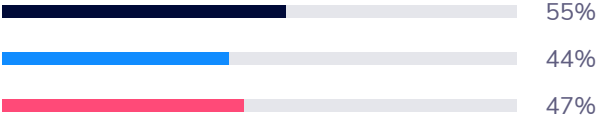
KEY FINDINGS

- Managers from organizations of all sizes approach one-on-one meetings with the same purpose and goals in mind.
- Across all organization sizes, the majority of managers approach one-on-ones with the goal of **understanding and roadblocks and how they can help eliminate them.**

Most discussed topics

1-50 EMPLOYEES

14% • 17%
8% • 25%
19% • 17%

51-500 EMPLOYEES

16% • 18%
7% • 27%
19% • 15%

501+ EMPLOYEES

13% • 17%
8% • 23%
21% • 13%

● Employee motivation   ● Performance

● Growth and development   ● Alignment to company mission

● Autonomy and accountability ● Connection to people and/or work
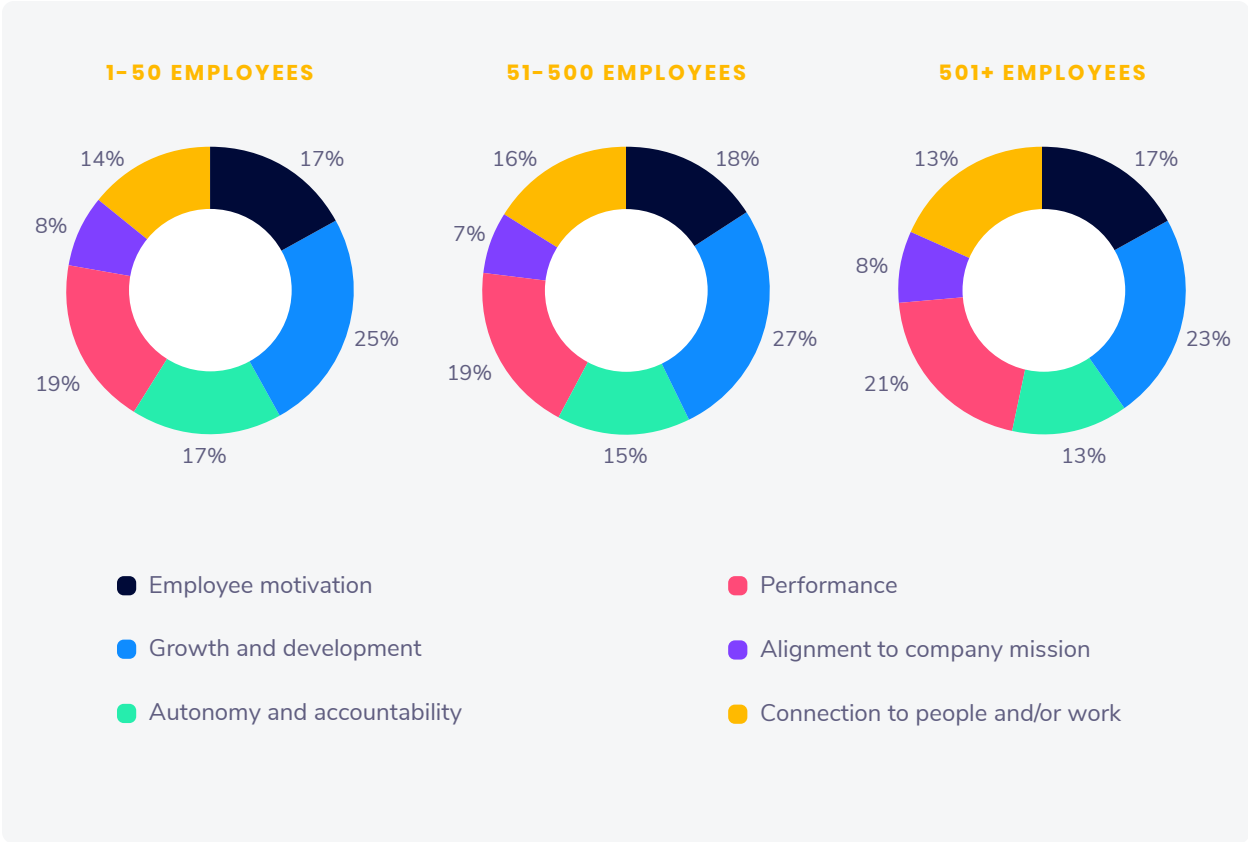
Regardless of company size, the two **most discussed** topics in one-on-ones are **growth and development and performance.**

However, as company size increases:
- Connection to people and work becomes a greater topic in one-on-ones
- Accountability and autonomy are spoken about less during one-on-ones

Most discussed topics

As companies grow in size it becomes increasingly more challenging for managers to make sure they're providing value to direct reports reports. As the organization size increases, challenges shift from contributing to the agenda, to having productive conversations and making time.

1–50

- 29% Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct reports
- 29% Getting my direct reports to contribute to the agenda

51–500

- 37% Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct reports
- 25% Getting my direct reports to contribute to the agenda

1–50

- 38% Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct reports
- 19% Having meaningful, productive conversations
- 19% Making time for one-on-ones

Communication tools

As organizations grow, it can be more difficult and cumbersome to implement new technology both at a team and organization level. This section will take a closer look at the tools managers from different organization sizes use most to communicate with their teams.

PRIMARY TOOL BY COMPANY SIZE
- **1-50 emplyees – Slack** (75%)
- **51-500 employees – Slack** (57%)
- **501+ employees – Email** (51%)

1-50 EMPLOYEES

51-500 EMPLOYEES

501+ EMPLOYEES

- ● Email
- ● Slack
- ● Microsoft Teams
- ● Other
- ● Skype
- ● Zoom
- ● Facebook Workplace
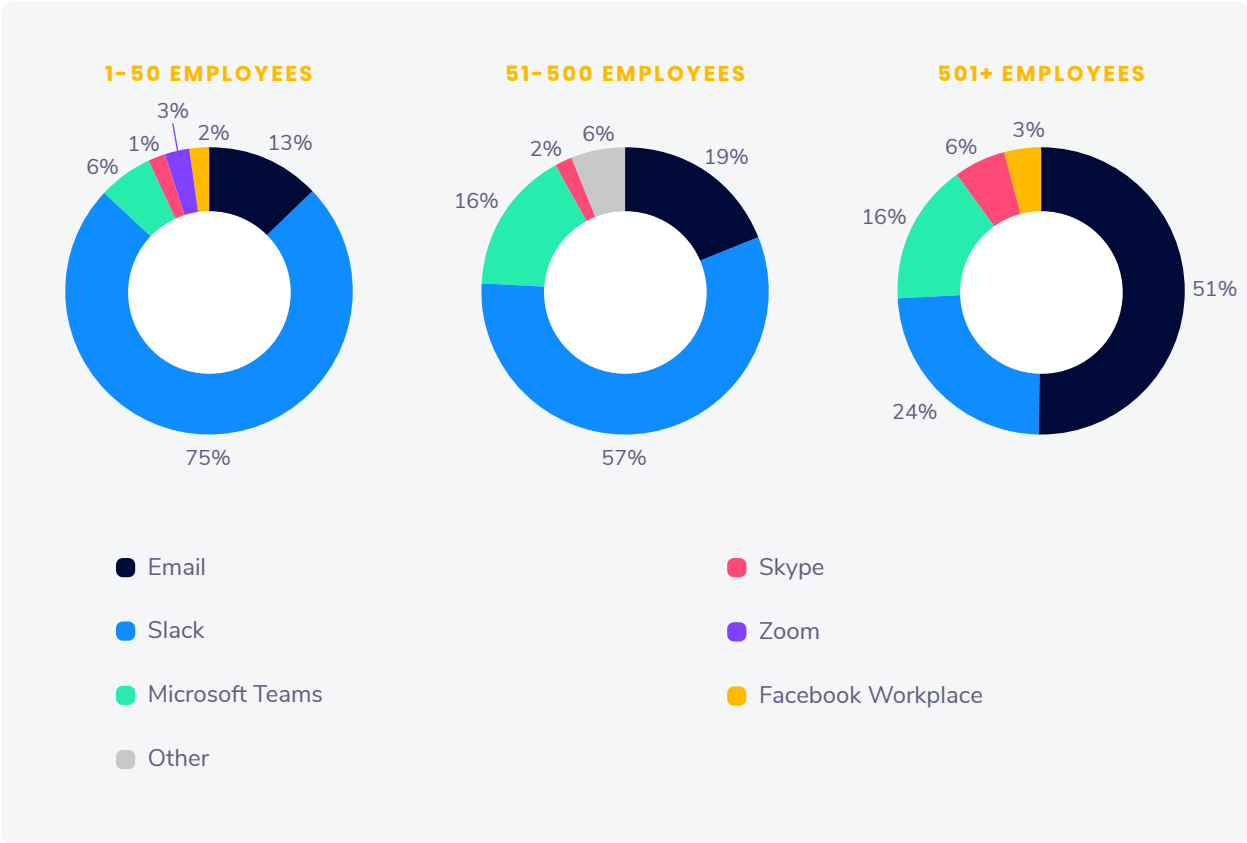
As companies grow in size, the use of email becomes the primary tool for communication. Other tools that increase as primary communication tools for teams as companies grow in size include:

- **Microsoft teams**
- **Skype**

Experienced vs. New Managers

42% of new managers admit that they develop their style by observing and mimicking a previous manager, rather than through any type of formalized training[17]. This section aims to analyze how managers with different levels of management experience approach one-on-one meetings. Do they face the same challenges or do the challenges remain the same regardless of years of experience?

17. https://www.hrdive.com/news/managers-say-they-lack-training-and-44-feel-overwhelmed-at-work/520396/

Demographic breakdown

Years of management experience

- **0-2 years** 33%
- **3-5 years** 17%
- **6-10 years** 31%
- **11+ years** 18%

Direct Reports

26% 44%
32%
0-2 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

26% 37%
37%
3-5 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

26% 34%
40%
0-2 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

22% 33%
44%
3-5 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE
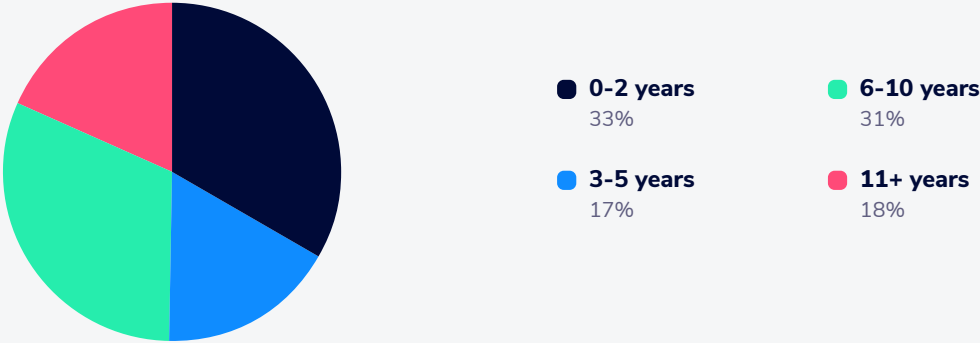
- 1-3 direct reports
- 4-6 direct reports
- 7+ direct reports
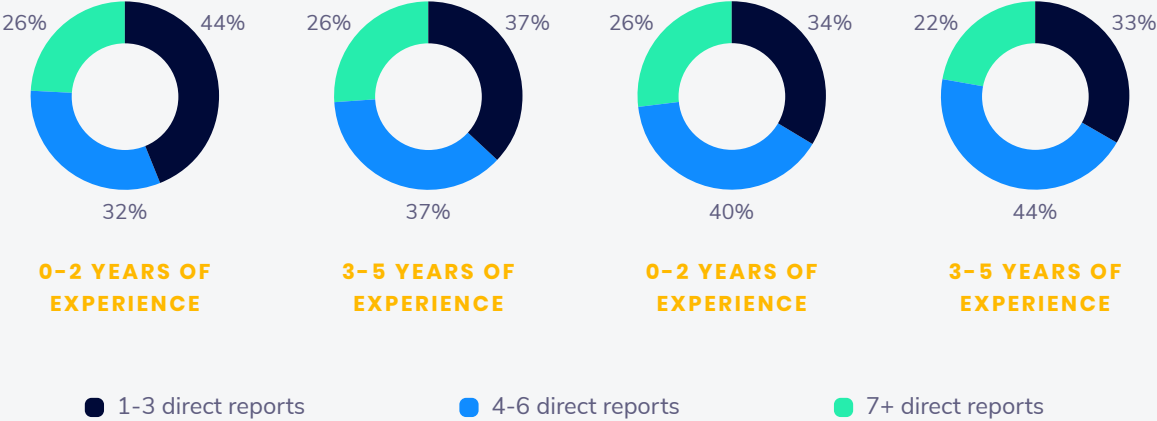
The majority (44%) of managers with less than 2 years of experience, on average, manage 1-3 employees, whereas managers with more than 3 years of experience on average manage more than 4 employees.

Role of the manager

What do managers feel is the most important part of their role?

0-2 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE
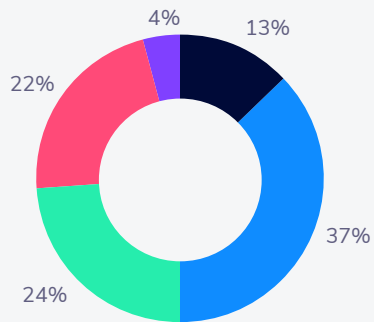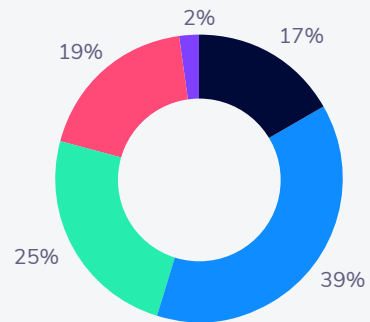
13%
37%
24%
22%
4%

3-5 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

17%
39%
25%
19%
2%

6-10 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

11%
34%
24%
32%

11+ YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

11%
36%
33%
17%
3%
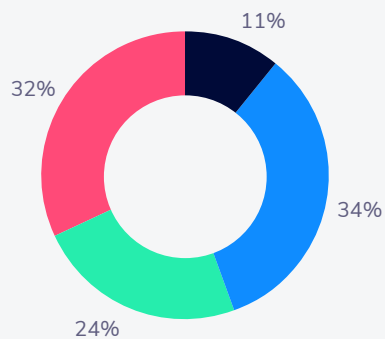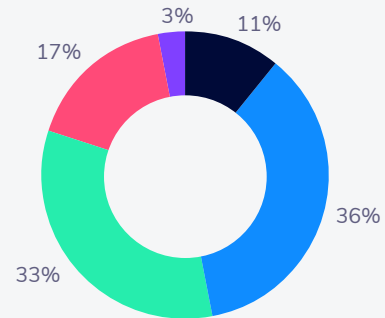
- ⬤ Creating a safe working environment for my team
- ⬤ Keeping the team on track to achieve goals
- ⬤ Providing direct reports with growth and development opportunities
- ⬤ Removing any blockers from my team
- ⬤ Other

Some responses that fell under 'Other' include:
- Ensuring my team has all the tools they need to succeed and grow
- Creating a productive workflow for the team

One-on-ones

What's being discussed?

0-2 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE
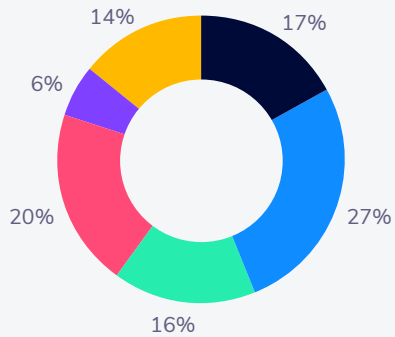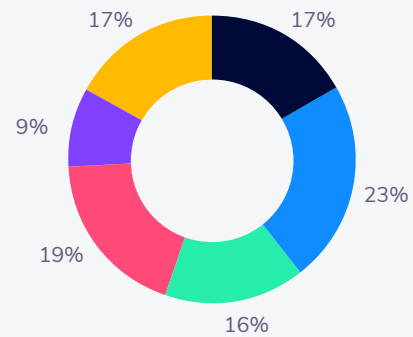
14% · 17%
6%
20%
27%
16%

3-5 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

17% · 17%
9%
19%
23%
16%

6-10 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

16% · 14%
8%
21%
26%
15%

11+ YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

19% · 18%
7%
20%
25%
12%
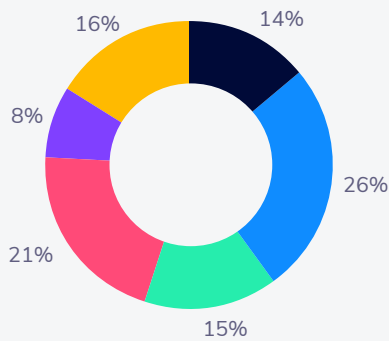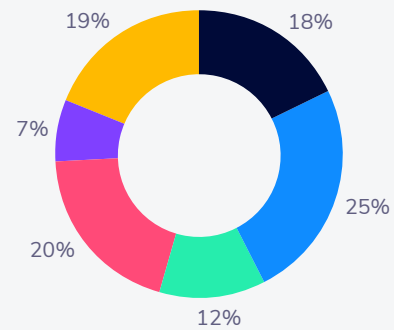
- ● Employee motivation
- ● Growth and development
- ● Autonomy and accountability
- ● Performance
- ● Alignment to company mission
- ● Connection to people and/or work

Regardless of a manager's seniority:
- The most discussed topics are growth and development and performance.
- The least discussed topic is a direct report's alignment to the company vision.

Top 3 challenges when it comes to one-on-ones

Regardless of a managers seniority, the biggest challenge managers face during one-on-ones is ensuring they're providing value to their direct reports.

0-2 YEARS

34%
Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct report

34%
Getting my direct reports to contribute to the agenda

15%
Making time for one-on-ones

3-5 YEARS

31%
Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct report

24%
Having meaningful, productive conversations

19%
Getting my direct reports to contribute to the agenda

6-10 YEARS

27%
Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct report

24%
Having meaningful, productive conversations

19%
Getting my direct reports to contribute to the agenda

MORE THAN 10 YEARS

46%
Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct report

20%
Having meaningful, productive conversations

17%
Making time for one-on-ones

Many vs. Few Direct Reports

In this section, we take a look at whether or not the number of direct reports affects how managers approach one-on-ones, the challenges they face and the tools they use to communicate with their teams.

Demographic breakdown
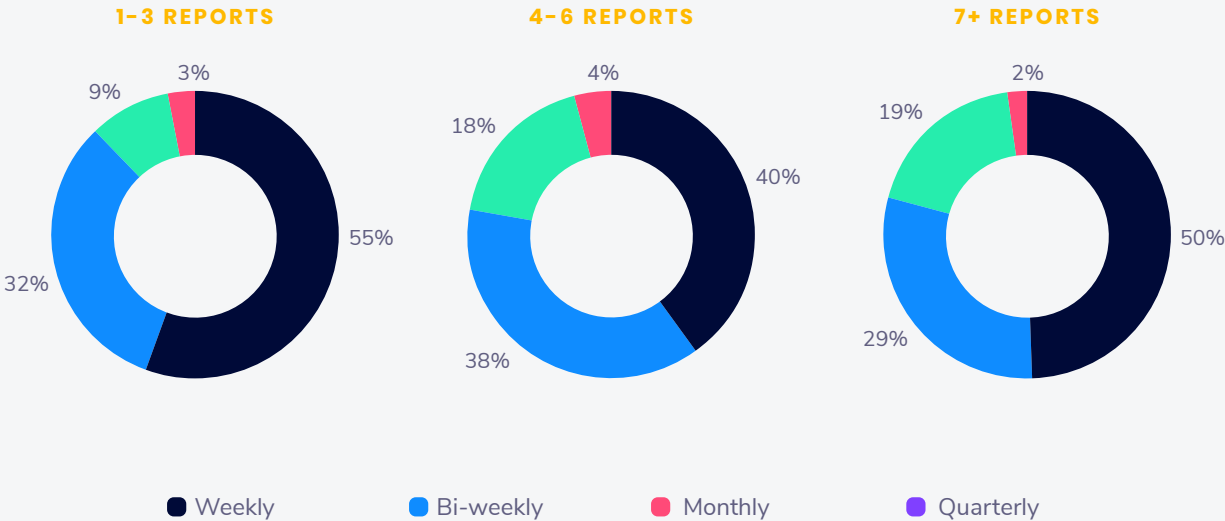
The average manager has 4.7 direct reports.

Number of direct reports

- **1-3 direct reports**
  38%
- **4-6 direct reports**
  37%
- **7+ direct reports**
  25%
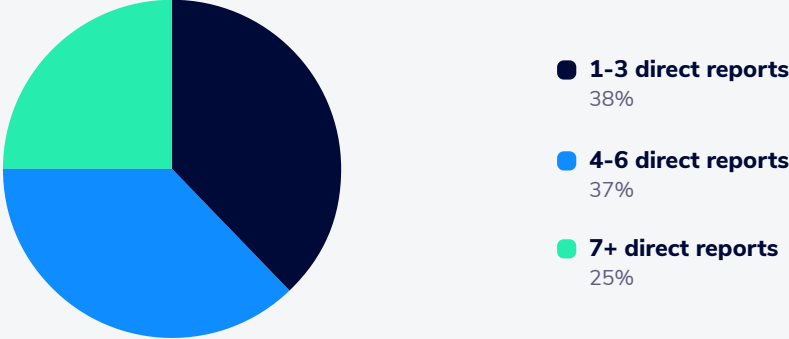
One-on-ones

Regardless of how large a manager's team is, the majority of managers surveyed reported having one-on-ones weekly for 30 minutes.

One-on-one meeting frequency

1-3 REPORTS

3%
9%
32%
55%

4-6 REPORTS

4%
18%
40%
38%

7+ REPORTS

2%
19%
50%
29%

- Weekly
- Bi-weekly
- Monthly
- Quarterly

One-on-one agenda template usage

As team size grows, do managers more and more use the same template for their one-on-ones? We found that there is no major difference when it comes to a manager's decision to use agenda templates or not in respect to the number of direct reports they manage.

Managers with 1-3 direct reports
62% are mostly, or always using the same agenda template for all one-on-ones
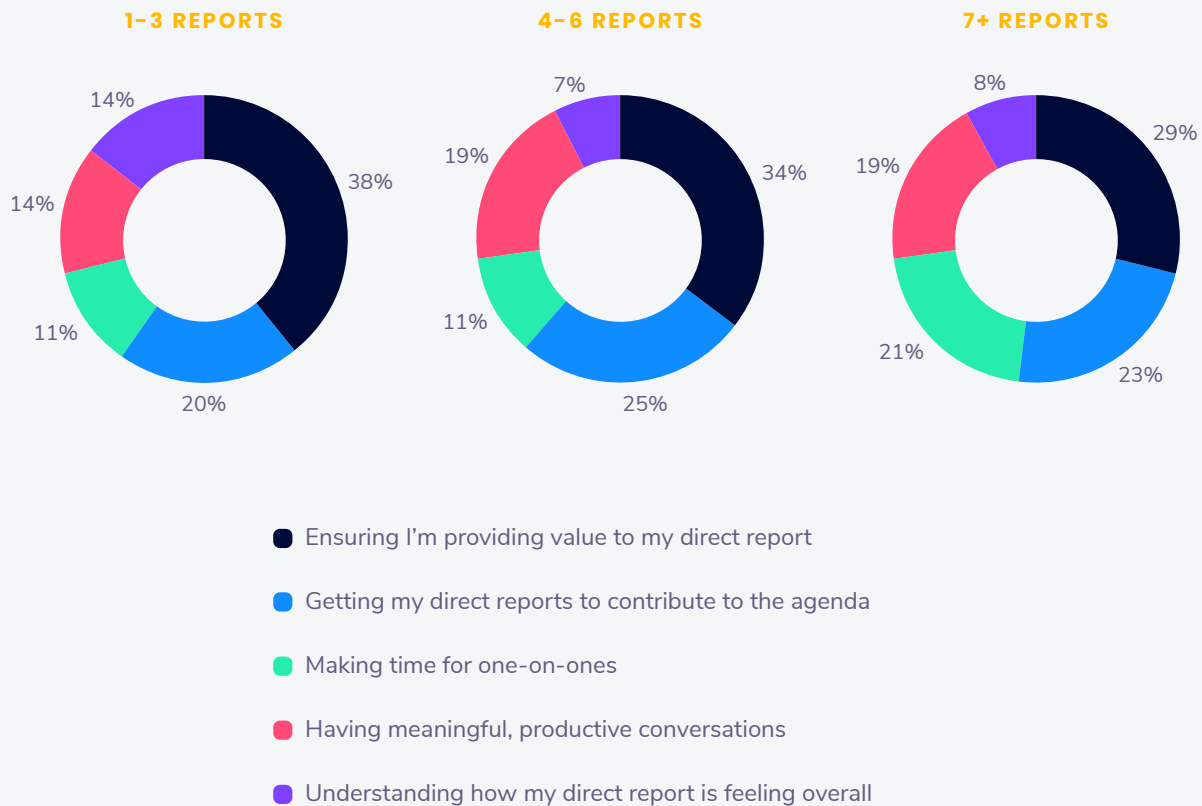
Managers with 4-6 direct reports
66% are mostly, or always using the same agenda template for all one-on-ones

Managers with 7+ direct reports
60% are mostly, or always using the same agenda template for all one-on-ones

One-on-one challenges

Managers with more than 7 direct reports are more likely to struggle with making time for one-on-ones and less with ensuring they are providing value to direct reports.
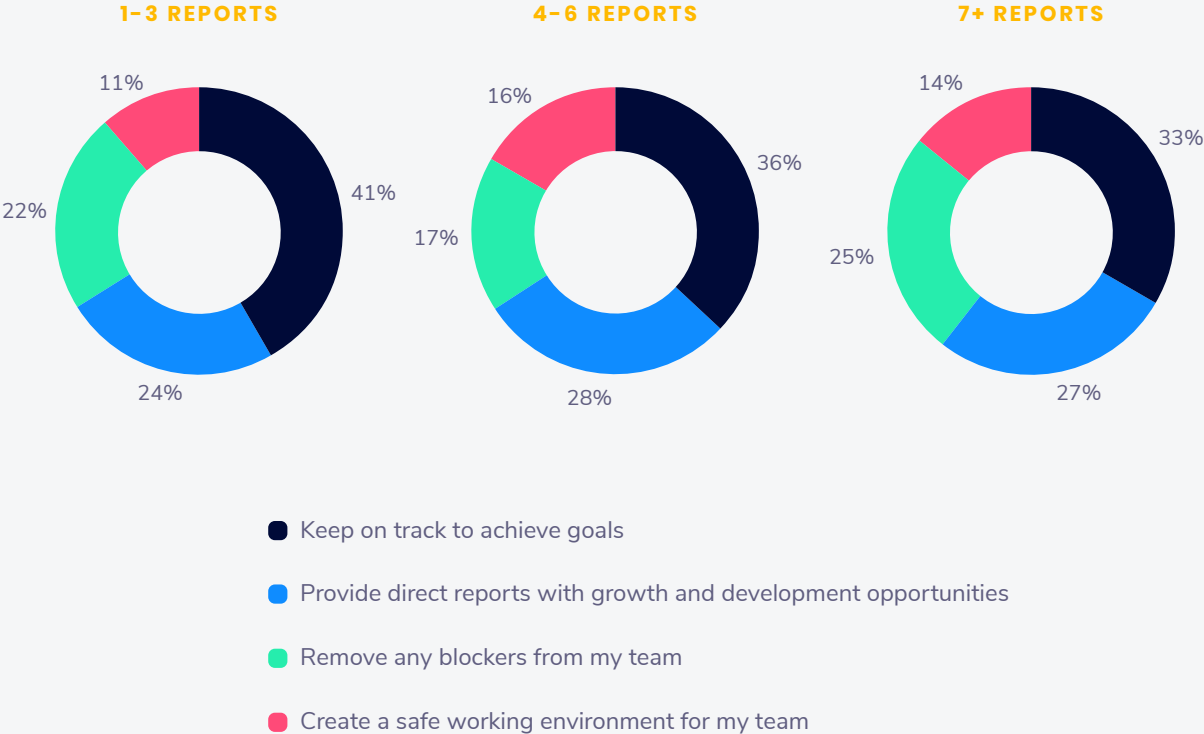
1-3 REPORTS

14%
14%
11%
20%
38%

4-6 REPORTS

7%
19%
11%
25%
34%

7+ REPORTS

8%
19%
21%
23%
29%

- Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct report
- Getting my direct reports to contribute to the agenda
- Making time for one-on-ones
- Having meaningful, productive conversations
- Understanding how my direct report is feeling overall

Role of the manager

What managers believe to be the most important part of their role

Regardless of direct report count:

- Managers believe that the most important part of their role is to keep the team on track to achieve goals.
- Managers prioritize creating a safe working environment for their team the least.

1–3 REPORTS

11%
41%
22%
24%

4–6 REPORTS

16%
36%
17%
28%

7+ REPORTS

14%
33%
25%
27%

● Keep on track to achieve goals

● Provide direct reports with growth and development opportunities

● Remove any blockers from my team

● Create a safe working environment for my team

Biggest challenge for managers

In this section, we analyze how the number of direct reports a manager has affects the challenges they face in their role.

1-3 DIRECT REPORTS
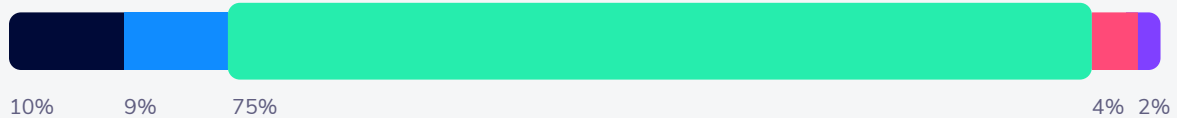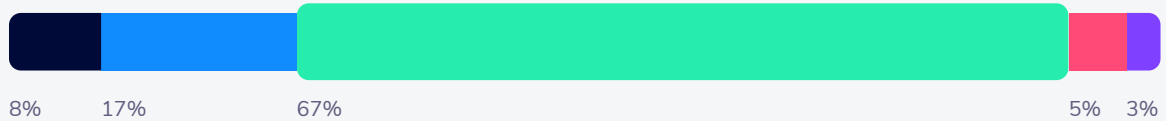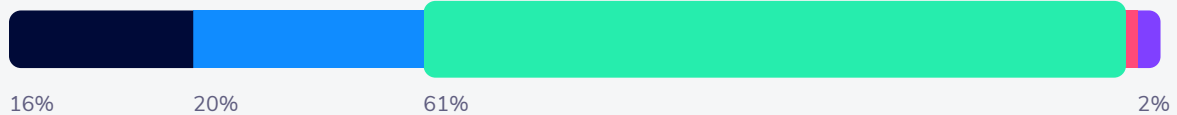
10% 9% 75% 4% 2%

4-6 DIRECT REPORTS

8% 17% 67% 5% 3%

7+ DIRECT REPORTS

1%

16% 20% 61% 2%

- Getting my team to collaborate with one another
- Hitting team goals
- Juggling managing my team with my other responsibilities
- Retaining my employees
- Other

Communication tools used

As a managers' team size grows, email becomes more of a primary communication tool when compared to Slack:

1-3 DIRECT REPORTS
Email 22%
Slack 58%

4-6 DIRECT REPORTS
Email 26%
Slack 54%

7+ DIRECT REPORTS
Email 32%
Slack 47%

Departmental Approaches to One-on-ones

From marketing to engineering, different departments often have entirely different structures and dynamics, however there's also a lot of commonalities around how managers within these departments lead their teams.

For the purpose of this section, we have grouped the teams that would interact with one another most often into larger cohorts (as seen in demographic breakdown below).
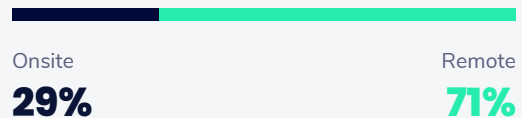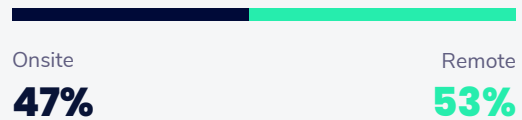
Demographic breakdown

MANAGERS BY DEPARTMENT

- **Customer Success/Marketing/Sales**
  38%
- **Operations/HR/People/Finance**
  33%
- **Product/Engineering/Design**
  23%
- **Other**
  6%

REMOTE VS. ONSITE

Customer Success/Marketing/Sales

Onsite	Remote
50%	**50%**

Operations/HR/People/Finance

Onsite	Remote
29%	**71%**

Product/Engineering/Design

Onsite	Remote
47%	**53%**

When it comes to remote work, the largest remote demographic comes from operations, HR, people and finance teams.

Count of Direct Reports

On top of that, our survey found that managers within product, engineering and design departments will typically manage more people compared to other departments.

79%
of product, engineering and design managers manage more than 4 people

24%
of operations, HR, people and finance managers manage more than 4 people

19%
of customer success, marketing and sales managers manage more than 4 people

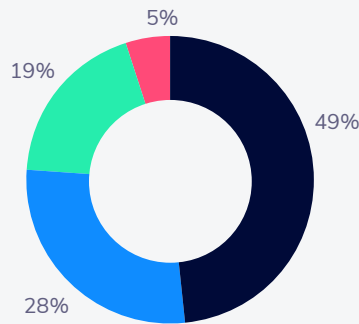# One-on-one meeting frequency

Meeting frequency

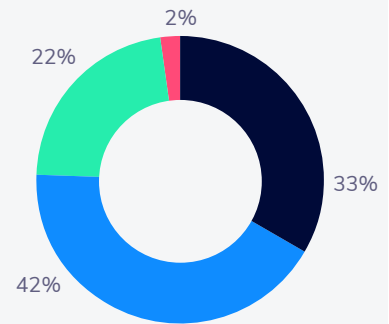With the exception of product, engineering and design, the **most common meeting frequency is weekly.**

CUSTOMER SUCCESS, MARKETING AND SALES
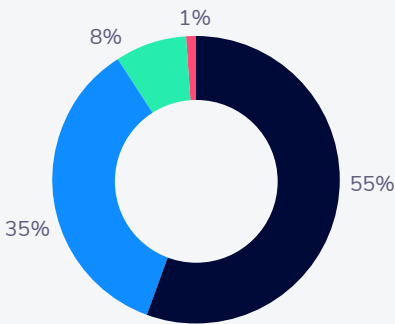
- 1%
- 8%
- 35%
- 55%

OPERATIONS, HR, PEOPLE AND FINANCE

- 5%
- 19%
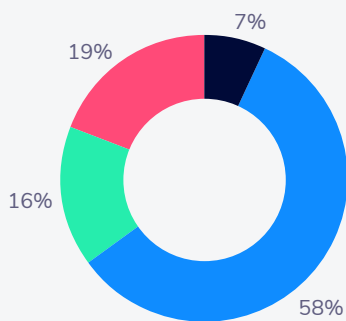- 49%
- 28%

PRODUCT, ENGINEERING AND DESIGN

- 2%
- 22%
- 33%
- 42%

● Weekly   ● Bi-weekly   ● Monthly   ● Quarterly

One-on-one meeting duration

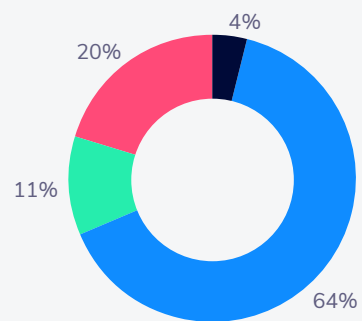Regardless of department, the **most common** one-on-one meeting **length is 30 minutes.**

CUSTOMER SUCCESS, MARKETING AND SALES

- 7%
- 19%
- 16%
- 58%

OPERATIONS, HR, PEOPLE AND FINANCE

- 2%
- 19%
- 17%
- 15%
- 48%

PRODUCT, ENGINEERING AND DESIGN

- 4%
- 20%
- 11%
- 64%
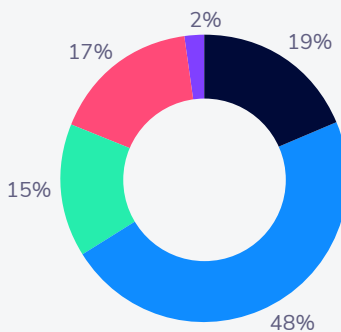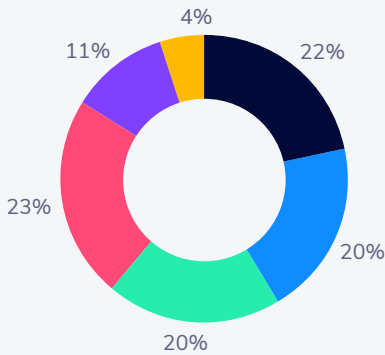
● 15 minutes   ● 30 minutes   ● 45 minutes   ● 1 hour   ● More than 1 hour

One-on-one challenges
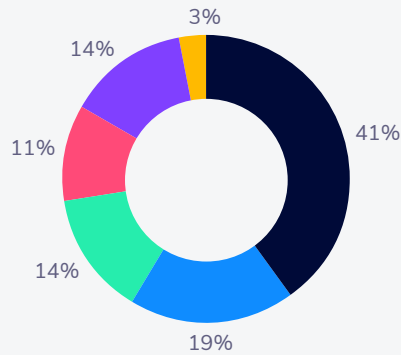
CUSTOMER SUCCESS, MARKETING AND SALES

3%
14%
11%
14%
41%
19%

OPERATIONS, HR, PEOPLE AND FINANCE

4%
11%
23%
22%
20%
20%

PRODUCT, ENGINEERING AND DESIGN

5%
4%
13%
42%
36%
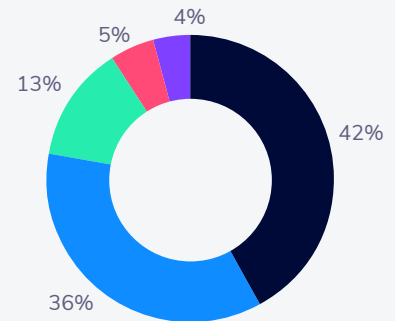
● Ensuring I'm providing value to my direct report

● Getting my direct reports to contribute to the agenda

● Having meaningful, productive conversations

● Making time for one-on-ones

● Understanding how my direct report is feeling overall

● Other

KEY FINDINGS

- Product, engineering, and design managers struggle the most with feeling like they're providing value to their direct reports.
- Customer success, marketing and sales managers also struggle the most with feeling like they're providing value to their direct reports.
- Operations, HR, people and finance managers struggle the most with making time for one-on-ones.

Weekly time spent in all meetings vs. one-on-ones

The stats below compare, on average, how much time leader's spend across all of their meetings with the amount of time they spend in one-on-ones by department.

33.3 – 50%
of a customer success leader's weekly meetings are spent in one-on-ones.

12 – 14%
of an engineering leader's weekly meetings are spent in one-on-ones

13 – 18% and 33.3 – 50%
of an HR or People leader's weekly meetings are spent in one-on-ones

10 – 16%
of a marketing leader's weekly meetings are spent in one-on-ones

33.3 – 50%
of an operations leader's weekly meetings are spent in one-on-ones

16 – 50%
of a product leader's weekly meetings are spent in one-on-ones

13 – 15% and 40 – 60%
of a sales' leader's weekly meetings are spent in one-on-ones

Engineering managers, on average, spend more time in meetings per week than managers in any other department (21-25 hours), however they spend the least amount of time in one-on-one meetings.

"As a software developer, avoiding meetings is generally a good call because they interrupt flow and often don't really need you to be there, and meetings aren't really getting work done. One of the weirdest things about becoming a manager is how much more meaningful meetings seem to become, and how many more of them appear on the calendar."
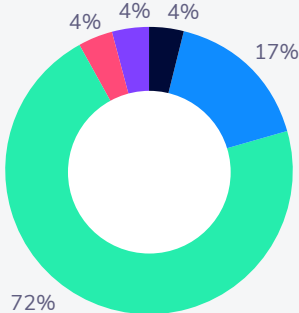
Chris Kelly
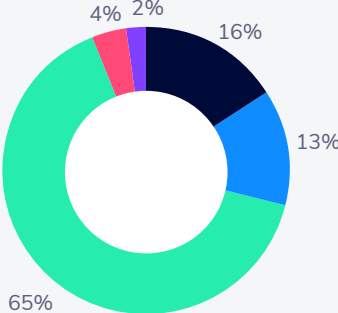Former Senior Manager, Software Engineering at Salesforce[18]

18. https://ckdake.com/content/2015/a-day-in-the-life-of-an-engineering-manager.html

The role of the manager

One-on-one challenges

CUSTOMER SUCCESS, MARKETING AND SALES

4% 4% 4%
17%
72%

OPERATIONS, HR, PEOPLE AND FINANCE

4% 2%
16%
13%
65%

PRODUCT, ENGINEERING AND DESIGN

2% 13%
15%
70%
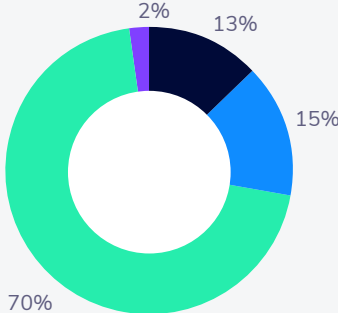
- Getting my team to collaborate with one another
- Hitting team goals
- Juggling managing my team with my other responsibilities
- Retaining my employees
- Other

KEY FINDINGS

- Less than 4% of all managers in all departments reported struggling with retention as their biggest challenge as a manager.
- More than 64% of each department polled said their biggest challenge was 'juggling managing my team with my other responsibilities.'

Methodology

The State of One-on-ones Report was created using answers from a sample of over 200 people-managers worldwide. The goal was to understand how managers approach one-on-ones, what major challenges they experienced in their roles and more. By collecting this data, we were able to identify trends across managers ranging from years of experience, departments and physical location relative to their office. The data was given voluntarily by survey respondents.

Defining our data set

The State of One-on-ones Report was prepared using survey data collected from over 200 people-managers worldwide. The only criteria used when circulating our survey was that respondents must currently be managing at least one direct report.

Our data set included a wide range of people-managers. Our respondents ranged in:

- **Seniority:** From analyst to C-suite
- **Geographic location:** Responses from every continent, excluding South America. However, the countries with the largest amount of data considered were the United States and Canada.
- **Location relative to office:** Entirely and partially remote managers, and onsite managers.
- **Department:** Operations, marketing, customer success, engineering, human resources and people, sales, product, finance, design and more.
- **Industry coverage:** 30+ industries, including software and technology, business services and consulting, education, financial services and insurance, healthcare, media, retail, internet and more.