



Walk a Mile in Their Shoes

THE COVID PANDEMIC THROUGH THE LENS OF FOUR TECH WORKERS

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared Covid a global pandemic. What followed was one of the most tumultuous times in recent history, filled with uncertainties about almost every aspect of daily life—including the workplace. Specifically, major tech companies shifted their operations from an office-based model to WFH (work from home) within a matter of weeks. Twitter mandated work from home on March 3, Microsoft and Facebook made similar announcements on March 4 and 6, respectively, and much of the world followed soon after.

At the time, most people expected about a two-week outbreak. A few weeks turned into months, and at the time of this writing, 20 months after the initial WFH directive hit tech workers, we're still typing this article from our basements.

Tech workers were at an advantage working from home since much of their job happens on computers, and collaboration can often be done over the Internet. That said, this was still a major change for software development companies, and it took time for individuals to adjust. Unsure of what the next “two weeks” would hold, a group of researchers at a major software company

launched a diary study within days of the WFH directive. They enrolled more than 400 individuals—software engineers, program managers, designers, and more—into a study where participants recorded daily reflections about their experiences working during Covid. As the pandemic persisted, so did the study. Still ongoing with more than 11,000 records, this diary study is the largest known of its kind, tracking the lives of tech workers as they navigate WFH and hybrid work throughout the pandemic.

This article shares the stories of four fictional people made up from the amalgamated diaries of 20 individuals who submitted more than 150 diary entries over the first year of the pandemic.

Read on to meet Valencia, a female manager who struggles to balance child care with the demanding responsibilities of leading a team of engineers; Colson, a male engineer navigating the challenges of being an individual contributor without a family during isolation; Jay, a male manager located at the company's headquarters but managing a global team; and Sam, a nonbinary designer dealing with team drama. The article follows these four composite characters as they navigate a year of Covid while shipping one of the largest software products in the world. While the past 20 months have been a challenge, evidence suggests the next year and beyond will continue to be filled with changes in how people work as they settle into a new normal. These four stories are meant to help you better understand experiences in this new world so you can operate in a more empathetic and productive way as we move into the uncertain future of hybrid work.

This study is grounded in reflection/journaling literature, which has evidenced how purposeful, continuous self-reflection leads to self-improvements that increase productivity and well-being.

STUDY BACKGROUND

This longitudinal study was launched in a major division of a multinational software company on March 16, 2020. It is a “diary study,” which is a qualitative research method where participants are asked to record entries about their lives over a period of time.¹⁰

To observe how tech workers were impacted by WFH mandates, we asked participants to reflect daily using a short online survey consisting of a mix of multiple-choice and open-response questions. After 24 weeks they were asked to switch to a triweekly format—every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Upon joining the study, each participant created an anonymous username.

Study participants were recruited via email, drawn from a pool of internal engineers; 442 employees elected to participate in the study throughout its inaugural year.

This study is grounded in reflection/journaling literature, which has evidenced how purposeful, continuous self-reflection leads to self-improvements that increase productivity and well-being.⁶ The act of reflection could be especially helpful and important during these unprecedented times. Reflection is also known to increase awareness of one’s productive and unproductive work habits and help individuals identify actionable strategies to achieve concrete goals.⁶

Additionally, expressing gratitude to others, specifically through self-reflection, is a crucial step in improving emotional well-being and reducing depression.⁷ In this study, people who reported no gratitude were 22 percent less likely to report being satisfied that day.²

MEET THE PEOPLE

While the study was anonymous, employees had submitted their roles and genders when onboarding. This data was used to group the diaries into categories and create “personas.” The stories of the following four people do not represent a single individual but were composed from a selection of similar individuals’ diaries and edited for anonymity. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the distribution of diaries based on persona.

	FEMALE MANAGER: VALENCIA	JUNIOR ENGINEER: COLSON	MALE MANAGER: JAY	NON-BINARY DESIGNER: SAM
#Participants	8 [1.8%]	239 [54.1%]	16 [3.6%]	16 [3.6%]
Average Satisfaction	4.02	3.68	3.15	3.93
TOP 3 Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Overworked•Physical/ mental health•Kids	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Physical/mental health•Work•Too many meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Too many meetings•Overworked•Physical/mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Work•Physical/ mental health•Too many meetings
BOTTOM 3 Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Communication•Current events•Getting started	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Getting started•Current events•Physical movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Getting started•Current events•Internet connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Getting started•Current events•Remote connection
TOP 3 Gratitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Team•Flexibility•Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Flexibility•Work•Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Health & safety•WFH ability•Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Comfort•Flexibility•Connection
BOTTOM 3 Gratitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Back to office•Vaccine/tests•No meeting Fridays	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Vaccine/tests•No meeting Fridays•Fix Hack Learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Back to office•Vaccine/tests•Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Vaccine/tests•No meeting Fridays•Fix Hack Learn

VALENCIA

Valencia is a senior female engineering manager with two kids and a golden retriever named Sunny. During the first few weeks of WFH, Valencia struggled with balancing work and managing her kids, especially as they transitioned to remote learning. Valencia and her husband took turns playing teacher, eventually growing accustomed to the intermittent calls of “MOM!!!” that reverberated in the background of her meetings. Some days, Valencia wondered if she should hire a nanny to entertain the little ones, but finding child care during Covid was no easy feat.

Valencia did enjoy the greater flexibility offered by WFH, however. She could wear sweatpants every day, work outside, and exercise or garden whenever she had a free moment. Valencia also loved being able to spend more time with her kids throughout the day; family walks with Sunny during lunch were a highlight of her WFH experience. Throughout the pandemic, Valencia consistently appreciated the ability to WFH, noting that this allowed her family to remain “relatively safe at home. Other people can’t mitigate their risk as easily.” Some of her friends in other industries lost their jobs altogether.

As summer 2020 began, though, Valencia began to feel more isolated, missing hallway conversations and in-person interactions. She was glad her team was still able to have meaningful discussions about current events such as Black Lives Matter, but “to do that over the phone instead of in person makes it feel somehow less genuine and less impactful,” she wrote. With everything going on in the world and the stress of competing priorities weighing on Valencia’s mind, she often struggled to find

the motivation to start the day and work on her never-ending list of to-do items. She tried to take solace in the little things in life, like watching her son graduate from kindergarten and petting Sunny between meetings. She was also happy to welcome two interns to her team for the summer, and she was excited to find out she was pregnant with her third child.

Valencia reflected, “I also really miss having the forcing function of a commute to let me switch in/out of ‘work mode’ for the day. I never thought I’d miss a commute!” She appreciated sleeping in but missed the time to transition to and from work mentally. Valencia also began to realize that “WFH means my family has more visibility into my work life, including when colleagues treat me poorly. I don’t know how I feel about that.” For the most part, she has enjoyed the benefits of WFH and hopes it remains an option in the future.

As time went on, Valencia tried to organize more morale-building events and social gatherings for her team, such as online games and cooking sessions: “I played Codenames with my reports at lunch and it was fabulous even though I lost. I loved doing that with them.” She also participated in a few mentoring circles, which were always fun, especially when they included free Grubhub vouchers.

Occasionally, when her kids decided to behave and the house was relatively quiet, Valencia was able to have a solid, productive day of work; her new office chair and second monitor certainly helped, too. During the pandemic, Valencia’s company offered a generous leave option for parents of young children. Valencia was hesitant to take advantage of this pandemic leave policy, not wanting to

jeopardize her career, but she did take a two-week vacation with her family as summer ended. She had a lot to catch up on when she returned, but said the time away was worth the extra work. Valencia also made full-time offers to both of her summer interns, wrapping up her summer on a high note.

Fall came before Valencia knew it, bringing a whole new wave of anxieties and challenges. She worried about schools reopening, but it seemed that remote learning would still be an option, at least for now. At work, there was heightened tension between teams, and Valencia was tired of all the drama in partner meetings. The pandemic had given her a deeper appreciation for self-care, and she was beyond grateful that her family had stayed safe thus far. Although it was difficult, Valencia began taking more days off to recover her mental and physical health, especially as her pregnancy progressed.

The days grew longer and darker, and Valencia felt stressed by the impending election and spiking Covid numbers. She reported, “One of my reports’ families is starting to show Covid symptoms, wish there was something I could do to help.” On the bright side, Valencia saw her new baby girl for the first time during her 20-week ultrasound scan. Her family also moved into a lovely new house by a lake. Valencia loved being able to work from anywhere thanks to WFH. She was ever-grateful for her supportive team and manager (“I am just so in love with my team. They are so fabulous”), especially as the pregnancy side effects began intensifying and she struggled through sleepless nights.

Soon enough, the holidays rolled around, and Valencia

occupied herself with putting up festive decorations, feasting on turkey, and watching her kids play in the snow. Nonetheless, there was a bottomless stockpile of work to complete as always, which was exacerbated by the lack of boundary between work and home; Valencia often reported, “another day of only adding to my to-do list but never removing things.” With the passing of winter and first hints of spring, her due date was fast approaching. Valencia worked hard to tie up loose ends, and thankfully, her team had a fantastic new hire who took a bit of the stress off her shoulders as she prepared for maternity leave.

And with that, Valencia was off to have her baby. It had been a long year of WFH, but Valencia was hopeful for brighter days ahead. “With the vaccine progressing, it feels like we’re finally approaching the beginning of the end of this pandemic. It’s exciting but also scary. I want to get back to normal, but I’ve also gotten used to this and found a lot of silver linings in the circumstances.” Valencia wondered what “normal” even means for the future of work. A question we can all ask ourselves is, “How can we find and keep the good elements from this wacky time?”

ARE YOU A VALENCIA?

Being a parent during Covid has certainly been challenging, especially if you don’t have stable child care. With the additional challenge of managing a team, you might also be dealing with team dynamics or onboarding new hires. Consider these options.

Bring back the “commute.” Valencia was shocked to find herself missing the commute. Commuting often serves

as a temporal and spatial boundary between work and life, helping people not blur the lines and feel “always on.” Microsoft Teams recently launched a “virtual commute” feature to help workers wind down at the end of their days, even during WFH.

Ask for help. Even though her company offered parental leave, Valencia was nervous about taking it. Many parents felt similarly and worked until they burned out, sacrificing their physical and mental well-being. Don’t wait to take the time you need or ask for help.

All onboard. Valencia hired several people during the pandemic. Being a new hire during Covid has come with its own set of challenges. New hires need to communicate with folks on their team, and having one-on-one face time with managers was associated with less of an increase in work hours during WFH. Be sure to set up regular one-on-ones. Want to better understand remote new hire experiences, and how to help? Recent research shows what it was like to onboard during the pandemic.⁹

COLSON

Colson is a junior software engineer who lives alone in his apartment. When the WFH order was first issued, he experienced much anxiety and uncertainty. As someone who enjoyed the social aspect of being in the office, he felt lonelier than ever when everyone started working from home. In his early diaries, Colson often wrote about how “isolation is starting to get me down.”

Additionally, there was a nonstop stream of technical difficulties during the first weeks of WFH, especially in terms of establishing a remote desktop connection. Colson

got a “sore shoulder from not having the most ergonomic setup at home—couldn’t sleep because of it.” In fact, it was hardly a setup at all; Colson’s apartment was so cramped that he didn’t even have room for a desk.

On the upside, because he didn’t have kids or roommates, there were fewer distractions at home, which made for a quieter work environment than many of his colleagues. It was also nice not to have a daily commute, allowing Colson to have a “more leisurely breakfast at home [instead of rushing to catch a bus].”

Throughout the pandemic, it never ceased to amaze Colson how his days were always jam-packed with “hours of meetings.” In some ways, he “liked that—being able to see and talk to people,” but it certainly got overwhelming at times. Colson felt especially bad for those in other time zones, noticing how some of his “team members [were] working 12h+ a day.”

He was really enjoying the flexibility that came with WFH, having more time to work out and “go food shopping midday when it was less crowded.” Colson picked up a few new skills too, like playing the keyboard, baking bread, and of course, extreme bingeing shows on Netflix. He also remained grateful that he had a job and could keep working during the pandemic, noting how “it’s hard to see friends in trouble who can’t.”

As summer came around, Colson reveled in the warmer weather (and his alleviated shoulder pain, thanks to a better setup he acquired as the reality of the length of pandemic settled in), always looking forward to “getting outside for a walk at the end of my day.”

Colson also found himself caught up in the Black

Lives Matter movement, wondering, “Where is this country going? The George Floyd murder and protests are on my mind, as well as the president saying, ‘Looting starts, shooting starts.’ I am alarmed and scared. It feels dystopic.” He struggled to grapple with his privilege, but simultaneously wanted to find “opportunities to engage and feel like I’m doing something about the world’s problems.” With time, Colson began actively participating in protests and strikes, educating himself about systemic racism, and feeling energized by society’s increasing “momentum, awareness, and drive for change.”

Of course, there was always more work to do, and some days, the weight of the world made Colson’s work feel unimportant. Colson wrote, “With so much racism and police brutality coming to the forefront, work just doesn’t matter much to me.” Along with being unable to find the motivation to work, it became increasingly difficult to navigate life in the pandemic without the support of readily accessible family and friends. Eventually, Colson decided to start seeing his therapist again, who suggested getting a pet to alleviate his feelings of isolation.

Sure enough, Colson soon adopted a cat to keep him company—this was easily the best decision he’d made during the pandemic. Mimi, a sweet and energetic ragdoll kitty, quickly became Colson’s best friend and favorite meeting buddy. Colson would often write about their outdoor escapades as well: “I walked my cat today, and we both had a good time.”

Unfortunately, Mimi’s adorable face couldn’t distract Colson from all his problems at work. There was a never-ending surge of deadlines to meet and emails to read, and

it didn't help that he was constantly pelted with "unclear and shifting expectations" that felt impossible to meet. Being the on-call engineer was also more stressful than normal because of the challenges of getting help remotely. In the fall, the election added to Colson's stress. He stated, "Really nervous about the political climate. I am sure it will all be OK, but it does not appear that way."

He found himself taking more mental health days, which again was possible only because of the flexibility that came with WFH. He also had a few close calls with Covid, as his friend's grandfather died from the virus and several family members of his sister's roommate had tested positive. Moments like these gave Colson a deeper appreciation for his own health and safety, as well as being privileged enough to afford access to healthcare.

Additionally, Colson was extremely grateful toward his "manager who supports me 100 percent," and he was sad to learn that the manager would be retiring in a few months. It was also disappointing that Colson would have to cancel a trip to Japan that he had been planning for more than a year.

After a long and well-deserved holiday break, Colson came back to work refreshed and ready for a new start. With his manager retiring and growing dissatisfaction with work ("What is the point of what I'm doing, anyway?"), Colson decided it was time for a change. He had done a lot of self-reflection over the holidays and was finally motivated enough to begin the interview preparation process, with Mimi by his side.

Before he knew it, it was spring again, marking nearly one year of WFH. Colson had his "last one-on-one with my

manager of many years who is retiring at the end of the week. So sad to have to say goodbye not in person.” But Colson was able to see a light at the end of the tunnel, as he had secured a job on a new team and was having a great experience so far: “My new group has a [virtual] team meeting every Wednesday—a lot of fun and positive energy.” Although he still had “concerns about the future and elimination of the virus,” the increasing availability of Covid vaccines gave Colson hope, and he remained grateful for “being able to work from home where I am safe—and knowing I can continue with this, hopefully until I have been vaccinated.”

ARE YOU A COLSON?

Colson is very social and found isolation to affect his mental health. It also took him a while to accept WFH as a long-term prospect, so he was slow to set up a proper working environment.

Get properly set up. Many workers did not have a proper workspace at home. For months, people worked from laptops on beds, couches, or wherever they could, causing various ergonomic issues. Consider finding a more permanent work solution to alleviate these problems. Researchers are investigating using AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality) to create spacious and socially connected work areas regardless of the physical realities.⁴

Take care of yourself. Living alone during a global pandemic was hard on Colson’s mental health. Research shows that the pandemic is having a strong negative impact on the mental health of many. Consider reaching out to a professional if you feel like you need support.

Interested in what work and mental health will look like in the future? A series of online conversations with HCI (human-computer interaction) experts offers some insight.⁵

JAY

Managers were hit especially hard during the pandemic. Jay is a midlevel manager with three kids, managing a team in three time zones. Throughout the pandemic, his gratitude remained consistent—he reported being thankful for safety at home and his family in nearly every single diary entry for 15 months. While he loved working and traveling before the pandemic, he was incredibly thankful for still being able to be productive and manage his team at home. Describing WFH, Jay said, “Remote work seems to be a roller coaster, and it’s hard to predict which days I’ll finish feeling super-productive and which days I feel like I didn’t get enough done.” As Jay saw other families experience loss over the course of Covid, he was thankful his family, at least thus far, had been spared.

Jay regularly reported feeling overworked, with days full of meetings and an overwhelming backlog he could never get in front of. From early in the pandemic, his workday diaries reported things like: “Another day of back-to-back meetings, all hands, and one-on-ones. Staying connected with the team remotely can be hard to scale,” and “Consistently behind... trying to catch up. Two steps forward, two steps back.” In the spring, the cadence of the business compounded Jay’s schedule with fiscal-year planning, performance reviews, and end-of-year sprints colliding. Jay worked 14-hour days, often taking early morning meetings

to accommodate team members in one time zone and late-night meetings to accommodate those in another.

As fall rolled around, his children started remote school, which brought new challenges. Jay's wife is a stay-at-home parent, so child care was thankfully not a stressor; however, he still heard every squabble, and it was hard not to get involved. He continued to take care of his team, reporting gratitude for "safety at home. Nice demo day today. Interviewed somebody too, helping to keep the team fully staffed." Come October, however, he was hit with a shock: A coworker passed away suddenly. Within a few months, he lost another to Covid. While Jay never imagined he would enjoy WFH, the scary reality of Covid left him continually grateful for being able to work in relative safety at home.

As an USA-based employee, Jay was especially affected by fall: "Everything hitting at once. Tired of remote work. So many meetings/trainings keep getting added on my already-full plate. Kids' remote learning was hard this week. Social/political/Covid stresses. I'm tired of working fully remote—it's exhausting, physically and mentally."

In the winter, darkness and the extreme cold made his days shorter and caused him to cancel a vacation. In Jay's words, it seemed like "every day is Groundhog Day." As winter started to fade and the one-year mark of Covid-induced WFH came around, however, Jay was hopeful that things might improve. His last diary entry of the first year of the pandemic concluded: "Safety at home. A stretch in the days. More blue sky in the last week than the previous two months, it seems. Yay for spring. Here's hoping 2021 will be a better year for most."

ARE YOU A JAY?

If you're a manager juggling family and work, or even just life and work, you might see a lot of yourself in Jay. If so, here are some tips and resources that might help.

Fix your communication. Consider running a meeting to establish a “communication contract” with your team. Using this research-backed guide, identify communication methods that might not be working.

Breaks for the win. Try setting your meetings to start 5 or 10 minutes later, defaulting to 25 or 50 minutes, instead of 30 or 60. Outlook can automatically do this when scheduling meetings, ensuring that you have a few minutes between meetings to regroup.

Make the most of meetings. If you're going to be spending a lot of time in meetings, make sure they are as productive as possible. All meetings should have clear goals and agendas. Use parallel chat wisely and think about deciding in advance how it should be used.^{3,11} Consider replacing some meetings with asynchronous collaboration. For more tips on effective meetings, check out the Hybrid Meetings Guide.⁸

SAM

Sam is a nonbinary designer who loves working from the solitude of their home. Early on, while struggles with too many meetings existed, they were nothing compared to the ease of WFH. They said, “I fully understand and empathize with coworkers who have children, dogs, etc. that find it difficult to concentrate at home, especially with schools being closed. For my personal experience, my home is much easier to concentrate in than the office.

Recognizing that the virus is causing hardship and suffering around the world, and that I hope that ceases as soon as possible, my personal work-life balance has enormously improved during this time.”

Their own personal work situation was flourishing at the start of the pandemic, but they knew this wasn’t the case for team members, and many of their social interactions suffered. They said, “I’m starting to notice calls where the background noise is really distracting [kids talking/playing/ yelling, random beeping sounds, water running]. I wish there was an audio feature to ‘reduce background noise.’ It’s also really hard not to interrupt people when you have something to say, so I’ve started just to post my thoughts in the meeting chat instead.”

A few months later, Microsoft Teams did add a feature to control background noise,¹ but this didn’t address all the issues Sam was facing. They said, “Trying to be social on a Teams call is difficult when I’m not already close with some people on the call,” and found themselves “...thinking a lot about normality today and how that has been shaken up for many of us, and might be for long enough that we forget what it was like before...”

As the early months of the pandemic passed, the enjoyment of WFH didn’t fade. Typical work issues popped up, like feeling overworked and struggling with time zones, but Sam always found the bright side. “Can you imagine what it would be like to experience a plague WITHOUT Wi-Fi?? Let’s count our blessings.”

Their lack of commute and boosted productivity at home gave Sam the opportunity to use their newly rediscovered appreciation for technology for other tasks

as well. One highlight from April was “setting up Duolingo for my Thai/Laoian parents to help teach them more English, following along on a second iPad to triangulate what the UI was telling them in Thai. Fascinating, humbling, inspiring all at once.”

In May, Sam found the senseless killings of African Americans incredibly challenging to process but was grateful for his company’s CEO who had “[a] powerful and direct opening statement on racial allyship during today’s employee town hall, in the wake of senseless tragedies this week.” That said, the violence and protests happening around the community were overwhelming and causing them to lose sleep and focus. They said, “The human rights movement happening right now totally has my attention. The world is on fire.” They continued to express gratitude for their company, though, stating “[I’m most grateful for] Org leaders speaking out against racism and encouraging us to join the statewide general strike in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.”

As summer rolled around, the delight of not commuting didn’t fade. “Months in, I am still giddy about not having to commute every day, and that it’s going to last through the summer.” Not everything was perfect, though; issues with early morning and late-night meetings continued because of differing time zones and Sam’s close friend decided to leave the company. This left Sam reflecting on “how much work there is to do to dismantle systemic racism. Sometimes I think Skynet will take over first. But hope springs eternal that the moral arc of the universe bends toward Justice.”

In late summer, while Sam was still enjoying WFH, their team drama made for some challenges, and they decided

to take some time away. After a nice break, it was difficult to return to infighting and complaints about coworkers, but Sam was happy just to have a job in a safe place during this time. Thankfully, being able to take a nap midday and have mental health breaks helped them deal with the drama others brought to the table.

In September, wildfires in the west made for unsafe outdoor activities, but Sam was thankful, as usual, to have a safe home to seal themselves in. Sam's optimism throughout this challenging time seemed to come from a never-ending list of gratitudes. For example, one day in September, Sam was grateful for: "No commute, stable income, clear objectives, healthy body, healthy mind, hope for the future, respect for how much grinding toil and suffering it took past generations to get civilization to reach this level of well-being, recognizing there's a LOOOOOOONG way to go." Their honest assessment of where the world is also motivated Sam to get involved in social activism. Instead of seeing societal challenges as reasons to be down, Sam viewed their own ability to make a change as a motivating force.

In December, Sam took a long holiday, having not used much vacation throughout the pandemic. It certainly felt harder to "return to work" in January when that just meant staying home and the new year came with a ramped-up workload. Sometimes the hardest part of the day was "just thinking about how much I need to get done in the week ahead." The cross-team collaborations this work opened to Sam were excellent, although "having a lot of projects on my to-do list and not a lot of time to do them" was challenging. When the same old work infighting popped up, Sam did

their best to navigate it, while being grateful they didn't have to be in the office to witness it in person.

And while they continued to be grateful for many reasons ("no commute, manageable workload, good benefits, home exercise equipment, functioning nervous system, and central processing brain unit"), there were still days where not having peers around to jumpstart their energy was difficult. "I've had days like this before, where everything feels one degree off from understanding, but previously, I'd be able to find a grounding element amongst my peers. At home, I feel adrift today."

One year in, Sam continues to be thankful for their peaceful work environment but knows many colleagues and friends aren't so lucky. The dissonance between their situation and others, as well as the difficulties of navigating the social world of remote work, continues. However, gratitude and optimism are getting Sam through each new day.

ARE YOU A SAM?

Sam loved the quiet and focus of working from home while living alone but did find social isolation to be a problem.

Get social. Covid negatively impacted social relationships, and living alone was even harder. Finding alternative ways to connect with your team and friends, such as online games or physically distanced gatherings, can help bolster social ties.

Be the change. Especially in America, the first year of Covid came with a variety of additional issues—unequal access to vaccines, systemic racism in healthcare, and more. If you are struggling with this, consider finding ways

to help, such as joining an activist community or educating yourself further about these causes.

CONCLUSION

Covid has changed how people work in many ways, but many of the outcomes have been paradoxical in nature. What works for one person may not work for the next (or even the same person the next day), and we have yet to figure out how to predict exactly what will work for everyone. As you saw in the composite personas described here, some people struggle with isolation and loneliness, have a hard time connecting socially with their teams, or find the time pressures of hybrid work with remote teams to be overwhelming. Others relish this newfound way of working, enjoying more time with family, greater flexibility to exercise during the day, a better work/life balance, and a stronger desire to contribute to the world.

How can we build work environments, tools, and processes to support the full range of experiences people are going through?

One key starting point is providing opportunities for people to reflect on what is and isn't working for them. Participants in this study stated that the act of completing the diary made them feel more in control during this difficult time, and nearly half stated that just reporting gratitudes improved their well-being and satisfaction with their workdays. By aggregating and anonymizing responses from these diaries, our organization was better able to learn how to support employees (such as adding breaks between meetings, creating meeting-free Fridays, etc.); and by sharing this information with them, we created a

culture where people felt seen and heard.

The next 20 months could look as wild as the last, with office reopening dates constantly shifting, major companies across the globe changing their work models, and the great reshuffle transforming the lives of individual software engineers. Use the stories and tips presented here to reflect on what works for you and your team, and learn how you can make the best of the rapidly changing world of hybrid work.

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