



## **Best Practices for Companies and Workers**

What should companies and workers do to ensure that technology is designed to minimize harm and promote adolescent and user well-being from its inception? While broader structural changes are likely necessary to fully center health and well-being online, there are plenty of concrete opportunities for change at the company level that would keep companies both accountable for the potential negative impacts of their platforms, and responsible for actively promoting civility and health. Because healthy technology use is difficult

to define and means different things to different people and populations, a one-size-fits-all approach to digital well-being is insufficient. Instead, companies will need to build a comprehensive strategy for improving well-being that remains nimble enough to address new situations as they arise:

“It’s got to be a lot of things working together and not just one or two things. And everyone thinks, ‘Oh, could we just have this new policy. No that’s not going to do it. Oh, we could add this platform feature. No, that’s not going to do it. Oh if we did this education campaign. Well, who’s doing

it because the last one we did was really boring and no one cared.’ So it’s trying to find how all those pieces fit together in this bigger puzzle and then it’ll make it work.”

Our research suggests that proactively thinking about adolescent and user well-being in the product development process is not only the ethical thing to do, it will also lead to value-adds for users, is often more profitable in the long term, and reduces the risk of losses from public relations and regulatory disasters.

- **Create targeted approaches and policies for adolescent users**

**Focus on empowering, rather than just protecting adolescents on social platforms.** So much of the online health and well-being work is for kids and teens, but it does not include their voices, or empower them to action. Consulting and doing user research with young people would allow platforms to design their products and features to best empower them from their perspective. Some participants mentioned the importance of balancing parental surveillance tools with the privacy interests of adolescents.

“I think to how we approach youth-facing groups, there’s still a glut of safety orgs that protect kids rather than empower and elevate kids. I’d like to see that shift happen a little bit. Not to devalue anyone’s work, but... how do we get youth in the conversation?”

**Move away from parental consent models for adolescent technology use.** Minors have a different legal status than adults, yet companies still expect them to navigate legal contracts like terms of service and privacy policies that are written for adults with the unspoken and unverified assumption that parents and parental consent are involved. The technological underpinnings make seeking parental consent onerous for online platforms, and the low-friction methods for verifying age are easy to circumvent. Rather than continue with the fiction that children and tweens are excluded from platforms through age gates and parental consent requirements, work to make the whole platform, and the whole system, safer for kids and teens:

“...the age of consent and parental consent model, I think, is just not working in today’s [world]... Most kids have their own phone. Parental controls and age gates are quite easy to circumvent. And then, I’m seeing these like trends to double down on ID checks or having high levels of friction to signing up—in an attempt to enforce those requirements. I don’t know if that’s really the right direction to be going and if there’s some totally different rethinking that we need to do in terms of what kids need and how to empower them instead of just assuming that their parents are going to approve or provide consent for every single app and website they sign up for. Instead of maybe just rethinking the system entirely to making that ecosystem safer for kids and not having to add that friction that probably doesn’t help them in the end anyway.”

### **Allow for adolescent learning and rehabilitation.**

We treat children and adolescents differently from adults to acknowledge that they are in the process of developing into physically, cognitively, and emotionally mature adults prepared to be accountable for their decisions and choices. Making mistakes is part of that learning and development process. Companies should build systems that allow adolescents to make mistakes while still keeping them accountable for their behavior:

“So, we’ve been thinking a lot about when a young person violates our rules, or does something really wrong, and then they get suspended, is that something that they should be held accountable for forever? And should we be looking at permanent suspension, especially of young users where they’re still kind of formulating how they want to be in the world?... If someone got suspended for saying... ‘I want to kill you,’ that’s suspendable, because it’s a violent threat.... If you send that when you were 16 to somebody you hate and you actually have no intention of killing them, is there any kind of rehabilitation that we can do... there’s a lot of different things we can do to help educate especially younger users about how they should show up in society, and that’s something that I’ve been talking a lot [about] with the design team.”

At the same time, the context for violations of rules can be complex. And companies may not be the best vehicle for education or rehabilitation and may instead need to work with outside groups—parents, educators, or civil society—to craft

interventions for youth engaged in problematic online behavior.

- **Intentionally design and promote the desired environment and culture on a platform**

Culture and community do not passively or innately develop on a platform, they are created through intentional or unintentional design and marketing choices. We found that, in general, workers at social gaming platforms have put more thought into how to design products and features that will promote a healthy environment and culture, particularly for adolescents:

“We’re the Facebook society, and that doesn’t necessarily mean we know how to be good digital citizens ourselves. So there’s clearly a gap here. And so our premise was, well, what if we met kids where they are, which is they’re all playing games right now. And use that as a vehicle through which we could teach resilience, how to behave respectfully, how to identify problematic behaviors. And with that, pair that with training for caregivers. So how do you have the conversation with your kids? How do you show interest and involvement? Rather than thinking this is some silly thing that kids do on the side, but recognize that it’s a key part of their development years and play a role and bring your level of responsibility as a caregiver into that space. We thought that was a very powerful space to work...”

Social platforms are not neutral technologies that provide a blank space for users. Companies should be actively working to build a safe, healthy environment on a platform. Promoting a healthier and more pleasant platform culture can incentivize users to spend more time in the space, return more frequently, and generate more revenue for the company.

“Players who chat in their groups, like their clans, their alliances, if they’re chatting in their player group, their lifetime value is way higher than the other players who don’t engage in chat as much. It’s like 20 times more lifetime value. So they spend [more] time playing the game, their session length is longer and they spend more money as well in the game.”

- **Remind product teams of the humans using the platform**

**Consider a broad range of user subgroups when developing new features and products.** The humans using social platforms don’t all look or think like the folks who build them. Relatedly, tech workers should not assume that all adolescents are the same. Talk to those users, and collect data to determine which groups to focus on most urgently. These subgroups will likely vary by product, and responses should be tailored to the given context. Product teams should not assume that users will want the same features they would want, or would react similarly to design changes.

If employees wouldn’t want the adolescents or other vulnerable people in their life to use a product or feature, or could envision why some people would be negatively affected by their design choices, they should reconsider them and speak up.

“With my teams, I have always tried to emphasize the humanity of what we’re doing.... Those are real users on the other side, make decisions that feel good for yourself, your community, your children, your environment. And to remember that it’s not just numbers on the other side, to remember these are actual people.”

- **Integrate expertise about user well-being into product teams and across all roles**

**Ensure that employees with expertise in user health and well-being are integrated into product teams.** While there is little consensus about what constitutes healthy technology use or digital well-being, it is still important to include people on product teams who will serve as internal experts who think about these concepts from a variety of vantage points.

Our research suggests that companies engaging with user health and well-being early in the production process see better outcomes. Further, empowering internal experts on well-being to make decisions and truly considering their input in the decision-making process will also lead to fewer failed launches. One model is to permanently staff an internal expert to each product team to participate in

all aspects of the process from the very beginning, but also concurrently raising expectations that all members of product teams are thinking about user well-being as a part of the development process.

Thus, instead of relying only on policy, legal, or trust and safety teams, build product development infrastructures that include thinking about user well-being across roles and incorporate research on user experiences with well-being. This will help ensure that well-being is centered in the development process from product ideation to launch, not tacked on to the end.

When companies spend money to support policy teams charged with considering user well-being, but ignore these issues in product design, our respondents viewed these efforts as superficial window-dressing.

“One of the challenges is that companies often fund policy and they do not fund product, technology frameworks, and architecture to address [well-being] or even put those people in positions of leadership or power, and that is a massive, massive problem.”

Companies seemed interested in thinking abstractly about well-being but not in empowering experts on well-being or investing in new infrastructures in the product design process to ensure that well-being measures are put into practice.

However, proactively integrating health and well-being into the product development process by empowering internal experts, integrating them on product teams and expanding thinking about well-

being among all staff is not only the ethical thing to do, it will also lead to value-adds for users and serve as a way to reduce the reputational and financial risk of public relations and regulatory disasters.

- **Hire, retain, and empower a diverse workforce**

**Diversify the tech workforce**, particularly for product development, design, and technical roles. Our research, in addition to a large and growing body of literature, suggests that teams with diverse sets of lived experiences produce better results, both for users and for companies' bottom lines.

“...Most importantly, and often most overlooked, is the environment. And that environment is not just the conditions that you create within a game that afford different behavior patterns or set expectations consciously or unconsciously among players, but that environment also includes your development environment. And if that company with which you work does not align necessarily in that process, then that can become very difficult as now you're facing, in some cases, pretty explicit contradiction of the values that you're trying to promote.”

**Build infrastructures that allow employees to voice their concerns without fear of retaliation.**

Employees shouldn't be seen as blockers if they express apprehension about a product. If employees with training in health and well-being were brought in at the beginning of product development, they would be able to add their expertise and insight

instead of blocking products that are already near shipment. Similar to other kinds of internal reporting, create dedicated systems and a culture that allow all employees to raise concerns about the impact of products in-development on users without fear of professional repercussions.

**Nurture unions.** Another way to build this infrastructure is to encourage unionization. While Silicon Valley has traditionally been quite hostile to worker organizing, workers increasingly find themselves at odds with decision-making, business practices and product decisions at the companies that employ them. Recently a small group of employees at Google formed the [Alphabet Workers Union](#) to begin to concentrate employee voices and create a point of contact and action for concerned workers. The formation of the union was the culmination of a number of years of employee actions like walkouts and protests at Google and other large tech companies.

### **Acknowledge racism and work to mitigate racial discrimination.**

Acknowledge that racism and racial discrimination is systemic across multiple institutions including the tech industry and broader systems of education, health care, and wealth distribution. Building equity and fairness on social platforms requires active dismantling of racism in these systems, prioritizing the needs of minoritized communities. This means, for example, prioritizing these communities in product design, and in research around product use and development. Mitigating racial discrimination also requires significant changes in decision-making processes regarding hiring and promotions at tech companies.

### ▪ **Require training in ethics and the humanities in all staff and new hires**

Ensure that all staff members receive **ethics and humanities** training that isn't perfunctory. This training should deeply engage with a wide range of thinking, perspectives and issues, and connect to an organization-wide commitment and belief in the importance of diversity and ethical work. Ethics training will help companies and workers recognize sources of structural discrimination and bias, and how personal experiences and behavior may obscure the view of important harms. Look to hire people with substantive educational backgrounds in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

“First of all, I wouldn't let a single person graduate from any coding program, any CS program, any engineering program, that did not have ethics training. I think simply exposing engineers to ethics, at a formative moment, would be really meaningful.”

On a broader level, work to change industry expectations, hiring parameters, and higher education graduation requirements across technical, engineering and computer science fields to include more humanistic and social science course work. Such broadening of tech company employees' university training would go a long way toward bringing the human to the forefront of factors considered during product development.

- **Consult experts, civil society, and diverse groups of users to anticipate effects on users prior to launch**

Assume responsibility for the disparate impact of products on different subgroups of users, regardless of the intent behind them. Work to anticipate and avoid potential negative effects **by consulting experts and members of those user subgroups.**

When proactive responses fail, take real action to mitigate unintended negative effects and discrimination.

“...I do believe there’s a, kind of, maybe, a renaissance happening where there are many individuals in the company who are saying, ‘Hey, the stuff that we’re doing, the decisions we make have lasting impacts.’ We previously kind of pretended that wasn’t true, and now there’s no ignoring that it is in fact true. So the next generation of entrepreneurs, I think there’s just no pretending and covering your eyes.”

Our research suggests that there is already growing recognition that social media and social gaming platforms cannot keep their heads in the sand about their potential and actual harms to users. Companies can and should build on this proactive momentum.

- **Collaborate with industry partners to mitigate harm across platforms**

Cross-organizational collaboration and exchange of information with others in similar roles at other

organizations can help platforms work through thorny problems, public crises, and scale challenges.

**Allow for sharing of information** related to enforcement against bad actors and human well-being across companies. For example, one participant floated the idea of a shared repository of terms and harmful media as a way of avoiding duplicate work and enhancing responsiveness.

“If we all kind of partner to create some kind of repository around these words or to share information around these words. Each company can do what they want with them, right? We all have our own policies, we all approach these issues slightly differently, but the terms are the same for all of us.... If we could have that information more readily available and shared more rapidly, I think that would help all of the companies to be able to get ahead of some of these things.”

**Connect with and share learning with others in similar roles.** This is currently executed informally through relationships, Slack channels and conversations at conferences, but could be professionalized in a third party group that serves employees in certain roles (like the newly formed [Trust and Safety Professional Association](#)) or a membership organization for companies interested in pushing their thinking on certain topics, like the [Fair Play Alliance](#) or a multi-stakeholder entity like the [Global Network Initiative](#) that provides a place for companies, academics and civil society to come together around an issue.

Many folks we talked to in trust and safety roles found the larger community of workers in this space

to be collaborative and helpful, though others asked “Who brings everyone together?” and pointed to corporate competitiveness as inhibiting collaboration.

“I think one of the reasons I personally love working in this space is that it’s not necessarily competitive compared to other product teams or other parts of the company. It’s very much like a rising tide lifts all ships kind of community.”

Our research suggests that there are many ways that both outside actors and workers inside technology companies can work to improve the digital health and well-being of adolescents. For regulators and members of civil society, we find that outside pressure and threats of regulation are some of the primary mechanisms driving change within technology companies. Within tech companies, many workers are looking for recommendations to build and improve their approaches to adolescent and user health, and would benefit from the thinking of outside organizations and from more power within. Ideally, these moments of collaboration would not just occur during highly-publicized moments of extreme harm, but would become sustained community relationships. These ongoing relationships are especially important because addressing the harm of social platform use for adolescents requires a nuanced understanding of the differential impact of social platforms on different subgroups of adolescents, not just an ad-hoc response to extreme events.

For workers inside technology companies, our primary recommendations include:

- Rebuilding the way new products are designed and implemented to focus more specifically on adolescents and on digital well-being generally, from beginning to launch and beyond;
- Diversifying the tech workforce to include technical staff with a variety of lived experiences and training;
- Broadening engagement and outreach to both user subgroups and civil society.

All of our specific recommendations in these categories are designed to shift companies away from a focus on their imagined average user, to hold companies accountable for their strategic ignorance about adolescent health, and to shift power dynamics in companies so that workers have the ability to prioritize and design for adolescent health.