

# The Value of Analytics to Assess Remote Employees' Well-Being

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## Key insights

Analytics can empower organizations and HR to assess and protect remote employees in this unprecedented time of uncertainty

- Employees are continuously facing new, ubiquitous personal and professional stressors in a remote workplace
- Analytics are available for employees to self-help and for HR leaders to assess stress levels and understand the impact on performance
- Analytics help drive data-driven decisions to provide interventions and protect your employees from collaboration overload

Life after lockdown will never be the same, including the workplace. In fact, a recent survey of [Fortune 500 CEOs](#) reveals what leaders anticipate the future of work and the people at work will look like post-pandemic: More than a quarter of respondents (26.5%) predict that 90% of employees at any given time will not be working from their usual workplace while more than half (51%) believe that business travel at their company will also never return to pre-COVID-19 levels. Simply stated, the bulk of the workforce is expected to continue to work from a remote/home office.

A key takeaway? Organizations in every industry around the world need to embrace an adaptable, anytime-anywhere work ecosystem and environment to protect employees, including their well-being, and move toward recovery. But is the human workforce ready for this paradigm shift?

“Disease itself multiplied by forced quarantine to combat COVID-19 applied by nationwide lockdowns can produce acute panic, anxiety, obsessive behaviors, hoarding, paranoia, and depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the long run. These have been fueled by an ‘infodemic’ spread via different platforms of social media.”<sup>1</sup>

## Coping with higher productivity demands and higher stress

Across borders and cultures, the structure of families and domestic dynamics are facing a variety of new challenges for a remote worker, including the concurrent balancing of professional and personal responsibilities. Employees are dealing with higher productivity goals, new technology challenges, and collective anxiety—all while managing constant interruptions in the home. This delicate balancing act is uncharted territory for most of us and can put enormous strain on the individual, relationships within the team and across the larger business organization as well as on the family structure. The combination of emotional distress, fear and anxiety combined with distractions and upheavals in everyday life can create negative impacts on performance that can ripple across the entire business.

### Working from home: The good, the bad, the ugly

With the unprecedented global lockdown has come a huge paradigm shift where employees, across virtually every industry in every location, are working from home every day for weeks and months. Previously, working remotely was considered a bonus, a perk. But now, with both parents working from home, in a makeshift office at times, it’s challenging to try and juggle the chaos, the workload, the spouse, the meals, the children at home doing online classes. In a pre-COVID world, most of us managed our professional world by switching on at the start of every new workday and switching off in the evening—creating a finite boundary around the personal and the professional.

Most HR professionals believe in taking care of the talent force that takes care of the business. But this new and sudden shift in how people work means there is a real need to understand, discuss and create interventions to ensure the mental and emotional well-being of each employee. This approach is important because you want to ensure there are no hidden pockets of stress that could surprise your organization later with unforeseen repercussions. Surely there’s an app for that, right? Not exactly. But there are workplace analytics available to help HR professionals measure what is going on behind the scenes. Let’s break it down into the main categories of the workforce we want to look at.

[1] NCBI article “Psychosocial impact of COVID-19” May 27, 2020  
(PMC US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health)

## Did You Know? The Cost of Distractions

It takes an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds to return to the original task after an interruption according to Gloria Mark, who studies digital distraction at the University of California, Irvine. Multiple studies confirm this.\*

*\*How Distractions At Work Take Up More Time Than You Think; Feb 2020*

### The individual: managing disruptions and productivity

We are all unique. Each of us needs different mechanisms to deal with the move from a formal and structured office setup to a fluid work-from-home situation, where boundaries are nonexistent. And this challenge is legitimate, irrespective of one's marital status or socio-cultural environment. For example, at a formal workplace, a lunch break is strictly 30 minutes and viewed as a defined period for a meal break. Working from home can make a lunch break a completely different experience. Maybe you eat at your desk or you make your children a meal, taking up more time than the previously allotted 30 minutes. Similarly, when we take additional breaks from interruptions at our home-office, we can often feel an urge to explain our actions or cram in other activities to make up for lost time.

These kinds of seemingly insignificant actions and distractions pile on top of each other, incrementally creating a river of stress in the individual. Humans are creatures of habits--changing those habits does not come easily and requires coping mechanisms and support.

Pertinent questions for HR to ask:

- Are individuals provided a safe space and environment to share their inability to cope with the new working format? (Organizations are hearing complaints about incompatible tools and processes, but not about well-being. There is still a taboo around asking for help.
- Is the individual getting enough time to focus on what matters amid various collaboration interventions created in the new working model?
- How can companies help individuals cope with stress and provide them with adaptation guidance and support groups?

### The team: building a high-performance team from afar

Many leaders are inadequately prepared about how to best manage remote working teams. Previously, the most popular managers were the ones who said, "I don't micromanage your clock-in time, I care more about the quality of your deliverables." It's a different story when 100% of the team is working remotely. Suddenly, this philosophy no longer works. Managers are grappling with ways to measure individual and team productivity. When a team member was habitually late, for example, the larger group often enforced better behavior by a sort of peer pressure. Information previously gathered from individual body language, work floor presence, tone of voice, speed of walking, posturing, and other subtle nonverbal aspects that impact team dynamics are now unavailable. Even

## Did You Know?

55% of all human communication is from body language?\*

*\*At Least 70% of Communication Is Non-Verbal*

*(Based on Professor Mehrabian's pioneering research on the field of nonverbal communication)*

the best managers have been at a loss as to how to assess the team collectively and individually with the absence of these softer aspects.

Pertinent questions to ask:

- How has the Pareto 80/20 principle changed post-pandemic with respect to each team?
- Are there new, pressure "hot spots" within the team; if yes, how can you help to calm them?
- Do some of these teams need immediate intervention? Some may even need to go through the stages of storming, forming and norming all over again, but the remote working model.

### **The organization: when collaboration is too much of a good thing**

While CEOs are predominantly focused on maintaining revenue by reinventing products, services, and operations, the functional heads and executives are focusing on stabilizing delivery, sales, secured way of working, and the digitization of processes. However, there is a gap in that many companies have failed to create a consolidated view or governance to look at the new remote working model end to end. As a result, many organizations are seeing an overload in collaboration.

Collaborating is a must in a matrixed organization, which is where most companies are at or are heading toward right now. The challenge is that extreme collaboration reduces focus hours and this places a stress on the system, teams and individuals. Sometimes, even internal communications, change management and talent teams get it wrong. Perhaps the organization does not need so many cooking events, remote yoga classes, and coffee connect sessions. Consider that it might be more important to invest in rebuilding "team belongingness" than "organizational belongingness." So, it is important to have a complete view to tune up and down the scale of engagement from across functions or at an organizational level. It's essential to give space for the team leader/manager to establish priorities and ways of working. Consider that it might be more effective to let social collaboration take place at a pace that each team requires and let it be initiated by them.

Pertinent questions to ask:

- Does my company spend sufficient hours on collaborations? When is it too much?
- Which are my functions that invite more collaboration, than necessary?

- At an organizational level, where are the hot spots of stress building? What types of interventions do those areas need?
- What are the data and insights on well-being and collaboration that are available to the CXO to create interventions?

## Leveraging modern workplace analytics to drive decision making

Enabling CEOs or executives of organizations to answer these questions mean they must be empowered with data and analytics. Large to medium enterprises today use various data and analytics tools to measure activities and productivity and ensure talent processes are followed. Many of these enterprise tools and platforms collect and store data signals. These include not only tools that enable talent processes but also messaging tools, collaboration tools and idea repository tools. Microsoft Outlook, for example can work as an exchange tool and is able to provide data collected from Office 365 data to individuals on their work and messaging patterns through the **My analytics** or **Insights** button embedded in the Outlook inbox toolbar.

### **Measuring digital collaboration to understand employee well-being**

With digital collaboration front and center in the remote workplace, there is a need to measure the effectiveness of that collaboration. The measurement framework needs to cover everything starting from enablement and adoption of collaboration platforms to help create data-guided, intervention-led user behavior transformation programs.

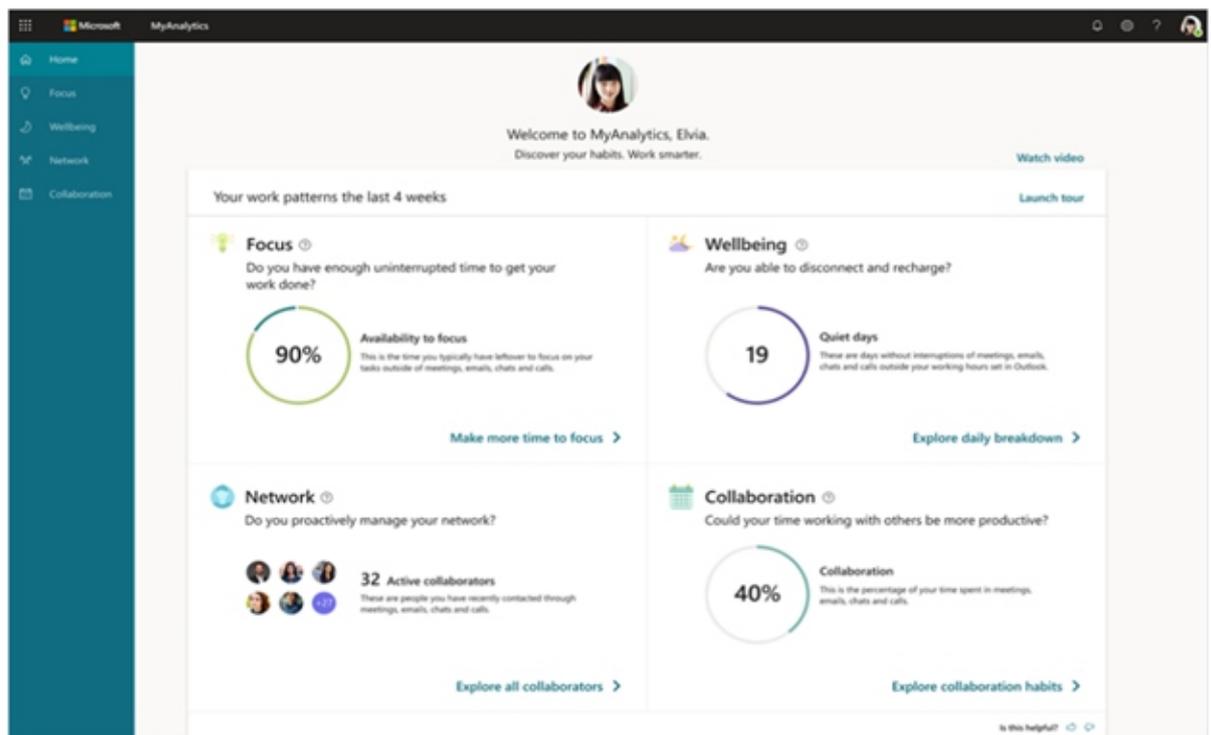
Before this can happen, organizations need to be able to collect the enormous amount of collaboration signals like time spent on email, instant messaging/chatting, file coauthoring, calls, scheduled and ad hoc meetings. Bringing all this data together can generate insights about the collaboration patterns and behaviors at both an organizational and individual level. These insights when viewed with the organizational context and other enterprise data, analytics could help in unravelling some of the pointers related to work stress and emotional well-being to tell a very human story.

The set of collaboration insights needs to be looked at two levels: 1) the personal insights that can be made available to the individual to take necessary self-interventions and 2) an aggregated insight that can help business leaders and HR leaders diagnose deviations from the calibrated baseline of the organizational average.

## Individuals: using analytics to (securely) assess employee behavior

One of the tools in the market that enables individual insights is [MyAnalytics](#) from Microsoft. This tool gives individuals the ability to look more closely at their own collaboration behavior and become more aware of the activities in each workday and the meaningful work they perform. This analysis and insight eventually can help each person plan a more balanced approach to their role. Only individual employees can access this information; managers or other organizational authority do not have access.

To understand how this works, a sample MyAnalytics dashboard shown in the following graphic displays a section labeled Focus. It indicates that this individual has a consecutive 2 hours of undistracted of time available to complete more meaningful work.



Some of nudges and recommendations from MyAnalytics helps individual to adopt performance-improving behaviors which might otherwise go unnoticed. For instance, individuals can work on their chronic habits of checking emails too frequently. Habits like this can be distractors and result in productivity loss. (As mentioned earlier, it takes an average of 23 minutes to recover from distractions). The MyAnalytics helps an individual to plan self-interventions for improving on finding more focus hours.

## **Organizations: using group and aggregated analytics to identify the need for employee intervention**

There are two types of modern workplace data and analytics tools. One set specifically focuses on the usage aspects of the collaboration tools and reports metrics which can be used to further view usage and adoption patterns. The second set of analytics tools allows for aggregating and understanding the collaboration behavior patterns of teams, units, departments, functional groups and the larger organization. Microsoft Workplace Analytics (WpA) is one technology solution that falls in the second set and offers a comprehensive collaboration behavioral analytics workbench.

WpA workbench provides a range of data and analytics, here is a condensed sample that can help explain some of its insights.

- **Workweek span:** When WpA is applied to a set of enterprise data involving email exchanges and collaboration tools, it can shed light on how the workweek span ranges across units or groups that exist within the enterprise. For example, it can uncover whether Marketing works more hours than Operations and whether its members are working days, 40 hours a week, on an average. If Marketing is still working more out of office hours, then it is a red flag for the CHRO to investigate whether the behavior pattern is due to the nature of work that Marketing performs or whether there other influencing factors, like a work culture set by its leadership. If it is the latter, then planned interventions by HR can ensure the Marketing team is not working weekends and avoids burn-out.
- **Focus hours:** WpA can provide insights about whether the teams are getting sufficient undistracted periods in a day to complete their assigned job tasks. And if a unit is found to have insufficient number of focus hours, it is important for the unit head to first diagnose the problem and plan actions accordingly. This results in improved employee productivity and reduced work stress among employees. Such interventions can include a closer look at the kinds of meetings the team gets invited to, revisiting the team structure to see if additional layers can help distribute collaboration workload, and other strategies.
- **Collaboration overload:** WpA can help reveal patterns of collaboration overload. It's important to understand which particular mode of collaboration is impacting more for a particular team or a unit. For instance, teams could be identified as having excessive email exchanges for one-on-one collaboration when they could be using instant messaging or chat. So those teams could be nudged to

switch to instant messaging or chat platforms (like Microsoft Teams). WpA can also help identify the rise of collaboration overload for teams which exceed the organization baseline. Business unit leaders can look closely at the collaboration instances and determine if the quantity and frequency of meetings and other collaboration instances need to be reduced or distributed.



### Workplace analytics:

#### Information to proactively manage employee well-being

The enormity of changes involved in the new way of working--at an individual level, team level and an organization level—creates collective and individual stress that can escalate out of control if left unchecked. This seriously and negatively impacts the emotional well-being of each and all of these entities—in turn, negatively impacting organizational performance.

#### Ensuring well-being to protect your talent—and your business

Organizational leaders (CEOs, CIOs and CHROs) need to rethink their strategy in this new environment and ensure they are asking the right questions to each business unit, its people and processes. To arrive at answers that can guide leaders and managers, the decision makers require data and analytics, especially about people interaction and collaboration. The tools and technology are available to help organizations tap into the right signals, analyze and capture and share insights that help managers mentor and employees perform better with meaningful interventions that identify and flatten the curve of stress.

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