

• REMOTE & HYBRID · GUIDE

How to manage remote teams *with a skills matrix*

When you cannot see people work, capability becomes invisible, and the people you see least, your remote team members, are the ones most easily overlooked for development. A skills matrix replaces line-of-sight with a shared, written record of where everyone stands and how they are growing, so development stays visible and fair wherever people sit. This is how to lead a distributed team on evidence, not proximity.



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Reading time 12 min · **Method** Upleashed 0 to 5 capability framework · **Updated** May 2026

THE SHORT ANSWER

To manage a remote or hybrid team with a skills matrix, use it as your shared source of truth for capability, since you cannot rely on seeing people work. Score everyone the same way, track development over time, and review progress equally across locations so growth depends on performance, not proximity. In short: **a skills matrix gives a distributed team the visibility line-of-sight used to provide, so remote people are developed and recognised on evidence, not overlooked because they are out of sight.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Capability is invisible at a distance.** You cannot see remote people work, so a written record of skills replaces line-of-sight.
- **Proximity bias is the real risk.** People you see least get developed and recognised least; the matrix counters that with evidence.
- **Track trajectories, not snapshots.** Watching how each person's capability changes over time flags who is progressing and who has stalled.
- **Develop on performance, not presence.** A shared scale keeps growth and opportunity fair across office, hybrid and remote.
- **Make development explicit.** Remote growth needs deliberate, documented plans, not the informal learning that happens in an office.

— START HERE

You cannot manage *what you cannot see*

Managing in an office leans heavily on line-of-sight: you see who is picking things up, who is struggling, who is ready for more. Remove that, as remote and hybrid work does, and capability becomes invisible. A skills matrix is unusually valuable for distributed teams precisely because it **replaces line-of-sight with a shared, written record** of where everyone stands, so you can manage capability you cannot physically observe.

A shared source of truth

For a distributed team, the matrix becomes the **single source of truth** for capability, consistent, visible, and the same wherever people sit. Scored on one scale and kept current, it gives an at-a-glance view of the team's skills that no amount of informal observation can match when half the team is on a screen. It is especially powerful in remote settings, where consistency and accuracy matter most, because there is no corridor chat or over-the-shoulder glance to fill the gaps.

Counter proximity bias

The defining risk of hybrid work is **proximity bias**: managers unconsciously favour the people they see in person, who get more attention, more development and more advancement, while remote colleagues become less

visible and miss out. A skills matrix is a direct antidote. By grounding development and opportunity in documented capability rather than who is in the room, it lets you ensure growth depends on **performance, not proximity**, which is exactly what fairness in a distributed team requires.

Track trajectories over time

Because you cannot watch remote people develop day to day, it matters to track **how their capability changes over time**, not just where it sits today. Re-scoring at each review turns the matrix into a record of trajectories: who is steadily progressing, and, crucially, who has plateaued. A flat line on a remote team member is the early warning that proximity bias may be quietly at work, that someone out of sight is being under-developed, while there is still time to act.

— WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Out of sight, *out of development*

Hybrid work is now the norm, and with it comes a quiet unfairness: remote people, seen less, are developed and promoted less. A skills matrix is how a manager keeps capability visible and growth equitable across every location.

8%

GARTNER, 2024

of organisations have reliable workforce skills data, so most distributed teams are managed without a clear capability view.

~30pp

GALLUP

higher employee trust is possible when development and fairness practices are strengthened in distributed teams.

39%

WEF, 2025

of workers' core skills are expected to change by 2030, so remote development cannot be left to chance.

In an office, a great deal of development happens informally, overheard problems, quick desk-side coaching, being pulled into a stretch task because you were there. Remote workers miss almost all of it, and perceived inequity erodes trust in a distributed team fast. A skills matrix counters this by making capability and development **explicit and visible for everyone**: it shows where each person stands regardless of location, prompts deliberate

development plans rather than incidental learning, and lets a manager check, in black and white, that remote people are progressing as well as those in the office. Trust in a distributed team grows when people see that recognition and advancement follow performance, not proximity, and the matrix is the evidence that makes that promise real.

— WHAT IT ANSWERS

Four remote questions the matrix answers

For a distributed team, a skills matrix answers four questions that line-of-sight used to answer in an office. Each keeps a remote team visible and fairly developed.

ANSWERS 01

Where does everyone stand?

A shared, current view of capability across the whole team, the same wherever people sit, replacing the line-of-sight you lose at a distance.

ANSWERS 02

Who is being overlooked?

Flat development trajectories on remote people surface proximity bias early, so you can act before someone out of sight falls behind.

ANSWERS 03

Is development fair?

Comparing progress across office, hybrid and remote shows whether growth depends on performance rather than presence, the test of fairness.

ANSWERS 04

What should we plan?

Clear gaps prompt deliberate, documented development plans, the structure remote growth needs in place of incidental office learning.

Together these turn distributed management from anxious guesswork into **deliberate, evidenced leadership**. Instead of hoping remote people are keeping up and quietly favouring the ones you see, you can lead the whole team from the same clear picture: everyone's capability visible, everyone's progress tracked, development planned on need rather than nearness. That is how a manager earns trust across locations, by demonstrating, with evidence the whole team can see, that being remote costs nobody their growth, their recognition, or their next opportunity.

The 0 to 5 capability framework

Managing at a distance needs a scale precise and consistent enough that a score means the same thing for someone you never see as for someone at the next desk. This framework, developed by Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith, provides that shared language, so capability and progress are comparable across every location.

-
- 0** **No skill required or desired** EXCLUDED
- Not needed for the role. A consistent definition matters most when you cannot see the work, so one person's exclusions read the same as another's.
-
- 1** **In training / Trainee** WEIGHTING 25%
- Up to 75% trained. Movement up from here is exactly the development trajectory you most need to see in a remote person you cannot observe directly.
-
- 2** **Developing capabilities** WEIGHTING 50%
- More than 75% trained; works alone but quality not yet consistent. Defined the same everywhere, so remote and office progress can be compared fairly.
-
- 3** **Capable** WEIGHTING 75% · USUAL TARGET
- Works unsupervised, which is exactly what a remote role demands. The common target, and a level the matrix lets you confirm without watching over a shoulder.
-
- 4** **Subject Matter Expert / Trainer** WEIGHTING 100%
- Can train others, including remotely. These people are ideal for distributed mentoring and for spreading capability across locations.
-
- 5** **Strategic ownership / Leadership** WEIGHTING 100%
- Sets direction and standards. Recognising this level on evidence, not visibility, ensures remote leaders are seen and advanced as readily as those in the office.

Score the same, compare the trajectory

Because everyone is scored on the same 0 to 5 scale, with weightings Level 1 = 25% up to 3 = 75% and 4 and 5 = 100%, you can express each person's capability as a percentage and, by re-scoring over time, watch the **trajectory**. A rising line is healthy development; a flat line, especially on a remote person, is the signal to check whether they are being under-developed out of sight. Comparing trajectories across locations is the clearest test of whether development is truly fair.

A worked example. Two people, same role, different trajectories:

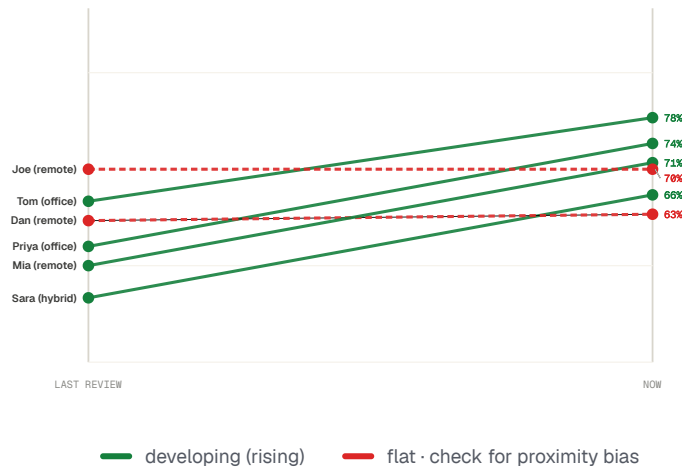
```
Office colleague last review 58% → now 74% → developing well
Remote colleague last review 62% → now 63% → flat: overlooked?
same capability once, diverging now – the matrix surfaces it, line-of-sight would not.
```

— [SEE THE TRAJECTORIES](#)

Who is *actually developing*

Here is the team's development shown as trajectories: each line runs from a person's capability at the last review to where they are now. Rising lines are healthy growth; a flat line, especially on a remote team member, is a warning that someone out of sight may be being overlooked. In an office you might sense this; on a distributed team, only the matrix shows it.

CAPABILITY TRAJECTORY · LAST REVIEW → NOW



Dan & Joe

two remote people are flat, capability unchanged since the last review while office colleagues climbed

Illustrative team on the Upleashed 0 to 5 framework. Each line is a person's capability from the last review to now; flat lines flag stalled development.

WHAT THE DISTRIBUTED MANAGER READS HERE

- **Office colleagues are climbing.** Priya and Tom rose strongly since the last review, the steep green lines. Healthy development, but worth asking how much was the informal, in-person learning remote colleagues cannot access.
- **Two remote people are flat.** Dan and Joe show flat red lines, no movement since the last review. This is the proximity-bias warning: people out of sight may be getting less development, stretch work and attention.
- **Act on the flat lines.** Not a performance verdict, a prompt. Open the development conversation, set deliberate goals, and offer the stretch opportunities they may simply not have been in the room for.
- **A hybrid person is thriving.** Sara rose well, evidence that remote and hybrid people can develop strongly when growth is planned deliberately rather than left to who is in the office.

— DOING IT

Five steps to lead a distributed team

Using a matrix to manage a remote or hybrid team adds rigour without surveillance. These five steps keep capability visible and development fair across locations.

1

Score everyone on one scale

Map the whole team, office, hybrid and remote, on the same 0 to 5 framework, ideally combining self and manager assessment to reduce bias. One consistent scale is what makes capability comparable when you cannot rely on seeing the work.

2

Make it the shared source of truth

Use the matrix as the team's single, visible record of capability, accessible to everyone, not a private manager's note. In a distributed team this transparency replaces the informal knowledge an office shares by being in the same place.

3

Re-score regularly and watch trajectories

Update scores at each review and look at how each person is changing over time, not just today's snapshot. Rising lines confirm development; flat lines, especially on remote people, are the early signal to investigate before someone falls behind.

4

Develop on need, not nearness

Direct development, stretch work and opportunities by what the matrix shows people need, not by who you happen to see. This is the deliberate counter to proximity bias: every plan justified by capability, every location given equal consideration.

5

Review progress equitably

In one-to-ones and reviews, hold remote and office people to the same evidenced standard, and let the matrix show that recognition follows performance, not presence. Visible fairness is what builds trust across a distributed team.

Six mistakes managing remote teams

MISTAKE 01

Managing by line-of-sight

You cannot see remote work. Replace observation with a shared, written capability record.

MISTAKE 02

Letting proximity bias run

Favouring who you see erodes trust. Ground development in documented capability, not presence.

MISTAKE 03

Snapshot, not trajectory

Today's score alone hides stalled growth. Track change over time to catch who has plateaued.

MISTAKE 04

Leaving remote growth to chance

Office learning is incidental; remote learning is not. Make development explicit and planned.

MISTAKE 05

A private manager's matrix

Hidden data builds no trust. Make the matrix a shared, visible source of truth for the team.

MISTAKE 06

Unequal review standards

Judging remote and office people differently is unfair. Hold all to the same evidenced standard.

The method is free. A ready-made matrix just makes a distributed team's capability *visible to all*.

Everything here works in a blank spreadsheet, and that is a fine place to start. A purpose-built template just makes distributed management easier: everyone is scored on the same scale, capability is tracked over time, and the picture is visible at a glance from anywhere, so trajectories, flat lines and development needs are clear wherever people sit, replacing the line-of-sight a distributed team simply does not have.



The Advanced Excel Skills Matrix gives a distributed team one shared, current view of capability and how it is changing, the evidence that keeps remote development visible and fair, all on the same 0 to 5 framework used throughout this guide.

TRY IT FREE	MOST POPULAR	WHEN YOU ARE READY
£0 The online 5x5 builder maps a small team in your browser, with no sign-up. Accessible from anywhere.	£199 The full Excel template: capability tracking, required levels and analytics, up to 30 people and 30 skills. One-off, yours forever.	£1 Upgrade to PulseAI in your first year for a living, web and mobile version with AI skill suggestions and reminders.

— COMMON QUESTIONS

Quick *answers*

Q How does a skills matrix help manage a remote team?

It replaces the line-of-sight you lose at a distance with a shared, written record of capability. Scored consistently and kept current, it shows where everyone stands and how they are developing, regardless of location, so you can manage and develop people you cannot physically watch work.

Q What is proximity bias and how does the matrix counter it?

Proximity bias is the unconscious tendency to favour the people you see in person, who get more attention, development and advancement, while remote colleagues are overlooked. A skills matrix counters it by grounding development and recognition in documented capability rather than who is in the room, so growth depends on performance, not presence.

Q Why track trajectories rather than current scores?

Because a snapshot hides whether someone is growing or stalling. Re-scoring over time shows each person's trajectory, and a flat line, especially on a remote team member, is an early warning that they may be under-developed out of sight. Trajectories let you act before someone quietly falls behind.

Q Isn't this just surveillance of remote workers?

No, and the distinction matters. A skills matrix tracks capability and development, not activity or hours. It is about making growth visible and fair, ensuring remote people get the development and recognition they would in an office, rather than monitoring what they do minute to minute. Used openly, it builds trust rather than eroding it.

Q How do I keep development fair across locations?

Score everyone on the same scale, make the matrix a shared and visible record, direct development by what people need rather than who you see, and review progress against the same evidenced standard for all. When the team can see that opportunity follows capability rather than proximity, fairness becomes visible and trust grows.

Q How often should I update it for a remote team?

Regularly enough to catch trajectories, typically each review cycle, quarterly or twice a year. Distributed teams change and develop just as fast as co-located ones, but without the informal signals, so a current matrix matters more. Stale data is especially misleading when you have no line-of-sight to correct it.

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Alex is the creator of the Upleashed capability framework that powers Skills Matrix Template, the award-winning Excel skills matrix. A Chartered Manager with an MBA, an LLM and a doctorate in business administration, he has spent more than two decades helping operations, HR and quality teams turn capability from a gut feel into something they can measure, manage and prove.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex J. Martin-Smith".

Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith

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Develop on evidence, *not* *proximity*.

You now have the distributed-team method. The quickest way to start is to score your whole team on one scale, make it visible to everyone, and watch the trajectories at your next review. The flat lines you find, especially on remote people, are exactly where deliberate, fair development keeps your team whole wherever they sit.

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