

# THE FUTURE OF WORK

And How It Can Be  
Flexible,  
Productive,  
Meaningful,  
and Connected.

From Canopy Advisory Group's  
Founder and CEO,  
Griffen O'Shaughnessy



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# I. Introduction To The Future of Work

## What is the future of work?

The past 3 years have been a vast experiment in where we work, when we work and how works get done.

I'm Griffen O'Shaughnessy, the Founder and CEO of Canopy Advisory Group, and I'm going to tell you what we do know, even amidst all of this uncertainty.

**We know the future of work will be flexible. We know it will focus on employee wellbeing and connection. And we know that in this AI powered environment, human skills will become that much more crucial.**

In these next chapters I'm going to breakdown the research about the future of work. I'll discuss things like how to build a culture of connection in a distributed workforce, how to measure and assess productivity in a flexible work environment, and some opportunities to enhance employee well being.

**At Canopy, we began reimagining how works gets done over two decades ago. As Tim Ferris said about the innovation curve, a great idea always looks different at first. Today, we're honored to sit at the intersection of corporate needs and worker flexibility.**



As James Clear said, “the ideal form of work feels like play, but still accomplishes something useful and valuable.”

## II. Flexibility

Flexibility decreases burnout, makes economic sense, and creates more diverse teams.

Why does flexibility continue to be at the core of this conversation?

### Let's Define Flexibility.

According to Slack's Future Forum, one of the most widely read surveys on workplace trends, the term "flexibility" includes both when people work and also where people work. Our research suggests that there are 3 primary reasons why flexibility is key to the future of work:

it decreases burn out, it makes economic sense, and it creates more diverse teams – and data shows that diverse teams add more to the bottom line.

According to the Future Forum, burnout is still on the rise globally, with 42 percent of the workforce reporting it. **However, workers with more flexibility report less burnout with greater productivity and focus.** They have less stress and anxiety and stronger work-life balance. This is



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why workers are demanding flexibility – it allows them to be their best selves, at home and work, which makes them more motivated, leads to more creative ideas, and it increases their output and energy around work.

**The second reason why flexibility is key is that it makes economic sense.** What we've found is that many roles don't require a full time employee, so adding fractional or project based professionals saves valuable company resources. Further, since flexibility increases job satisfaction, it leads to less turnover in the workforce. This is critical for an organization's bottom line since the average cost of replacing a single employee with a \$100,000 salary is more than \$34,000.

**The final reason why flexibility is a key to the future of work is that it creates more diverse teams.** When employers limit their search for talent to the immediate area around their headquarters, and mandate a 9 to 5 schedule, they dramatically shrink their talent pool and miss out on some of the nation's top and most diverse talent. Further, by creating the space for work to happen both in person – think, certain meetings, bonding events and real-time brainstorming sessions– along with work that can get done more asynchronously – like deep work with large chunks of time that are meeting free, using new digital tools that make it easier and more enjoyable – you're creating a work environment where a more diverse team with different styles of communication can thrive. This way of work is quickly transitioning from a “nice to have” to a “must have” for business and the bottom line.



The pandemic opened our eyes to a new way to work and there's no going back. As Adam Grant said, “We know flexibility is the future of work, the big question is how.”

### III. A Culture of Connection

How can we build a culture of connection in a flexible work environment?

We know that flexibility is the key to the future of work, but while added flexibility has many advantages, it also presents new challenges in building and maintaining a culture of connection among employees.

There are 3 strategies that companies can use to foster a sense of connection even when their team is working flexible hours or from a remote location.

The strategies include:

- 1) Communication
- 2) Transparency and
- 3) Training

**First and foremost, communication is key. Nothing kills connection more than a lack of communication.** Companies need to ensure that communication is consistent – top down and bottom up – and that channels are open and accessible to all employees, regardless of where they are located or what their schedules look like. Striking the balance between micromanaging and total freedom can take time, but it's worth the investment to figure out how each person works best, and supporting that communication cadence. This includes email and chat platforms, regular virtual team meetings and, most importantly, regularly planned in person get togethers.

Remote work doesn't mean "never in person" — in person time together fosters the most authentic form of human connection and leads to open communication. While we may not all be in the same location from 9-5 anymore, we can still schedule quarterly team building events and retreats. Or, if possible, weekly or monthly social activities.

**Transparency is the second key element in building a culture of connection in a distributed workplace.** Transparency is created by sharing information openly, encouraging feedback and being honest and direct. This includes being sure that employees are aware of any changes or updates to policies, procedures, or goals and asking for their feedback via a survey or, better yet, an in-person or virtual town hall meeting. Then...and this is key...listen to the team and take action where appropriate.

This listening demonstrates that an organization values employee input and is committed to creating a workplace that is responsive to their needs. When employees feel that they are part of the decision-making process, they are much more likely to feel connected to the company and their colleagues. This is the core of transparency.

**Finally, offering training and professional development opportunities is the third key element in building a connected culture.** Provide employees with opportunities to learn new skills and advance their careers through monthly webinars and in-person lunch and learns. For teams that are more spread out geographically, schedule quick quarterly trips to be inspired at beautiful locations with incredible speakers. These

opportunities break down barriers, promote a sense of camaraderie and belonging and foster a team of life long learners which certainly adds to the bottom line.

So, when we think about building a culture of connection in remote work environments, it requires intentional effort. By prioritizing communication, transparency, and training, companies can help foster a sense of community and connection among their employees, even when they are working from different locations and on different schedules.

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## IV. Measuring Productivity

Did you know that half of all U.S. employees start their day with an unclear definition of what they're supposed to achieve? In this chapter I'll focus on how to measure productivity in a remote work environment and I'll highlight 2 key strategies: how to set effective goals and how digital tools can help managers stay updated and help employees track their progress.

Pre-covid, many managers used to rely on hallway conversations, chit chat before meetings, and casually dropping by an employee's office to keep up to date with what their team members are working on and just generally to see how they're doing. But with so much work being done remotely now, many managers are feeling out of the loop and disconnected. So how can these managers stay connected and be assured of their remote employees' productivity?



The most important factor in maintaining productivity in a flexible work environment is setting appropriate goals. Since almost half of all US employees don't know what's expected of them at work each day, it's no wonder that their managers don't know what they're achieving. Goals need to be measurable and clear.

### **So what makes an effective goal?**

Historically, many organizations have tracked how many hours an employee worked as the most important metric. But, on its own, the number of hours worked a day is no longer a good measure of productivity because it ignores the quality and the efficiency of the work.

The best organizations connect goals to the most important part of a person's job, which is usually an employee's behavior or a specific business outcome. This could include a revenue growth goal for a sales person, an innovation goal for a product designer, or a customer satisfaction goal for a service provider. Ideally, all of these goals ladder up to the overall company objectives.



**Second, how do we use digital tools to track progress against these goals?** It seems like there's new people success software available every day, but they all serve basic functions: from goal setting and performance management to employee engagement. The key is to make these tools valuable to employees. Software is only as good as its use, which requires a rollout plan and clearly communicating its value.

It's important to pick tools that include two-way feedback mechanisms, OKR tracking, and other ways to understand and act on employee feedback while improving employee engagement, experience and effectiveness. While we know what to do, it's important to consistently communicate with middle managers about what not to do.

- **Don't over schedule 1:1 meetings.**
- **Don't micromanage by firing random messages all day.**
- **And don't track keystrokes or use software to record someone all day as it will create trust issues.**

Being thoughtful with management styles and downward communication is critical.

In conclusion, measuring and assessing productivity in a remote work environment requires intentional effort and that effort must include setting effective goals and using digital tools to track progress toward reaching those goals.

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## V. Employee Wellbeing

Finally, I'll discuss how flexibility, with the right leadership, can improve employee wellbeing.

**As we know from research, employees who have flexible work arrangements are less likely to suffer from stress and anxiety, which can lead to a range of mental health problems.**

Flexibility gives employees the chance to manage their workload in a way that suits their work and lifestyles. However, as remote and hybrid work blurs the lines between work and life, corporate leaders have to be more intentional with employee well-being. It's no wonder the corporate well-being market is now estimated to be 10s of billions of dollars. While corporate benefits such as free counseling, meditation and other well-being solutions are important, nothing can replace effective management. It's about building a culture where employees can bring their whole selves to work — a holistic approach to physical, emotional and social well-being.

Empathetic leadership is no longer relegated to the “soft sciences” of leadership — it's core to employee well-being. Part of empathetic leadership

means trusting your employees. For some companies, monitoring screentime is their approach to effective management. I believe that creating the right goals for employees and helping them meet those goals in whatever way works best for them is most effective for a company's bottom line, and trust between employers and employees.

Employees who are given this freedom tend to be more motivated and focused, leading to increased productivity and job satisfaction. **Trust leads to commitment.** This is part of why I founded Canopy nearly two decades ago. I believe that there's a way to work that is built on trust and that marries corporate and employee needs. And I believe that Canopy's fractional and project-based work model meets that need. The pandemic may have brought new challenges into the light, but the increased visibility into the lives of employees is really an opportunity. We can redefine leadership, build trust and strengthen corporate culture and bottom lines along the way.

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## VI. Bringing it Together

Canopy Advisory Group held a panelist event with two experts, Case Button and Derek Johnson, hosted by Canopy's CEO, Griffen O'Shaughnessy, to discuss these topics and pose some new questions. The outcome was an engaging and enlightening conversation full of new insight and some great takeaways for both employees and leadership.



### FLEXIBILITY:

In a market where employees are in demand they are more able to dictate their terms - what we're seeing is that people want flexibility to stick around and companies are having to adjust - how's that working?

**Derek:** I believe that people wanted flexibility before Covid. When they looked at jobs they looked for how close the office was to home, to their kid's school, to their dentist...it's always been important. Now, if you tell an employee they have to be in the office for a job they're going to turn it down because it's not a given anymore.

**Case:** Remote work doesn't mean never in person though, connection happens in person and it is hard to recreate that virtually no matter what you try.

### CONNECTIVE CULTURE:

**A team can all be in the same physical space and not feel connected - so what are some ways we can get that connection?**

**Case:** Usually the reason to come together is human connection. At Slack, we decide that connection happens in person and acknowledged that we were never really able to recreate it virtually. One solution for us was general all-team slack channels which seemed to provide an equalizing connection between all levels of the company and did not force anyone out of their comfort zone. There was till the issue of video meetings and our office culture so we experimented a lot with what felt best for everyone. We felt able to connect more with people when they did not have their videos on. In my workplace we found that the performative nature of video meetings meant that type A extroverts thrived, but it hindered connection and productivity of others. We found that either everyone should be in the office or everyone should be remote on particular days - either all in or all out was better. It really comes down to finding what works for your team and the culture of your business

best and how you can support your team while also remaining productive and connected.

### MEASURING PRODUCTIVITY:

**How can we measure productivity when teams are remote and working flexible hours?**

**Case:** We're constantly interrupted by all the apps we can be contacted on. It'll be different for every team, but leadership at Slack addressed the interruption issue by setting up one week per month when there were no one-on-ones and everything had to be written. The result was a week of deeper focus that we all really needed.

**Derek:** It's also so important for leaders and employees to recognize that everyone works differently and that's ok. We might have the same project, but it will take us different time to finish it in. Leaders really need to remember that so long as you are turning it in, it does not matter how you got there. It comes down to treating employees like adults and letting them manage themselves to an extent. People used to measure how many hours they were in the office, but really we should be measuring output.

## EMPLOYEE WELLBEING:

**How can we support employees struggling with the overwhelming number of work touchpoints when they are remote?**

**Derek:** For individuals, it's all about setting expectations and boundaries about when they are available for communication. People need to consciously block individual work time from engaging-with-others time. It's key that people think introspectively about when they are most productive and what helps them get there. Old school leaving your desk and commuting used to be a time to decompress, but now we're always at our screens. How do we step away and put away the technology? I've been taking my 1:1s as phone-call-walks so I'm still working, but I'm also away from my screen and desk - everyone's going to find different things that help them break up their day and screen time best.

**Does employee wellbeing connect back to company culture?**

**Derek:** Yes. We're seeing burnout, a lack of decompression time away from work sources and apps, and employees being stressed out by the instant gratification world we live in where clients and teammates expect immediate responses. It connects back to company culture in so far as HR best practices are changing.

**What are some actionable ways to address employee wellbeing?**

**Derek:** There are a number of things companies could consider doing. As burnout is the biggest problem the four day week is a great solution. As I mentioned before, measuring productivity by end goal rather than time spent is also good for worker's mental health. When you're workers are flexible and work remotely additional autonomy might be necessary. All to say, if a company can create a space and culture where burnout rates are lower, employees are happier and retention rates are higher.





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