

# **Measuring Employee Wellbeing in Remote Workers**

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **New Metrics Needed to Evaluate Remote Workers**

### **Introduction**

Whether engineering, business, or consulting roles, companies and teams found themselves at home five days a week, seeing and hearing each other's voices through a screen rather than being in close physical proximity to one another. This topic is increasingly relevant as many companies are now proposing the best way forward through a variety of mechanisms, whether it be fully remote work, fully in-person work, or a hybrid of the two options. Companies will need to determine how their decision will affect their employees on an individual level, but also, how the individuals' reactions will translate into the company's success. For example, CEO and founder of Meta, Mark Zuckerberg, has already sent out a company-wide memo indicating that employees will be free to work from wherever they want long past the COVID-19 pandemic (Porterfield, 2021). Whatever route companies ultimately decide to take for the future of their company, a huge piece of remote work that is being overlooked are the metrics being used to evaluate employee performance.

Rebecca Knight, a senior correspondent on the topic of 'Careers in the Workplace' urges companies and management to remember what the deep-rooted purpose of performance reviews are in the first place (Knight, 2020). They are not explicitly to punish poor performers or give out raises to high performers. Instead, they are in place to reinforce a company's values and strengthen organizational culture. Knight argues that employee evaluations are one of the strongest artifacts of corporate culture and the way these evaluations are occurring during COVID-19 will be especially remembered and reflect, either positively or negatively, the true values of a company. It is incredibly important to focus on the right criteria during remote work, and Knight explains it would be 'really unfortunate if you focused on the transactional aspect of performance,' instead of looking at things like teamwork and collaboration abilities, empathy,

and the ability to adapt. She also theorizes that COVID-19 and the spiral into remote work can be a great thing, as it provides corporations the opportunity to shift towards people-focused management system and being able to encapsulate factors like resilience and agility rather than just standard measures like efficiency and production.

It's a lot easier for companies to have a standardized, concrete set of principles they assess when all employees are working together in a physical office space. They all work in the same environment and perform with the same potential opportunities. However, it is the case that many companies are still measuring employee performance with outdated metrics that are only applicable to an office setting. Gartner, a leader in the technology and consulting space, through a number of surveys and studies, found that by replicating too many office-centric practices, their employees were more fatigued and had decreasing performance levels (Baker, 2021). Gartner quickly realized that 'to succeed in a hybrid future, organizations must stop duplicating office-centric practices and shift to a human-centric model.' This ideal fits in perfectly with the idea that metrics, too, must be reinvented to prevent employee burnout and keep efficiency high while employees work from home.

As a society, so much value is placed on numbers and workplaces specifically attempt to quantify everything they can to have objective data that can be used to view trends and aid in decision-making. While these numbers are obviously useful for employee efficiency purposes, that is usually all they are good for. It's hard to quantify metrics like employee wellbeing and mental health, and perhaps that is why many companies still haven't done so. The presented research will take a brief look at how companies currently use metrics to assess their workers' contributions. More importantly, though, it will justify why performance review metrics alone

cannot accurately evaluate workers in a work-from-home environment, and why it is vital for employee well-being to also be considered for any remote employee.

### **Monitoring Remote Workers as An Alternative to Reformed Metrics**

Many companies have shied away from the idea of even thinking about the development of work-from-home metrics because they immediately turned to remote monitoring technologies. Remote monitoring technologies can be used for a number of reasons such as an attempt to receive “objective” data so that company decisions regarding an employee are not made simply on personal relationships and just a mere appearance of contribution (Fairweather, 1999). A number of surveillance technologies have come to light over the last couple years, as the demand for them has increased with COVID-19 (Bernstein, 2021).

Some popular capabilities of remote monitoring technologies include keystroke tracking, where your manager/employer can see every key that is sequentially pressed on your keyboard, email-scanning software, eavesdropping on meetings, and recording remote files and websites that are accessed (Mitrou, Karyda, 2006). Why would a company ever need to come up with new metrics for their remote workers if they have tools such as this which will essentially feed information on what their employees are doing directly to them? Kerrie Krutchik, who’s been an attorney for 34 years, was hired in the Spring of 2021 at a new law firm. To her surprise, her new company laptop arrived in the mail with the stipulation that if she looked away from her laptop for too many seconds or even shifted her body positioning in her chair, she would have to scan her face back in from three separate angles (Abril, Harwell, 2021). Krutchik admitted that it was a ‘constant, unnecessary, nerve-racking stress’ and that the thought of being watched by someone interfered with her ability to actually focus on document reviews.

One of the big problems with remote monitoring technologies is how it fosters an environment of distrust. Companies often feel that they should use these technologies to tightly enforce that employees ensure that they receive the maximum return on investment. However, this way of thinking is unhealthy as it completely removes employees from the decision-making process in terms of how they will be watched and evaluated. As a result, being a subject of suffocating monitoring is often interpreted by employees as a lack of trust from management (Jeske, 2022). It would be far more reasonable for management and employees to work together to arrive at some conclusion on how each worker should effectively be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Additionally, remote monitoring technologies do nothing along the lines of evaluating its employees' well-beings.

ExpressVPN, a major software VPN service, conducted a survey of 2000 employers at companies with remote or hybrid work settings and found that around 78% of them admitted to using some sort of employee monitoring software in order to check their online activity and track their employees' performance and behavior (ExpressVPN, 2021). Additionally, 73% of employers said that the contents of stored employee messages, emails, and/or class have influenced their decision-making when giving out employee performance reviews (ExpressVPN, 2021). If managers are relying on media content that they aren't supposed to see in the first place to determine whether an employee gets a raise, demotion, or even gets fired, clearly the metrics in place are far from just. It would be much more practical to focus on metrics like self-improvement, employee potential, communication skills, and even just overall happiness, which would in turn lead to a more productive worker. After all, research conducted by Oxford University's Saïd Business School found that workers are 13% more productive when they're happy. Studying salesmen specifically, they found that happier workers would work faster by

making more calls per hour of work and more significantly, were able to convert more of these calls into actual sales (Bellet, Celement, De Neve, 2019). Of course, not all companies are guilty of using remote monitoring technologies, but even those that don't are still doing their best to find the right set of metrics that can be used to fairly and accurately measure employee wellbeing and output.

### **What Is A Metric and Which Ones Are Companies Using**

Aside from remote monitoring tools, it is important to understand what metrics companies are currently using to try and gauge how their employees are doing. First, it's important to grasp why companies even have to use metrics. In the corporate world, the goal of the metric is typically to help make decisions in regards to talent management. Talent management is commonly known as a "comprehensive, well-planned and systematic process" that includes developing and assessing employees in an attempt to increase an organization's efficiency of operations. (Bostjancic, Slana, 2018, p. 2). Google, one of the largest tech companies in the world, is known for being a prestigious workplace, but their performance review process is criticized as not being holistic. Katy Levinson, an ex-software-engineer at Google recounts that "Any improvement not based on a hard metric was flatly not a respected use of time" (Edwards, 2016, par. 11). It's unjust to think that time spent working in a group or explaining something to a coworker could be regarded as a waste of time since there is no measurable production coming out of that interaction. Additionally, how can you measure something like self-improvement or improved mental health over time? Though factors like this would never show up on a code review at Google, they can directly affect an employee's performance. TELUS International conducted a survey of over 1000 Americans and found that 45% of them feel less healthy mentally while working from home, and over half of the

respondents have taken a ‘mental health day’ since the pandemic pushed work online (Westfall, 2020).

Another recent study conducted by Deloitte Insights found that 28% of organizations are giving out performance rewards based on the achievement of team metrics (Pimentel, 2020). However, Buffer’s 2022 State of Remote Work report, which collected data from over 2000 remote workers around the world, found that loneliness and unplugging are main struggles of remote work for around 25% of workers, especially after having done it for over a year and a half now (Buffer, 2022). Analyzing these two statistics together, it’s hard to overlook the fact that individuals being evaluated on team performance could be struggling to fit in with their respective teams. It’s incredibly important that companies using team performance metrics also incorporate aspects of individual performance to constantly support and assist their individual employees. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

### **Why New Metrics Are Needed**

Though metrics are in place for most companies to keep track of employee performance as it relates to their objectives, few companies actually have initiatives to continuously check on employee well-being and make sure that they are feeling healthy and in-touch, especially for those working from home. Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, published news that employees would have to return to the office for at least three days a week. Cher Scarlett, a software engineer at Apple, and a large number of other Apple employees are upset to hear this news, especially because they say they were churning out the same high-quality products Apple is known for and supported this sentiment by demonstrating that Apple stock prices had hit an all-time high just this past year during remote work (Kelly, 2021). Though a period that will be looked back at as a dark time in world history, a silver lining of COVID-19 was that it shed light on mental health

issues. Scarlett suffers from a mental illness and has found deep comfort in working from home. In addition to her mental illness, being a single mother adds stress to returning to the office. The fact that Apple witnessed peak stock prices during the pandemic shows that employees were still performing well and that their standard performance reviews to gauge employee output likely went well, but they still lacked employee wellbeing measures that might have been able to indicate much earlier that many workers would have preferred to continue remote work. It seems that Apple could have done better from a public relations perspective, and having such measures to check in on employees on a personal level certainly would've improved that front.

A group of 80 employees in a Slack channel at Apple, which contained about 2800 members, drafted a letter to Tim Cook advocating for their ability to work fully remote past COVID-19 following his hybrid work announcement. One section of the letter read, “Over the last year we often felt not just unheard, but at times actively ignored. Messages like, ‘we know many of you are eager to reconnect in person with your colleagues back in the office,’ with no messaging acknowledging that there are directly contradictory feelings amongst us feels dismissive and invalidating” (Schiffer, 2021, par. 6). It follows that had there been some sort of consistent check-in from management to talk to employees about remote work, the findings would have likely supported what most of these workers would have wanted all along – the option to work from anywhere indefinitely. There is no doubt that having management assume what employees want without directly asking them how they feel can be demoralizing and frustrating. An increased line of communication with employees that would reveal how they are doing on a personal level would certainly be helpful in combatting issues like what is occurring at Apple.



## **What Can Evaluating Employee Wellbeing Look Like?**

First and foremost, it's of the utmost importance that companies and management act with empathy for those working from away. It's inevitable that everyone has a different background and operates under different circumstances, whether it be simultaneously juggling client calls and entertaining toddlers, to working with the struggle of feeling isolated and alone.

A measure that companies should strongly consider using to stay in touch with their employees' health is having frequent management check-ins at least twice a month. Corporate giants Deloitte, Adobe, General Electric, and Accenture are just a few of the companies who have recently ditched their annual performance review in favor of a more iterative review process for their employees (Doheny, 2021). Robert Sutton, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University says that, "The way human beings make progress is through small steps, not through a bizarre conversation once a year. (Doheny, 2021, par. 3). An approach of having quarterly performance reviews supplemented with weekly one-on-one meetings to redefine goals and evaluate feedback is much preferred to having an annual performance review (Ma, 2021). This increased contact between management and employees is a much healthier alternative to having a singular, high-stress performance review at the end of each year after 12 months of being clueless about management's perspective on your performance.

Another reason why more frequent check-in between employers and employees are important is because it streamlines a healthy form of communication, and communication plays a key role in overall wellbeing. For many workers, being involved in communication and having flexible forms of it led to a better overall wellbeing (Bordi et al, 2018). It is important to note that communication, even if virtual instead of in-person, still leads to a stronger mental health

than having no communication at all. A study of roughly 300 undergraduate students at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) found that students with more virtual interaction partners exhibited a better mental health than those who had no or fewer virtual interactions (Sahi et al, 2021). As new technology emerges, it becomes even easier to have interactions similar to those found in the workplace and really close the social gap between working in an office versus remote. For example, products like Zoom and Slack are communication methods proven to keep employees connected and in a steady stream of communication (Lyons, 2020). BMC Public Health, an open-access, peer-reviewed journal conducted a rapid review to find the effects of working from home on physical and mental health. Starting with a pool of 1557 studies, the search was narrowed down to an analysis of 23 different studies since they were the only ones to include a measurable health outcome. The number one takeaway from one of the studies conducted in the UK was that “communication and support from colleagues emerged as two key factors to ensure successful remote working and to balance the psychological aspects of well-being (Oakman et. al, 2020, p. 4). Additionally, a major subtheme of this study was that interacting with others and building relationships directly and positively affected one’s psychological well-being.

Similarly, another study found that higher levels of communication were usually able to predict an improved overall well-being and specifically, a better mental well-being (Xiao et al, 2020). The study follows and concludes that, “promoting effective communication among co-workers can help to maintain a better mental health status. (Xiao et. al, 2020, p. 189). Though many employers might inquire about one’s work-from-home situation, there’s not much they can do to affect their personal life outside of the workplace. Karen Williams, a chief product officer at Halogen Software explains that companies that devote time, money, and energy towards

initiatives that support employee well-being will have a competitive advantage over those that don't (Florentine, 2017). Therefore, they should focus on what they can do, like advocating for them to meet fellow coworkers – whether it be through Slack channels of common interests, clubs, or just asking to catch up with someone from another team that they may have previously crossed paths with.

An important finding from the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* concludes that “productivity has been positively associated with employees’ wellbeing” (Hernandez, Abigail, 2020, p. 670). While things like happiness, communication, and overall mental health constitute one’s well-being and are clearly factors in an individual’s performance, how can these things be measured or even quantified from a manager’s point of view? Perhaps the most direct form of eliciting wellbeing information from employees is simply by sending out surveys, hosting town hall meetings, or making requests for honest feedback. Though these are all good options that can result in honest answers, they usually require a healthy, transparent workplace culture. This is also difficult with a new employee, and a manager asking such a question might risk overwhelming a new addition to their team. Some more concrete metrics would include things like checking to see if your employees have primary care physicians or have access to preventative care (Florentine, 2017). For companies that host a number of wellness activities, keeping track of which employees regularly attend events like those might also be a great metric to consider. Other metrics to assess would be amount of sick time being used by employees, amount of overtime being used, and even insurance data (Florentine, 2017). Another measure of well-being can also come in the form of exit interviews when someone is leaving a company. Though employers usually keep close tabs on retention rates, these metrics don’t often specifically focus on mental health. Employers can make it a point to explicitly ask

how the company and what they worked on directly attributed to their mental health and stress levels (Albrecht, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

With remote work often blurring the line between life and work, it is more important than ever that those working from home have a healthy overall well-being. Though current company metrics only focus on production and efficiency that relate to talent management, I think the next decade needs to see an incorporation of wellbeing metrics for the sustainability of remote work. Metrics will look different for each company in terms of how to measure how their employees are actually doing on a personal level. Despite this, human resources and upper management must prioritize mental health and wellbeing going forward. Due to the number of independent variables that each remote worker deals with, work and life can no longer be thought of as separate entities. With workers spread out and experiencing a diverse array of circumstances, employers must take it upon themselves to constantly check on their employees and make sure they are doing well, so that consequently, they can put forth their best work.

If further research were to be conducted, it would be interesting to see how remote work can affect mental health and also company performance in the long-term. Though there is not much data out there on this, since the pandemic only started about two years ago, it will be interesting to re-visit this work in several years and see if these findings are still consistent with what is seen in the workplace.

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