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Review

Balancing Work And Family

Let's Redefine "Productivity" for the Hybrid Era

by Jaime Teevan

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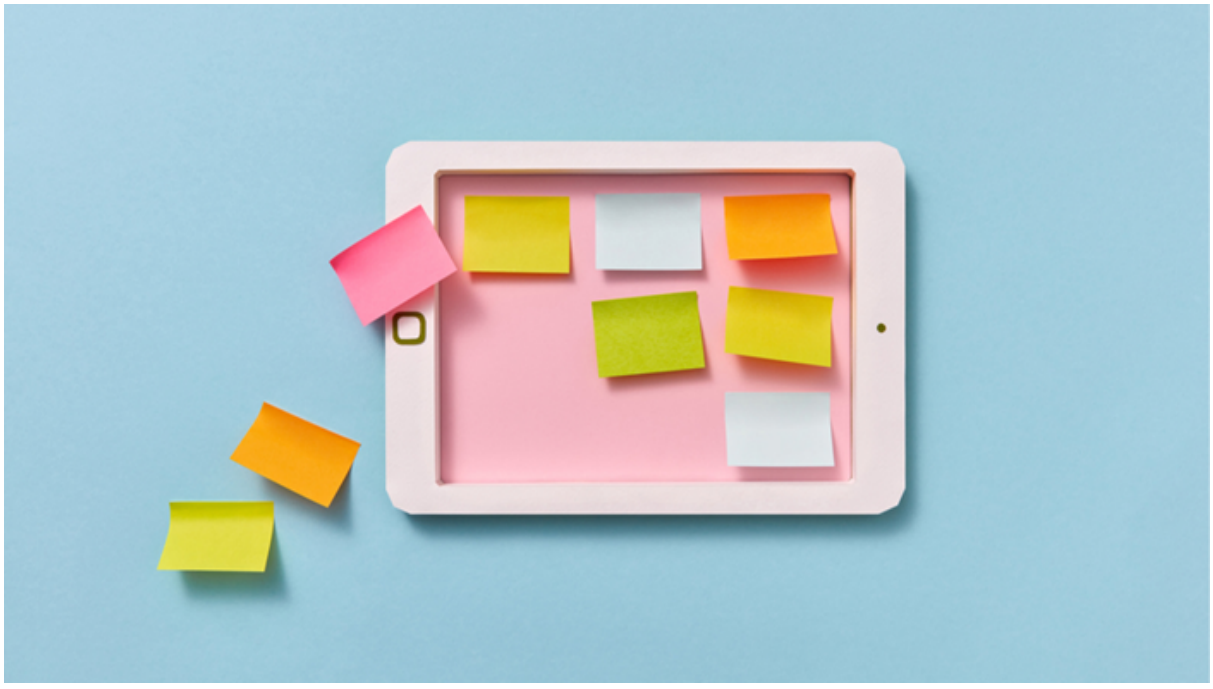

Yaroslav Danylchenko/Stocksy

Summary. Study after study has shown that it's not enough to be guided by simple measures of productivity as we figure out how to move to hybrid work. While it may be tempting to equate high levels of employee activity with success, doing so misses the factors that drive long-term, sustainable innovation. Managers must expand the way they think about productivity to focus on well-being, social connections, and collaboration and the innovation they bring to drive business

success. Based on extensive research from Microsoft, the author offers three ways managers can embrace a more expansive view of productivity in a hybrid world — one that promotes well-being, collaboration, and innovation for you and your team.

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The boundary between work and home has never been a clear line. Even when I'm in the office, for example, I'm on call if any of my four kids needs me. I remember how hard it was to get things done in my early days at Microsoft when they were babies — I had a lot of free time while they napped or played, but I couldn't use that time productively because I might have to drop everything to attend to them at any moment.

They say necessity is the mother of invention, and as a mother and researcher, trying to manage the boundary between work and home brought a lot of invention into my life. For example, while most productivity research tends to focus on eliminating distractions, I began to imagine what we could do if we used the micro-moments we have each day productively. This led me to develop approaches to algorithmically break tasks down into microtasks that fit more easily into the fragmented way we actually work. The resulting concept, which we call microproductivity, expanded the way we think about productivity at Microsoft.

Fast forward to March 4, 2020, when the boundary between work and home truly came down and Microsoft sent its Seattle-area employees home to work. We didn't know it at the time, but we were at the start of one of the greatest disruptions to work in generations, and it created an opportunity for us to expand our understanding of productivity yet again. Hundreds of researchers from Microsoft, LinkedIn, and GitHub came together to form the largest research initiative in Microsoft's history, now called the "New Future of Work." Together, while

figuring out how to work from home and struggling with childcare ourselves, we've conducted more than 50 research projects on remote work.

Despite a year and a half of research, it's almost impossible to predict what work will look like months from now, let alone years. We see, for example, that while people miss many things about working from the office, the idea of losing the flexibility of remote work is scary; CEO Satya Nadella calls this the "hybrid paradox." But the research points to a clear need for managers to create a new definition of productivity that considers the hybrid paradox — one that not only factors in how much people get done, but how they actually work when the boundary between work and home no longer exists.

A New Definition of Productivity

Information worker productivity is hard to define and measure, but researchers use two key types of data to approximate it: 1) self-reported worker data, or asking people if they feel productive, and 2) worker activity data, or counting the number of emails sent or lines of code written. When companies first went remote, many were surprised to see that these standard metrics of productivity remained high. For instance, one year into the pandemic, Microsoft's Work Trend Index survey showed that self-assessed productivity of more than 30,000 global workers external to Microsoft remained the same or higher. Microsoft's annual employee survey showed similar results.

Looking at activity data, a study in one division of Microsoft showed that the number of features checked in by developers per hour increased by 1.5% while focus time increased by 6%. Repositories in GitHub also saw flat or increasing activity.

But when we look at the research more closely, it's clear these metrics don't tell the whole story. As work pushed into our homes, helpful boundaries began to blur. Almost half (49%) of Microsoft employees in one study reported working longer hours, and only 9% reported working fewer. In a global study of workers external to Microsoft one year into the pandemic, 54% said they felt overworked and 39% reported feeling exhausted.

We also lost a lot of the benefits of working together in the office. Participants in our studies reported that creative work like group brainstorming was more difficult while remote. There's also mounting evidence of lost connection to coworkers. A recent paper we published in *Nature Human Behavior* found that our networks at work are becoming more siloed, presenting risks to innovation, knowledge transfer, and ultimately, productivity.

Study after study has shown that it's not enough to be guided by simple measures of productivity as we figure out how to move to hybrid work. While it may be tempting to equate high levels of employee activity with success, doing so misses the factors that drive long-term, sustainable innovation. We must expand the way we think about productivity to focus on well-being, social connections, and collaboration and the innovation they bring to drive business success.

Working with This New Definition

Based on what we're seeing in the research, here are some ways managers can embrace a more expansive view of productivity in a hybrid world — one that promotes well-being, collaboration, and innovation for you and your team.

Well-being

Despite the burnout so many of us feel, the hybrid environment

offers an opportunity to create a more sustainable approach to work. Remote and in-person work both have distinct advantages and disadvantages, and rather than expecting the same outcomes from each, we can build on what makes them unique.

When in the office, prioritize relationships and collaborative work like brainstorming around a whiteboard. When working from home, encourage people to design their days to include other priorities such as family, fitness, or hobbies. They should take a nap if they need one and step outside between meetings. Brain studies show that even five-minute breaks between remote meetings help people think more clearly and reduce stress.

Likewise, watch out for the risks each type of work carries with it. People can avoid the long commutes they used to have by staggering their schedules to avoid traffic. Encourage them to set boundaries at home so they don't work every hour of the day just because they can.

The trick is finding what works for each individual. A key theme in our research is that there are enormous individual differences in whether and how remote work can be effective. People have different experiences depending on their tenure at a company, where they live, and their gender, race, or role. Even individuals with similar contexts have idiosyncratically different experiences. For instance, some Microsoft employees cite work-life balance and focus time as reasons to go into the office, while others cite those exact things as reasons to work from home.

Over the next few months, ask people to take the time to reflect on when and where they feel the most or least productive. Have them ask themselves: Do I seem to work better in the morning or

evening? When I work from a certain location, are there fewer interruptions? Do I feel more focused?

Collaboration

At Microsoft, the biggest reasons employees want to go back to the office are collaboration and social connections. But if someone goes into the office on a day the rest of their team works from home, they won't get those in-person interactions. A key aspect of making hybrid work productive is finding a compromise between individual workstyles and team needs.

One way to do this is by making team agreements. At Microsoft, we're asking each team to create a set of team norms that define how they'd like to work together in our hybrid workplace. Individuals can share how they work best. Teams can establish meeting-free days or plan regular in-person team meetings. To avoid one person's flexible working hours becoming another person's after-hours messaging, managers can set norms around the times of day responses are expected.

It's also important to ensure hybrid meetings are as inclusive and intentional as possible. Use a hand-raise feature to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak and, if you're using meeting chat, assign a moderator who's separate from the person running the meeting to follow the chat and bring key subjects into the conversation. These things are particularly important if the remote people are more junior than those in the room. Other things we're experimenting with include asking in-person attendees to join meetings as soon as they arrive to the meeting room so remote participants are included in the pre-meeting chat. In-person attendees may also want to join on their individual laptops so remote participants have a better view of them.

Under the old definition of productivity, coordinating team collaboration around individual workstyles and thinking hard about whether your team should change its meeting practices might have seemed unnecessary, high maintenance, or even awkward. With the new definition of productivity in mind, these activities are essential.

Innovation

In the simplest sense, innovation often requires people getting together to exchange and prototype ideas and brainstorm solutions, balanced with time for individual focus and reflection. If done right, hybrid work can create exactly those conditions. If done wrong, those important social connections can erode and impact innovation. Thinking of productivity more expansively — by optimizing for the conditions that spur innovation — can help hedge against those risks.

First, consider what work should be done remotely versus in-person. Remote work is great for individual productivity and routine tasks, while tasks that depend extensively and dynamically on other people and creative tasks like brainstorming and problem solving are where in-person collaboration thrives. For example, the start of a big project is a great reason to get together in person, but once problems are formalized, workstreams standardized, and responsibilities settled, many projects shift into a loosely coupled mode, where remote work can be more effective.

Likewise, meet new people in person. Coming together when a team is established and encouraging new hires to spend time in the office can create foundational social connections that fuel innovation and serve them well in the remote work that follows.

Finally, encourage your team to build relationships with people outside their immediate circles at work. These weak ties are critical to innovation because they're how we best access novel information, whether that's a new idea, access to a potential collaborator, or a new opportunity to make an impact. While in the office, create opportunities for your team to chat with and learn from people they haven't worked with before. You can proactively build weak ties while working remotely, too, by encouraging small talk at the beginning of meetings, asking people from other teams to share learnings, and seeking diverse feedback.

While many things are uncertain as we look ahead, our job isn't to predict the future of work — it's to help shape it. As many of our customers, and Microsoft itself, shift into hybrid work in the coming months, we'll be using this expansive definition of productivity to not only guide the way we work, but to drive innovation in our tools that more than a billion people use to get work done.

In the end, we'll know we were successful if work is better than it was before — not just in terms of short-term metrics, but in helping people, teams, and organizations be productive and achieve their goals in a way that also supports well-being, collaboration, and innovation.

Sonia Jaffe and Brent Hecht helped author this piece.

Jaime Teevan is chief scientist at Microsoft, where she is responsible for driving research-backed innovation in Microsoft products. Her early work at Microsoft focused on using AI to help people accomplish their goals, developing the first personalized search algorithm used by Bing and introducing microproductivity into Microsoft Office. Jaime has served as technical advisor to Microsoft's CEO and currently leads Microsoft's effort to understand post-Covid work practices.