

State of Work Survey Report June 2020

Matt Schouten - 18 July 2020

Summary

The June 2020 State of Work Survey found:

- Remote workers identify communication with their manager as the most common new challenge to overcome.
- Remote managers identify communication challenges (connection to their team, oversight and basic management, and coaching and mentoring) as the most common new challenge to overcome.
- Adjustment to remote work is ongoing and encompasses physical factors (e.g. workspace), psychological factors (e.g. motivation), and family factors (e.g. children).

Recommendations based on survey data are:

- Deliberately invest in manager and employee communication
 - Managers should help remote employees set boundaries
 - Operationalize remote behaviors to remove tactical problems
 - Be patient, control what you can, and let the rest go
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Introduction

It's mid-July as I write this, and June feels so long ago. Early June even more so.

In early June 2020 I ran a survey to better understand how the world of work has been affected by the rest of the world. In an outcome that I should have predicted, response rates were low. Several individuals that had committed to complete the survey did not do so; several individuals that shared the survey did not fill out the survey; and I held the survey open longer than planned when an extension was requested. As I said, I should have predicted this outcome. I have experienced the anecdotally widespread feeling that it is hard to keep up on everything, despite the restrictions most people have on their activities theoretically giving more free time.

As I write this, schools are planning re-opening in the fast-approaching fall. Some companies plan to remain remote for the foreseeable future; others have already required workers to return to the office. Meanwhile, the pandemic that disrupted life is breaking out again across the U.S.

While the number of responses is low in absolute terms and the insight the survey gives for June 2020 is not statistically significant, there is useful insight in the responses.

Survey Results

The survey asked questions regarding the workplace, being managed, managing (if the respondent self-reported having direct reports), individual work, and how children affect working from home.

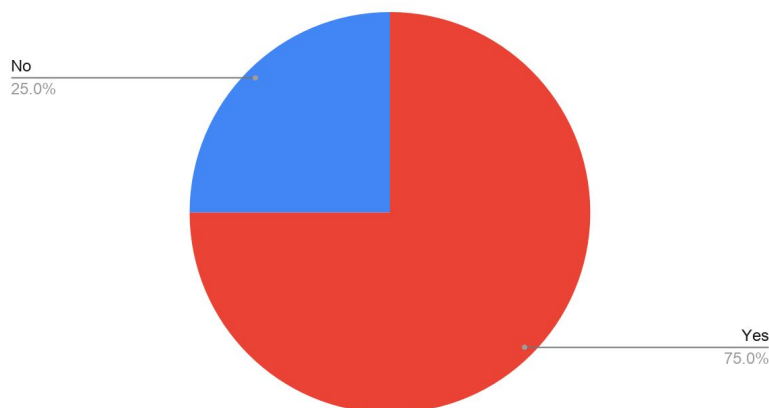
Demographics and Basic Statistics

The survey was completed by 8 individuals, not including me, between June 1 and 19, 2020. All are currently employed. The individuals represent a broad range of industries and job roles, though most have some connection with engineering and technology of some sort. Responses are mostly, but not exclusively, from the state of Iowa.

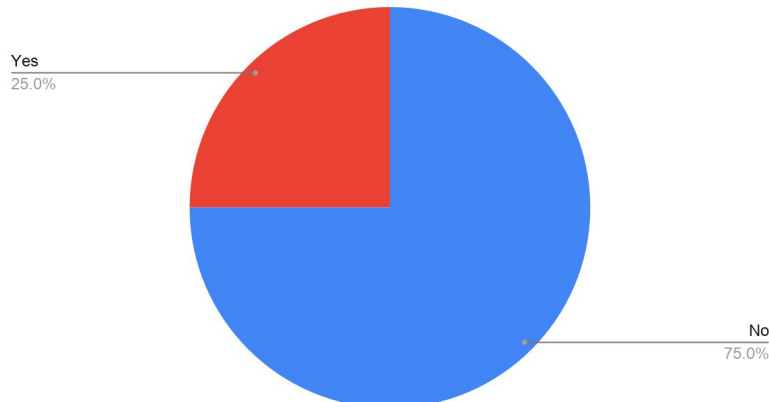
Employment Statistics

Only 25% of respondents were working remotely prior to the pandemic. 75% are currently working remotely. Interestingly, one individual that was remote prior is now non-remote.

Are you working remotely now?



Were you working remotely prior to the pandemic?



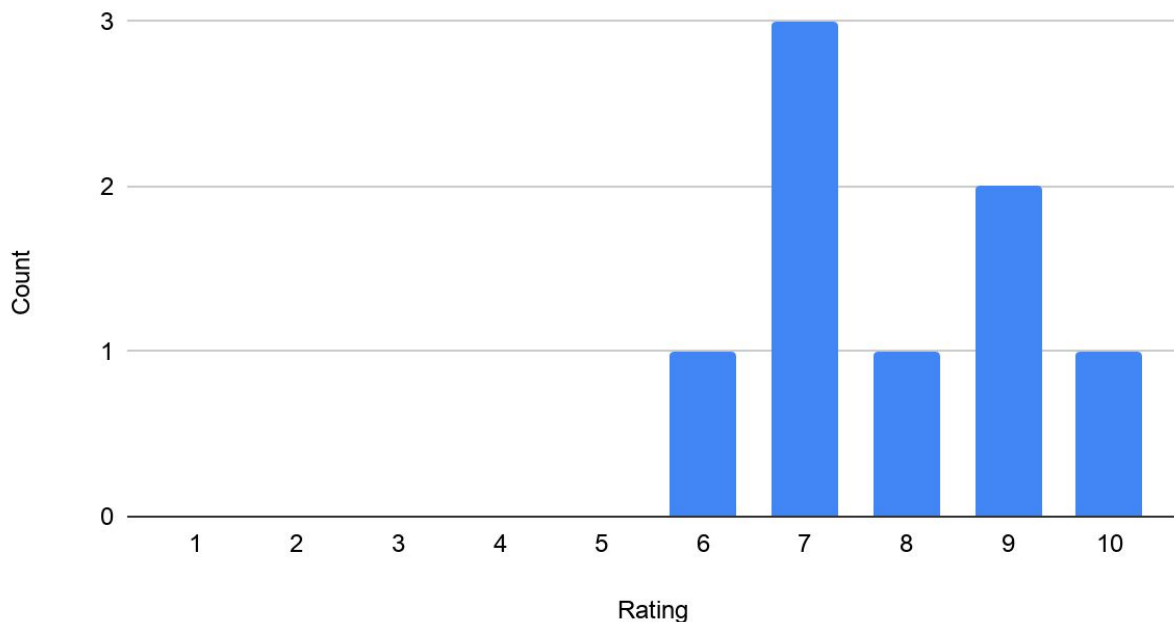
75% of respondents are managers (i.e. have individuals reporting to them). The number of direct reports ranges from 3-7, with a mode of 3 and mean of 4.

Work Environment Statistics

50% of respondents report working remotely in an environment that includes children. Number of children ranges from 1-6. In a quirk of small sample sizes, every respondent that answered “Yes” to having children in their remote working environment reported that the group of children includes at least one high-school-aged child.

The general feeling about managers was positive. Respondents were asked to rate their manager on a scale of 1 (worst) to 10 (best). Responses ranged from 6-10, with a mode of 7 and a mean of 7.8.

Count vs Manager Rating



Although the data is not available, a longitudinal analysis of manager rating over time could be quite interesting.

Qualitative Results

This section will present results from non-numeric questions and synthesize information from related questions.

Work Slowdowns

Half (50%) of respondents reported a slowdown in work because of pandemic-related factors. Layoffs, reduced customer demand, and cutbacks in hiring were all mentioned.

The survey did not specifically address the question of stress, but the content and tone of many responses indicates that stress levels are generally elevated. Work slowdowns were reported in response to the question “How has your work been affected by the pandemic?”

Managing

Most (75%) of respondents are managers. Of those that are managers, most (67%) were new to managing remotely.

The managers, regardless of experience with remote management, reported challenges with managing remotely that fall into three broad categories:

- Connection to their team - relationships, engagement, organic interactions
- Oversight and basic management work - driving results, ensuring employees are doing what needs to be done, accountability, ability to easily check on work or observe employees at work
- Coaching and mentoring - determining coaching topics, continual observations allowing course-corrections and broader discussions

Managers that were new to remote management reported new challenges that can all be classified under the category of connecting to their team. This category encompasses technical issues, human factors issues that arise even when technology works perfectly¹, and social issues such as camaraderie and morale.

The majority of managers tied at least one of the challenges they reported to the need to produce results.

Being Managed

Despite—perhaps because of—slowdowns in work in companies or entire industries, 38% of respondents report they are working to grow the business for which they work. Of those that reported pressure to grow business, all had reported a slowdown in their workplace or industry on a prior question.

A separate 38% of respondents reported challenges that have nothing to do with slowdowns; when analyzing the data I had lumped them into a group I categorized as “world doesn’t stop”. Respondents still report challenges related to relationships with their managers and navigating corporate goings-on unrelated to remote work or the pandemic².

The survey specifically asked those that were newly remote what new challenges they were facing. The responses are categorized as follows:

- 38% - Increased difficulty / friction in communicating with their manager
- 25% - Getting more communication³⁴

¹ One response cited “benefits and inefficiencies” that come with “rubbing shoulders with people every day”. Others expressed the benefits that come from proximity and being “face to face”.

² In this instance, going through a merger, causing role redefinition.

³ This seems inconsistent or paradoxical given the number of indicators (both on this survey and anecdotally) about the difficulty of communication increasing as companies are thrown into remote work. By way of explanation, one non-remote respondent reported “my manager...is here more [instead of] traveling,” which has improved their work communication. It is also unclear whether this is a “challenge” as the question asked, or simply a difference.

⁴ In what may be a quirk of a small sample size, or may be a statistically yet-unsound pointer to future study, the two respondents in this category ranked their managers at 7. This is on the lower end of reported results. My two hypotheses based on this data are (1) managers providing increased communication would previously have been rated lower and have “moved up” in rating based on

- 25% - N/A (already remote)
- 12% - No response

The plurality that reported increased friction in communicating with their manager listed factors including lack of daily exposure, reduced opportunity to ask a quick question (e.g. hallway chat or stopping by their desk), and reduced quality of communication over a remote link.

Combining the findings from this section and the “Managing” section strongly suggests that managers would be well-served to invest in deliberately and regularly connecting with their direct reports.

Venturing far from the data, I would hazard the conclusion in the paragraph above is especially applicable for any managers that are relying on their direct reports to help overcome a company or industry slowdown.

Being Remote

Individuals new to remote work identified several effects of remote work on their effectiveness and schedule:

- Motivation and focus are more difficult.
- The work environment may be more comfortable⁵, but not as productive.
- It is difficult to separate work from non-work time at home.

The third item, difficulty separating work from non-work time at home, manifested in two ways.

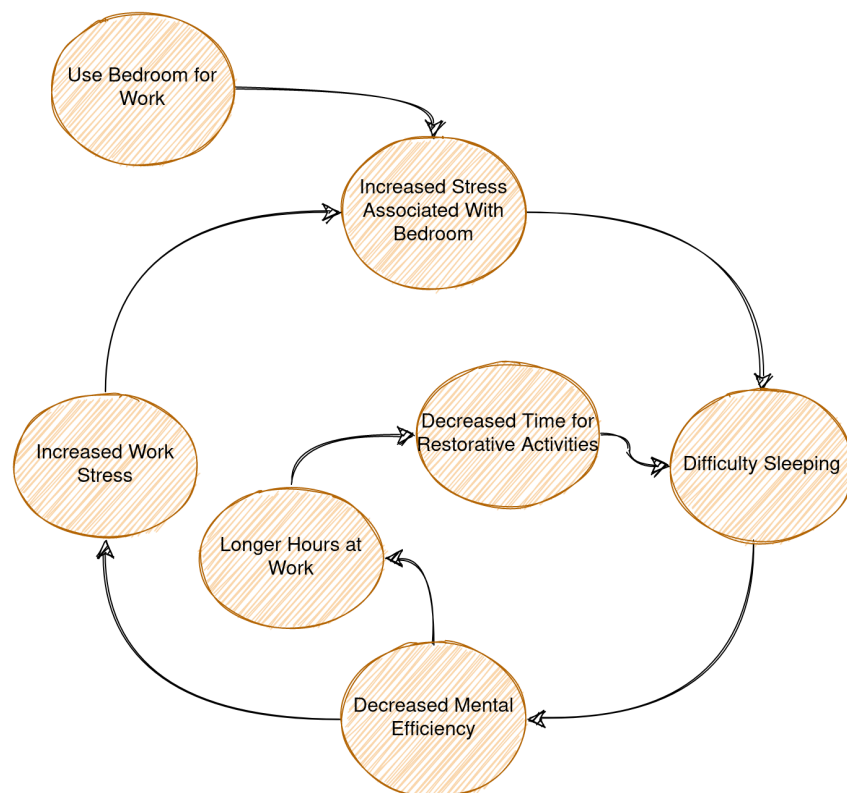
The first manifestation is being willing to work longer hours, such as later into the evening. It is not clear whether this is a personal reaction to reduced feelings of motivation and productivity, supporting varying schedules across a team, or a result of having been asked to put in more time.

The second manifestation is a mental blurring of boundaries as work has begun to occur in the same spaces previously used only for recreation, relaxation, and restoration. Intuitively, this makes sense: if work occurs in one’s bedroom, the bedroom is no longer a place mostly used for sleep. Instead of being used 8 hours a day for sleep, it is suddenly used for 16 hours a day, evenly divided between sleep and work. Those two activities have markedly different emotions and stress levels associated with them.

increased communication or (2) managers ranked 7 are generally seen as “meh, they’re alright [shrug]”, and that the increased communication is worth remarking upon as a contrast from previous managerial neglect. To be clear, I have no data to support either hypothesis at this time.

⁵ I did not gather data specifically about work-from-home work area set-up. Working from home was described as “more comfortable” in one response and increased comfort was suggested in others; what makes it more comfortable is not clear.

Again, extrapolating beyond the data, it is easy to hypothesize here that a negative cycle could occur from using one's bedroom as a long-term work-from-home location. Using the bedroom



for work increases the stress associated with the room. Therefore, it is more difficult to sleep restfully. Lack of restful sleep decreases mental efficiency. Reduced efficiency increases stress, reduces motivation, and likely increases hours worked. Therefore, stress associated with the room increases yet again; increasing hours worked also decreases time available for restorative activities. This feeds back into the cycle by causing still more sleep difficulties. Although, as stated, this is a hypothesis based on extrapolation beyond what the limited pool of data can support, I would

recommend that managers ask employees—particularly those that are now working out of their bedrooms—about their stress levels, sleep, and perceived effectiveness, with an eye toward helping to the extent possible⁶.

Among all remote respondents, there were mixed opinions about remote work. Some preferred it; some did not; most expressed much more nuanced opinions. Most of the opinions shared are unsurprising to anyone who has read even a handful of articles about remote work in the popular press recently. However, as managers and other leaders make decisions about short- and long-term working arrangements, I would caution them against simply relying on their perceptions or articles they have read. An open discussion with employees might take longer, but I would expect it to have better outcomes than a top-down dictate without employee input.

An unexpected finding was the effect of being the one family member to be required to venture out into the world to work, while the rest of the rest of the family is hunkered down, sheltering at

⁶ A manager who asks about these things with even a hint that the employee might suffer negative consequences from honestly describing increased stress or reduced effectiveness is damaging their long-term working relationship with their employee. That would certainly be ineffective, and almost certainly unethical.

home. This arrangement was reported to cause strain on home relationships. The nature of the strain, the relationships affected, and the points of friction were unreported.

Children

The survey specifically asked questions about working remotely with children in the home. As previously stated, 50% of respondents report working remotely in an environment that includes children.

Respondents reported enjoying seeing and interacting with their families more when working from home. That benefit was accompanied by the anecdotally well-attested increase in interruptions and noise. Pets were also reported as causing interruptions and noise.

With schools having moved to remote schooling, there were reports of additional effort needed to oversee schooling. In-person teachers and staff check on homework, supervise children, and ensure students are taking time to eat lunch. In breaks from working remotely and after work, parents need to handle all of those responsibilities⁷.

Very little of the information gathered for this section was surprising to me. I have plenty of experience working from home with children in the house. I interact regularly with people⁸ that have children in the house while working. And many people in my circles have experienced the increase in work that came with the sudden shift to remote schooling.

Insights and Recommendations

Analyzing and synthesizing the results of the survey provides several insights into the State of Work in June 2020, and into what managers can do to sustain their employees' ability to deliver results.

Deliberately Invest in Manager and Employee Communication

Findings from the “Managing” and “Being Managed” sections strongly suggest that communication between remote managers and employees is more difficult than when working in the same building. This aligns with a large volume of research over decades showing that proximity affects the frequency of communication⁹. Given that relationship quality increases

⁷ Observations about the shift of oversight responsibilities from teachers to parents should not be taken as a criticism of teachers or schools. Various schools have put in different levels of effort, but teachers have worked hard to do the best they can for students given the challenging circumstances.

⁸ Remote colleagues and socially-distanced social contacts alike, in addition to secondhand accounts such as friend-of-friend social media chatter.

⁹ Thomas J. Allen's “Managing the Flow of Technology” (1977) is often cited in technical R&D work; his work has been extended in follow-up studies over the years. Similar work has been done in other realms including education. The “Allen Curve” graphically represents the basic finding that communication frequency drops off as distance increases, across all communication media.

with the quality and frequency of communication¹⁰, this should be a concern for managers who believe that relationships are important to getting the best possible results from their employees.

Remote managers are dealing with limitations of technology. In the current work environment, that is well-known, and most companies are investing in solutions. However, optimizing the video chat software alone will not solve manager-employee communication.

Remote managers must invest in deliberately and regularly communicating with their employees. In addition, they must relentlessly reduce friction to employee-initiated communication, keeping in mind that barriers are always higher than the manager thinks they are. Some employees are comfortable making a telephone call, leaving a voicemail, and waiting for a call back. Others are not. Some employees worry that sending a Slack message is too intrusive. Each team and each relationship is different; individual managers must take ownership of ease of communication¹¹.

Managers Should Help Remote Employees Set Boundaries

Findings from the “Being Remote” section strongly suggest that employees, especially those that were suddenly thrust into remote work, are having difficulty separating work from the rest of their life. It can be difficult even when physical space permits clear delineation; much more so if physical space does not.

Managers should use their role to help employees set boundaries needed for effective mental health and renewal so that work is sustainable. I recommend spatial boundaries (if possible), boundaries on hours, and boundaries on after-hours commitments.

Spatial boundaries means having a dedicated space for work. Not all employees have the space at home to make that possible. To the extent that it is, managers should allow employees to expense equipment so that their home workspace can be equipped as needed. This obviously includes work equipment and materials (laptop, sticky notes, headset microphone, etc). It also might include a chair, standing desk, or room divider—whatever equipment the manager and employee might mutually decide is best to maximize the employee’s effectiveness.

¹⁰ In fact, some research findings indicate that communication quality is positively correlated with frequency of communication. For example, Zhang, Qi & Wang, Lei & Lin, Weipeng & Ma, Jingjing & Yu, Kun. (2015). Communication frequency, quality and relationship satisfaction: A P-E fit approach.

¹¹ A reasonable starter measurement would be (1) number of manager-initiated communications to the employee, (2) number of employee-initiated communications to the manager, and (3) number of questions asked by the employee when the manager initiates communication (“hey, as long as you’re on the line...”). If (1) is much larger than (2), or if (3) averages higher than about 1.5, it is likely that communication friction is too high and that employees are less effective because of perceived barriers to getting their questions resolved.

Boundaries on hours will keep an employee's work time from expanding to fill the available time. Mechanical equipment often has load limits and duty cycles printed on it. Humans do not come with a load limit stamp, but they do have limits. Boundaries on after-hours commitments reduce the low-grade anxiety or mental open loops employees feel when they are constantly on call. A great many managers are no doubt excited that employees might be putting in more hours, or checking email more often in the evening; these managers should check to see if they are risking burning out an employee, potentially damaging relationships, and needing a long period of recovery¹².

While some employees may be capable of setting these boundaries themselves, it is helpful for a manager to check with employees on boundaries and give "permission" to do so—or even to direct their employees to set boundaries for themselves¹³.

Operationalize New Remote Behaviors to Remove Tactical Problems

Many of the challenges that managers reported are tactical issues. In the minds of those managers, the tactical challenges no doubt directly connect to desired business outcomes, but those larger outcomes were not articulated.

An overriding challenge of this pandemic has been that major shifts in "how" have occurred, often without the time to re-focus on the end goals. It is not surprising that this leads to tactical issues.

Managers should plan, using the best information they have available, for how behaviors will be operationalized to remove tactical problems. In other words, whatever the "new normal" looks like for a company or department, the manager should create or modify ongoing operational plans so that the current tactical problems are solved—or better, eliminated. These plans must be made with the business outcomes in mind.

To take a brief example, several managers lamented the difficulty of keeping a team connected and engaged while remote. Team connection and engagement support business outcomes that may be different at different companies; we will sidestep trying to determine what those are for this example. Non-remote tactics used in the Before Times might include face-to-face meetings, team lunches, physical pats on the back, and having a poster on the wall showing the team's project goal. Most of those tactics do not translate well into remote work. New tactics need to

¹² Any manager who might suggest that the current state of the labor market allows them to hire replacement employees more easily, or that the "kids these days" are "soft" because "back when I was that age, I always worked 45 hours and reported 40", or similarly dismisses the importance of boundaries is welcome to do so. Such managers may want to consider the effect on long-term results, work environment, and retention. They may also want to ask themselves "what shall it profit a man[ager], if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" People matter.

¹³ Saying "I need you at your best, and when you work 12 hours a day, you're not bringing your best anymore. Get everything you can done in 8 hours, then log off and do something you enjoy," is a powerful statement of support.

be chosen and operationalized. Perhaps a weekly “team learning” session in which the team watches a work-related TED talk and holds a follow-up discussion could take the place of team lunches; kudos from the manager could be delivered in public Slack channels; time could be allocated at the weekly team meeting to allow for water-cooler banter; and a daily or weekly email could restate the project goal and summarize progress toward it.

Operationalizing these particular tactics is a matter of some schedule changes and requests for certain behavior changes (e.g. delegating sending a weekly email; using public Slack channels instead of private messages). Not every change will be this simple, to be sure. Investing the energy to remove tactical problems will almost certainly pay off.

Be Patient, Control What You Can, and Let the Rest Go

100% of respondents have experienced work-related changes due to the pandemic. Many of those changes are beyond their control (for example, their company choosing to work remotely, or schools closing). Some things can be controlled (for example, which side of the brand-new makeshift bedroom desk to set the laptop on, or when to get up in the morning).

In at least one answer from everyone who responded, I inferred some amount of stress. Several responses identified rises in general stress levels, or the stress levels of others. I would guess that nobody is surprised by that. Not all of the stress is completely work-related, of course. Again, I would guess that’s not a surprise.

Managers must be sensitive to the raised stress levels. They must communicate transparently so their teams understand what is going on and feel like it is okay to not be completely okay. They must demonstrate care for their employees, to help their employees get through a challenging time (and to be able to benefit from strengthened relationships in the future). They must give flexibility to their employees because their employees are dealing with a lot—again, not just work.

Individuals must be willing to assert their needs. If I am feeling stressed to the point of ineffectiveness, I need to recognize the need for a break and take it.

Control what you can. Let the rest go.

Future Study

The results of this survey suggest opportunities for future study.

1. A broad study of remote work set-up and employee satisfaction would be interesting. Questions to explore include location within the home, privacy of the space, whether the space is dedicated to work, time having worked remotely, time the workspace has been set up in its current location, frequency of breaks, frequency of location changes (e.g.

taking time to work on the couch instead of at the desk), and perceived productivity levels.

2. As mentioned in the “Work Environment Statistics” section, it would be interesting to collect longitudinal data on manager ratings, tracked by manager and individual. This is likely to be valuable to managers and companies as well, provided privacy protections are in place so the ratings are delivered honestly.
3. A follow-up survey in late August or September when schools are likely to have resumed would likely capture a variety of changes.
4. Further exploration of what attributes and behaviors are the most valuable to working remotely and managing remotely would no doubt be valuable.

Conclusion

First of all, I sincerely appreciate everyone who completed the survey or shared it. Your input and support were motivating through this entire process.

It's clear, even without this survey, that the work world has been seriously disrupted by COVID-19. Stress is elevated as people move to working remotely in a time of work slowdowns and economic concerns.

People and connections still matter, even—or especially—now that most people are physically distancing themselves. Picking up the phone and giving someone a call might be helpful to you both.

I enjoyed collecting and analyzing this data, and plan to try to gather more data in the future (likely a follow-up survey in late August or early September). Until then, I'd be happy to talk through the results, insights, and implications with anyone that is interested. If you've read this, you're welcome to email me at matt.schouten@gmail.com or find me at <https://www.cybadger.com/>.

May you stay healthy, connected, and happy!