

Behavioural Synchrony in a Virtual World





Have you ever wondered why we love to clap in unison with a group of people? Why parents and children will often synchronise their expressions and noises during play? Or why, on a night out, we might find ourselves unconsciously coordinating our movements on the dance floor with people we've never met before? The answer is a lesser-known human social phenomenon called *behavioural synchrony*.

Behavioural synchrony is a way in which social groups build cohesion and cooperation through imitative action performed simultaneously. The past 20 years has seen an immense amount of research into behavioural synchrony as a social behaviour, surfacing some of the reasons why we do it and its benefits.

For leaders this practice offers some clues on how we can better connect people and build cohesion in our teams. Developing these types of deep connections can have an enormous impact on team member engagement and wellbeing at work – and are no small challenge in hybrid and virtual environments.

Why Synchronise?

The original idea goes back to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who suggested certain adaptive functions for behavioural synchrony, after having observed it in a diverse range of social settings, such as religious practices, ceremonies, and festivals.

A significant body of research has now established that performing synchronous actions promotes [an array](#) of positive pro-social and cooperative behaviours. Following a period of behavioural synchrony, people have a greater sense of group unity, stronger rapport, and higher levels of sympathy for each other. Another interesting outcome of behavioral synchrony is that we remember more about our synchronous partners - it promotes interest and attention in others.

The potential reasons for these effects are various: synchrony makes us perceive ourselves as more similar, it signals cooperation, it removes boundaries that mark our sense of individuality, and it improves our understanding of each other.

What's more, synchrony goes far beyond just physical coordination. Research shows that synchronisation occurs on neural, physiological and affective levels... This connects to the deep tendency for humans to sync up when interacting, such as conversation partners showing [synchronization in brain oscillations](#). Face-to-face our connections are more profound than we might think, and this has consequences for how we interact and show up at work.



Modern Asynchrony

In a virtual world, our opportunities for having these types of experiences are much more limited. Not only do we struggle with the lag and stutter of online calls (for example, research confirms that Zoom lag disrupts the normal rhythm of turn initiation in conversation), we rarely get a chance for deeper connections and synchrony in these types of interactions.

Meetings are often shorter and, due to the nature of the technology, there is particular focus on one speaker rather than a more generalised awareness of the group. We often eschew team building and other exercises, which might lean on this synchrony because they feel more difficult to arrange and lead in this space. But given behavioural synchrony's importance for creating pro-social attitudes and behaviours, we know this is a problem. We want our teams to feel more connected in our future workplaces, not less.

Virtual Synchrony

So, if the positives of this practice are so clear, how can leaders develop behavioural synchrony in virtual and hybrid spaces? Synchrony can be established in a variety of ways: through shared movements, vocalisation, and even shared sensory stimulation. We are not just limited to walking in lockstep to benefit from this behaviour.

So, we recommend thinking about the following:

Get everyone in the same room

There is nothing better than getting everyone together every now and then, for building these connections – even if it's only once a week, a month or even a year! There is a wonderful range of activities you can perform, which gets to the very heart of this practice, including dancing, drum circles or singing.

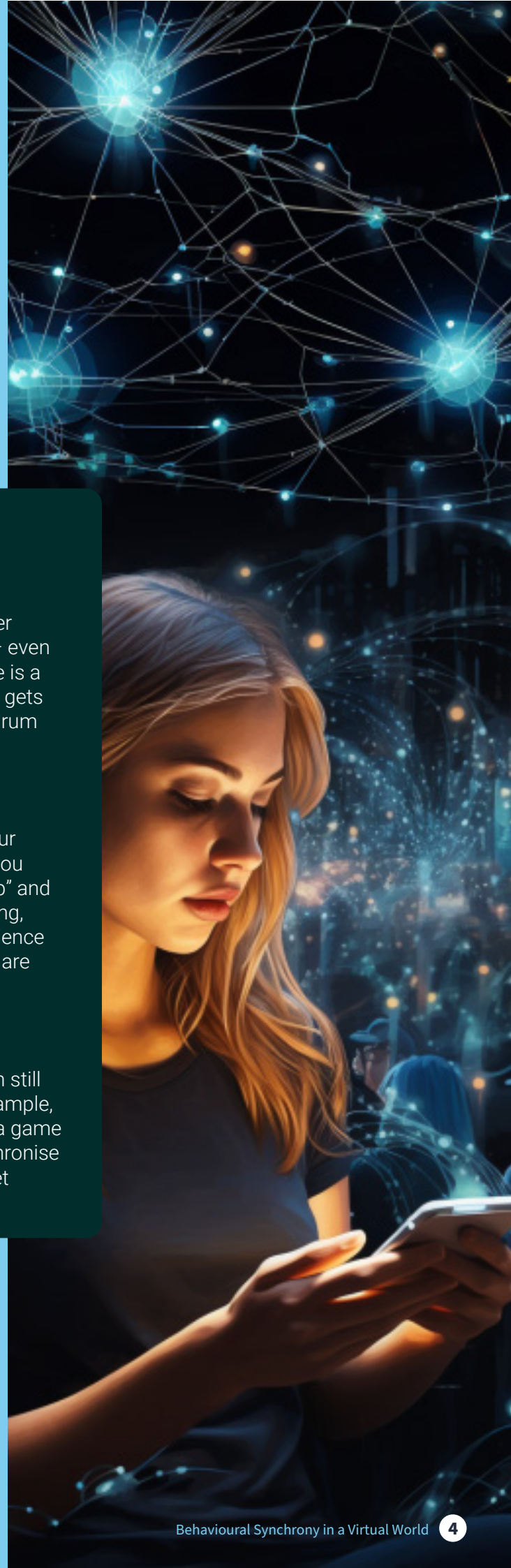
Get synchronous online

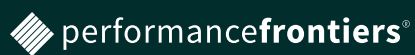
Our next best option is to introduce synchrony into our online interactions. During your next team meeting, you might want to try exercises which require “syncing up” and involve synchrony such as rock paper scissors, singing, vocal exercises or even just observing a visual experience together. People will feel more connected when they are called to act in the same way.

Get creative

If we don't have space in our online meetings, we can still cultivate synchrony between team members. For example, we could encourage the team to start their call with a game to get connected and have a bit of fun. We can synchronise in our interests, in our ways of working and our secret language – we are only limited by our imagination.

As we make the shift to new ways of working, there are lessons we can take from the past that might be more important than we think. *Getting in sync* requires more than just an internet connection, but is well worth the effort.





Performance Frontiers
Suite 1E
19 Lang Parade
Milton QLD
Australia 4064
[P] +61 7 3870 8433
[E] info@performancefrontiers.com
performancefrontiers.com



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