

How Shifts in Remote Behavior Affect Employee Well-Being

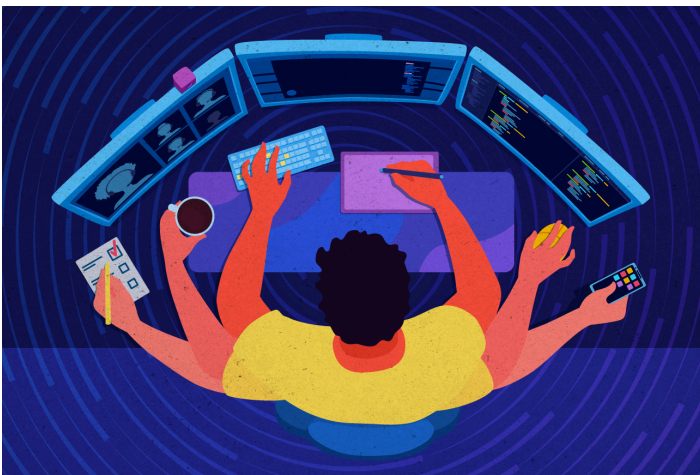
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In March 2020, a large share of businesses had to make remote work a norm, five days a week. The learning curve was steep, but in the short run, it seemed to boost productivity, especially by cutting commute times. Soon, however, a subtle shift in work practices — the way we collaborate, communicate, and manage — was observed.

Those almost imperceptible changes had direct consequences for employee well-being, but there has been a dearth of data and analysis to truly understand the effects of remote and hybrid work. Particularly in times of transition, the ability to collect relevant data and run experiments is crucial to identify potential issues posed by these new modes of working — and it can also show us the way forward.

Starting in 2020, Vitality, a wellness and financial services firm, organized a large-scale study of more than 1,000 of its employees across all business units and four locations in its offices in the United Kingdom, focusing on their well-being, job capacity, and broader health and work outcomes. Automated data collection using Microsoft Workplace Analytics was complemented by supplementary weekly surveys over a five-month period. While many of our findings confirmed our intuition — that the shift to remote work might have made us more productive but at a cost to our well-being — there were also plenty of surprises, and we were able to identify several underlying mechanisms to better understand the new context of work.

The Cost of Productivity: The Erosion of Work-Life Boundaries

Working from home definitely made many people feel more productive — over half (55%) of the home-based workers we surveyed reported getting more work done. There is, however, a cost to this boost in productivity: When employees work from home, it can be difficult for them to compartmentalize their personal and professional lives, leading to a deterioration in work-life balance.

In looking at our data, this was not immediately obvious: While the average number of meetings increased by 7.4% during the period June 2020 to December 2021, the average number of hours spent collaborating with others after standard work hours decreased by 5.6%, with employees' overall workweek spans remaining practically unchanged.

But averages can be misleading. Looking more deeply, we found that many employees — and sometimes entire departments — became substantially busier during the shift to remote work in 2020, while some others started to work less than before. For 10% of workers, the workweek span (combined time spent working each day, Monday to Friday) decreased by 12% or more; for another 10%, it increased by 9% or more.

Our data also suggests that the quality of work changed too: Most departments now spend more hours in low-quality meetings, which we define as meetings during which an employee is multitasking, double-booked, or accompanied by a colleague in a similar role. It thus appears that work practices have indeed changed, but the direction and extent of change depends largely on individual employees and their particular situations at work and at home.

Addressing the Role of Workplace Behaviors in Well-Being

The natural question is whether those varied changes in people's work patterns had broader effects on their work capacity. The subsequent question is whether shifting workplace behaviors could help to maintain well-being and improve work outcomes.

To answer these questions, we focused on a core set of workplace behaviors that we saw as having the most significant impact on a range of well-being and work outcomes:

- **Collaboration hours:** A combination of time spent in meetings, on calls, and dealing with emails and instant messages, both during and after work hours.
- **Low-quality meeting hours:** Meetings during which a person multitasks, is double-booked, or is accompanied by another colleague with a similar role.
- **Multitasking hours:** Time spent sending emails or other messages during meetings.
- **Focus hours:** Blocks of at least two hours on a person's calendar during which they have no meetings.
- **Workweek span:** The number of hours worked per week (Monday to Friday), tracked through the first and last collaborative actions for each workday.

As we explain below, these five workplace behaviors could be central levers in workplace interventions to improve workers' well-being and capacity.

The relationships emerging from the data are clear: Working longer (a higher workweek span), less productively (more low-quality meetings), and in a more stressful manner (higher levels of multitasking) is associated with universally worse outcomes. More after-hours work generally increases one's sense of engagement but has no real impact on work productivity and quality. Increased focus hours seem to drive work outcomes but not engagement.

These findings suggest that collaboration is crucial for employees to feel engaged, but in the context of remote work, collaboration can also erode the work-life boundaries that may worsen burnout and mental well-being in the long term. To compensate for the reduced work-life balance, employees rely on focus hours, which generate disengagement but do help people regain a sense of control over their work.

Our previous research shows that mental well-being, in particular, forms a key link between [individual well-being and work environment on the one hand and work outcomes on the other](#). Work stress, poor work-life balance, and low job satisfaction are all critical indicators of a worker's diminished level of well-being. Balancing collaboration and focus hours — depending on the tasks at hand, and the stages of a project and the work — appears crucial to maintaining well-being. Controlling the quality, content,

and usefulness of meetings to avoid a jump in the number of meetings due to the difficulties of communicating only remotely is crucial. These broad associations are promising; by helping employees to structure their workdays better, we could simultaneously improve their well-being and work capacity, improve engagement at work, and maintain (or increase) their output and productivity.

What Drives Predictable Work Patterns?

Helping employees improve their well-being is neither new nor necessarily driven by altruistic motives. Many employers in countries such as the United States have been spending large sums on health promotion programs, largely in an effort to mitigate employee health care liabilities, given that [effective initiatives often provide a good return on investment](#). Such initiatives should arguably expand to the work behavior space as well.

The effectiveness of health interventions can be greatly enhanced by proper targeting of those in need. More effective workplace interventions would reflect fundamental differences in employees' preferred working styles and how they respond to changes in work patterns. Workers' personalities, job profiles, and broader work context should matter; what's effective for highly engaged executives might not work for stressed middle managers or fresh graduates in junior positions.

To examine whether workplace policies and their consequences in terms of workplace behaviors would affect individuals differently, we mapped out employees across various aspects: gender, age, job seniority, office location, management responsibilities, contracted work hours, job role, probation status, and work contract type. The clusters of employees that we could identify were highly consistent both in terms of behavior and employee characteristics. Long workweek span (behavior) was associated with higher levels of multitasking and more meetings; those with longer workweek spans were typically older men with higher job seniority (characteristic). Because typical behaviors are associated with employee seniority, a person's age, position, and managerial status can give us a good sense of their

average work patterns.

How Shifts in Workplace Behaviors Affect Employees Differently

The next step was to explore how workplace interventions targeted at core behaviors — such as increased collaboration hours, meeting quality, and focus hours — could affect those different types of workers in varied ways. We identified 16 individual work pattern profiles determined by four levels of employee seniority — executive, senior, associate, and junior — and four levels of work engagement, from low to high. We captured work capacity data on the basis of employees' life and work satisfaction, and their levels of anxiety and stress, work energy, and work-life balance. We deemed these factors to be core determinants of employees' ability to carry out their work in the best conditions.

We found that the effects of behavior changes correlate differently to levels of seniority and engagement. The effect of increasing workweek span or focus hours indeed depends on workers' level of seniority. While focus hours are useful for senior employees, they decrease well-being for more junior colleagues. (We can expect junior employees to want more social interactions rather than to work in isolation from their team.) The effect of multitasking and after-hours collaboration, on the other hand, depends principally on employees' level of engagement with their work, which varies widely within each seniority level.

Tailor Workplace Interventions for Your Team

Many organizations have been tempted to apply blanket hybrid work policies to their entire employee populations, forcing everyone to come to the office for a certain number of days and under specific conditions. At the same time, remote workdays are being increasingly regimented as well, with regular meetings and allocated time for socializing.

There surely can be benefits in regulating focus and collaboration hours and in assessing the usefulness of

meetings, yet our results show that the consequences of those approaches vary depending on employees' level of seniority. Junior employees need more collaboration hours to learn the culture, meet coworkers, and socialize. In contrast, more senior employees need to preserve more focus time for complex tasks. Thus, personalization is needed in the way we approach work behaviors at the workplace — and, by extension, employee well-being. What is the most beneficial change for some might make very little difference to or even have negative effects on work attitudes for others.

Such data-driven findings can help in adapting hybrid work policies to meet individual employees' needs. Recognizing the need for a personalized approach, leaders can empower individual teams to discuss and decide on what work patterns are best for them to enhance autonomy and

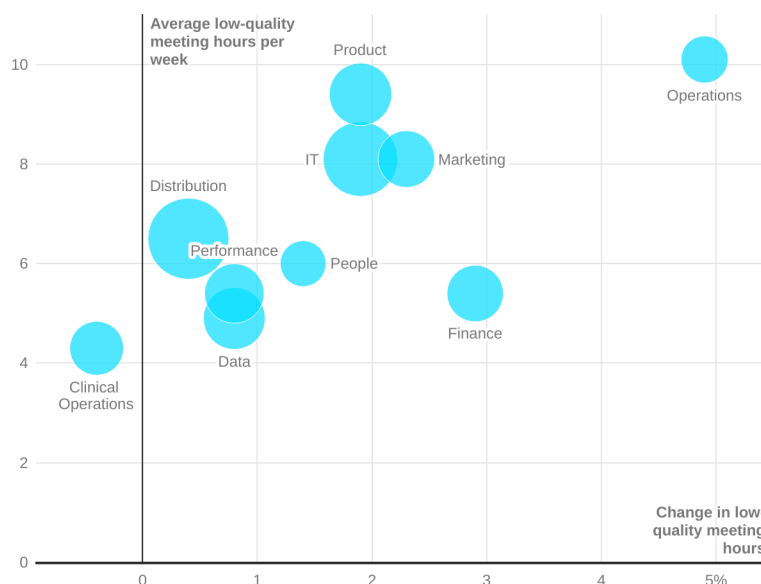
flexibility. By adapting to the forever changed world of work and appreciating personal differences, leaders can empower their employees and unlock value for their businesses.

About the Authors

Shaun Subel is director and Martin Stepanek is lead researcher at the Vitality Research Institute, which is focused on advancing the science of behavior change by better understanding the relationship between behaviors and health, longevity, and productivity. Thomas Roulet (@thomroulet) is an associate professor in organization theory at the University of Cambridge. His work focuses on evaluations and social relationships at work.

Change in Low-Quality Meeting Hours, by Function



















During the pandemic, employees in almost every organizational function spent increased time in low-quality meetings, defined as meetings during which a person multitasks, is double-booked, or is accompanied by another colleague with a similar role. The size of the bubble correlates to the number of people tracked in the corresponding function.



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The Impact of Remote Work Behaviors on Work Outcomes

Changes in workplace behavior correlate to changes in both work- and well-being-related outcomes.

<i>Increase in..</i>	Sense of Time Pressure	Work-Life Balance	Work Productivity	Work Quality	Work Engagement
Collaboration hours	 0.24	-0.26 	-0.07 	-0.09 	 0.11
Collaboration hours – after work hours	 0.19	-0.17 	0.03 	0.01 	 0.21
Low-quality meeting hours	 0.19	-0.13 	-0.06 	-0.10 	 0.10
Multitasking during meetings (hours)	 0.14	-0.14 	-0.03 	-0.06 	 0.14
Focus hours	-0.24 	 0.19	 0.09	 0.12	-0.02 
Workweek span	 0.17	-0.29 	-0.08 	-0.10 	 0.12

The Effects of Changed Remote Work Behaviors on Work Capacity

The tables indicate the effect of increasing a given work behavior (such as increased workweek span) on overall work capacity, by level of seniority. Green dots indicate resulting higher work capacity (a positive outcome), red dots indicate resulting lower work capacity (a negative outcome), and yellow dots indicate no or low impact. Employee levels of seniority are shown in columns, and their level of work engagement is shown in rows. “High” indicates higher-than-expected work engagement, and “low” indicates lower-than-expected work engagement.

Workweek Span (increase)

		SENIORITY LEVEL			
		Junior	Associate	Senior	Executive
ENGAGEMENT LEVEL	High				
	Mid-high				
	Mid-low				
	Low				

Multitasking During Meetings (increase)

		SENIORITY LEVEL			
		Junior	Associate	Senior	Executive
ENGAGEMENT LEVEL	High				
	Mid-high				
	Mid-low				
	Low				

Focus Hours (increase)

		SENIORITY LEVEL			
		Junior	Associate	Senior	Executive
ENGAGEMENT LEVEL	High				
	Mid-high				
	Mid-low				
	Low				

After-Hour Collaboration Hours (increase)

		SENIORITY LEVEL			
		Junior	Associate	Senior	Executive
ENGAGEMENT LEVEL	High				
	Mid-high				
	Mid-low				
	Low				



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