

Where are you on the Blob Tree?

How to Maintain Team Health and Monitor Project Teams in a Work-From-Home World

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ABSTRACT

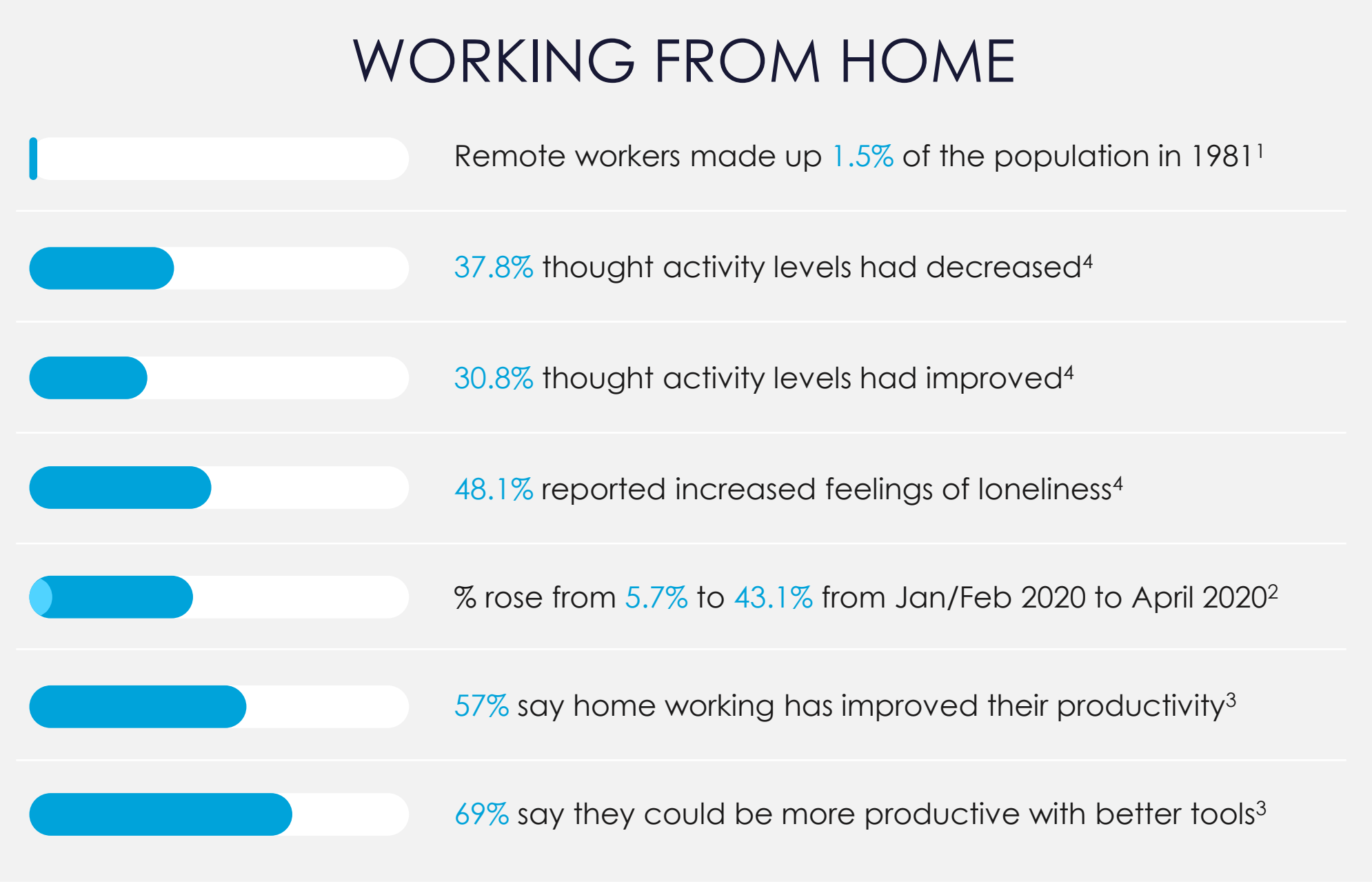
In the modern working world, the concept of the traditional office space has evolved significantly. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift toward remote work, transforming the way that teams function and collaborate, but how effective is home working? How do we develop relationships with our colleagues in an era where “water cooler chats” are no longer an option for many people? And how do we ensure that our workmates and direct reports are equipped to take care of their wellbeing?

This poster will explore techniques and tools, such as *The Blob Tree* and *Clifton Strengths*, used to aid team health and monitor project teams in a work-from-home world. It will also examine the link between team health and communication frequency between Project Management and the team(s) within Agile management.

THE DEATH OF WATER COOLER CHATS

COVID-19 and its aftermath had an undeniable effect on the way many of us work, requiring large numbers of the working population to work remotely. With 1.5% of people working from home in 1981¹, it is by no means a new concept. To many people, however, their first taste was in April 2020 when **the number of those working from home rose to 43.1% from 5.7% in January of that year²**.

As more organisations recognise the benefits of working from home, such as the **increase in productivity** which in one pre-pandemic experiment was found to be as high as 13%², it becomes increasingly imperative to maintain team wellbeing and address the challenges that working remotely may pose.



48.1% of employed adults in Wales reported **increased feelings of loneliness** compared to when they worked from an office. It's simple: **when workers are not equipped with the tools to deal with a sudden shift in working environment, their wellbeing falls.**

THE DEATH OF WATER COOLER CHATS

An individual's **wellbeing dictates their experiences and perceptions of what's important⁵**, so being aware of your team's wellbeing is vital. Effective communication is the epicentre of remote team management, so clear and **efficient communication channels** must be established. This is illustrated in a project adhering to Agile principles; a Constant Feedback Loop ensures communication through a multitude of meetings, such as Demos, Daily Stand-Ups, and Change Board Meetings. Some of these meetings may not be relevant for every project, but the key message is applicable to all: **create accessible channels for issues, praise, and feedback**, and your team will thank you in their results and wellbeing.

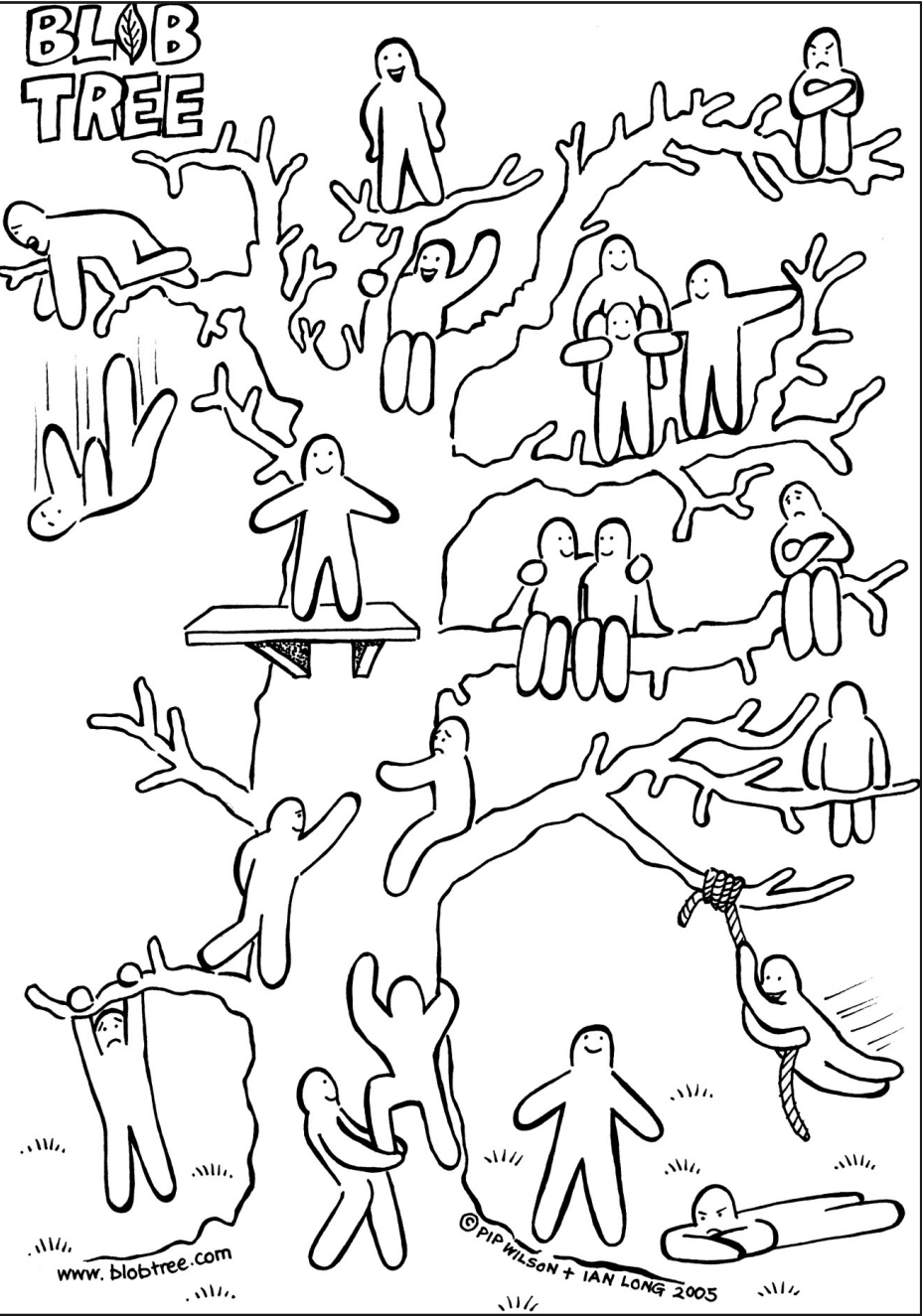
THE BLOB TREE

The Blob Tree is a visual tool that represents various emotional states through abstract figures. This graphic is often used in one-to-one meetings to assess someone's emotional state, however it can also be used to determine a team's sentiment regarding a project.

“ *There is no right and wrong about the Blobs, which is very important. A leader who uses them in a 'one way of reading them only way' will find that the rest of their group become very frustrated in discussions.* ”
- Ian Long & Pip Wilson, creators of The Blob Tree⁶

The Blob Tree is especially useful for those that struggle with emotive language or prefer non-verbal communication. The act of having them explain which Blob they identify with at that time can lead to a **deeper understanding** of their current state, and keeps the person at the focus of discussion, instead of the business.

The Blob Tree can be tailored to whatever works best for your team. In fact, there are many official and unofficial versions of the Blob Tree, such as The Blob Classroom or The Blob Bridge. You may also want to refine the process depending on the situation, for example if you are running low on time but still want to check in, you can “turbo-Blob” and get a 30-second description. Just showing you are **interested** is often enough to form a **level of trust** between manager and team, and you can always follow up offline.



- Which Blob are you right now? Why?
- Which Blob would you like to be? Why?
- Is that Blob representative of your work, emotional state, or both?
- Is it significant to you that your Blob is on the floor/close to the tree trunk/up high?

REMINDER

Your aim is to understand why they chose that blob. You may want to ask more specific questions to those that struggle to verbalise their thoughts and emotions, such as neurodiverse individuals. Similarly, broad questions may benefit bigger-picture thinkers.

I feel like I'm the Blob near the bottom of the tree, holding onto some rope and swinging forward.

Tell me more about that forward motion. Is that significant?

I think I rushed into my project start-up, but I'm excited about the work. The Blob is smiling, and he looks excited.

Ok, I'm hearing that you're still feeling positive about the project despite rushing in. What excites you about the project?

CLIFTON STRENGTHS

Clifton Strengths is a framework developed by Gallup Institute to **identify and leverage individual strengths**. Its primary focus is on personal development, but knowledge of the strengths within your team can have a positive effect on profitability, efficiency, and wellbeing.

Taking a Clifton Strengths Assessment will provide you with a list of all 34 Strengths ranked by how naturally those strengths come to you. **It is important to understand that Strengths are not what you are “good” or “bad” at. Rather, it shows you what energises you.**



USE WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW

- SCHEDULE** regular meetings
 - Provide time to air questions, concerns, and comments at a consistent and dependable frequency
 - Foster an environment of transparency and trust
- UTILISE** pre-existing collaboration tools
 - Video conferencing
 - Instant messaging
 - Professional social networks
- EXAMINE** how much time you create for the person versus the project or business
 - Ensure your team are your priority, and the rest will follow

CONCLUSION

The shift to remote work has redefined the way teams function, demanding a proactive approach to maintaining team health and monitoring project teams. By establishing clear communication channels, incorporating tools like the Blob Tree to address emotional well-being, and utilising technology and leadership skills for effective monitoring, organisations can thrive in this new working structure. In this evolving landscape, workforces must be equipped with tools that work on an individual basis, and as a team. This will help create a high-functioning, successful, and healthy team.

SOURCES

¹ Felstead, A. and Reuschke, D. (2020) Homeworking in the UK: Before and during the 2020 lockdown, WISERD

² Bloom, N. et al. (2014) 'Does working from home work? evidence from a Chinese experiment*', The Quarterly Journal of Economics

³ Home working (2022) Brother UK

⁴ Griffiths, M.L. et al. (2022) 'Exploring the health impacts and inequalities of the new way of working', Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine

⁵ What is employee wellbeing and why is it important? (2023) Gallup.com

⁶ Long, I. and Wilson, P. "What are the blobs? A feelosophy", blobtree.com