

# Bridging the Virtual Gap: Enlivening Our Global Programming Team

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## ABSTRACT

As our Johnson & Johnson global programming team from all across the world continues to expand and remote work becomes more common, the physical distance between colleagues is rapidly increasing. Our company has been actively exploring ways to bring people closer together and one of them is the ENLIVEN initiative. Its members, programmers from different regions, are organizing face-to-face and online activities, fostering friendly competition, enabling creative collaboration and building a virtual community. The meaning of "ENLIVEN" is to make something more entertaining, engaging and appealing, which is exactly what we aim to do. We want to build a stronger feeling of community by encouraging open communications, facilitate authentic connections, and promoting cross-boundary learnings. We target to create ONE team that is inclusive, offers support, and empowers every individual. In this paper we will talk about the lessons we have learned during the first year, challenges we have faced and our achievements.

## INTRODUCTION

Our programming department at Johnson & Johnson consists of more than 400 clinical and statistical programmers. Being a global company, Johnson & Johnson has offices in various locations across the world and many employees benefit from flexible working arrangements that allow them to work from home 1-2 days per week. Moreover, there are also programmers who work completely remotely. The programming team is very diverse; people work in different therapeutic areas and can have very different roles even within the same paygrade. This diversity gives us a lot of opportunities to learn from each other and grow as a group. However, our size and geographical footprint sometimes can make it more difficult to connect and feel as being part of a community.

In the beginning of 2023, the decision was made to create the ENLIVEN team. This team had two primary objectives:

- Creating opportunities to come together as ONE C&SP community
- Sharing best practices, learnings and knowing the team, across regions, therapeutic areas and sub-teams.

## SETTING-UP THE ENLIVEN TEAM

During an Initiative Fair, people could learn about different initiatives and sign up for them. There, the idea about ENLIVEN was shared and everyone within our global team had a chance to volunteer to become part of the ENLIVEN team or engage with any of the other various initiatives. We started with programmers from various roles and levels from across the globe. We were divided into three subgroups, while trying to keep diversity as high as possible within the subgroups. The first group was the communication team. Second, there were team members working around engagement. The third group was responsible for the exchange of ideas.

## COMMUNICATION

Within the communication team, the first aim was to decide which channel we could use to enable and support communication between programmers all over the world. Ultimately, it was decided to create a private Viva Engage® page that serves as our internal social media. We also thought about how to integrate our ENLIVEN team into other communication channels we have, to make sure our programming group finds our Viva Engage page easily.

## ENGAGEMENT

This team's mission was to spark and maintain the interest in our initiative, coming up with the content for the Viva Engage page that involved various challenges, interviews, impressions from the conferences etc.

## EXCHANGE OF IDEAS

The objective of this pillar was to enhance interaction and communication within and between regions, functions and teams. This team focused on channels and opportunities to connect and interact to share thoughts, ideas and best practices with colleagues around the globe.

## WHAT WE DID

### VIVA ENGAGE

Social media is an incredibly powerful tool of the 21st century that enables us to stay friends and communicate while being physically (far) away from each other. In our programming team, we decided to have our own social media, our

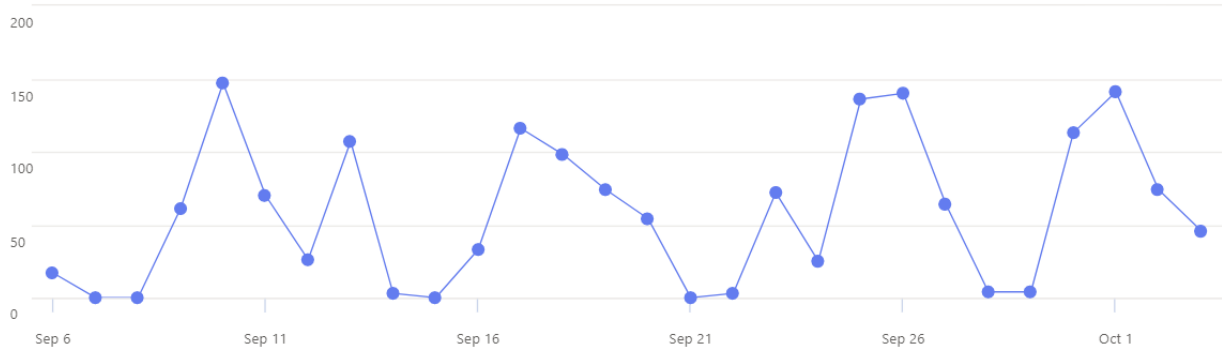
Viva Engage page. Similar to Facebook® or Instagram® we post pictures from holidays, share funny stories and childhood photos. The page currently has over 400 members and a few new posts per week. This kind of informal communication is extremely helpful when it comes to building relationships and we believe that a team that is not only limited to work-related conversations performs better than just a group of strangers assigned to a project. Knowing each other's backgrounds, interests and hobbies makes it easier to break the ice and forge connections despite being in different locations and time zones.

We did not just create the page and invite everyone to join, instead we decided to start with building excitement. We created a set of puzzles and riddles about the leadership team from our group. The programmers needed to solve these in order to get the pieces of the page URL. The winner would be the first person ever to post on the new page. This is when we encountered our first challenge that would come up again quite often. How to make sure that we are not giving advantage to one of the time zones? We decided to have region-level winners so that everyone had equal chances to win. The engagement was overwhelming and for the couple of hours after the launch we had received hundreds of emails with responses. That is how the page came to life.

Since then, we have posted numerous challenges (e.g. cooking challenge, childhood picture, DIY-challenge), interviews with our leaders and a lot of other fun content. Of course, this requires some effort from the engagement team, that comes up with the challenge ideas, people to interview etc., so internally we maintain a plan for the next several months of what will be posted next, taking into account internal and cross-industry events. After the initial encouragement that the engagement team provides, we are always happy to see other employees posting, starting conversations and commenting on posts. The page has become a great platform to get to know each other, share information that can be of interest to the wider group, promote internal and external charity events and various initiatives.

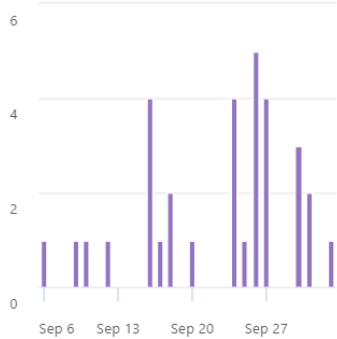
The graphics below show information from September 2024. The graphs below make it clear that we were able to create an active online community.

**Active people**



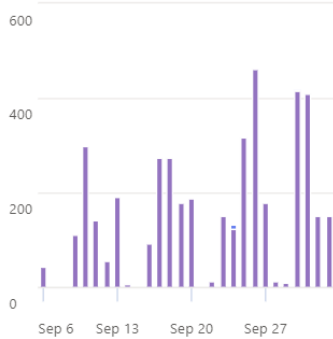
**Posted messages**

32



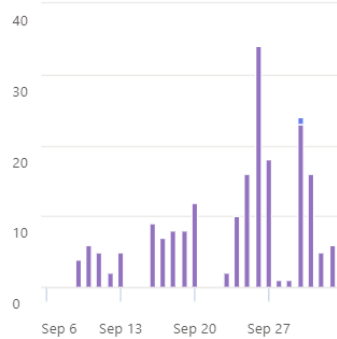
**Read messages**

4.26K



**Reacted to messages**

199



**FACE-TO-FACE ACTIVITIES**

Since we started our ENLIVEN team, we had multiple requests to do face-to-face teambuilding activities. We will highlight 2 of these events in the following sections.  
In 2023, our leadership decided to have the Technology day where all the programmers could come to the nearest site and learn more about new and established tools and processes. They reached out to the ENLIVEN team to

organize the team building activities. Our team had a few weeks to prepare and a few challenges to tackle. The format of the event had been changed a few times throughout the planning process and it went from face to face only to partially virtual. For us this meant that we needed to have two sets of activities: for people attending in person and for those attending virtually. We had to cover multiple locations in India, China, Europe and US making sure that all the sites and the virtual attendees in different time zones were included. We created a central database of potential ideas and then the ENLIVEN representatives from different sites picked the ones they found would be the best fit for the local team.

We also reached out to the global programming team again to search for volunteers to support us in several locations.

A few examples of the teambuilding activities that we did are the following:

- At some locations, human bingo was played. Upfront, participants had to provide a “fun fact” about themselves. All these fun facts were mixed together and put into bingo cards. When you were able to identify the correct person linked to a fun fact, that person put a stamp on the card. The first participants having a complete row or (later on) card could win a small gift.
- At another location, a drawing game was played. The group was divided into teams of 5 people. They all had a pen with 5 strings attached to it. Everyone had to hold a piece of string and without touching the pen, they had to recreate logos that were shown on the screen as good as possible to earn points for their team.

In 2024, we had a chance to organize team-building activities during the C&SP Day. This completely offline event was organized at 4 locations. All programmers came together at one of 4 locations; India, China, UK or US. We were part of the organizing team in the UK where over 100 programmers joined together. We organized a day-filling game, as well as an hour of fun activities as a break between the more formal sessions.

Before the event started, we gathered some information from the participants: We asked to provide a childhood picture or a picture performing a hobby (but without recognizable face), and answer following questions: “What is your favorite place in the world” & “If you could start your career over, what profession would you choose other than programmer?”. Based on the input, we printed one page for each participant and randomly distributed them in a closed envelope to everyone. Right before the first break, we allowed people to open their envelopes and have a look inside. We shared a video upfront to explain the rules of this game. If you were able to identify and approach the correct person from the clues in your envelope, that person would be eliminated, and you would get their envelope and continue your quest. At the end of the day, the person who had identified the most colleagues would be considered the winner of this game. This game immediately created a friendly atmosphere. Usually, many people are used to sticking with colleagues they already know, but with this game you could feel that boundaries between people melted away and there was a lot more informal interaction.

Next to that, we also organized an hour of fun activities. Because it is very difficult to organize something with such a large group of people, we split everyone into smaller groups of around 10 people. Within these groups, we played 3 games:

- Every group had to work together in a drawing challenge: We cut a picture into 10 pieces and had everyone look in secret at their piece. After a minute, we took the pieces away and started the timer. They had to draw the piece they just saw as good as possible based on what they remembered, on a bigger piece of paper and then put the puzzle together to recreate the initial picture. Afterwards we compared the times from the different groups and celebrated the winning group with a small prize.
- After that, the groups had to do the ping-pong challenge. We put an egg-tray against the wall and lined the group up after a line 3m away from the egg-tray. The clock started when the first person threw a ping-pong ball towards the container. It was the intention to throw all ping-pong balls into the tray as fast as possible, by alternating who was throwing. Like in the previous game, we also compared how long it took to fit all ping-pong balls into the tray and celebrated the winning group.
- In the last game, we searched for the best player in every group in a game of pitching pennies. In this game, everyone received 2 pennies. It started by throwing a penny one-by-one towards a wall. The person who threw closest to the wall collected all the pennies on the ground. As long as you had pennies, you could compete until there was one winner left. We ended our fun activity by bringing all groups together again and having a tournament between the winners from all groups. There was a lot of excitement in the room when we ended up with the overall winner of the game.

## **VIRTUAL ACTIVITIES**

Every quarter, our leadership organizes a townhall for all programmers. These townhalls are typically used to share information to the broader team about the organization, new tools and processes. At the end of 2023, the leadership team asked us to prepare a fun activity for this townhall. We worked together and came up with some kind of virtual escape-room in which programmers were asked to help a team of detectives to rescue the head of our department. Upfront, a video was created where we asked the head of our department to sit in the same room/desk as where he would be during the townhall. We filmed him being kidnapped from the meeting by 2 colleagues dressed up like criminals. The townhall was going as usual and then after 20 minutes, the head of our department suddenly dropped

out of the meeting. Immediately after that, two members from the ENLIVEN team took over the meeting, dressed up like undercover agents. We informed the team that the head of our department, from now referenced as Mr. O, was kidnapped from the building by another pharmaceutical company, and we showed the film that we created upfront. We told them we needed the help from the best programmers in the world to get him back safely. After this, we used the breakout rooms in Zoom® to split the team into smaller groups to collaborate. We provided a macroized Excel file to all participants in which only the first worksheet was accessible, showing a crossword puzzle with questions related to Johnson & Johnson. By solving the crossword puzzle together, they could unlock the first answer to find information about where Mr. O was kept hostage. When the puzzle was solved, we asked teams to get back into the original Zoom meeting. A few minutes after the first groups solved the puzzle, we closed the break-out room and brought everyone back together. We, as secret agents, provided the code to open the second worksheet and again created break-out rooms to solve another puzzle. By solving a SUDOKU puzzle, participants would be able to find out the code to unlock Mr. O. Again, we waited for the first teams to solve the puzzle and a few minutes later closed the breakout rooms. Afterwards the security officers could happily re-welcome Mr. O, who expressed his gratitude to all programmers for being such an amazing team! During both puzzles we always had ENLIVEN team members available to help groups that reached out for help or were unclear on what to do. We first had a meeting accommodating for people in EU and US time zone and afterwards a meeting in Asia time zone.

1. How would you rate our C&SP Townhall?



2. Any other questions or comments? (Please include your name if you would like a response)

Th ENLIVEN segment was such a fun addition to the end of year townhall. The effort of the ENLIVEN team to put on a great activity is really appreciated and it was fab acting by the 'security officers'!!

Another virtual team building activity that we organized across different regions was the "Desert Island" game. This activity was a modification of a well-known ice breaker, where each team member was asked to select something they would take with them to a deserted island. However, we added some twists to the rules for our game. We divided the attendees into virtual groups. We then set the stage by presenting a story of a shipwreck and asked each member to select an item that they believed would be essential for their survival before the waves stranded them on the island. Each team was asked to come up with a name and select the crew members: First officer responsible for listing the necessary items and ideas, a chef in charge of ensuring everything was done on time and a captain to present the team's survival strategy. The teams were given 10 minutes to collaborate and establish how they would survive on the island for at least a few weeks. The innovative solutions for survival varied from essential camping items like water, fishing nets, and matches, to a large survival pack. Some teams even came up with the idea of having a satellite phone to call for a helicopter pickup.

## EXCHANGING IDEAS

There are two main ingredients for an idea to be born: a need and time. There is no idea without a problem, and without investment there is no solution. Would Einstein discover gravity if he had not been hit by a falling apple when having nothing else to do but have a nap? The same applies in today's hectic life where we do not have time to stop and think even for a moment. Especially now when we are reachable from everywhere in the world around the clock. We do not even stop for a coffee but sip it at the desk while working.

Exchange team elaborated on this problem and introduced a very obvious solution by initiating "Informal-Coffee-Sessions". These were informal gatherings of friends or colleagues in person or online over a coffee without any pre-specified agenda. Without any intention people just chatted and let it flow freely. After a while when our cups were almost done, we wrapped it up. Then we reflected together on what we talked about and what we learned, and if needed arranged another coffee session. By embracing the power of informal coffee sessions, one can deepen relationships, spark new ideas, and create a more collaborative work environment.

Another knowledge sharing opportunity was to support the conference attendees by creating a general framework to share and enhance the conference experience. It was a booklet for advice on how to prepare for the conference in advance to get the most out of it. It gave advice on how to build a detailed agenda from travel arrangements, exploring the city and networking to presentation attendance and learning from exhibitors. Finally, on arrival it had instructions on how to share the experience on our ENLIVEN page!

## RECEPTION

Whenever we organize something, we always hear very positive sounds coming from the team. It is clear that our colleagues appreciate the informal interactions and the activities that we organized. We asked some people from within our group how they experienced our activities and got some genuinely nice feedback.

Principal Statistical Programming Lead, UK

*"Since it's inception, I've really enjoyed Enliven. Whether the team has been creating fun in global town halls or keeping us connected through Viva Engage, this initiative has huge value. The standout event for me was the virtual event where our VP was kidnapped and breakout groups were tasked with solving clues to secure his safe release. It was very imaginative and well put together considering we are such a large group.*

*To me Enliven is more than just the group and activities though, it's a feeling that there is a global community of people who have fun high on their agenda and a smile for each other even though we are widely spread. I really like feeling part of that.*

*I hope the group continues to be courageous and to push the idea that a global group can feel like a tight community."*

Senior Data Engineer, Switzerland

*"Technology Day, October 2023 - The Enliven team took care of the social event on that day, which was a huge success:*

- Open discussion with the team in planning the event.*
- The suggestion from the Enliven team to have this slot right after lunch was, in my opinion, a game changer and truly energized the audience for the afternoon presentation session.*
- Everybody participated in the activities, and the feedback was positive.*
- The Enliven team played an important role in sharing happiness and promoting a positive mindset during the event.*

*In the future, I'd like to see more face-to-face event."*

## WHAT WE LEARNED

The first US face-to-face event and the virtual one during the technology day were the most challenging. For the US location we had over 100 people attending in person, and it required all the strength and energy of the ENLIVEN representatives and the volunteers to manage such a large audience. After these first experiences, we had a few learnings:

- Asking for extra regional support worked out well. Some people were eager to help organize the event and learn more about the initiative.
- Time zones should always be taken into account so that everyone is in the same conditions.
- We found it worked best not to try and have the same activities per site but to let the local representatives decide.
- In addition to the actual activities during the team building slot it helped to have one background activity that lasted the entire day where people needed to ask each other questions and connect during the breaks.
- For the sites with larger numbers, simplicity was key: the more elaborate the activity, the more things can go wrong.
- Symbolic prizes like a box of chocolates can make a difference and boost the engagement.
- After every event we have a debrief on what worked well, what could have been done better and which activities could be reused at a different site next time.
- It is essential to take cultural differences between regions into account, to avoid confusion.
- It's essential to have an additional moderator to handle technical aspects for virtual team building activities with small groups.
- Hybrid events need separate activities and organizers for on-site and virtual attendees and are still challenging to keep everyone onboard. People who are attending the event virtually are more difficult to keep engaged for virtual informal sessions as well.
- When organizing a face-to-face activity, it's crucial to have someone to make you aware of all practical implications from the venue (size of the rooms, distance between rooms, etc.) to accommodate your activity.
- It takes time and effort to grow an active online community, but it is well-worth the effort.

The formal interactions between colleagues go better if you have established informal connections as well. I remember walking into the UK office for the first time where I met a US colleague for the first time that I have never spoken with. We introduced ourselves and when I said my name, he recalled something I recently posted on our Viva Engage and we immediately had a nice informal conversation, which makes it easier to afterwards have a formal discussion as well.

## CONCLUSION

Working in the ENLIVEN team has been both challenging and satisfying. Organizing games & events, brainstorming about new challenges and new ways to bring people together requires a lot of time and creativity. Since this is

something that comes on top of our regular work, with often conflicting timelines, it has sometimes been stressful to have everything organized. But seeing the effects of our work, seeing the informal connections in our group grow and hearing the positive responses from the community makes it very rewarding to be in the ENLIVEN team.

We have come across some hurdles from which we learned, making us a stronger team to continue with. Working in a diverse team like this also gives us an opportunity to get more insights into diversity, equity and inclusion, and how to take that into account while thinking about enlivening our community.

Over time, we see our online community getting stronger and stronger. In the meanwhile, it became a habit for many colleagues to post something when someone attends a conference or has an on-site or virtual activity. We hope to get more chances to organize informal get-togethers, especially face-to-face, within the group and make the programming community an even stronger team.

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