

Remote work does not break culture. Poor measurement does

AMBER BURTON

CEOs like Jamie Dimon have reignited the return-to-office debate, often framing flexibility as a risk to collaboration, productivity and culture. At the same time, some organisations report the opposite – that their cultures have strengthened under more flexible models.

Culture has become one of the most frequently cited – and least consistently measured – factors in this debate.

At Akamai Technologies, CHRO Anthony Williams has spent several years testing whether flexibility and culture are at odds. His team's approach is an example of how culture can be measured, tested and improved, regardless of where work happens.

In a recent interview at the Institute for Corporate Productivity's (i4cp) Next Practices Now Conference, Williams shared how Akamai has taken a more strategic approach to reinforcing its culture after moving to a remote-first work policy.

The company's "FlexBase" model enables over 95 percent of its employees to work from their chosen location, and they use their physical offices as hubs for collaboration, training, and anchor events.

Rather than assuming Akamai's culture would erode, Williams' team made a deliberate decision early on in its remote-first journey to treat culture as a system that could be examined and



improved. Before expanding its flexible work model in 2021, the HR team partnered with an external firm to conduct a formal cultural diagnostic. The goal was to establish a clear baseline for what was working and what needed to change. That baseline continues to guide decisions today.

"We have made the decision that every five years we will do a cultural di-

agnostic," said Williams.

For Akamai, the cadence matters. It signals to employees and leadership that shaping culture is an ongoing process, not a one-time initiative. It gives leaders a reference point to track progress.

The company's most recent culture diagnostic, completed last year, showed improvement in targeted areas while

maintaining core strengths. The results showed positive signs of culture readiness – what i4cp defines as possessing a culture and leadership system designed to continuously adapt behaviours, decisions, and ways of working as business needs evolve. This is a key component of future-ready organisations.

"Interestingly enough, the areas

that we (sought) to preserve were still intact from a reporting and quantitative standpoint. The areas that we were seeking to improve improved a little," shared Williams. "We can say that we are better than we were in terms of being able to evolve the culture."

In the time since the company's first culture diagnostic, Akamai has established its flexible work approach, scaled the number of its employees, and expanded the nature of how it has grown the organisation, said Williams. Something he shared would not have been possible if there had been cultural erosion.

Many organizations rely on indirect signals such as attendance, engagement scores, or turnover to assess culture. At Akamai, leaders defined specific attributes tied to business performance and measured against them.

"We measure productivity on an index," Williams said. "It's a set of variables that gives us an indication of how productive we are in a flexible work environment."

That index has been refined each year. The approach is iterative, with adjustments based on what proves to be meaningful.

This level of specificity changes the conversation. Rather than debating whether remote work affects culture, leaders can evaluate outcomes tied to defined metrics.

Adapted from hrexecutive.com