

The Collins' Score

A Human Flourishing Metric

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The purpose of this essay is to propose a new metric — the Collins' Score — to measure both individual and collective flourishing in the workplace. This paper will 1) provide the context by which the metric was discovered, 2) define the metric, 3) suggest how to measure the Collins' Score, 4) discuss its relevance, and 5) speculate on positive outcomes of broader adoption.

This is an early draft, with two rounds of feedback incorporated. If you are reading this, I am still seeking a final round of feedback before publication, so please proceed with a critical eye in the spirit of curiosity and constructive criticism.

Part 1: Context

On February 18, 2019 the podcaster Tim Ferriss published a long-form interview with business writer Jim Collins. In the course of the interview, Ferriss asks Collins about his various habits for tracking his time. Collins describes a personal tracking regime that he invented and has been using consistently for over 30 years. At the end of every day, when he shuts down, Collins' records three things in a spreadsheet:

1. A brief record of the day's activities.
2. Number of hours spent in what Collins' terms "creative time," which is heads-down focus, i.e., Cal Newport's "deep work", Csikszentmihalyi's flow, etc. (NOTE: Collins is known by many in the productivity sub-culture for holding himself to a punishing standard of achieving 1,000 hours of creative time in any 365 day period. This averages to 2.74 hours/day @ 365 days or 3.84 hours/day @ 260 days, the typical number of work days/year.)

3. A daily rating on a scale of -2,-1,0,+1,+2. This is a totally subjective feeling about how your day went.

Here is Collins' description of the daily rating from the transcript the interview:

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Jim Collins: Now there's a third cell that I put in there that most people don't know as much about because people know about the hours thing somewhat. But all of us have dark times, difficult times. All of us have good times, right? But here's an interesting thing I noticed, which is that if you're kind of going through a funk, it colors your whole life. And you tend to think your whole life is a funk because you're looking through that lens.

And so I thought, "But actually I feel like my life is really pretty good." But when you're in that other place, it doesn't feel that way, right? And so what I started to do is I started creating a code, which is plus two, plus one, zero, minus one, minus two. And the other thing I put in — and the key on all this by the way is you have to do it every day in real time. You can't five days later look back and say, "How did I feel that day?" And what this is, is a totally subjective "How quality was the day?" A plus two is a super positive day.

Tim Ferriss: This is emotionally speaking?

Jim Collins: Exactly. Just like: "Was it a great day?" A plus two is just a great day. Doesn't mean it wasn't — there might not have been a really difficult day. It might've been a day of a really hard rock climb. It might've been a day of really hard writing. But it felt really good, right? It might've been a day of an intense conversation, but really meaningful with a friend or something. But what it adds up to is a plus two. Plus one is another positive day. Zero is meh. Minus one is kind of a net tone negative. And minus two is, those are bad days, right? And you put it in before you go to bed because if you try to remember, if I were to ask you Tim, right now, 17 days ago, or even five days ago to give the score, you're going to be distorted by how you're feeling today.

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After hearing this interview when it was published in 2019, I (David Dewane, the author of this essay) started experimenting with Collins' rating system myself and have been

using it consistently up until the present moment, more than 6 years. Here are a few important observations based on my own experiences:

1. I discovered very quickly what triggered negative scores in my work life and deleted or minimized them.
2. After just a couple of weeks of tracking, I realized that if I started the day with a clear target of what would have to be achieved to confidently score the day a +1, then a +1 was reliably achieved.
3. I engaged in the first few months of tracking with my mentor, a CEO living in another city. We began each day by texting each other our plan for the day, then finished the day by texting each other our score, accompanied by a description justifying that score. This accountability definitely helped establish the habit.
4. I was able to achieve +1 with such regularity, and avoid negatives with such consistency, that I changed my personal scale to -1, 0, +1, +1.5, +2. (NOTE: I don't think this is wise, but I include it in this description to underscore the effect that tracking the quality of my own days had on my daily experience).
5. I understand and appreciate why Collins has tracked this score for so long. There is a sense of control and influence over my own flourishing that comes with this daily tracking system. I intend to keep it up throughout the rest of my life.

Part 2: Defining the “Collins’ Score” a Metric for General Use

I am proposing that the community of people who influence the ongoing evolution of the workplace consider adopting and refining Collins’ tracking system as a general practice to monitor human flourishing in workplaces, both individually and collectively. There are three terms that need to be defined and agreed upon for the system to be meaningful more broadly.

1. **Collins’ Score** - A numerical score falling between -2 and +2 that is a subjective self-rating of one’s current emotional feeling, recorded daily, stating how well one feels

their day went. When averaged out, this number would be expressed as a decimal. An attempt at rating definitions that I'm sure could be refined by a social scientist:

-2 = A horrible day. A trend of -2 would lead to burnout, depression, or worse.

-1 = A net negative day. A trend of -1 would lead to general anxiety, negativity, and resignation.

0 = Meh. A trend of 0 would lead to languishing, apathy, and quiet quitting.

+1 = A net positive day. A trend of +1 is trending towards personal flourishing.

+2 = A truly great day. +2s are amazing. It's unclear if a trend of +2 is even possible.

2. **Focused Time** - What Collins' terms as "Creative Time" is a slippery subject. When people hear the modifier "creative" they tend to think of an artist painting on a canvas or poet dreaming up sonnets. This is not Collins' use, per se. Creative time, in the spirit of what Collins describes, is highly-focused, concentrated work that drives hard towards results. This concept is generally understood beyond Collins' own phrasing. Here are three definitions of related concepts:

Cal Newport described **Deep Work** - Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.

The definition in the wiki entry for **Flow** - in positive psychology, also known colloquially as being in the zone or locked in, is the mental state in which a person performing some activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. In essence, flow is characterized by the complete absorption in what one does, and a resulting transformation in one's sense of time.

Finally, a reasonably good AI summary of Aristotle's definition of **Eudaimonia** - a state that is the highest human good. An activity desirable for its own sake, not just as a means to something else. Eudaimonia is not just a feeling of pleasure or contentment. It's a fulfilled life, lived in accordance with one's deepest values and aspirations. It's a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being.

Collins' notion of Creative Time, Deep Work, Flow, and Eudaemonia are not strictly synonymous, but they overlap significantly. Relative to the average knowledge worker, I propose the more tame term **Focused Time** as something more generally acceptable, that leaves more romantic associations of “creativity” behind, while retaining the overlapping traits of these other concepts.

3. **Shutdown** - When someone decides to stop their workday. This is actually a deviation from Collins original system. Based on his description, Collins seems to pull his personal life into his scoring system (dinner with his wife, etc). I suggest instead setting shutdown at the end of the workday, to bracket the Collins' Score to work-related activities. Cal Newport, for example, also advocates for a shutdown ritual to conclude the workday and transition to non-work life. This is what I have done for the last six years, and it has been very effective at promoting flourishing.

Part 3: Measurement Tools

Collins tracks himself with an Excel spreadsheet. I personally keep a physical journal and note my scores on paper. These tools are crude but effective at the individual level.

For broader tracking and data analysis, we need to build a digital tool. This could be very simple. After a few conversations with digital developers, an app interface suggested itself. The tracker would be prompted twice a day for phone-based inputs. In the morning, the user would be asked two questions:

- 1. What time will you shutdown work today? (Set a clock)*
- 2. What would you have to achieve to get a +1 today? (1-2 sentence text entry)*

Then, at the time the user entered for their shutdown, they would get a second prompt. If they are not done with work when the prompt comes up, they can “snooze” the alarm and finish their day. When shutdown does come, they would get three questions:

- 1. How would you rate your day? (Push one of five buttons: -2, -1, 0, +1, +2)*
- 2. Why would you give today that rating? (1-2 sentence text entry)*

3. How many hours of Focused Time did you get today? (Number input)

Answering these five questions would likely take a few minutes of reflection and input, and maybe a glance at your calendar in the morning. These are things you are probably doing anyway. What you get in return is relatively simple, but potentially quite powerful. From the morning log, you get a small, personally-defined target for what flourishing would look like on a one day time horizon. From the evening log, you get two quantitative data points (daily rating and focused time) and one qualitative data point (reasons for rating). I'm not a social scientist, but I have been told that over time, with enough data, these qualitative ratings can also take on quantitative meaning, i.e., patterns of behavior.

The app would log daily data and provide a dashboard feature for the tracker to review. You could look at trends over any time period, track in focused time, and filter out day types (i.e., look at all +2 days). The objective would be to spot patterns and generally maintain a high Collins' Score over time. Over time, day after day, this data adds up to a significant record of one's emotional history and focused work output becomes clear.

Data Ownership and Sharing

First and foremost, tracking the Collins' Score should be opt-in. I know from experience that this kind of effort only appeals to certain personas. Dragging non-interested personas along will be an unnecessary burden on the whole effort and likely lead to inaccurate or incomplete data. This is especially important in team tracking efforts, which will be discussed below.

Like medical records, individuals should have ownership over their personal data, and an assurance that their data is by default private. Trackers should own the data forever and be able to take it between companies. For certain users, there is an extreme stickiness to tracking personal flourishing. Collins has been tracking for 35+ years. I've personally been tracking for 6+ years with no intention to ever stop. As you track, the more valuable your data becomes. The habit over time has the demonstrated potential

to teach individuals to surface what is important in their lives and what contributes positively or negatively to their own flourishing. Someone's +2 ratings, for example, may mean something different from one decade to another.

In terms of sharing, there are four distinct tiers that are interesting to consider:

1. **High-trust:** Sharing with high-trust people in your network. Sharing with mentors, coaches, very close business partners, etc. You could choose to give individual people access to your full log.
2. **Team:** If there are multiple trackers on a team, they could opt-in to pool both their Collins' Scores and the number of high focus hours they are logging. In this case, the data would be anonymized.
3. **Company:** An entire company could pool Collins' Scores across all teams. Again, the data would be anonymized.
4. **AI Agent:** Users could apply an AI agent to review all their data and assist in spotting trends and suggest ways to enhance personal flourishing.

Who does not have access to your tracking data? Anyone you don't give explicit permission to. For example, that the HR department at your company does not have access to an individual's data. If they did, the tracker may be incentivized to log inaccurate data.

Advanced Tracking

At an organizational level, a real sweet spot - and this is not far from current capabilities - would be, instead of asking about focused time, automatically analyzing two things: 1) calendar, and 2) communication tool usage. More sophisticated analysis could be done on things like density of meetings, amount of focused time, levels of interruption, and the Collins' Score.

Part 4: Relevance of the Collins' Score

There is a general sense in the “future of work movement” that we are trying to evolve beyond the functional, boring offices that reigned in the 20th century, towards workplace experiences that are more vibrant, fulfilling, and high-performance. The Collins’ Scores could help provide a relatively raw metric that could be useful both to individuals to help take control of their own flourishing, but also mined by social scientists and workplace designers for indicators of what types of interventions in the workplace move the needle on employee experience.

Subjectivity and the Work/Life Question

One challenging aspect of the Collins' Score is its subjectivity, especially as related to external factors affecting your work experience. What ultimately shapes the score is an open-ended, multidimensional question. If you had a fight with your spouse or were feeling sick would that really have any bearing on your workplace experience? This issue is, in most cases, reconciled based on the fine-grain nature of the data collection. In any case, the daily nature of the tracking will quickly suggest trend lines. The goal of this system is to make it a clear and compelling case that specific interventions contribute to flourishing based on sustained alterations to the trend that coincide with a change introduced to the employee experience. This is reinforced if the employees cite the change in the qualitative portion of their logs and are able to communicate those observations to their leaders.

There is a key question of whether to incorporate factors from one’s personal life into the rating system. External factors disrupting your workplace experience are a fact of life. My personal experience is that personal life stresses are outliers relative to the day-to-day workplace experience. On the other hand, I have witnessed colleagues whose personal life factors are more of a factor over the work experience. For the purposes of the beta version of this tracker, we will test it by limiting the score to the workplace hours, but be open to learning from early data sets to see if expanding the scope to allow people to account for data from other aspects of their lives is more effective at promoting flourishing.

Example of the Utility of a Broad Metric in Physical Space Design

When the sustainability movement was established in the built environment, certain metrics floated to the top that became effective measures of “high performance” buildings. It was possible to calculate the amount of energy consumed in kWh, the amount of embodied CO₂, or the gallons of water used per person. Metrics like these became the basis upon which certification systems like LEED operated. These metrics were extremely objective and could be modeled accurately by engineers in the design phase and then monitored with sensors after construction.

When we set out to make employee experiences that are “high performance” in terms of increasing human flourishing, there are important similarities and differences to the sustainability movement.

On the similarity side, the key act was realizing that performance targets could be placed on a building. Once the target was defined, it was relatively straightforward to set out a path to achieve the performance goal as long as the measurement system was clear. The single one decision of the performance target would then force a very significant cascade of decision making. For example:

If the goal was to create a “zero energy building” that meant that the building could be disconnected from the power grid and continue to function normally. As someone who has worked on multiple zero energy buildings, I can tell you what happens in rough terms. First, you do a full audit of all the energy your building uses and eliminate all unnecessary energy uses. Second, stop loss by increasing the quality of insulation in the envelope, especially the windows. Third, you switch over to low-energy building systems, lighting, appliances. And so on. Strangely, the result doesn’t look that much different. In other words, a building with triple pane windows and closed-cell insulation looks exactly like a building with normal windows and no insulation in the walls at all. But in terms of performance these two buildings are very different. The most significant

thing is how the addition of the performance expectation early in the project, coupled with measurable targets, changed the mentality of the entire project team — client, architects, engineers, contractors, and operators.

The differences in the “zero energy building” are also instructive. That generation of high performance projects was very objective, and completed with a familiar cast of consultants: primarily mechanical and electrical engineers. A new generation of high performance buildings that promote human flourishing is highly subjective, and will require a new type of consultant that architects are not used to working with on a regular basis: social scientists such as anthropologists and ethnographers. While social scientists have had a major impact on the world of user experience (UX) as it applies to technology, their capabilities have yet to be broadly integrated into the design of physical spaces. The Collins’ Score could be an interesting entry point. For example:

Imagine that instead of “zero energy building” you set out to design a “+2 office,” in other words, an office designed in such a way as to give employees the best shot at a +2 day every time they showed up at work. Again, setting the target triggers a cascade of consequences. First, you need a clear audit of the current Collins’ Score for the employees using the office. Second, you would need to develop a clear sense of what kinds of factors move the Collins’ Score up and also drag it down. Third, the researchers and designers would work with the client team to imagine changes to their employee experience that would have the best chance at raising the collective Collins’ Score. These changes would almost certainly not be limited to space, but include adjustments to technology-enabled moments and even cultural practices. Fourth, you would rank these ideas on an opportunity matrix and start implementing changes that suggest high impact-to-cost value. Finally, after these changes are in place you continue to monitor the Collins’ Score for a shift upward and also continue a dialogue with employees so that the qualitative learning balances out the strictly quantitative Collins’ Score average.

The Importance of Sharing

In preliminary conversations with colleagues inside and outside my own company (i.e., many of you reading this draft), the topic of sharing has sparked lively discussion.

Personally, I am the type of person that would give my mentor and leadership coach access to my data. I have a very close partner in my current business who I'd share with, and happily share his data too. If there was anyone who I was actively mentoring who wanted to share their data with me I'd be interested in reviewing theirs prior to a focused mentoring session. For high trust people, I would be interested in a feature on the tracking app where I get alerts when they have extreme days, either +2 or -2, when I would reach out to either celebrate or commiserate. I would also like to be notified if significant trends form, such as a rut of languishing if the number is hovering around zero too long.

Hybrid and Flex Working Scenarios, Generational Impacts, Persona Shift Detection

Tracking the Collins' Score is not intrinsically tied to in-person work. Naturally, it would be very interesting to see trends for individuals and teams relative to both in-person and work from home scenarios. It would be likewise interesting to note the effects of hybrid work on different generations and seniority levels. Preliminary observation in our company has shown that there is a tier of employees that are both new to a company and fully remote that creates a notable isolation. Seeing this expressed in a chronically low Collins' Score would be a powerful incentive for an organization to modify the employee experience of someone facing this scenario.

There is a subtle yet poignant anecdote that is also worth mentioning at the close of this section. I observed the case of a real estate broker who worked for one large firm, JLL. When he first moved to Chicago he considered himself "Mr. JLL." He was on the softball team and participated in many formal and informal social events. Then he got married and had a kid. He no longer had the bandwidth to participate on the company team or do many of the social events. His ties to the company faded and he eventually left for a competing brokerage, CBRE. My speculation is that he went through a persona change

that went undetected by the company, and perhaps that the individual was not even conscious of himself. It would have been interesting in this scenario if his Collins' Score would have been riding high in the "Mr. JLL" days, then go through a steady decline to languishing when his life circumstances changed. Had the company been alerted to this reality they may have had the ability to intervene and adjust his role in a way that would have put him back on a track of flourishing at JLL, saving the company from losing a valuable employee.

One Critique on Coupling The Collins' Score and Focused Work

One reviewer of this paper, Chris Butterick, former Senior Director of Global Workplace Operations and Services at LinkedIn, offered the following critique, suggesting that the tracking of focused time may not be essential:

It sounds like the theses here are:

- 1) Defining for oneself what flourishing means will increase the potential of flourishing.
- 2) Establishing a habit of being proactive and intentional about flourishing each day will increase the likelihood of flourishing.
- 3) Documenting and tracking performance against these intentions will increase the consistency of flourishing.
- 4) Team-level and building-level visibility to the aggregated individual experiences of flourishing may correlate to design and programming decisions that create business value.
- 5) Focused time is highly correlated with flourishing so it should be tracked accordingly.

Of these 4 theses, I'm wondering if nearly all the value comes from the first 4. The 5th makes sense to me, but I wonder if it adds complexity in a way that could inhibit adoption. The two reasons I think this are:

1) The value comes from people achieving their intentions to flourish, and as a person considering the building-scale or company-scale impact of that flourishing I am more interested in whether that achievement happens than I am about how it happens (i.e. via increased focused time or not).

2) The ways in which humans will experience flourishing may change rapidly in the coming years due to the advancement of technology. If AI will transform or abstract away 70% of what most people currently perform in their deep work or states of flow, then what we consider Focused Time may look very different in the years ahead. I hope that we'll spend our time indexing on the functions and tasks that depend on and amplify our humanity, so my day of flourishing may look like hours of deep conversation with certain colleagues or a day of learning alongside my teammates.

a. You could argue that all of that already fits in the model of Focused Time, but I'm wondering if the added layer of defining, tracking, and reporting on it is necessary if the goal is to enable the broadest adoption of Collins' Score usage.

Part 5. Speculate on Positive Outcomes of Broader Adoption

The Two Huge Wins

There are two sets of correlated data that would be extremely consequential, if they could be proven over many years in a wide variety of settings.

1. Correlating a higher Collins' Score to higher levels of Focused Time.
2. Correlating higher Collins' Score to better business performance (person or team).

The ratio of score to focus time would be relatively easy to demonstrate and would be extremely important for an individual conscious of their own level of flourishing and interested in maximizing it. The ratio of score to business performance would be extremely important to leadership, whose job is literally to help steer the business itself towards flourishing.

Conclusion and Next Steps

If you made it to the end of this paper, David Dewane officially owes you a drink. Seriously, I am a designer, not a scientist. The reason I'm writing this out in a quasi-academic fashion is because I've experienced traction with this concept personally and see how it could be transformative to the evolving conversation around "future of work." Within a couple months I'll have a functional tracker and anyone interested will be able to experiment with it in a Beta test environment. If you are interested in being part of that test group, or if you want regular updates from the testers, let me know and I'll do my best to accommodate.

Most importantly, if you have any insights that can improve this idea I would be very grateful for any critical feedback you can offer. Thank you.