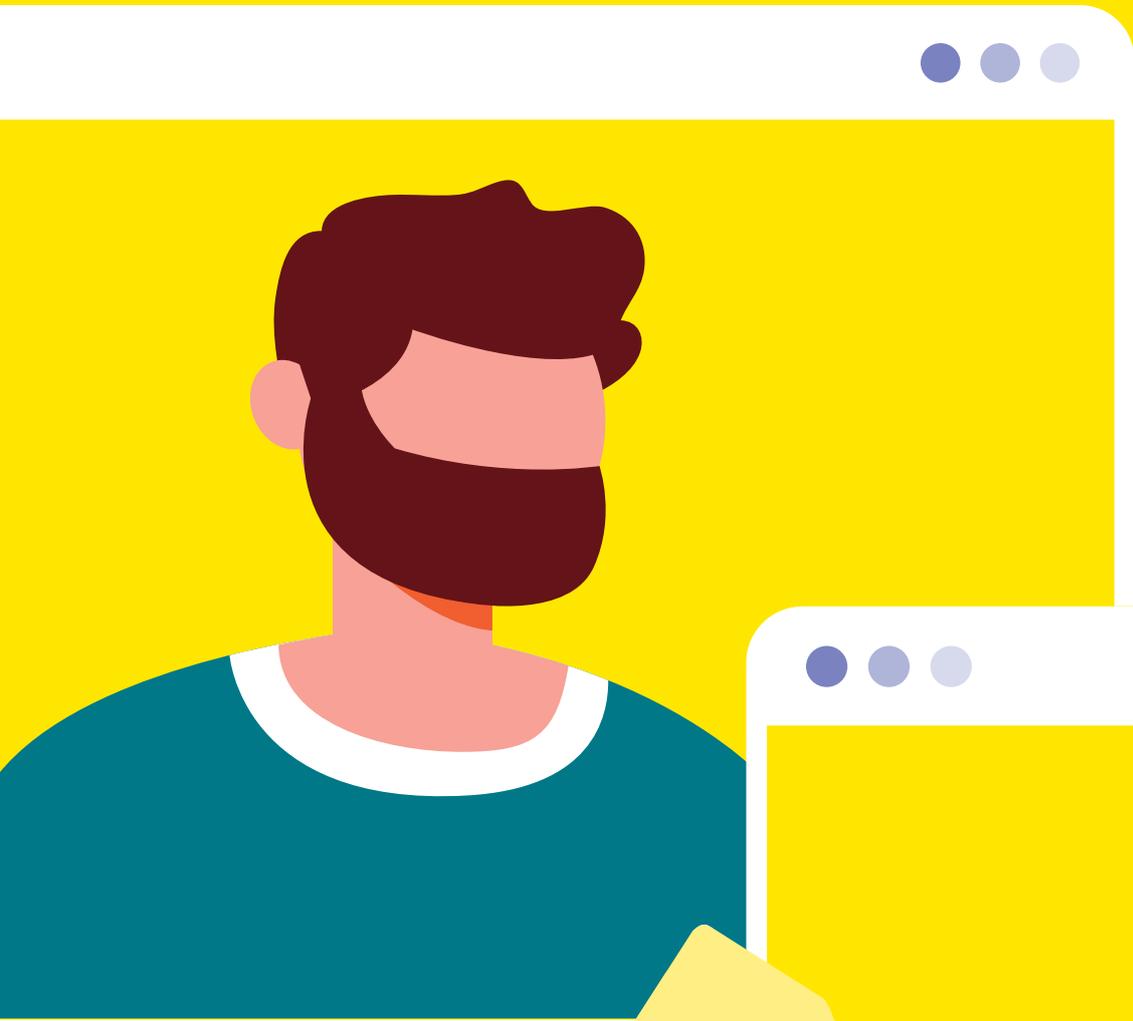


# Working during the Pandemic: From resistance to revolution?

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*Bedegal (Kensington campus), Gadigal (City and College of Fine Arts Campuses) and the Ngunnawal people (Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra) who are the traditional custodians of the lands where each campus of the University is located.*

# Key findings

1 |

The 2020 pandemic compelled people to work from home, transforming the world of work. We considered it essential to understand how this form of working was undertaken on a large scale.

We aimed to identify the experiences of a key group of employees – those working in the Australian Public Service (APS) – during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Around 6,000 APS employees responded to our survey, including nearly 1,400 managers.

The key message was the overwhelmingly positive experience of managers and employees, realising the benefits of working from home and dispelling some long-held concerns.

## Managers

- Managers were highly supportive of working from home.
- Over 90% believed that their teams' productivity was the same or even higher when working from home.

## Employees

- Nearly two-thirds of employees felt that they got more work done than when at the office.
- Nearly two-thirds felt that they had more autonomy.
- Employees also enjoyed the personal benefits, including less commuting time, more time with family and for caring responsibilities.

## In the future

- Over two-thirds wanted to continue working from home on a regular basis for some of their hours.
- The key reasons for wanting to continue working at home included the ability to manage work and caring responsibilities, and time for themselves and family.
- Nearly two-thirds of managers indicated they would be more supportive of working from home in the future.
- While managers are supportive, organisational culture may be lagging.

# Key lessons

First, while the focus in recent decades has been on *flexibility of hours*, our findings suggest that *flexibility of location* of work is at least as important. Greater flexibility in the place of work reduces the need for flexibilities such as reduced hours through part-time work and seemed to be a key piece in the puzzle of reconciling work and caring responsibilities.

Second, the findings suggest a major shift in the mindset of managers, from previous resistance or scepticism about the benefits of working from home to a new understanding of the potential productivity and other benefits. The findings confirmed employee enthusiasm for working from home on some workdays and identified improved management receptiveness towards it in the future. Policy may be lagging behind practice, and there is scope for innovations in policy and work design and understandings of performance.

Third, there are some remaining hurdles to overcome. Findings suggest some employees are a little surer of manager support for working from home in the future, but are lukewarm about whether they will get organisational support. ICT also remains a challenge.

Finally, there are also some areas where the working from home experience could be improved, post-pandemic. Many employees reported working longer hours than pre-pandemic, and there is scope for employers to address health and wellbeing aspects. There is also scope to focus on relationships and professional networks, with some employees reporting decreased ability to undertake some of the less tangible, relational aspects of work.

# Introduction

**Working from home expanded rapidly during the 2020 pandemic as millions of employees were compelled to leave their workplaces to contain the contagion in the world's "largest work-from-home experiment" <sup>[1]</sup>**



3 |

Speculation has been rife on whether or not working from home will become "the new normal", including in the public sector [see for e.g. 2, 3]. Early messaging indicated that this form of working would not be a lasting feature<sup>[4]</sup>; yet others believe that pre-pandemic ways of working will not be restored for some time, if at all<sup>[5]</sup>. In this report we contribute to the evidence base to conclude that not only will working from home be a lasting feature of our working environment, but that it may even be heralding a revolution in the way we work.

The opportunity to work from home has been available since the 1990s, due to changes in technology alongside calls for greater flexibility in the hours and place of work. While there is widespread acceptance and use of flexibility in hours of work, such as part time work<sup>[6]</sup> and flexible starting and finishing times, there has been slower uptake of flexibility in the place of work. Data indicates about a third of all employed people regularly worked from home pre-pandemic<sup>[7]</sup>, although this likely includes workers doing work after hours at home.

While the Australian Public Service (APS) was an early pioneer of working from home, as evidenced by the creation of the 1994 Australian Public Service Interim Home-Based Work Award, twenty years later in 2013 only 10 per cent of APS employees worked from home to some degree<sup>[8]</sup>. By 2019, this had increased to around 15%, albeit the usage was twice as high amongst executive levels and senior managers than for APS-level employees<sup>[9]</sup>.

The slow uptake of working from home is largely due to uncertainty about the productivity and performance effects. This resistance from managers and organisations is longstanding, from the earliest evaluations of "telecommuting"<sup>[10]</sup>. Since that time, the findings on how working from home affects the capability and capacity of organisations and whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages is equivocal. Organisations have been uncertain about the impact on organisational performance and productivity<sup>[11-15]</sup>. For employees, the benefits for balancing work and family and the negativities through perceived adverse career effects has led to working from home being accessed mostly by women<sup>[16]</sup>.

Our 2018 research, with nearly 300 managers across four state public services, also uncovered continued resistance. We found a disconnection between policy and practice, with policies promoting working from home but some managers reluctant to allow employees to implement those policies<sup>[17, 18]</sup>.

There is a gap in knowledge of the gender aspects of working from home. The current literature is contested on how it affects work/family conflict and whether it embeds traditional gender roles<sup>[16]</sup>. Our previous research identified anecdotal evidence that women are more likely to work from home, and the perceived career limitations for those who do so<sup>[18]</sup>.



## Our study

The pandemic forced employers' hands and potentially normalised working from home – now and into the future. By the end of May 2020, 57% of APS employees were reportedly working from home<sup>[19]</sup>. By August 2020, almost two-thirds of APS employees were working from home<sup>[20]</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic rendered most managerial objections irrelevant. The massive exodus of employees into the home provided a unique opportunity to study the rapid escalation of a previously gradual and contested practice.

We worked with the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) to develop the survey instrument, and the CPSU distributed the survey to their mailing list on our behalf in late June 2020. We aimed to capture the experiences of those working from home, as well as the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of those not working from home. This report contains simple analysis of results using Excel pivot tables and cross tabulations.

The sample comprises 6,000+ respondents, and included about 20% non-union members and approximately 25% managers, across a broad range of occupations and agencies. The sample is broadly representative of the APS workforce profile<sup>[9]</sup> in terms of ethnicity, indigeneity, and ongoing tenure.

The sample is slightly higher in representation of women (65% compared to 60% in the APS), and slightly lower in representation of higher classification levels (23% EL and SES compared to around 28% of the APS). It is slightly lower in representation of ACT based employees, but comparable on the proportion of employees in other states.

A limitation of the study, however, was a selection bias towards those working from home, resulting in an under-representation of those who did not work from home. While this reduced the number of responses to our questions about reasons people did not work from home, it does not diminish the responses from those who did, which are discussed in this report.

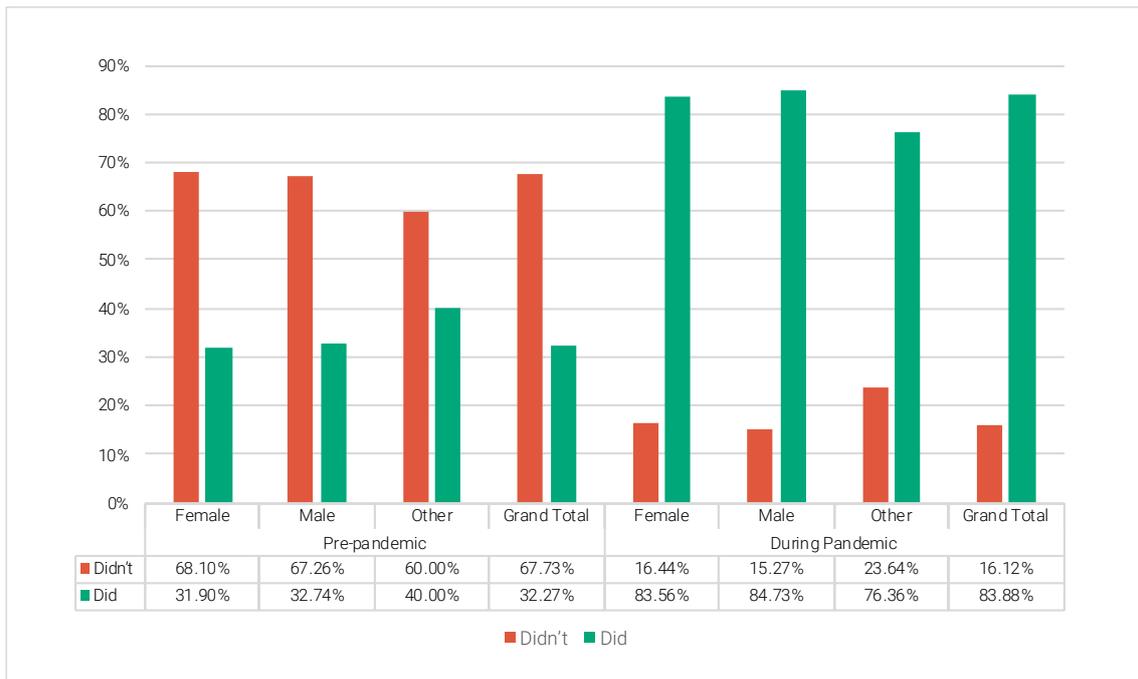
We would like to thank the CPSU for their collaboration and distribution of the survey. We would also like to thank CPSU members and others who participated and provided rich data for our research.

# Who worked from home?

The pandemic reversed the onus of employees requesting to work flexibly, requiring people to work from home where possible to contain the contagion.

5 | In May 2020, 57% of APS employees were reportedly working from home<sup>[19]</sup>. In our research, respondents were skewed towards those who worked from home, but nonetheless demonstrated the substantial shift, from just under one-third (32.27%) working from home pre-pandemic to more than 80% (83.88%) during the pandemic restrictions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Comparison of working from home before and during the pandemic





Nearly 1,400 of our 6,000 respondents had responsibility for managing staff. Over two-thirds of those managers had all their staff working from home (67.7%), with a further 13.4% having more than half working from home. Only 6.6% had no staff working from home.

Variations for specific groups include:

- By gender, patterns were relatively similar between men and women. This contrasts with the general trend in the Australian workforce of markedly more women than men working from home during the pandemic<sup>[21]</sup>.
- By age, younger people were somewhat less likely to work from home pre-pandemic but equally likely to work from home during the pandemic.
- By classification level, non-executive levels were much less likely to work from home pre-pandemic, but only slightly less likely during the pandemic.
- By fraction, there were similar rates of working from pre-pandemic for full-time and part-time employees working more than 0.6FTE. During the pandemic, however, full-time staff were more likely to work from home than part-time staff (85.3% for full-time, 79.9% of part-time more than 0.6FTE, and 72.2% for part-time less than 0.6FTE).

# Who didn't get to work from home?

Previous research confirms that working from home does not suit everyone. Research shows, however, that enabling those who want to work from home to do so is a matter of organisational fairness<sup>[22, 23]</sup>.



In our sample, 16% did not work from home during the pandemic. Our survey provided the opportunity to select multiple reasons, and we found the following:

- Around two-thirds identified reasons related to their job, such as working in a service delivery agency or other operational requirement, or not having the required technology at home.
- Nearly half identified reasons relating to their organisation, such as their manager would not let them, or their agency culture was not conducive to working from home.
- Around one-third identified reasons relating to their own choices, such as not wanting to work from home, not wanting to let their team down, or concerns about career effects.
- Some preferred their usual place of work, as a reprieve from the constant presence of their household or family.

"I hate my house, it's cold, and the kids are annoying, the dog stinks."

Many respondents' comments related to managers' decisions or permissions. Many told us that they did not meet their agency's criteria to work from home. Criteria prioritised those who were more vulnerable, but also other groups such as parents. Overall, the comments suggested that some managers were continuing to implement pre-pandemic organisational policy, even while the government and the Australian Public Service Commission encouraged people to work from home<sup>[4]</sup>.

While more than 80% of those who did not work from home said they were happy for those colleagues who did, many also expressed other emotions. These ranged from ambivalence to open envy (as one respondent stated: "it's lucky for some!"). "Luck" played a role in who was able to work from home. Respondents expressed many concerns about the lack of equity or fairness in the criteria and decisions across different work units.

"It felt as though not all employees were treated equally i.e. I was not given the option to work from home and my colleagues were. It felt as if my wellbeing wasn't valued as highly as others"

"They were lucky to be able to do this, I wish that in future we have a choice..."

Previous research has identified that working from home can lead to an "us" and "them" feeling between those who can and those who cannot work from home<sup>[14]</sup>. Organisations therefore would benefit from ensuring fairness and transparency in determining who can, and cannot, work from home.

**Tip:** Agencies should develop clear and transparent policies that allow fair opportunities for all employees to be able to work from home if operational requirements allow.

# Productivity

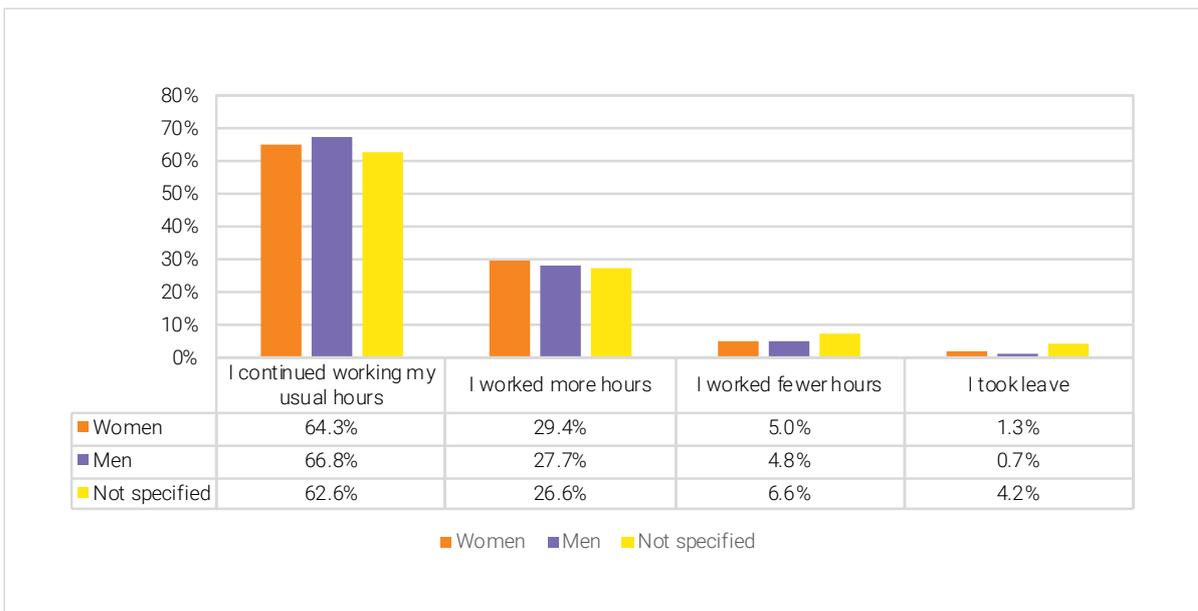
Given that productivity is one of the major sources of concern about working from home, we asked questions that would help to build a picture of how productive employees were when working from home. We asked respondents to consider the impact on factors such as the number of hours worked, the span of hours worked, and their perceptions of their level of control over their work.

## Number of hours worked

9 |

Research has found that employees worked longer hours when working at home during the pandemic, ranging from 48 minutes to three hours a day<sup>[24,25]</sup>. Our research asked about the number of hours worked from home during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic (see Figure 2). Around two-thirds of respondents told us they continued working their usual number of hours (with previous research showing that many APS employees worked longer hours and unpaid overtime before the pandemic<sup>[26]</sup>). Very few worked fewer hours or took leave, and 28.6% said they worked more hours.

Figure 2. The number of hours worked from home during pandemic restrictions





We asked those who worked more hours about the causes. Respondents were able to select multiple answers, and we found:

- half of respondents cited increased workload during the pandemic.
- around one-third also noted no commuting time, which enabled this time to be used for work.
- around one-quarter cited that they lost track of time, indicating increased employee engagement.
- a minority sought extra hours due to a drop in household income.

The small number of people working fewer hours identified reasons including fewer distractions meaning they could be more efficient; home-schooling meaning they had fewer options, or better work-life balance. However, some identified that they had less work to do, and some were directed to work fewer hours or refused permission to accumulate flex-time.

Some employees reported that they worked longer hours as they felt guilty about not completing enough work, or that their manager would think they were not being productive. This guilt stems from employees believing they needed to justify working from home – even when required to do so in a pandemic.

For some, the guilt arose from tasks taking longer when performed from home, with employees reading more on their computers in lieu of conversations, a lack of printed material making reading slower, and slower work processes. Some also suggested that virtual meetings were longer, which is contrary to previous research that suggested virtual meetings are shorter, but more frequent<sup>[24]</sup>. Employees often made up any lost time, as this respondent stated:

“...productivity per hour decreased, so [I] had to increase hours to compensate.”

These findings are important, if other findings on higher productivity (discussed later) are at the cost of longer working hours and less work-life balance.

**Tip:** There is scope for managers to be more engaged on employee wellbeing in relation to working hours, reviewing workloads and excess hours, and ensuring flexible hours (flex-time) continues to be available at home as well as at the usual workplace.

## Fast Facts

**66%**

Chose to work their usual hours

**15%**

Chose to work outside their usual hours

**5%**

Were obligated to work outside their usual hours due to household obligations

**5%**

Believed they were expected by managers to complete work outside their usual hours

**33%**

Felt they had more autonomy over when they did their work

**64%**

Felt they got more work done than in the office

**33%**

Felt they were able to undertake more complex work

## Span of hours

We asked when people conducted their work. We found:

- almost three-quarters chose to work their usual pattern of working hours.
- around 15% chose to work outside their usual hours.
- around 5% said they were obliged to work outside their usual hours due to household obligations. This is surprisingly low.
- another 5% believed they were expected by managers to complete work outside their usual hours.

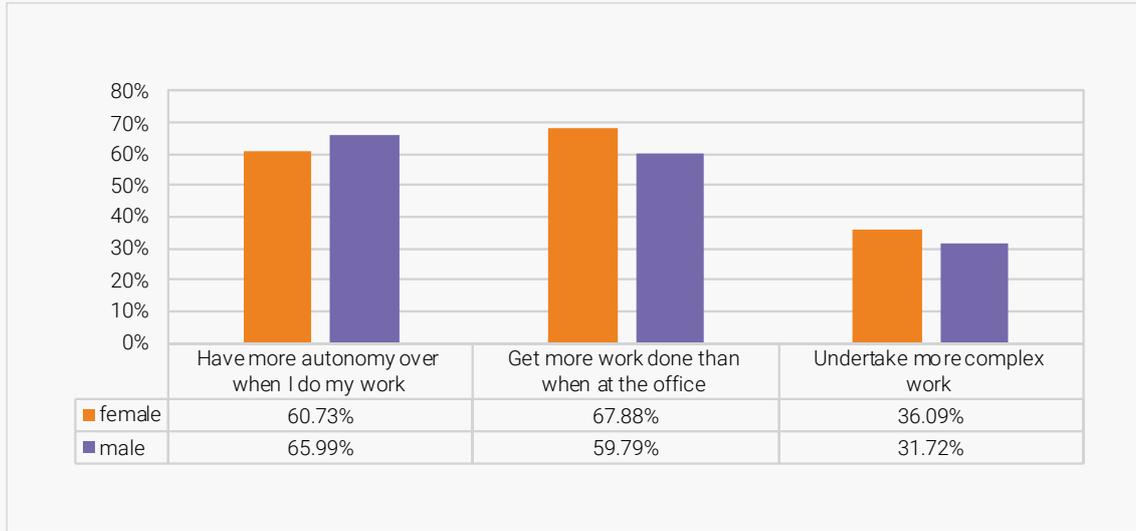
All up, our findings suggest that flexibility in the place of work might be more important than flexibility in when they work. Although the topic of work scheduling and the consequences of these schedules for family life has received increased attention in recent years, there tends to be greater emphasis on when work takes place rather than where work is conducted<sup>[27]</sup>. This focus has now changed.

## Employee perceptions of productivity and autonomy

We asked respondents how working from home affected various aspects of their work. Our findings (see Figure 3) include:

- Nearly two-thirds felt that they had more autonomy over when they did their work, with slightly higher levels reported by men.
- Nearly two-thirds (64.3%) felt that they got more work done than when at the office. More women than men agreed they got more done at home, and results were higher than average for women with children aged 5-17 years old. This is also a surprising result, which suggests better integration of work and caring responsibilities during the pandemic.
- One-third felt they were able to undertake more complex work.

Figure 3. Employee perceptions of autonomy and productivity



Our findings reinforce previous pre-pandemic research findings showing that working from home can result in increased autonomy and productivity [11, 13, 14, 23, 28-31]. This is significant, as research has shown that low levels of autonomy and job control can be associated with depression [32]. For lower level employees in

particular, increased autonomy and job control can alleviate or help prevent a deterioration in mental and physical health outcomes [33]. Lower level APS employees, therefore, may benefit more from working at home than their more senior colleagues.

## Productivity, working from home and managing work and caring responsibilities

As mentioned above, almost 30% of respondents worked longer hours. Our results show both positives and negatives of long hours on work and family commitments.

- For some, being able to better balance work and caring responsibilities meant they could work more hours, such as requiring less time or no time taking children to and from school.
- For others, the lack of separation between work and home meant blurred boundaries and longer hours, particularly for those home schooling.
- Over four fifths (82.6%) reported having more time for themselves and families.
- More than half were more able to help with caring responsibilities, with similar results for men and women. This may have offset the negativities of combining work and caring responsibilities while working at home during the pandemic.

- There were very favourable effects in terms of hours, with some being able to increase their part-time work hours.

Our findings show that both men and women were mostly better able to reconcile work and caring responsibilities whilst working from home during the pandemic. Other researchers have also found increased productivity during the pandemic, particularly for women (Baert et al, 2020). This contrasts, however, with other emerging research, with one study finding that 50% of parents considered their productivity declined due to working at home while caring for children [34].

# Networking and relationships

**While productivity benefits seem strong, there were some less positive results in terms of networking and personal interactions.**

We asked whether respondents were more or less able to undertake a range of tasks and functions (see Table 1). On each item, the majority (between two-thirds and three-quarters) indicated that it was the same as pre-pandemic. However, around one-quarter said they were less able to contact or collaborate with colleagues, or mentor or coach others, and around one fifth noted they were less able to maintain professional networks or access opportunities such as new projects or tasks.

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**Table 1. When working with others during the pandemic were you more or less able to:**

	Less able	The same	More able
Contact or collaborate with colleagues as needed	23.81	63.13	13.06
Get timely decisions from your immediate manager	15.95	72.56	11.49
Keep aware of what's going on in the agency	15.69	69.52	14.79
Manage/ mentor/ coach others	24.23	68.20	7.57
Maintain cooperation amongst colleagues	14.83	71.51	13.66
Maintain professional networks	21.92	66.98	11.10
Access opportunities such as new projects or tasks	21.53	63.66	14.81
Participate in meetings	15.11	66.04	18.85

Other emerging research on working from home during the pandemic has found that over a quarter of employees believed that this form of working decreases their chance of promotion and hampers professional development <sup>[35]</sup>.

While we were initially concerned about the potential impact on women, men were more likely to indicate they were less able to undertake each of these tasks or functions. This is contrary to the literature that suggests the career impact of flexible working arrangements <sup>[36]</sup> is worse for women than for men. This also might indicate that men are not as good at reaching out when working from home, which nuances research findings showing that men benefit more than women do when engaging in professional networks in a standard workplace <sup>[37]</sup>.

Paradoxically, working from home may therefore have an equalising effect on career opportunities for both men and women. Women's lower visibility in the workplace due to working at home has previously negatively impacted career development opportunities due to being overlooked by managers <sup>[18]</sup>. The corollary is that men have benefited more from networking opportunities than women <sup>[37]</sup>. Our findings show that men are now also accessing fewer opportunities, so the lack of networking and development opportunities may be equally experienced amongst those working at home.



## Communication

We asked employees about their experience of using virtual communications. The responses were very mixed. Some indicated that virtual meetings were better, with benefits such as higher participation rates in meetings, and more regular communication with managers than when in the usual workplace. Some suggested that they were more comfortable participating when not in a face-to-face meeting.

Many respondents told us that virtual meetings were more efficient; while as noted earlier, many said they also took longer. Virtual meetings also enabled more introverted team members to participate. In this respect, virtual meetings could perhaps be having an equalising effect on participation. International research shows that more meetings were held during the pandemic, but they were of shorter duration<sup>[24]</sup>.

Others identified several disadvantages using virtual communications. These centre around three main areas. Firstly, many respondents complained that their agency's ICT systems were not adequate to hosting meetings; connectivity was an issue, which disrupted meetings. Secondly, many employees preferred face-to-face interactions, and missed the social aspect of working. Thirdly, many found virtual communication more stressful, being less participative and interactive and more disjointed, and not being able to read non-verbal communication as well. This can be a particular disadvantage for neuro-diverse employees. Many employees found it difficult to read body language – or were unable to see colleagues due to their organisation only allowing teleconferences, not videoconferences.

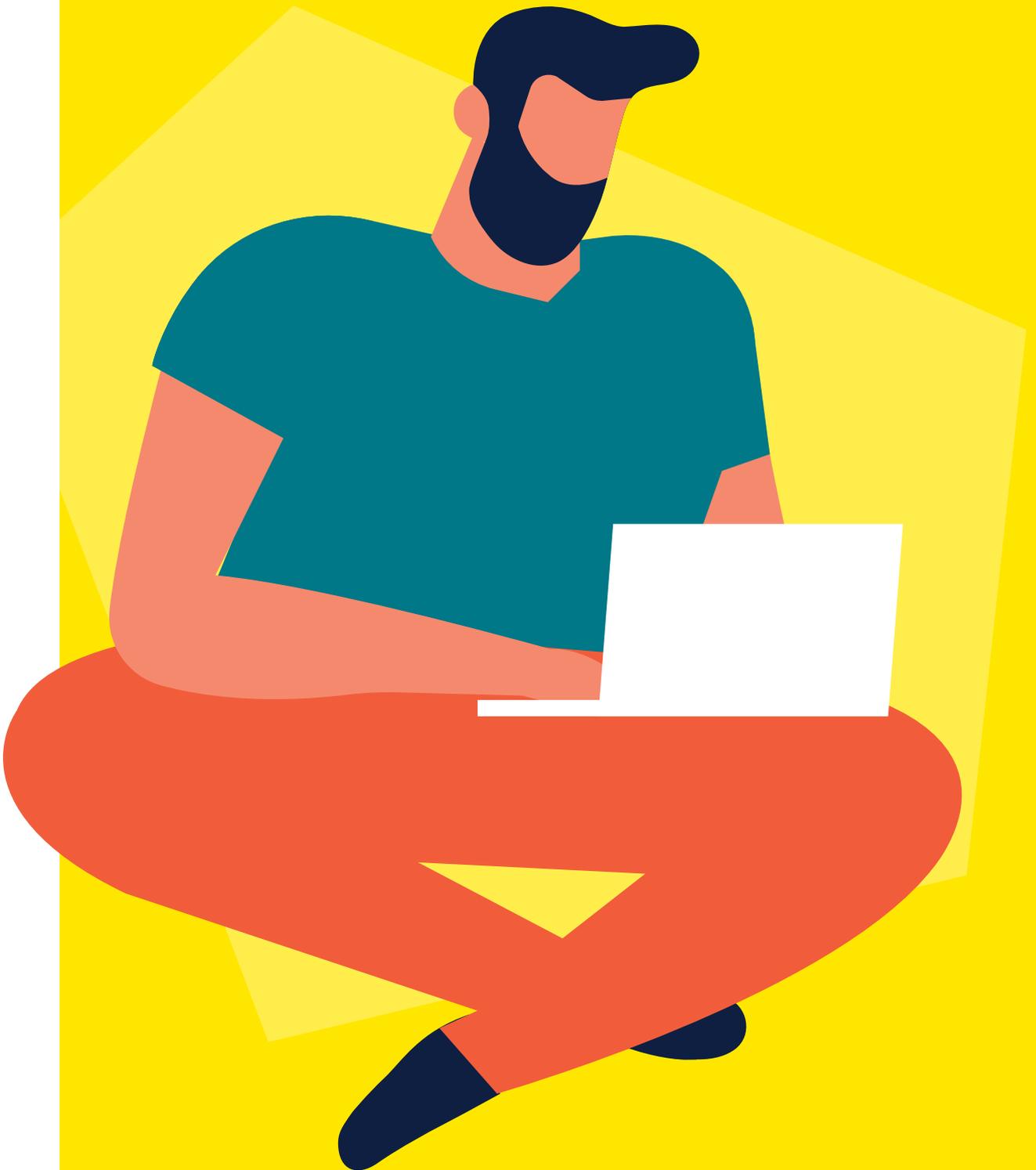
The use of virtual communications technologies is both a blessing and a curse. Early research into the effects of ICT on employees' communication patterns and stress levels during COVID-19 has found that working from home increases levels of technostress, due to work intensification, as well as employees feeling they need to always be working. Simultaneously, however, research findings show that those working from home experienced lowered work/family conflict, stress and exhaustion due to increased autonomy – presenting an “autonomy paradox”<sup>[38]</sup>.

## Tips

**Tip:** Provide all employees with similar opportunities to network and engage in professional development and networking opportunities, regardless of gender and location of work.

**Tip:** Use multiple forms and types of communications to ensure technology is not a barrier to participation, and to also ensure diverse groups of employees can participate.

# Managers and organisational support

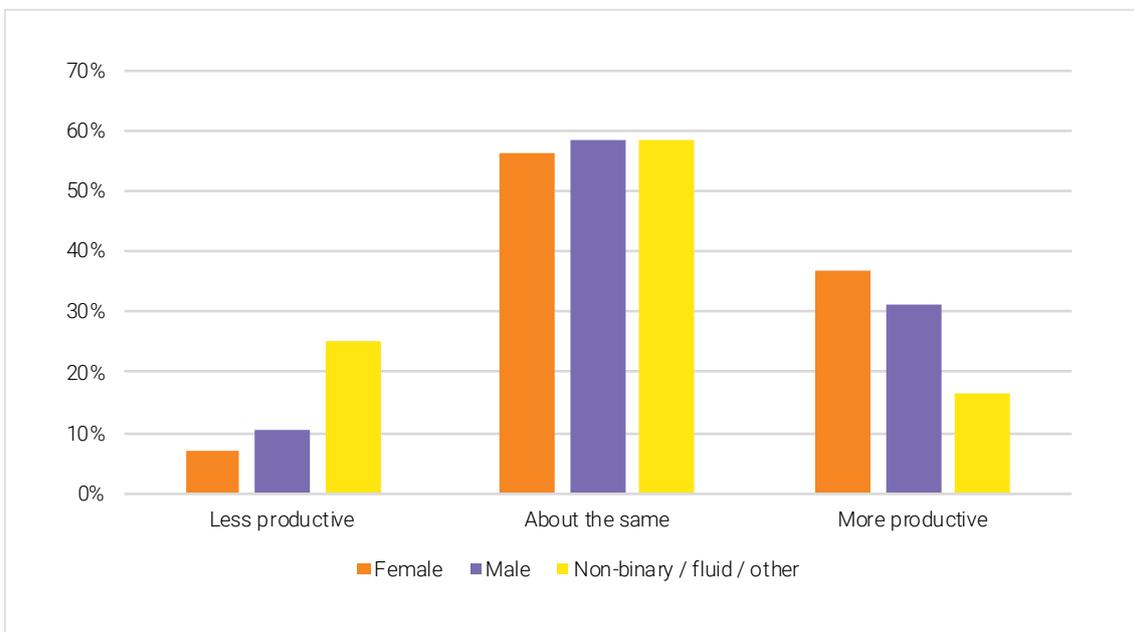


## Manager perceptions of productivity

**Managers overwhelmingly noted the increased productivity and performance of their teams (see Figure 4).**

When asked how their teams performed when working from home compared to working at the usual place of work (notwithstanding COVID-19 related factors such as home-schooling), only 8.4% said they were less productive. Over 90% reported that their teams were at least as productive, if not more productive, when working from home (57% noting the same level of productivity and 34.5% noting increased productivity). This is in line with international market research which found that 70% of managers believed that performance was the same or better from team members working from home<sup>[39]</sup>.

Figure 4. Manager perceptions of team performance from home



Female managers were more likely to perceive their team as more productive while working from home (36.7%) compared to male managers (31.1%) and non-binary respondents (16.7%). Managers of teams of all sizes were supportive.

“We were very busy which required all of us to produce more work, but working from home both helped (in terms of giving people more space to do work with fewer distractions) and hindered (less opportunities to organically share ideas and discuss things informally).”

Once technology was operating efficiently, productivity appeared to increase. Generally, managers reported that employees who were high performing pre-COVID, were high performing during COVID, even if they had caring responsibilities.

Many lamented the opportunities for incidental conversations in the workplace, although some managers noted that this also increased productivity as people had shorter, virtual conversations.

## Fast Facts

**12%**

Maintained their usual routine of meetings

**60%**

Supplemented their usual routine of meetings with additional virtual work meetings

**61%**

Women were more likely to hold additional virtual meetings

**39%**

Women were more likely to hold social meetings

**13%**

Managers that said they had a preference to have their staff at the workplace

Our previous research<sup>[18]</sup> found that managers were reluctant to allow staff to work at home, due to difficulties of managing and assessing performance. We recommended in 2018 that managers judge performance on outputs, not time. Managers have had to trust their staff working at home during the pandemic, and do just this.

While some managers were still uncertain about employees' productivity, a definite shift has occurred. We are therefore seeing changes not only to how employees work, but also to how performance is assessed and managed. As we have noted earlier, organisational policy is now lagging behind practice. Performance management systems require review, with evaluation based on outcomes. Correspondingly, the recording of hours as an indication of performance also needs an overhaul:

"The challenge is in management style one has to judge performance solely on outputs rather than hours' work... our flex-time system has proven very inefficient in this regard as it should be output based rather than input (time) based..."

**Tip:** Agencies review their performance management systems to ensure they match the practice of working from home. Agencies would benefit from actively promoting a focus on results-based outcomes.

## Manager perceptions of communication

Managers appear to have maintained strong communications with staff during the pandemic. While around 12% maintained their usual routine of meetings, the majority (around 60%) supplemented this with additional virtual work meetings.

Importantly, the majority of managers also kept a non-work connection with their staff, through social meetings (such as virtual coffee/drinks) and chat room forums. Managers provided numerous other examples of frequent use of one-to-one communications using technologies such as WhatsApp and Messenger.

Men appeared to be slightly worse at maintaining contact. While both men and women managers maintained the usual routine of meetings at around the same rate (85.8% and 87.8%), women were more likely to hold additional virtual meetings (61.6% compared to men (56.9%)), or to hold social meetings (39.1% compared to 29.71%).

## Managers who didn't let work from home

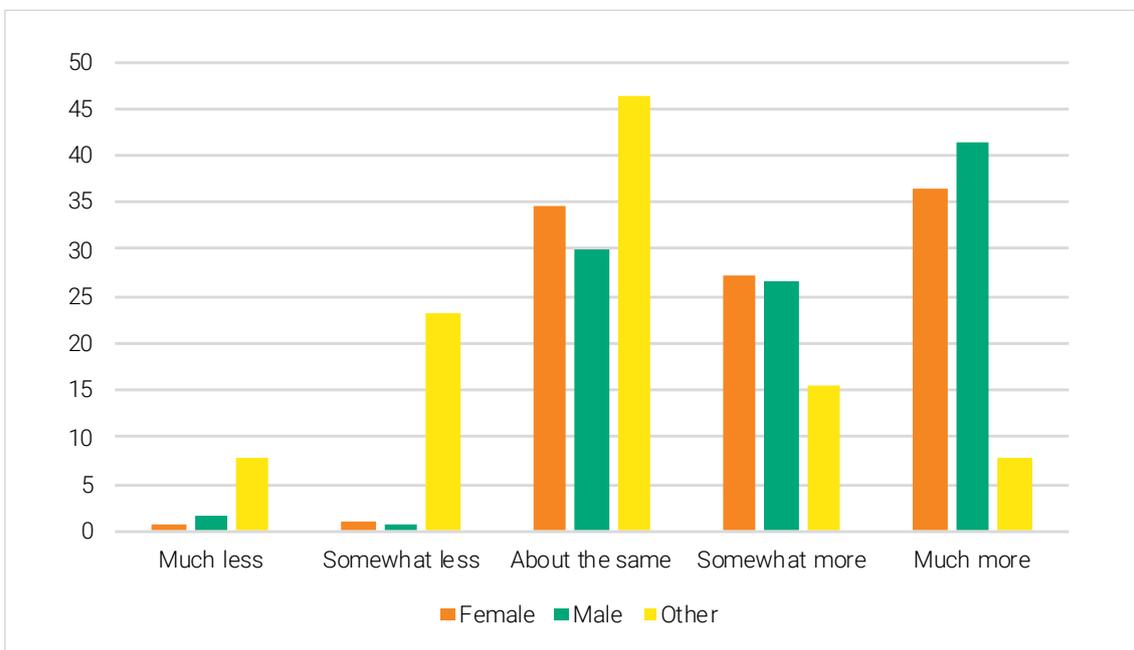
We asked managers for the reasons their staff did not work from home. The majority of reasons were related to operational requirements of the role or technology. However, 13% did say they had a preference to have their staff at the workplace, and 20% said it was about their agency policy or culture. Some reiterated that their staff could not work at home as they were not in a high-risk group; or did not have a medical certificate. Again, this indicates that some agencies were implementing a pre-COVID working from home policy. This approach, however, was not widespread.

## Managers' view on the future

The enforced working from home "experiment" changed many managers' perceptions about working from home (see Figure 5). When asked to think about their views on working from home before and during the pandemic, very few indicated they would be less supportive in the future (less than 2%). Around one-third said they would be just as supportive as pre-pandemic, but often their comments indicated that they were already very supportive before. Nearly two-thirds indicated they would be more supportive in the future.

Managers frequently commented about the crisis having proven that workers can be the same or even more productive at home. The experiment broke down rigid perceptions and demonstrated that many types of work can be done successfully from home. Our research reinforces emerging findings, with one report based on a survey of 12,000 respondents finding that over 70% of managers were more receptive to letting their employees work flexibly, including working from home<sup>[34]</sup>.

Figure 5. Level of support for working from home in the future, by gender



The biggest change from before the pandemic was amongst male managers, 68% of whom would be more supportive in the future, compared to 63.6% of women managers. This shift perhaps highlights that more managers have changed their position, from being relatively unsupportive of employees working from home, to enabling them to do so. Some noted the increased quality of engagement with staff, and that a conversation could be more focused and less subject to other workplace interruptions.

One manager noted:

"I'd always accepted the department line that working from home is a privilege and not a real workplace. Also that working from home makes you unavailable and disconnects you from the workplace. Discovered that I couldn't have been more wrong."

As one manager stated, the question should be "if not, why not?" This is an important question. Balancing the Future: The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016-19 required agencies to adopt a "flexible by default" approach, "such that working flexibly is the default at every classification and for any reason"<sup>[8]</sup>. Due to the pandemic, agencies were required to make decisions on which jobs could be performed at home; and which employees would be allowed to work from home. This constitutes an informal system of flexible by default.

**Tip:** Enabling employees to continue working from home if they desire, constitutes flexible by default and aligns with government policy.

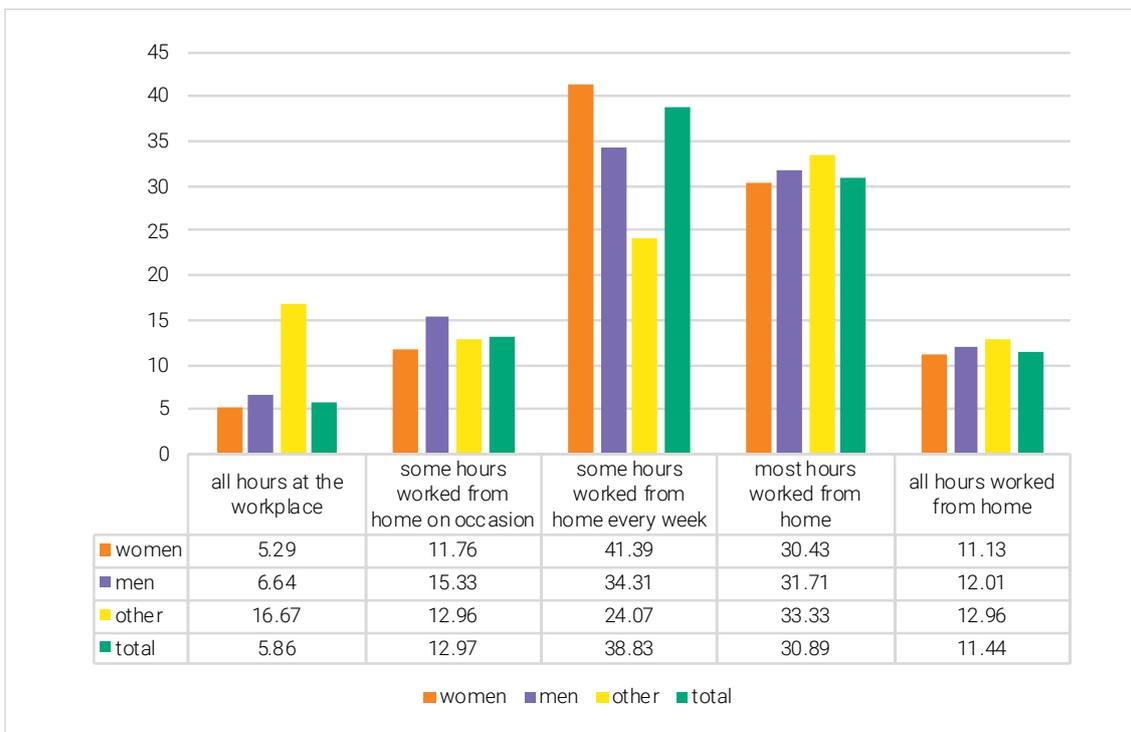
# What of the future?

We asked about future preferences and the reasons behind those preferences.

## Preferences around working from home in the future

Confirming the success of the “experiment”, there were few employees who preferred to spend all hours in the workplace in the future (see Figure 6). The most popular choices of employees were for some hours every week from home (38.8%) and most hours worked from home every week (30.9%).

19 | Figure 6. Preferred mix of office time and working from home in the future





Respondents ranked the importance of a range of factors in the preferences for future working from home. The most important factors were: having more time for myself/family (94.1%); gaining time from not commuting (93%); help with caring responsibilities (88.4%); getting more work done than when at the office (80.8%), and having more autonomy over when they did their work (75.9).

Women also ranked as important being able to increase their part-time working hours (62%). This suggests that working part-time is less of a choice and more the result of a requirement due to domestic responsibilities.

| 20

## Requests to work from home in the future

Most respondents were still working from home at the time of the survey. Some indicated that they would not make a request, as they preferred to go to their usual workplace for the professional or social benefits. However, quite a few comments were related to the agency culture, such as people knowing their request would be declined, or that they did not meet stringent criteria for working from home.

Overall, despite decades of flexible working policies, respondents remained sceptical. Respondents were quite lukewarm about their agency support for flexible working arrangements – only 17% strongly agreed that their agency supported flexible working, with a further 36.5% somewhat agreeing, and men were slightly more convinced than women.

They were much more convinced of their local manager or supervisor support for flexible working arrangements. Two-thirds agreed or strongly agreed that their supervisor actively supported flexible working arrangements, again with men being slightly more persuaded than women. This is somewhat lower than reported in Australian Government statistics, where 83% of respondents agreed that their supervisor supported flexible working arrangements <sup>[9]</sup>.

## What organisations can do to better support employees working from home

Overwhelmingly, our respondents reported that their organisation had been very supportive as they transitioned to working from home, and then continued to work from home. Respondents recognised the difficulties experienced by their organisation, with an increased workload, and new and changing technological challenges. Respondents made suggestions on how they could be better supported as they worked from home.

An overriding request was for improved technology. Employees and managers told us that their systems were too slow, and that they did not have access to all the necessary software, including virtual communications. Employees also repeatedly requested a monitor, or an ergonomic chair, and not all had access to an organisational laptop. Some requested that they be reimbursed for their expenses in establishing and maintaining a home office. The provision of ICT services, support and infrastructure is a significant issue for many employees.

“Improve technology, create a culture of inclusion where working from home is just as valued as working in the office.”

Respondents also discussed the need for culture change in their organisation, to normalise working from home. While many detailed support from their managers, many also described resistance from their senior leaders, and a culture of not trusting those who worked from home.

“Culture change to recognise that it is not a ‘lesser’ option/compromise that is begrudgingly allowed.”

Fairness and transparency in who is able to work from home was important to respondents, with lower level employees questioning why only more senior colleagues could work from home. Associated with this, respondents also requested that their organisations and managers provide them with clear communications about the transition back into the workplace, as well as everyday work information.

Employees also wanted clear information about expectations, which also goes to workplace culture, as well as performance management systems. Conversations about performance and output could be clearer for many employees. Finally, employees welcomed virtual social gatherings, and recommended these be continued.

“I think the biggest challenge will be the cultural change required in management, which I think the pandemic has forced to a certain extent... and the development of a practical performance management framework.”

**Tip:** Agencies would benefit from reviewing human resource processes to align them with working from home practices, including performance management systems and ensure clear communications about work expectations.

**Tip:** Sharing lessons about the positives and negatives of working from home and how this may be facilitated into the future will assist in normalising this way of working.



# Conclusion

"I think the pandemic has shown us that working from home is not some mythical beast. Most of the APS has the functionality and capacity to do so.

We need to move away from a system where we assume people are only working if we can see them...and start assessing output and effort.

I think it will be very easy for the APS to slide back into BAU [business as usual], and I think we need to maintain the momentum."

**Our research has shown that working from home can work. Managers reported that their teams were just as – if not more – productive, than when working in their usual workplace.**

Employees reported an increased level of autonomy over their working hours and were more engaged. This is particularly significant for lower level APS employees, as research shows that lower paid employees with high levels of job demands and little control have poorer physical and mental health outcomes than higher paid employees. Enabling APS-level employees to work from home – or continue to do so – may therefore not only result in increased productivity, but also improved health outcomes.

Respondents were better able to manage work and caring responsibilities, enjoyed more time with their families, and benefited from not commuting. Contrary to other research findings, women with children were more able to combine work and caring responsibilities than when working in their usual workplace. Enabling employees to be able to continue working from home may therefore progress gender equality, particularly for women in APS-level positions, where they have more autonomy, and are better able to combine work and family responsibilities.

The mass shift to working from home saw some challenges become more pronounced. ICT infrastructure was problematic for many respondents, and the ability of some to network and engage in professional development was hampered. Others were less engaged through virtual communications. Some missed the camaraderie of the workplace or wanted a reprieve from the constant presence of their household or family. Overall, employees want to continue to work at home for at least some of working week.

Regardless of these negatives, a fundamental shift has occurred in how millions of employees – including APS employees – work. Managerial resistance to working from home largely appears to have been overcome, indicating that we may indeed be witnessing a revolution in how we work.

# About the Authors



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Linda is the Work and Employment Research Group leader at CQUniversity. Her current research examines: public sector employment themes of merit and tenure; gender equity in pay, progression and superannuation; affirmative action in political parties; and senior executives in public services. She has received funding from the Australian Research Council and ANZSOG, and her industry partners include state governments, trade unions and superannuation funds. Linda is active in national and international research networks, and her other roles include Vice-President of the International Research Society for Public Management (IRSPM) and Chair of the Queensland Government Work Health and Safety Board.

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Sue Williamson is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management at UNSW, Canberra. As a member of the Public Service Research Group, Sue's scholarship focuses on how organisations can progress gender equity, with a focus on the public sector. Her work has been published widely in academic journals and media outlets and Sue regularly shares her findings with a wide range of audiences. Sue was awarded a highly competitive grant from the Australia and New Zealand School of Government to lead a research project examining the role of middle managers in progressing gender equality, with the findings widely welcomed. Sue is a past President of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand and is currently an active member of UNSW's Athena Swan's team to improve gender equality for women in STEM areas.

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