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Are your Employees at Home **Actually** Working?

5 Behaviours that Indicate Productivity to Managers

Dr. Joe Folkman

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5 behaviours that indicate productivity to managers.

Prior to the global pandemic, approximately 7.9% of the world's workforce worked from home. Now the latest pandemic estimates are that 34% of workers in the US work from home. The percentage of people working from home has also increased across the world.

Italy	24%
France	28%
Germany	29%
Spain	25%
Sweden	31%
UK	34%

Challenges and benefits of working from home

One reality, according to several studies, is that people working from home are working longer hours. From experience and conversations with many people, it seems clear that personal activities and work activities are more blurred than when people are in an office environment. At the same time, commuting has been eliminated for those working from home. Lunch breaks can be less time-consuming. Bottom line, what is the overall impact on productivity?

Productivity paradox

One of the biggest concerns about having employees work from home is that their productivity may be lower. You can easily find images of employees working from home, ranging from parents trying to work while babysitting, people talking on a Zoom meeting in their pyjamas, and others raiding the refrigerator. My oldest son created an outdoor office in his backyard since there was no space in his home. A Stanford economist, Nicholas Bloom, had conducted research for a Chinese travel agency on the impact on productivity and found positive gains. However, a condition for those working from home was that they had a room dedicated as an "office" in which they could function and that there were no young children at home during the day. When Bloom himself began working from home and had four young children sharing the house, he now concluded that widespread working from home could cause a worldwide productivity slump that could, in turn, reduce economic growth for many years.

Managers understandably wonder about the level of the productivity of their direct reports when they are working from home. When working in the office, managers feel they have a much better sense of a direct report's productivity because they can see them working at their desks.

Ideal practices for those who work from home

The late Peter Drucker made a relevant observation that I believe applies to our current situation. He noted that many people thought that the key to their success was to be conscientious, diligent, and consistently produce good outcomes. He cautioned that this was not correct. Yes, the person needed to do those things, but they also needed to make certain that their colleagues, and especially their boss, knew that they were doing an effective job.

What Behaviors Indicate Productivity and Effort to Managers?

Are there behaviors that indicate direct reports are productive? To answer that question, my colleague Jack Zenger and I examined a dataset of 9,755 individual contributors. Each contributor had been evaluated by their manager on 48 behaviors that best differentiate the most effective from the least effective individual contributors. Each contributor was also rated on their level of productivity and effort by their manager. An analysis was then performed to identify those behaviors that would differentiate the individual contributors with the highest ratings on productivity and effort from those with the lowest ratings. Once the behaviors were identified, we performed a factor analysis and clustered the behaviors into five dimensions that were most influential to managers on their ratings of productivity and effort.

1. Takes Initiative. When individual contributors not only do their assigned work but take on additional work, that sends a powerful signal of productivity and performance. This is especially impactful when the person sees a need that was not being met and takes on those tasks voluntarily. Parents are often frustrated at their children when they finish a meal and leave their plate on the table or throw their dirty clothes on the floor of their room for someone else to pick up. However, they are impressed and proud when their children do the opposite. (If tasks were assigned a point value, doing something important without being asked gets an individual contributor 100 points, whereas doing the same thing after being asked gets an individual contributor 50 points.) Those who take the initiative have an attitude of wanting to do more. They look for opportunities to add more value and help. Those who lack initiative want to do the minimum

2. Consistently Delivering Results. Our parents used to say, “Excuses are like feet; everybody has two of them!” We all encounter problems, and on occasion, we all find it hard to deliver what we said we would deliver; but some people can always be trusted to provide the results they promise. When people work in an office setting, it is easier for the manager to know precisely if results have been delivered. However, when people work remotely, the manager has less visibility. Believing it is your manager’s job to monitor and measure your deliverables is not reasonable. It often becomes especially difficult when the subordinate and the boss are both working from home. It is unwise to keep a manager guessing about what has been accomplished. Remote workers need to keep their manager informed about what has been done and what needs to be completed.

3. Displays Expertise and Good Judgment. Sharing your knowledge, experience, and deep expertise adds value to your work and increases the perceptions of your high productivity. When we lack the opportunities to display qualities, it is difficult to be perceived as highly productive. Often working remotely puts some people at a disadvantage because they lack the opportunities to share their knowledge and to demonstrate their sound judgment. One of the compelling reasons for more frequent communication between a manager and a subordinate who is working from home is the occasion this provides to assure the subordinate’s manager of the knowledge and good judgment that the remote worker possesses.

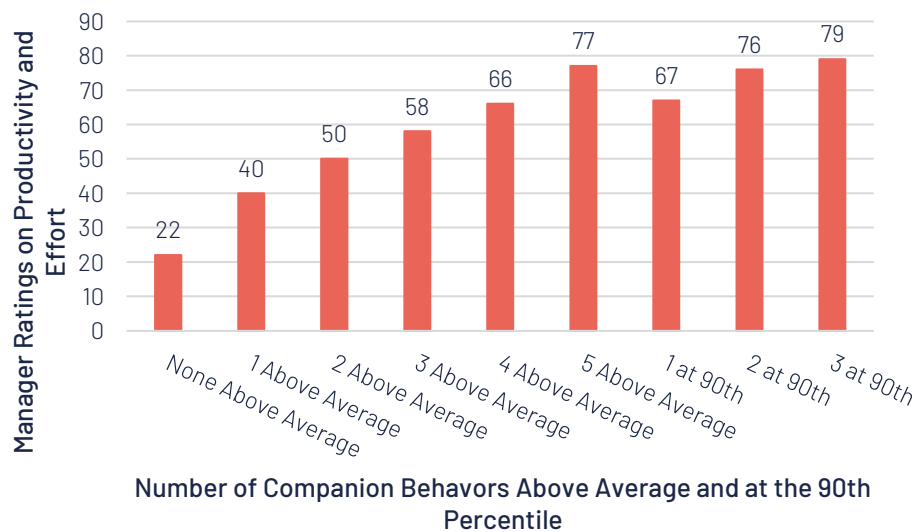
4. Is a Role Model / Walks the Talk. One of the great discoveries of psychology in the last century is that our behavior strongly shapes our mindset. We can effectively alter our mindset and attitudes by controlling how we behave. We frequently hear that the big lesson many have learned as they work from home during this pandemic is the need for a schedule and a routine. Why? Because their behavior changes how they think and feel about themselves and their work.

The true test of someone’s character is what they do when they know no one else is watching. Just because your manager cannot see you does not mean that it is okay to sleep in, quit early, take multiple breaks or watch TV while you work. Working from home creates some challenging situations that include difficult working conditions, childcare and pet responsibilities, which in turn lead to anxiety and stress. For those with children at home, ponder the example being set for them as they see you working from home. What lessons will they take away from watching you?

5. Willingness to Stretch. Often with stress and anxiety, people begin to feel overwhelmed and resist learning new skills or taking on difficult assignments. Effectively working remotely will require some new skills or may challenge you to do something that has been outside of your normal wheelhouse. Managers are always impressed when their reports are willing to try something new or take on a difficult assignment. It sends a signal about their work ethic and desire to be highly productive.

Impact of Improvement on Productivity and Effort

With our large dataset, we were able to measure the impact on manager ratings of productivity and effort with improvement on these five critical skills. If a person was below average on all five skills their productivity and effort ratings were at the 22nd percentile. Being just above average on all five skills raised the productivity and effort rating to the 77th percentile. That is one approach to improvement, but a strength-building approach might be to select three of the skills and become excellent at all three (e.g., 90th percentile on three skills). Being excellent at just three of the skills raises the productivity and effort ratings to the 79th percentile.



As the world struggles through this very difficult time, the individuals and organizations that exhibit and learn how to increase their productivity while working from home will come out of this period with a significant advantage.

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