

## Why Shifting Remote Work Behaviour Improves Wellbeing – but Only for Some

*By Shaun Subel, Martin Stepanek, Thomas Roulet*

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 shorter run, it seemed to boost productivity, especially by cutting commute time. Soon, however, a slow shift in work practices – the way we collaborate, communicate and manage - was observed.

Those almost imperceptible changes had direct consequences on employee wellbeing, 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 can also show us the way forward.

Starting in 2020, Vitality, a world leader in wellness and financial services, organised a large-scale study of more than one thousand of its employees across all business units and four locations in the United Kingdom offices, focusing on their wellbeing, job capacity, and broader health and work outcomes. Automated data collection using Microsoft Workplace Analytics was complemented by supplementary weekly surveys over a 5-month period. While many of our findings confirmed our intuition – that the shift to remote work may have made us more productive at a cost to our wellbeing -, there were also many surprises, and many underlying mechanisms we could identify to understand the new context of work.

### **The cost of productivity: The erosion of work-life boundaries**

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

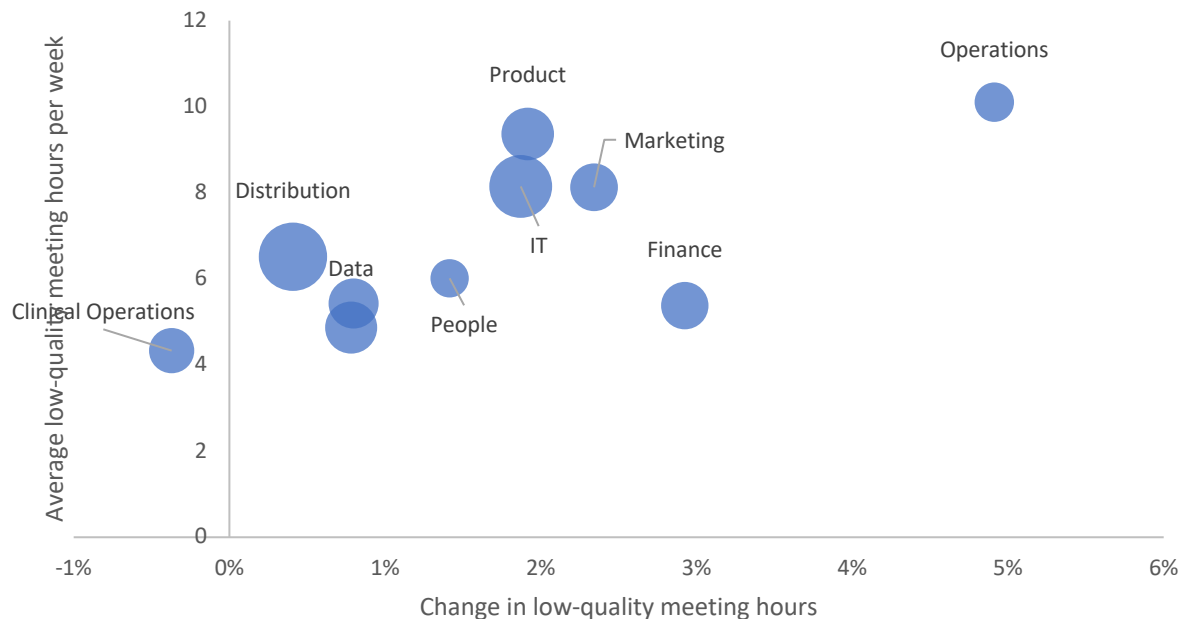
Observing our data, this is not immediately obvious: while the average number of meetings increased by 7.4% over the June 2020 to December 2021 period, the average number of hours spent collaborating with others after standard work hours decreased by 5.6%, with employees' overall workweek spans remaining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

Yet averages can be misleading. Looking deeper 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 defined as meetings during which an employee was multitasking, double-booked, or accompanied by a colleague in a similar role. It thus appears that work practices have indeed changed but are mostly offset on the average, and the direction and extent of change depends largely on individual employees and their particular situation at work and at home.

Figure 1: Change in Low-Quality Meeting Hours, by Function

Caption: 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 accompanied by another colleague with a similar role. The size of the bubble correlates to the number of people tracked in the study.



### Addressing the Role of Workplace Behaviors in Wellbeing

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 wellbeing and improve work outcomes.

To answer these questions, we focused on a core set of workplace behaviors which we saw as having the most significant impact on a range of wellbeing 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 hours
- **low-quality meeting hours:** meetings during which a person multitasks, is double-booked, or 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 in a person's calendar during which they have no meetings
- **workweek span:** 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 behaviours could be central levers in workplace interventions to improve workers' wellbeing and capacity.

Figure 2: The Impact of Remote Work Behaviors on Work Outcomes

Caption: Changes in workplace behavior correlate to changes in both work- and wellbeing-related outcomes.

	<b>Time pressure</b>	<b>Work-life balance</b>	<b>Work productivity</b>	<b>Work quality</b>	<b>Work engagement</b>
Increase in Collaboration hours	0.24	-0.26	-0.07	-0.09	0.11
Increase in Collaboration hours – after hours	0.19	-0.17	0.03	0.01	0.21
Increase in Low-quality meeting hours	0.19	-0.13	-0.06	-0.10	0.10
Increase in Multitasking during meetings (hours)	0.14	-0.14	-0.03	-0.06	0.14
Increase in Focus hours	-0.24	0.19	0.09	0.12	-0.02
Increase in Workweek span	0.17	-0.29	-0.08	-0.10	0.12

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 employee burnout and mental wellbeing in the long term. To compensate for the reduced work-life balance, employees rely on focus hours, which generates disengagement but does help people regain a sense of control over their work.

Our [previous research](#) shows that mental wellbeing, in particular, forms a key link between individual wellbeing and work environment on 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 wellbeing. Balancing collaboration and focus hours--depending on the tasks at hand, and the stages of project and work--appears crucial to maintaining wellbeing. Controlling the quality, content and usefulness of meetings is crucial to avoid an inflation in the number of meetings due to the difficulties of communicating only remotely. These broad associations are promising; by helping employees to better structure their workdays, we could simultaneously improve their wellbeing and work capacity, improve engagement at work, and maintain (or increase) their output and productivity.

## What Drives Predictable Work Patterns?

Helping employees to improve their wellbeing 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 healthcare liabilities, as effective initiatives often [provide a good return on investment](#). Such initiatives should arguably expand to the work behaviour 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 may not work for stressed middle managers or fresh graduates in junior positions.

To examine whether workplace policies and their consequences in terms of workplace behaviours 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 behaviour and employee characteristics: Long workweek span (behavior) was associated with higher levels of multitasking and more meetings; those with longer workweek span were typically older men with higher job seniority (characteristic). We can commonly associate typical behaviors to the seniority of employees. In other words, a person's age, position and managerial status can give us a good sense of their average work patterns.

### **How shifts in workplace behaviours affect employees differently**

The next step was to explore how workplace interventions targeted at core behaviours--such as 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, 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, their levels of anxiety and stress, work energy, and work-life balance. We deemed these factors 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 wellbeing for more junior colleagues. (We can expect junior employees to want more social interactions rather than working in isolation from their team.) The effect of multitasking and after-hour collaboration, on the other hand, depends principally on employees' level of engagement with their work, which varies widely within each seniority level..

Figure 3 Title: The Effects of Changed Remote Work Behaviors on Work Capacity

Caption: The tables indicate the effect of increasing a given work behaviour (e.g., increased workweek span) on overall work capacity, by level of seniority. Up arrows indicate resulting higher work capacity (a positive outcome), down arrows indicate resulting lower work capacity (a negative outcome). Employee levels of seniority are shown in columns, employees' level of work engagement level are shown in rows. "High" indicates higher-than-expected work engagement, "Low" indicates lower-than-expected work engagement.

Workweek span (increase)					Focus hours (increase)				
	Executive	Senior	Associate	Junior		Executive	Senior	Associate	Junior
High	↑	↗	↘	↘	High	↔	↑	↔	↘
Mid-high	↑	↑	↔	↔	Mid-high	↔	↑	↔	↘
Mid-low	↑	↔	↓	↘	Mid-low	↔	↑	↔	↘
Low	↗	↔	↓	↓	Low	↔	↑	↗	↔

Multitasking during meetings (increase)					After-hour collaboration hours (increase)				
	Executive	Senior	Associate	Junior		Executive	Senior	Associate	Junior
High	↗	↑	↑	↑	High	↗	↗	↑	↑
Mid-high	↗	↑	↑	↗	Mid-high	↗	↗	↑	↑
Mid-low	↘	↔	↗	↘	Mid-low	↓	↓	↘	↘
Low	↓	↘	↔	↓	Low	↘	↘	↔	↑

The tables indicate the effect of increasing a given work behaviour (e.g., increased workweek span) on overall work capacity, by level of seniority. Up arrows indicate resulting higher work capacity (a positive outcome), down arrows indicate resulting lower work capacity (a negative outcome). Employee levels of seniority (clusters of predicted behaviour based on employee and role profile) are shown in columns, employees' work intensity independent of their level are shown in rows. "High" indicates higher than expected work intensity, "Low" indicates lower than expected work intensity.

## The risks of a blanket approach to workplace interventions

Many firms have been tempted to apply blanket hybrid work policies to their entire employee populations, forcing everyone to come to the office on a certain number of days and under specific conditions. At the same time, remote workdays are being increasingly regimented as well, with regular meetings for different purposes, 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 co-workers, and socialise. In contrast, more senior employees need to preserve more focus time for complex tasks. Thus personalisation is needed in the way we approach work behaviours at the workplace (and by extension employee wellbeing). What may be the most beneficial change for some may make very little difference or even have negative impacts on work attitudes for others.

Such data-driven findings can help in adapting hybrid work policies to meet individual employee's needs. Recognising the need for a personalised approach, leaders can empower individual teams to discuss and decide what work patterns work 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.

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