Exploring

AD-HOC REMOTE COMMUNICATION
to improve hybrid co-worker relationships and responsiveness

Sina Zibakerdar

Abstract

The shift to remote/hybrid mode of working after COVID-19 has changed the way co-workers interact with each other in many ways. Reason is a creative design company where co-worker relationships and company culture are essential. The research question for this project was to study the new interactions concerning collaboration at Reason. Surveys, diary studies, and interviews were conducted among employees and using grounded theory, the focus of the question shifted to how the employees communicated with each other. The problem was that there was less casual convening happening among co-workers when they worked remotely. A design, therefore, is proposed to add such capabilities to Slack, the company's frequently used communication tool. A prototype user test evaluated the effects of this conversation mode. The results show that using tools of ad-hoc conversation improves co-worker relationships and responsiveness.
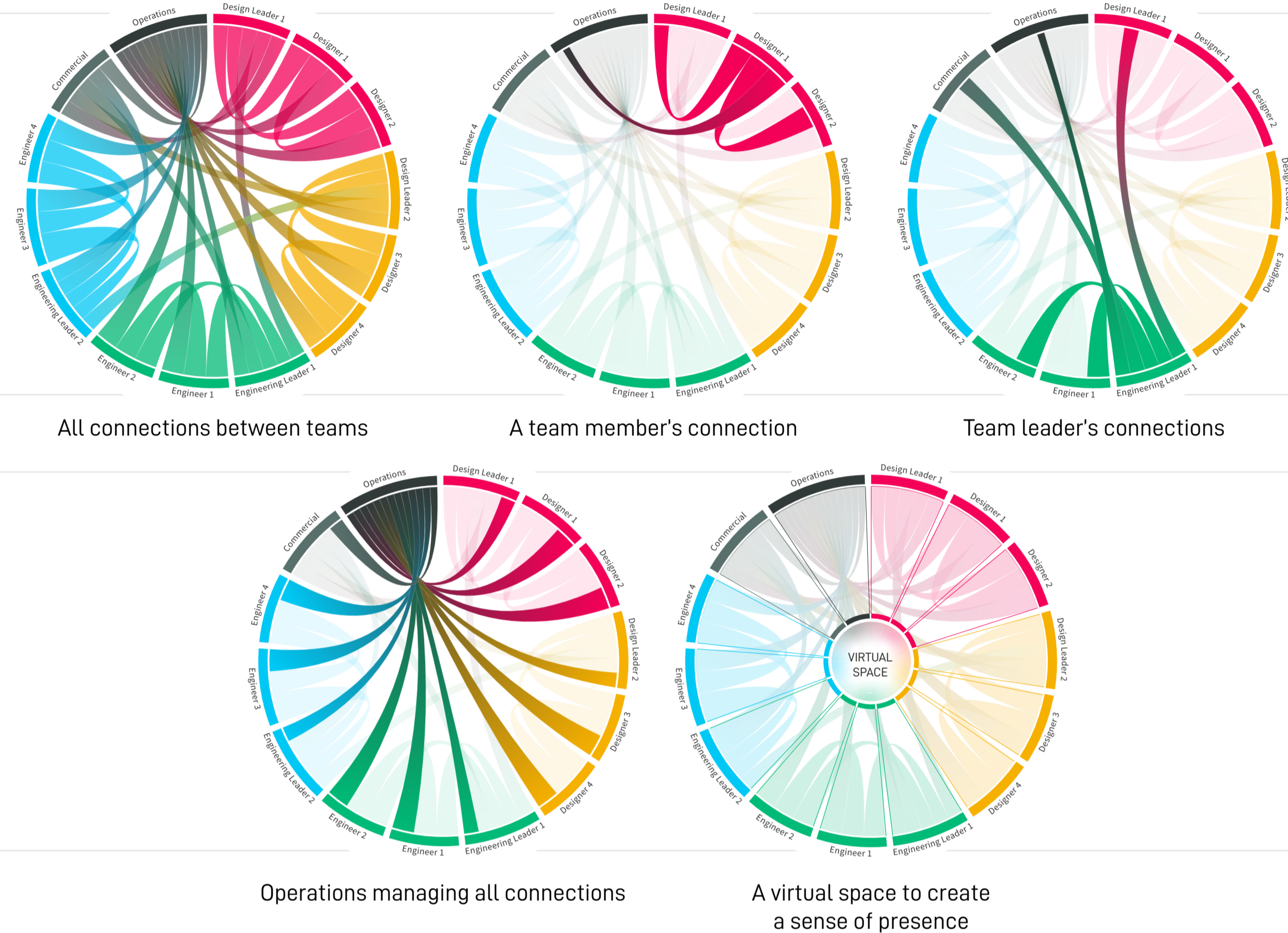
Introduction & Background

Reason is a design company operating on a remote/hybrid basis since COVID-19. Like other companies, they embraced alternative tools and techniques for remote collaboration without knowledge of the rich research done prior in the field of HCI and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work. Studying how collaboration is done within Reason can unearth insights into hidden problems or possible opportunities in co-worker interactions in a remote setting.

Study Methodology

After a survey and diary study, an overall knowledge of how the employees worked together was gathered. Following in-depth interviews, Collaboration pain points were found. After analysing the possible focus areas using an impact/effort matrix, co-worker communication was chosen as the intervention area. A hypothesis was formed using grounded theory: **A virtual space for ad-hoc conversation can improve co-workers' relationships and responsiveness.**
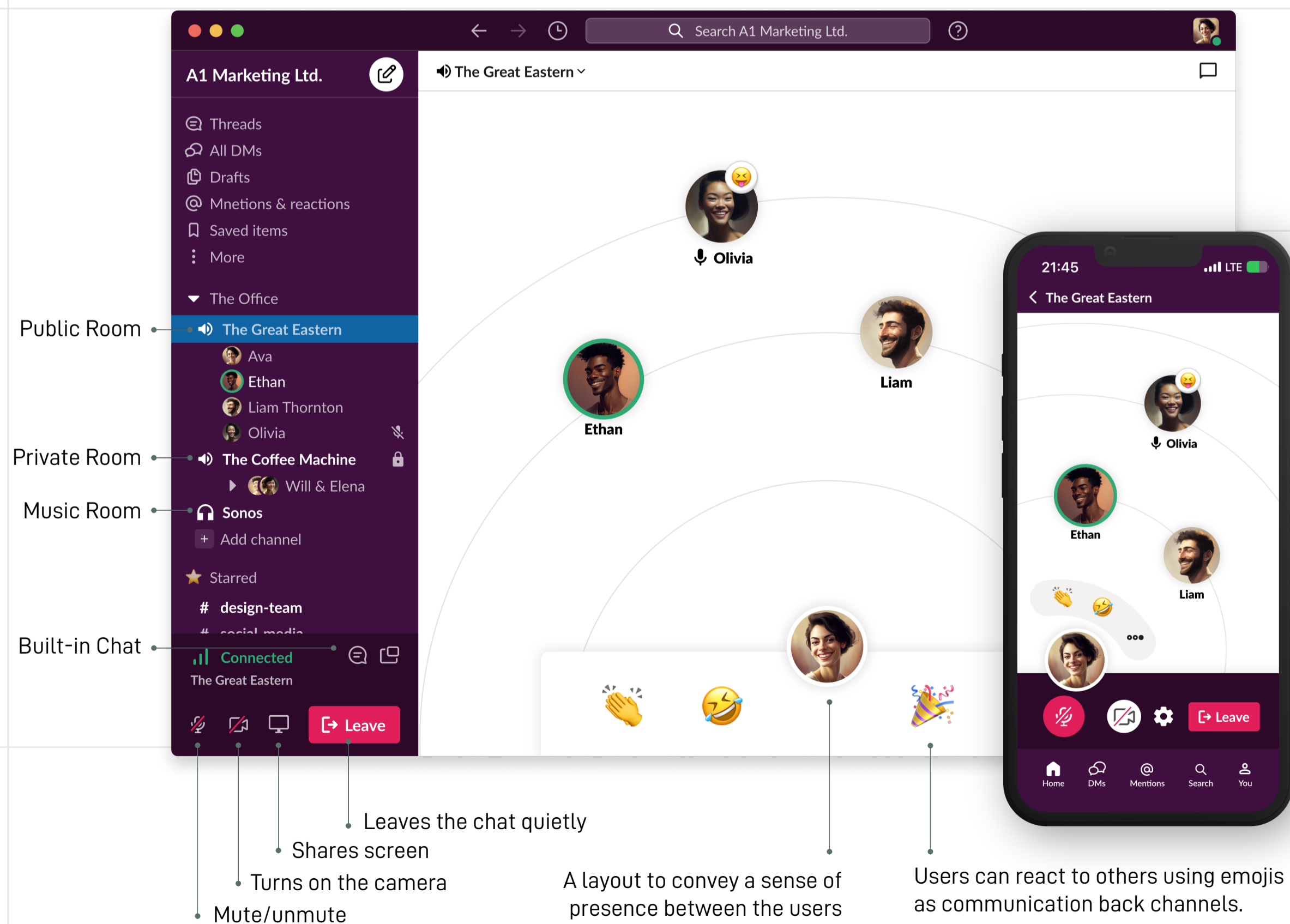
Solution

Most communication between co-workers happens within project teams using Slack and Google Meet. The operations team tries to help them connect more using social events, but they are only sometimes successful. A casual conversation tool that creates a sense of presence for everyone can help create and improve relationships.

All connections between teams   A team member's connection   Team leader's connections

Operations managing all connections   A virtual space to create a sense of presence

Design

Since Slack is the communication heart of Reason, it is best to integrate such capabilities within it so the users do not have to use other tools. Slack's channel-based design also supports voice channels acting as virtual spaces.

Public Room
Private Room
Music Room
Built-in Chat

Leaves the chat quietly
Shares screen
Turns on the camera
Mute/unmute

A layout to convey a sense of presence between the users

Users can react to others using emojis as communication back channels.

Testing & Evaluation

To test the hypothesis, Tandem and Discord, tools that allow users to have spontaneous conversations in a virtual space, were tested on 8 Reason employees. After the experiment, participants were asked about their experience and whether the tool improved their relationship with their colleagues and made their work more efficient.

Research Results

The results showed an overall positive effect on collaboration and socialisation. The engineering team found this mode of communication very effective while working together and asking questions from others as they could see who was available in the chat room. The design team, however, mostly used it to have casual chats while they were free and wanted to spend time with their co-workers. These cases relied heavily on users remembering to be online and available in the app, which was only sometimes the case.

Conclusions & Future Work

The outcome of the prototype tests makes a case for having such a tool for ad-hoc conversation and online presence in a remote and hybrid work setting to help build and improve co-worker relationships while speeding up communication for collaboration. However, Further work is needed to incentivise co-workers to have an online presence and be available in the virtual space to help initiate conversations more often.

Mood indicator
Speaker highlight (back channels)

Olivia   Ethan

Mute indicator
Dynamic shadow to grab attention to new speaker

Minimised always-on version