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Working during the Pandemic: The future of work is hybrid

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Contents

- Introduction..... 3**
 - Our study..... 4
- Key findings 5**
 - What does this mean for Australian Public Service agencies? 6
- Who Worked from Home? 7**
 - Working from home by classification..... 8
- Who Didn't Work from Home? 10**
- Hours Worked During the Pandemic Restrictions..... 11**
 - How many hours did employees work? 11
 - When were those hours worked? 12
- Usual and Preferred Working Patterns 13**
 - Factors determining employees' preference to work from home..... 15
 - Requests to work from home 15
 - Is there a match between managers' and employees' preferences? 15
- Managers and Organisational Support..... 17**
- Productivity 19**
 - Employees' perceptions of productivity 20
 - Managers' perceptions of productivity..... 21
- Networking and Relationships 23**
- Workplace Health and Safety..... 25**
 - Employees' workplace health and safety 25
 - Managers' perceptions of their teams' health and safety 26
- What of the Future? 29**
- Conclusions 31**
 - Further research 31
- About the authors..... 32**

Introduction



In June-July 2020, when many Australian states and territories were in lockdown, we conducted a survey of Australian Public Service (APS) employees, in partnership with the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). We wanted to know who was working from home, how work was being conducted remotely, and the impact on employees and managers. The findings are in our report *Working During the Pandemic: From resistance to revolution?*^[2]

In September-October 2021, at another peak in the contagion, we conducted a further survey. Many of our participants were in lockdown (in Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory), and indeed Melbourne set a world record for the longest lockdown, at 245 days^[3]. Employees were again working away from the office.

We have witnessed a significant shift in approaches to working from home. The conversation has progressed from pre-pandemic resistance to working from home^[4], to 2020 questions about whether working from home would become 'the new normal'^[5], to 2021 questions about how organisations and employees can implement hybrid arrangements that combine working from home and at the office. The normalising of working from home, however, has come at a cost. We found that employees, supervisors and managers experienced 'COVID-fatigue', leading to burnout and stress. While this is not surprising after almost two years of lockdowns and uncertainties, it does highlight employee wellbeing as an important consideration in future arrangements. However, some of the COVID-fatigue is just that – it is attributable to the pandemic. Without overarching factors such as enforced working from home and home schooling, hybrid working can be a very successful working arrangement.

Another of our findings – and this is also not a surprise – is that employees want to keep working from home. Global research shows that employees want to work in a hybrid working arrangement^[6]. Our 2021 research confirms that many managers continue to actively support working from home and expect to do so in the future, confirming our 2020 findings that managerial resistance is waning.

In this report we outline the benefits, but also the risks and negativities associated with this form of working. We set out our findings and provide tips for organisations, managers, and employees as the APS considers future ways of working in a COVID-normal environment.

Our study

Our 2021 survey replicated much of our 2020 survey, where we asked about who did and did not work from home, employee preferences around working from home and working arrangements, productivity, networking and relationships, and managerial and organisational support. In our 2021 survey we also included some new areas, such as workplace health and safety, and retention issues. These were emerging as key issues and required examination. The CPSU contributed to development of the survey instrument, and distributed the survey to members and non-members on their mailing list. We thank the CPSU for their collaboration, and thank CPSU members and others who participated and provided rich data for our research.

Over 5,000 employees responded, but we note that these are not necessarily the same employees who responded in 2020 and we note this as a limitation. The sample comprises 28.5% of managers or supervisors, and a quarter of respondents were not union members. Respondents came from a broad range of occupations across the APS. Employees from NSW, Victoria and the ACT comprised the majority of respondents (23.5%, 23.5% and 22.9% respectively). Employees from the Australian Taxation Office were slightly over-represented, and we note this as another limitation of the study.

Key findings



In our 2021 survey, we asked some of the same questions as we asked in 2020, which included who worked from home, preferences for working arrangements, questions around productivity, teamwork, and flexible working arrangements. In 2021, our survey included an increased focus on workplace health and safety issues and retention issues. We highlight some of our key findings here.

Our survey results highlight a discrepancy between the needs and preferences of managers and employees in three key areas.

First, our findings show a mismatch between preferred and actual working arrangements.

While only a small percentage of employees worked three days a week from home, a fifth of respondents would like to work this amount of time from home. Over a third of employees would like to work from home all the time, or for 80% of their working week.

It will be important for managers and organisations to work out optimum hybrid working arrangements – the amount of time employees can work from home, how tasks are distributed and workloads managed with hybrid teams. Over two in five respondents also stated that if their agency did not allow them to work from home at all, they would consider changing agencies or leaving the public sector.

Second, managers and employees have different perceptions of the levels of productivity when employees worked from home.

Almost three in five employees (59%) stated that their productivity was higher when working from home than in the office. Fewer than 10% believed that their productivity was lower when working from home. Two thirds of managers, however, considered that their team's productivity was about the same, whether working from home or in the office.

Further, more managers stated that their team's productivity had stayed the same throughout 2021, compared with our previous survey, where more managers believed their teams' productivity had increased.

Third, managers and employees perceive the impact of working from home on employees' mental health differently.

The vast majority of employees reported that they had not experienced any negative workplace health and safety impacts of working from home. However, over half of the managers had noticed negative physical or psychological impacts of working from home on their staff. This largely took the form of 'COVID-fatigue', with employees feeling exhausted and burnt out.

Longer working hours contributed to burnout, with a third of the 2021 respondents stating that they worked more hours than in pre-pandemic times, compared with 28% of respondents in 2020. Almost 12% of employees worked outside their usual working hours due to management expectation or workloads. This number has almost doubled from 2020.

What does this mean for Australian Public Service agencies?

Our findings highlight the continued need for APS agencies to monitor, and safeguard employees' health and wellbeing, including adjusting workloads to prevent employee burnout. Hybrid working has the potential to maintain, if not increase productivity, while also enabling employees to work flexibly and attain a better work/life balance. Agencies are encouraged to consult with employees and their representatives about preferred working arrangements, including the maximum amount of time employees can work from home, and to use this report as well as other evidence^[7] when designing and implementing hybrid working arrangements.

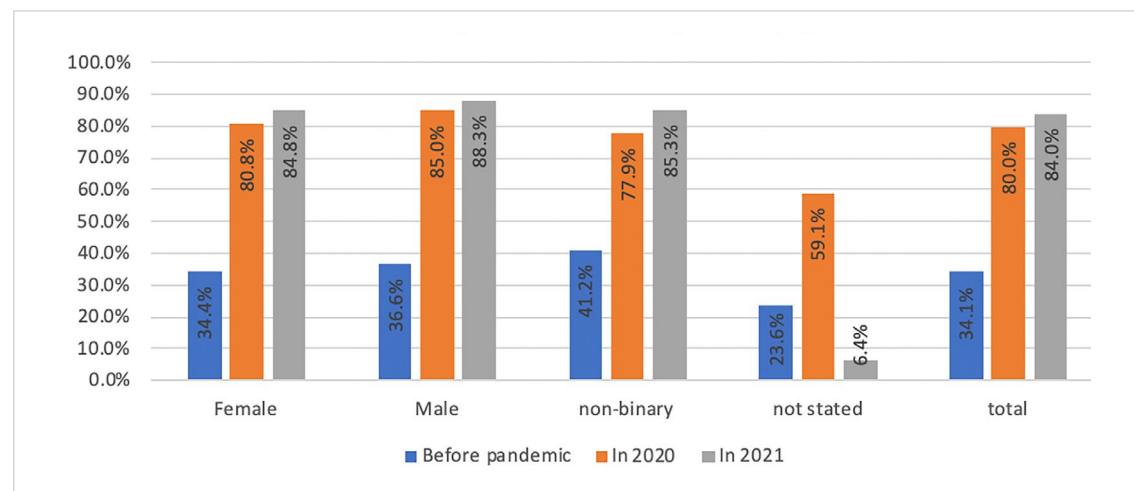
Who worked from home?



Pre-pandemic, working from home was an exceptional working arrangement, not widely accessed by APS employees^[6]. Our 2021 survey findings show the vast change in behaviour before and during the pandemic, as shown in Figure 1. Prior to the pandemic, approximately one-third of respondents stated that they accessed remote working, with little difference between men and women (women 34.4%, men 36.6%). In the 2021 pandemic peak, 84.0% of respondents worked from home, an increase from 80.0% in our previous survey.

Men were slightly more likely to work from home than women across all three time periods (pre-pandemic, 2020 and 2021). It will be important to monitor whether this continues outside of lockdown circumstances. Research shows that men are likely to prefer working in the office more days per week in emerging hybrid models^[9]. This can lead to 'proximity bias' – where managers preference employees who are in their immediate vicinity^[10]. This has implications for individual careers, as well as organisational diversity if certain groups of employees – including women^[11], carers and employees with a disability – are less visible than able-bodied men^[12].

Figure 1. Who worked from home by gender

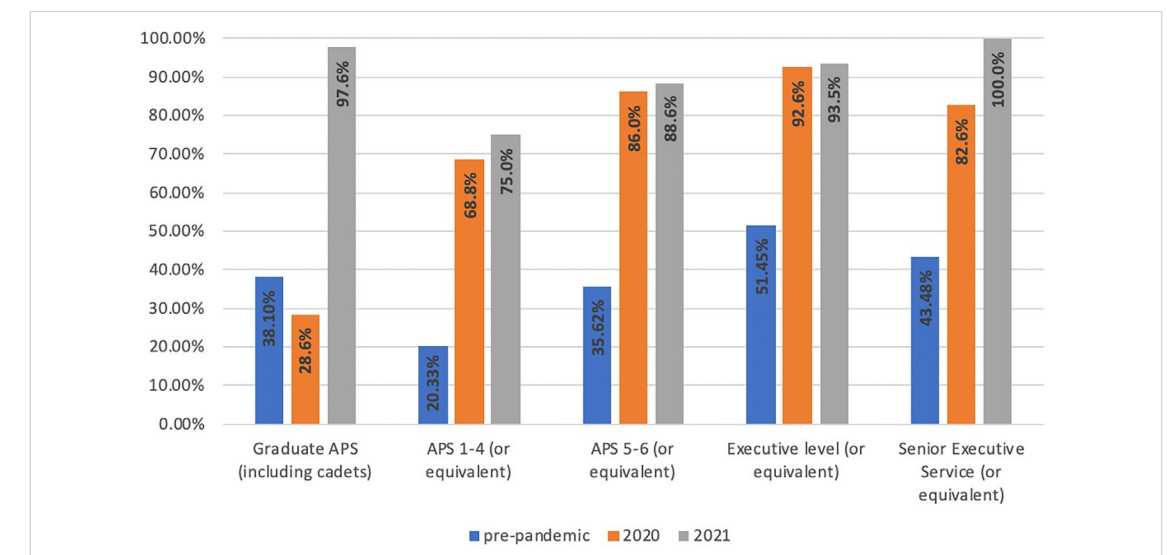


Tip: Agencies are encouraged to ensure managers are aware of the risks of proximity bias, and implement mitigation strategies. Gender disaggregated data on who is working in the office would also enable agencies to monitor which genders are accessing the office/working from home, and develop strategies accordingly to prevent proximity bias.

Working from home by classification

A range of issues influence access to working from home. Factors include the nature of the work, trust in the employee, and level of autonomy, with more highly skilled and autonomous employees more able to access working from home^[13]. Our findings show that the pandemic had a significant equalising effect on access to working from home across APS classifications. Before the pandemic, respondents were less likely to have worked away from the office if they held lower classification levels (80% of APS1-4s did not work from home pre-pandemic, compared with 64.3% APS5-6, 48.4% EL and 56.5% Senior Executive Service [SES]). While hierarchical differences were evident during the pandemic lockdown, they were less stark, with two-thirds and three quarters of APS 1-4 employees working remotely in 2020 and 2021, and more similar rates across other classification levels.

Figure 2. Worked away from the workplace by classification



Who didn't work from home?

Many lower level employees in the APS work in frontline jobs, and had previously been prevented from working from home based on arguments around service delivery, technology and workplace health and safety concerns^[14]. However, pandemic lockdown experiences resulted in a large number of these employees working from home. This indicates an important shift in which employees can work from home – it is no longer the preserve of higher level employees.

Now that these barriers have been shifted or removed entirely, organisations have the opportunity to review practices into the future about which roles and work can be done from home. Public sector organisations have been at the forefront of implementing ‘all roles flex’ and ‘flexible by default’^[15], and identifying which roles can be undertaken flexibly. Determining which roles can be performed remotely is the next stage in the development of flexible working.

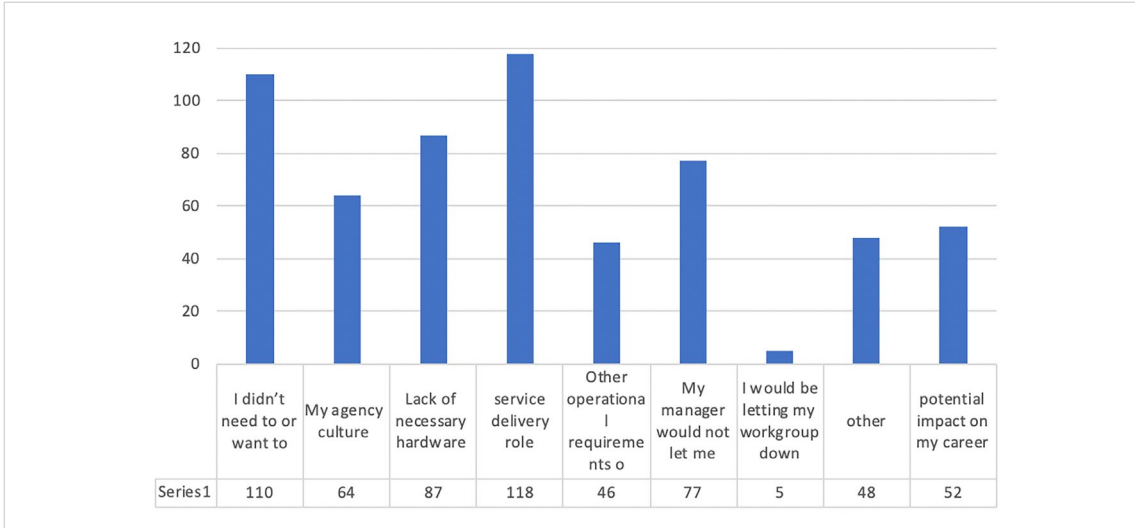
Tip: The post-pandemic environment provides an opportunity for agencies to reinvigorate their ‘all roles flex’ practices, with a focus on which roles can be undertaken at home and hybridly.

We asked those who didn't work from home (n=420) to list one or two key reasons for not working from home. The main reasons were:

- the respondent worked in a service delivery role (28%),
- they did not need or want to work remotely (26.2%),
- their manager would not let them work from home (18.3%), and
- their agencies' culture was not conducive to flexible working arrangements (15.2%).

A sizeable minority of respondents (16%) gave other reasons as to why they could not work from home. Many of these respondents explained that they did not meet their agency's 'criteria'. The main criteria was being a vulnerable employee, including having underlying health issues. Our previous survey findings^[16] revealed inconsistencies with managers' use of criteria to prevent employees working from home. In some cases, managers did not accept employees' medical certificates which advised that they should work from home. As with granting requests for employees to work flexibly, managerial discretion can result in inconsistencies across agencies.

Figure 3. Reasons for not working from home



Tip: Managers need guidance when applying criteria on who can, and cannot, work from home. As recommended in the *Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2021-26: Realising the benefits*^[17], agencies could also track informal requests to work from home to identify and overcome inconsistencies with managers' decisions.

Hours Worked During the Pandemic Restrictions



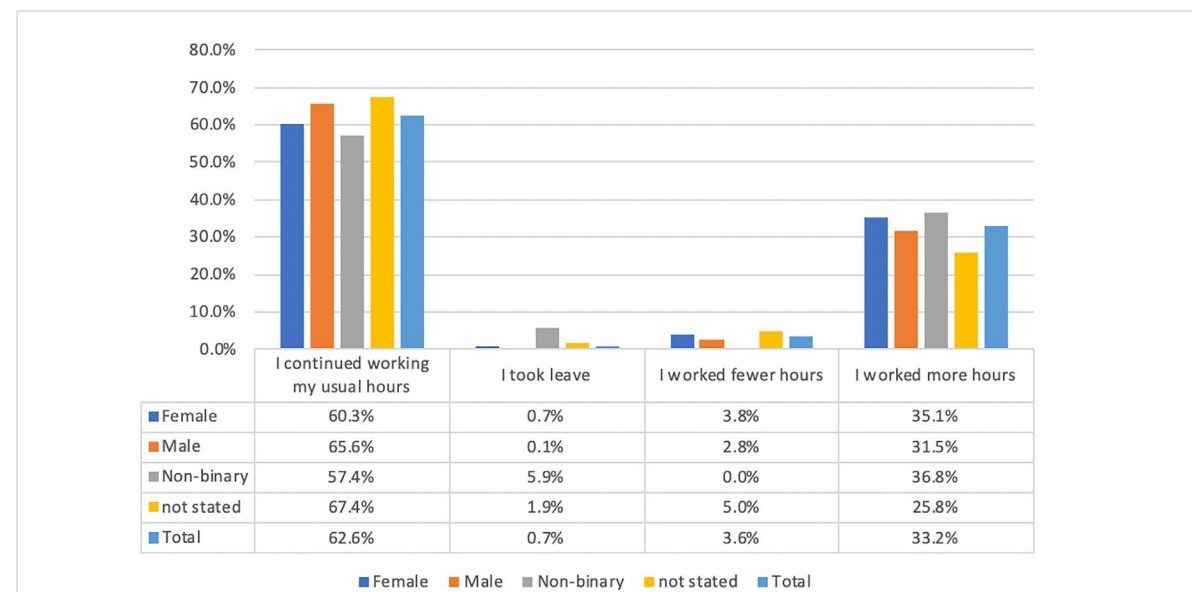
How many hours did employees work?

In our 2021 survey, 62.6% of respondents indicated that they continued to work their usual number of hours while working from home. However, of note is that there has been an increase in the number of hours worked between the two surveys. A third of respondents in 2021 said they worked more hours, compared with 28% of respondents in 2020.

There is the potential for these extended hours to lead to burnout, which has been supported by Australian Government data showing an increased level of APS employees reported feeling burnt out^[18]. Burnout can lead to demotivation and lowered performance, particularly for public servants who have also experienced structural changes within their agencies necessitated by responding to the pandemic^[19]. It is therefore essential that employee wellbeing is supported through preventative measures.

In 2021, more women than men worked an increased number of hours while working from home, as Figure 4 shows. Conversely, more men than women continued working their usual number of hours.

Figure 4. Hours worked during the pandemic lockdowns by gender

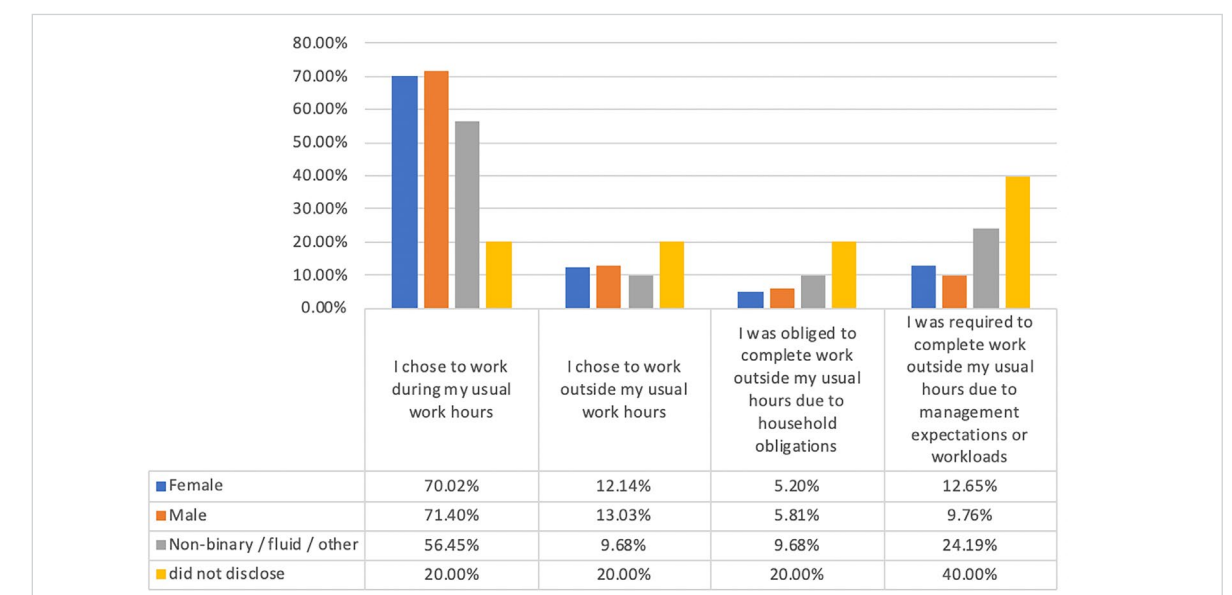


When were those hours worked?

Working from home has long been considered to be a flexible working arrangement that can assist employees to reconcile work and caring responsibilities^[20]. A large amount of research has also found, however, that working from home can exacerbate work/family conflict as boundaries between work and home blur^[21].

Overall, our 2021 survey results show that 70% of respondents chose to work during their usual working hours. Figure 5 shows that slightly more men than women worked outside the usual span of hours. Almost 12% of employees worked outside their usual working hours due to management expectation or workloads, with slightly more women than men doing so. This number has almost doubled from 2020. Not surprisingly, more senior employees – those at the Executive level or in the Senior Executive Service – were more likely to work outside the standard span of hours than were lower level employees.

Figure 5. When hours were worked by gender



Tip: Agencies and managers are encouraged to monitor workloads and working hours to ensure employee wellbeing and adjust workloads accordingly. Managers may also benefit from training in how to manage remote teams.

Usual and Preferred Working Patterns



We asked employees about their usual working patterns outside of pandemic lockdowns (see Figure 6) and their preferred working patterns (see Figure 7). The responses identify a significant mismatch, and key differences include:

- more than half of respondents (51%) worked all hours in their workplace, but this was the least preferred option (around 7.5%),
- only 4.4% worked from home around 60% of the time, but 20.7% would prefer to do this; slightly more women than men would like to work this amount of time from home,
- just over 17% of respondents would like to work from home 40% of the time,
- over a third of employees (37%) would like to work from home all the time, or for 80% of their working week, and
- only 5.8% worked all hours from home, while around 18.8% would prefer to do this.

Figure 6. Usual Pattern of Working Hours

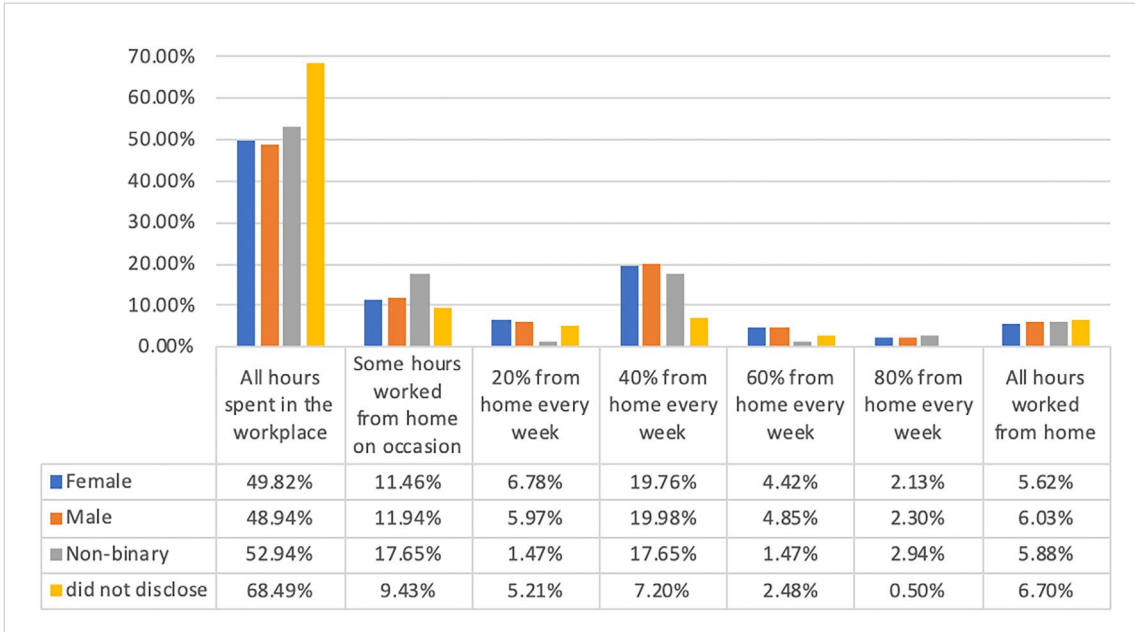
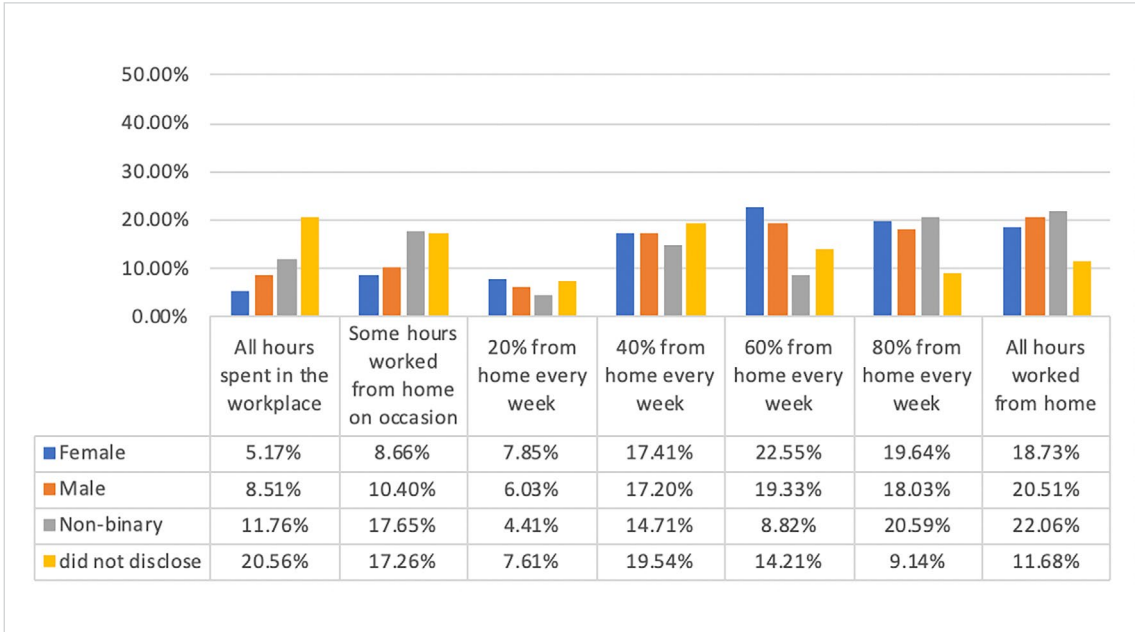


Figure 7. Preferred pattern of working hours



Tips

Tip: Agencies are encouraged to consult with employees and their representatives about their preferred working patterns, and to develop evidence-based policies incorporating both agency and employee preferences and needs.

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.

Tip: Organisational cultures and messaging can confirm support for flexible and hybrid working, ensuring that employees and managers discuss preferred working arrangements.

Tip: Organisations and managers are advised to find the right balance between employee preferences and organisational preferences, as working from home may become a key attraction and retention factor in the future.

Our findings align with the emerging literature which suggests employees’ preference is to work two to three days a week from home^[22]. A NSW survey found that employees have a preference for two to three days per week working from home^[23]. This mirrors findings from a global survey, which also found that respondents wanted to work from home two to three days a week^[24].

We were surprised at the minimal differences between the current working patterns of men and women, and the preferred patterns.

Factors determining employees' preference to work from home

Various factors were important in determining employees’ preference to work from home.

- Almost 90% (88.3%) of respondents stated that gaining time from not commuting was an important factor in their preference to work from home.
- A similar percentage stated that working from home enabled them to have more time for themselves and their family.
- Two-fifths of respondents stated that having more autonomy over when they could do their work was an important factor influencing their preference to work from home.
- Almost 70% stated that getting more work done at home than when in the office was also an important factor.

Requests to work from home

We asked respondents who had requested to work from home (outside of lockdown periods) whether their request had been granted. Fewer than 10% of requests were declined by managers. Over a quarter of employees (27.6%) stated that their preferred arrangement was approved in full. However, a significant proportion of employees (13.7%) said that their requested working arrangement was approved, but they did not ask for their preferred arrangement because they did not think that it would have been approved. This suggests some ongoing resistance to working from home – or that employees perceive resistance.

Is there a match between managers' and employees' preferences?

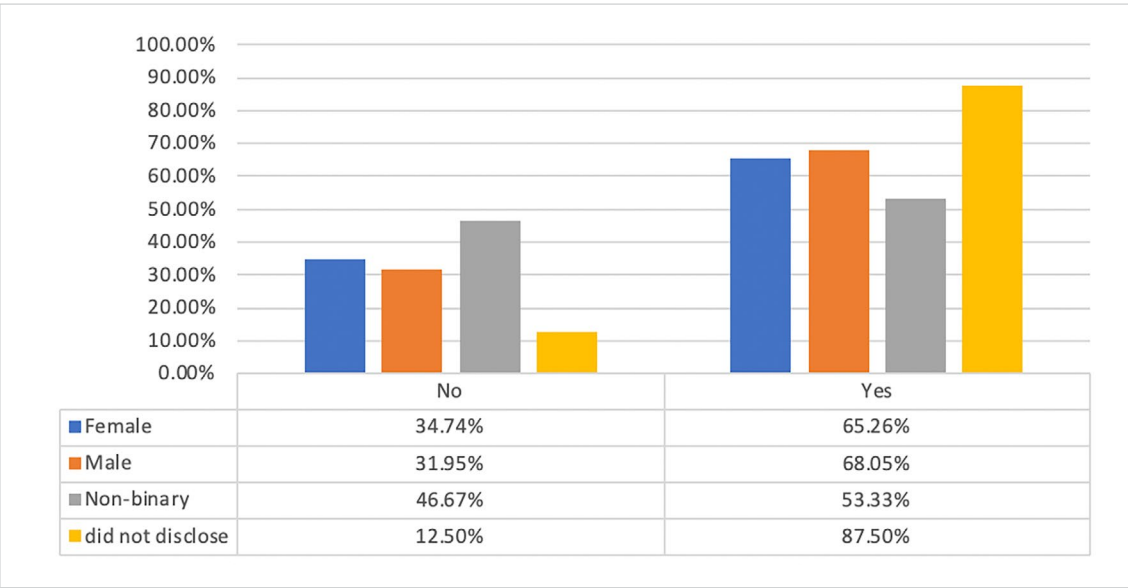
We asked managers what proportion of their team worked from home outside of lockdowns in 2021. Over 70% stated that either all, or more than half, of their team had worked from home (for some period) in 2021. This was considered to be the ‘usual’ working arrangement throughout 2021. We asked managers whether they preferred their teams’ usual working arrangements (or another arrangement). A majority of managers in our survey expressed a preference for their team to return to ‘usual’ working arrangements. Managers are increasingly comfortable managing hybrid teams, as these comments show:

[I] prefer staff be able to WFH if they wish as it demonstrates I trust them and allows them to balance work and family, which is necessary for good mental health (woman, Executive Level).

My team has demonstrated they are more productive at home and their well-being and health is better as demonstrated with low absent rates. We use different technology to keep in touch and they thrive with autonomy. I would prefer they be able to continue with what works best for them as it will benefit our team and agency (woman, APS5-6).

This finding has implications for agencies as they emerge into a COVID-normal environment, where it may be easy for agencies and managers to revert to pre-pandemic working arrangements, losing the opportunities and benefits that can accrue when employees work from home.

Figure 8. Is the usual arrangement the managers’ preferred arrangement?



However, there may be organisational barriers to employees working their preferred amount of days at home. We asked respondents whether their agency had placed a cap on the proportion of the working week employees can spend working from home. Just under half said that their agency had implemented a cap. Almost two in five employees, however, were unaware whether a cap had been implemented. The most common cap was 40% – agencies were allowing full-time employees to work from home two days a week.

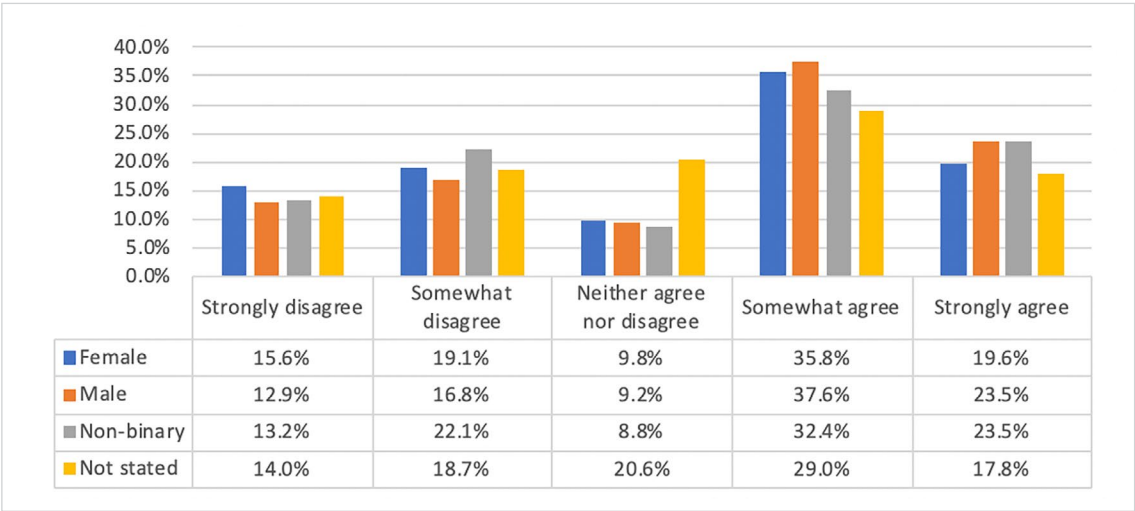
A minority of managers stressed the need for choice – for employees to be able to choose how much time they wanted to work from home as agencies move towards a hybrid working environment. However, researchers have argued that managers should decide which days employees should work from home, in order to ensure all employees spend some time in the office and to prevent proximity bias^[25].

Managers and Organisational Support



We asked respondents whether they believed that their agency actively supported the use of flexible working arrangements. In 2021, just over a fifth of respondents strongly agreed that their agency supported flexibility, an increase from 17% in 2020. Figure 9 shows that survey respondents of all genders agreed that their agency supported flexible working arrangements.

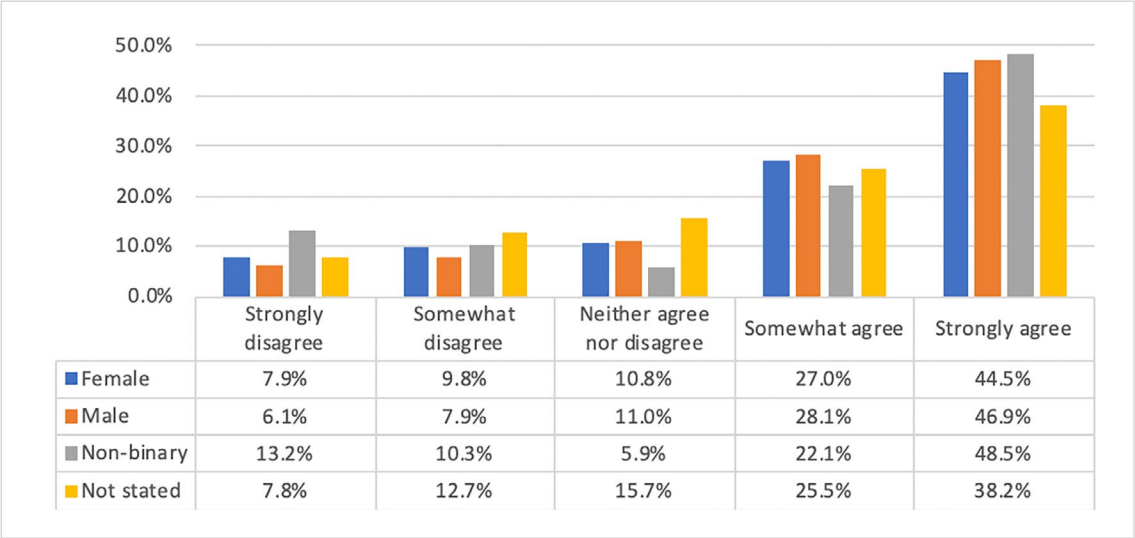
Figure 9. My agency actively supports the use of flexible work arrangements by all staff



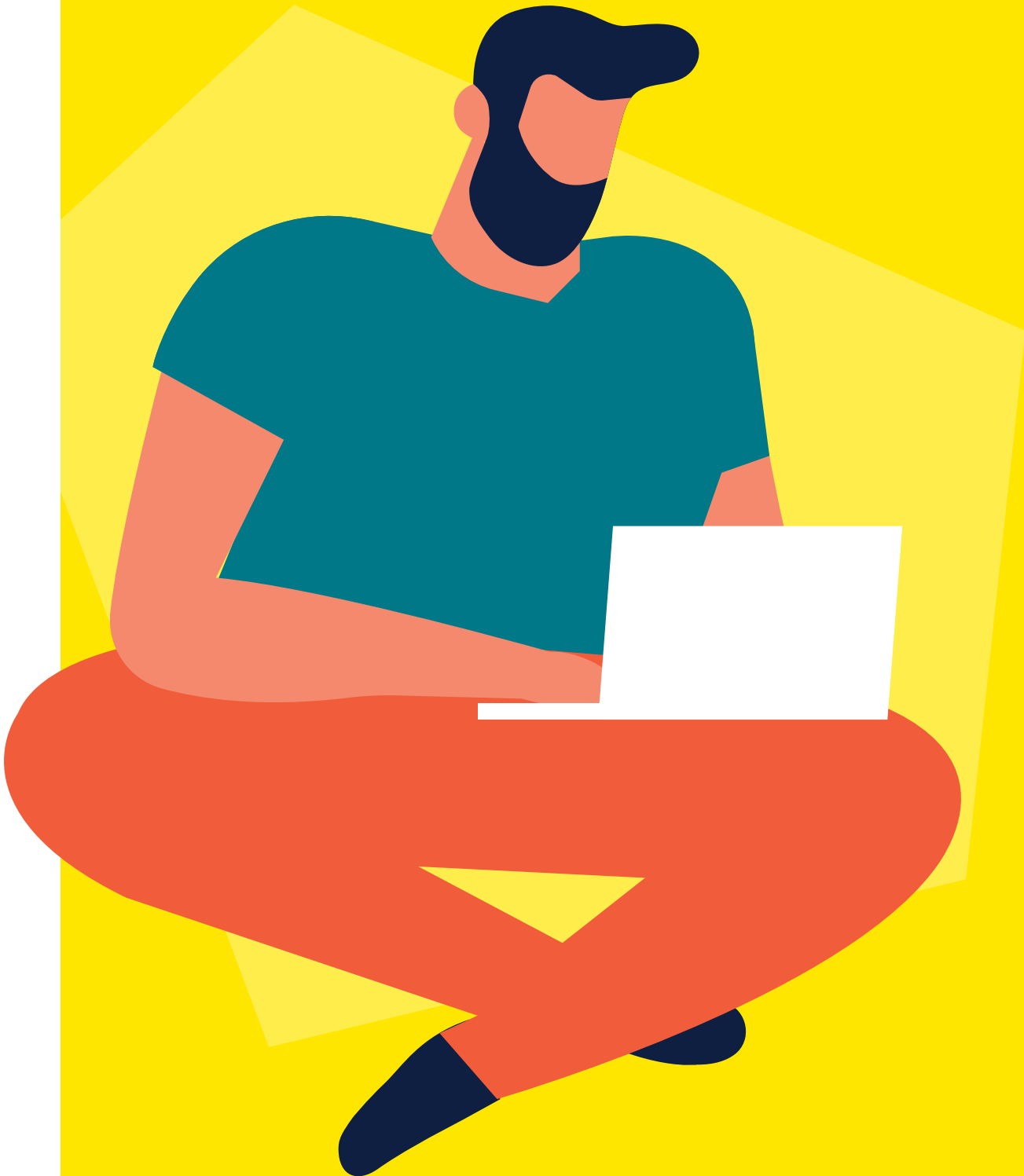
While the research is not extensive, emerging literature is showing increased support from managers for employees working from home since the onset of the pandemic, even as they overcome the associated difficulties^[26]. This aligns with our findings. The findings also show an increase in employees' perception that their manager supports flexible working arrangements. In 2021, 45% of respondents stated that their manager actively supports the use of flexible working arrangements. This increased from 37% in 2020, and highlights increased support for hybrid working, but also for flexible working arrangements more broadly.

One of the main findings of our 2020 survey was that many managers had an 'epiphany' and realised that working from home could be a successful way of working^[27]. This epiphany has translated into increased support for this form of working. Further, there has been a marked increase in the proportion of managers stating that they would be 'much more' supportive of employees working from home in future (44% in 2021 compared with 37% in 2020).

Figure 10. My supervisor actively supports the use of flexible work arrangements by all staff



Productivity

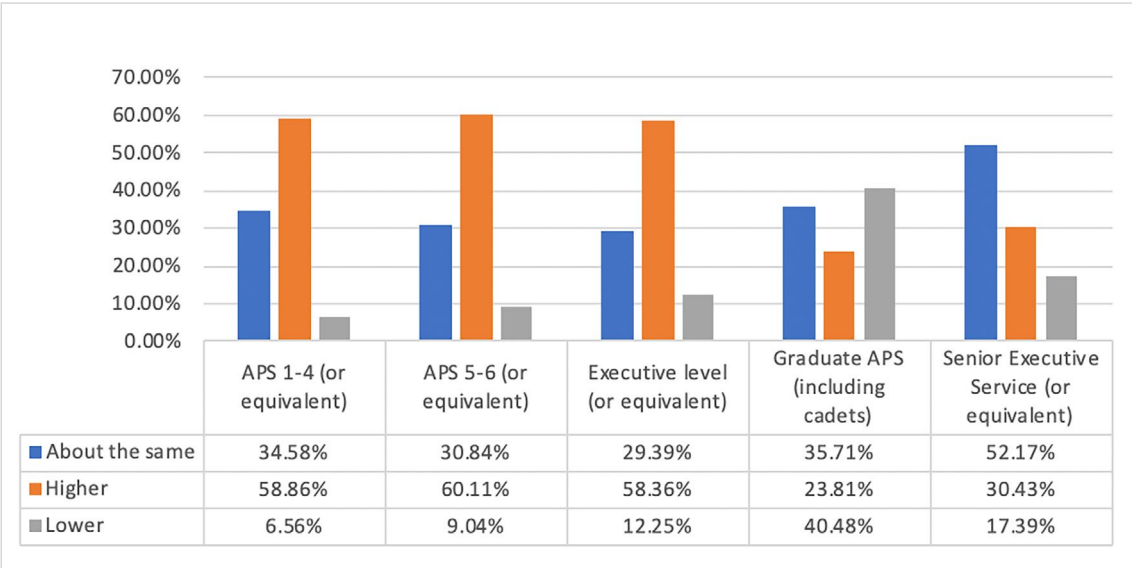


Employees' perceptions of productivity

We asked respondents to estimate whether their productivity was higher or lower when working from home. Almost three in five employees (59%) stated that their productivity was higher when working from home than in the office. Fewer than 10% believed that their productivity was lower when working from home. Two thirds of managers, however, considered that their team's productivity was about the same, whether working from home or in the office.

As shown in Figure 11, most employees considered that their productivity was higher while working from home. Exceptions include the graduate level, which might be used to more supervision, and the SES which might be more used to working from home. While there are limitations to self-reporting, these findings are confirmed by managers (discussed later).

Figure 11. Productivity working from home compared to the office



These findings reinforce findings from our previous survey in 2020, where respondents also considered that they were more productive working from home than in their employers' workplace.

It is also consistent with other surveys of employees and managers globally, who were consistently revealing self-reported increases to productivity and efficiency^[28]. This is expected to continue. The Productivity Commission notes^[29] that as employees start to return to pre-pandemic workplaces and hybrid working evolves, innovations and the identification of successful strategies which enable hybrid working will limit the risks of decreased productivity.

The respondents who reported their productivity was higher overwhelmingly said this was due to fewer distractions and interruptions. Many of them valued the opportunity to work without being distracted by colleagues, particularly in open plan offices, as these comments show:

I get interrupted every 5 minutes in our open plan office with people wanting to chat. Due to being fairly new to the team, I couldn't tell people to go away, and not many of them notice the subtle 'I have work to do' signs, so I just get a lot more done at home (man, Executive Level).

Much higher productivity when working from home as our office open space is too noisy, too many people, very difficult to concentrate in our office environment... (woman, APS5-6).

There may be a trade off between having employees in an open plan office with possibility lower levels of productivity, and greater access to mentoring and networking which can occur in the employers’ workplace (discussed below).

Tip: As some APS organisations consider redesigning physical workspaces as new ways of working emerge, it will be important to devise ways of minimising disruptions.

Managers’ perceptions of productivity

In our 2021 survey, over 90% of managers reported that their teams were just as, if not more, productive than they were working in their pre-pandemic workplace. This replicates findings from our previous survey. However, differences are evident between the two surveys, with an increased proportion of managers stating that their team’s productivity had stayed the same throughout 2021, compared with our previous survey, where more managers believed their teams’ productivity had increased.

Table 1: Managers’ Perceptions of Productivity, 2020 and 2021

Perceptions of Productivity	2020%	2021%
More productive	34.2	26.0
About the same	56.7	66.1
Less productive	9.1	7.9

The increased proportion of managers who considered their team’s productivity had stayed the same, but not increased in 2021, may be attributable to decreased discretionary effort once the initial burst of work on the commencement of the pandemic had subsided. Emerging practitioner literature has identified a phenomenon known as ‘panic productivity’ – the pandemic crisis drove people to work harder, and productivity increased^[30]. Throughout 2021, however, employees became fatigued and the initial burst of productivity due to increased discretionary work may have waned somewhat.

Tip: Levels of productivity may be fluctuating as employees work within a pandemic context. When measuring productivity and monitoring employee performance, managers may therefore need to adjust expectations and workloads accordingly.

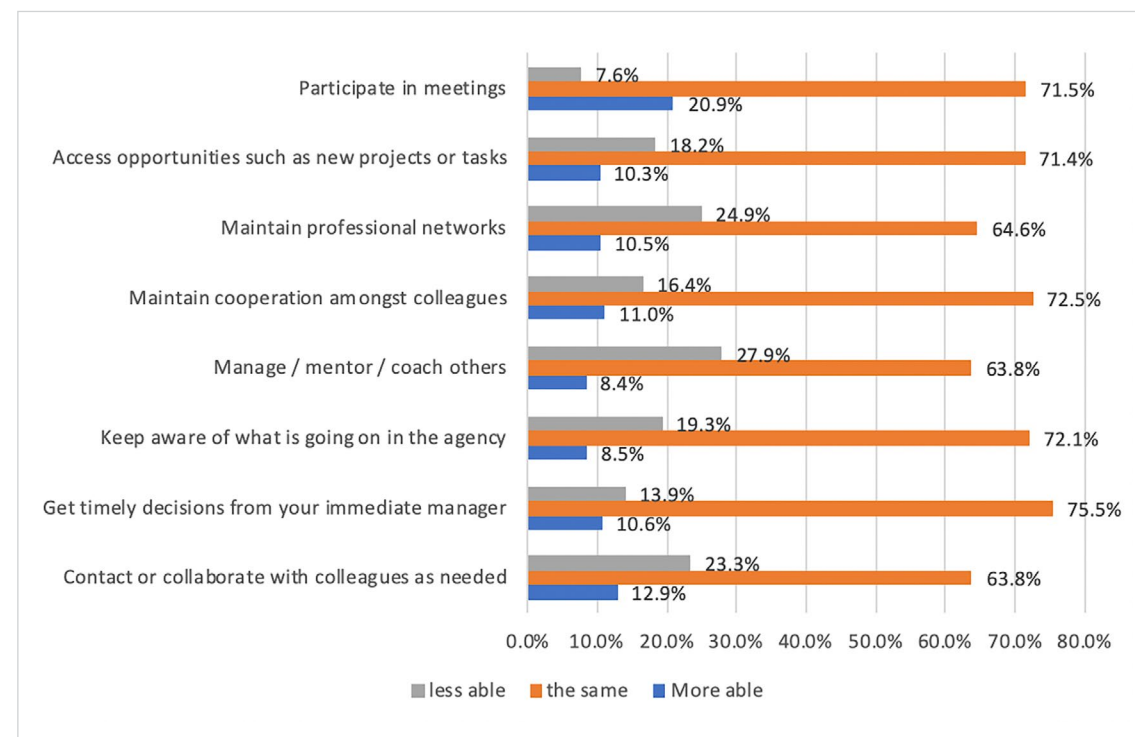


Networking and Relationships



We asked whether survey respondents were more or less able to undertake a range of tasks and functions. In 2021, the majority (just under two-thirds to just over three quarters) indicated that it was the same as pre-pandemic. This replicates our previous survey findings.

Figure 12. Networking and relationships



In 2021, over a quarter (27.9%) stated that they were less able to manage, mentor or coach others. This compares with just under a quarter (24.3%) of respondents who stated they were less able to undertake these tasks. This finding reinforces those in emerging literature^[31].

In 2021 fewer than 8% of employees said they were less able to participate in meetings while working from home. Significantly, in our previous survey, almost 50% of employees stated they found it more difficult to participate in meetings. This suggests that while mentoring and managing is more difficult when employees work from home, employees are now well used to participating in online meetings.

There has also been a slight increase in the proportion of respondents stating that it is more difficult to keep aware of what is going on in the agency. In 2021, 19% of respondents stated it was more difficult to keep abreast of agency developments – an increase from 15% in 2020. This highlights the importance of maintaining good communications between the organisation and employees. As employees transition into hybrid working, it will be important to ensure that communications are timely, regular and through a variety of communication channels.

Tip: Agencies need to ensure communications with employees are regular and widespread as they transition into hybrid working.

Workplace Health and Safety



Employees' workplace health and safety

In our 2021 survey, we asked employees if they had experienced any negative physical impacts of working from home. The majority (91%) had not. For those who had, the most common problems reported were back, neck and shoulder strain. This is consistent with findings elsewhere of the physical impacts, including musculoskeletal damage resulting from non-ergonomic setups^[32].

We also asked respondents whether they had experienced any psychological workplace injuries due to working from home. The vast majority (91%) had not, however, 9% had experienced a psychological injury. The most common psychological and mental health issues were isolation, loneliness and stress. This aligns with research showing the emerging health risks associated with enforced working from home, which includes loneliness, isolation, stress, and change fatigue^[33].

Researchers have predicted a wave of mental ill-health resulting from pandemic lockdowns, including for employees^[34]. The negative psychological impacts of working from home have been exacerbated by the pandemic and accompanied by a loss of control^[35]. Employees have also experienced high levels of fatigue, with recent research finding that employees can only "absorb half as much change before becoming fatigued as they could manage in 2019"^[36]. COVID-fatigue was evident with many of our survey respondents, encapsulated by this comment:

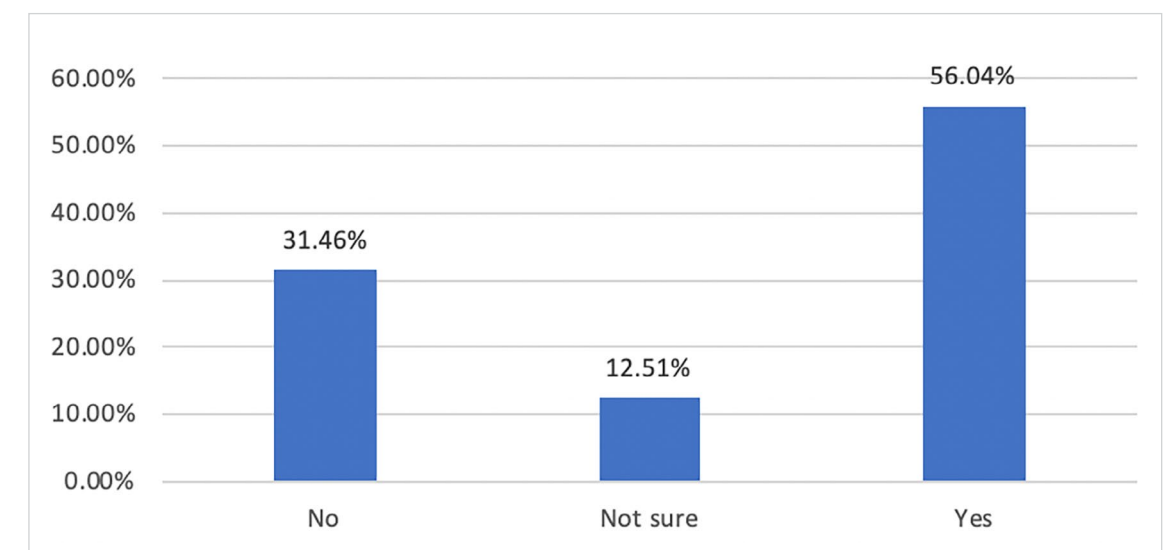
...I'm just not myself working from home and it stresses me out. I get less done, I feel lazy and guilty and my brain gets foggy and less able to process complex issues. I don't know what this is. It doesn't seem like depression or anxiety or burnout but my mental health is definitely not as good as it was (woman, APS5-6).

Tip: In order to prevent COVID and change fatigue and to ensure employees remain productive, organisations are encouraged to monitor employee wellbeing, and increase access to employee resilience programs and other support services.

Managers' perceptions of their teams' health and safety

While employees considered that their physical and psychological health had not been adversely impacted by working from home, many managers held different perceptions. Over half (56%) of the managers had noticed physical or psychological impacts of working from home on their staff.

Figure 13. Have you observed, informally or via formal means, any effects of working from home?



Over 700 managers and supervisors gave us written comments about the WHS impacts on their staff, and a third reported positive impacts. Managers reported that staff were productive and engaged working from home, and had a better work/life balance. Managers told us that staff enjoyed the flexibility and autonomy of working from home, with attendant positive behaviours, such as people exercising more.

However, half of the comments from managers detailed the negative WHS impacts of working from home. Managers told us that many staff struggled with isolation, leading to decreased motivation. Managers had noticed staff experiencing difficulties with home schooling, and while they provided support, home schooling appears to be a significant factor which negatively impacted on employees' mental health.

A notable minority of managers detailed concerns about 'lockdown fatigue', mental exhaustion and burnout. This was particularly the case with managers and teams in Melbourne who had experienced the longest periods of lockdown in Australia – and globally – throughout 2021^[37]. Managers noted that they did not believe that working from home *per se* was negatively impacting mental health, but that it was an effect of lockdowns. These comments are typical:

Everyone is very flat due to lockdown so it is hard to say if this is due to working from home or just because they can't do anything else. I would assume it's due to lockdown and that it would be different in a non-COVID environment (woman, Executive Level).

Lockdown is having a negative impact on our mental and physical wellbeing, however outside of lockdown staff appreciate flexible working arrangements and the ability to attend to personal commitments without missing full days of work (woman, Executive Level).

The discrepancy between managers' and employees' perceptions of the impacts on employees' mental health is not easy to explain. Employees answered this question in relation to themselves; managers responded while considering the impacts on the whole team. Employees may be under-reporting the negative impacts, and managers may be extrapolating negative impacts across a team. This is an area requiring further research.

The comments by managers indicate that once a 'COVID-normal' period commences and employees are able to socialise and access networks and support, that many of the negative mental health impacts associated with working from home may cease. There is little doubt, however, that wellbeing will continue to be an important area for agencies to manage.

Tip: Approaches to workplace health and safety should be revisited as hybrid working becomes more entrenched. In particular, our findings of both physical and psychological wellbeing challenges suggests more pro-active management support and intervention are required.



What of the future?



Our findings highlight the benefits of working from home, which include increased autonomy and flexibility and better work/life balance. Productivity has been maintained. The Australian Government has also realised the benefits of this form of working, and has stated that a 'distributed work' (ie remote working) has been shown to be a viable way of working, which has not undermined productivity^[38]. Working from home – and hybrid working – is here to stay.

APS agencies are considering what the future of work, and flexible working, might look like. Over two-thirds of APS agencies have reportedly reviewed their flexible working policy since the onset of the pandemic^[39]. We asked respondents if their supervisor was following the new policy – a third did not know whether their supervisor did, and another third stated that their supervisor or manager was not following the policy. This is an area which agencies could follow up, to ensure that managers and employees are not only aware of any new policies, but that managers are also compliant.

Working from home – or hybrid working – is becoming a standard employment condition. The vast majority of respondents (87%) agreed with the statement that working from home is emerging as a standard working condition that employees expect. Over two in five respondents (45%) also stated that if their agency did not allow them to work from home at all, that they would consider changing agencies or leaving the public sector.

This finding aligns with predictions of 'the great resignation', with labour market churn following the periods of pandemic lockdowns^[40]. This may be a North American phenomenon, with limited evidence showing that Australian employees are planning on changing jobs^[41]. However, organisations are realising the need to make remote and flexible working part of their employee value proposition (EVP)^[42].

APS agencies' EVPs also need recrafting to be future-focused, and to attract and retain the best employees. Over four fifths of our respondents who were managers considered that working from home contributes to their organisation's ability to attract and retain staff. However, while this is a strong finding, over a quarter of managers (28.6%) were unsure whether limitations on working from home would decrease their organisation's ability to attract and retain staff. These findings indicate that more research – both practitioner and academic – is needed to identify what constitutes a good EVP.

Further, organisations are increasingly considering allowing employees to 'work from anywhere', which extends beyond working from home, to include working in other locations, cities and even countries^[43]. We asked managers if working from home had enabled their agency to advertise their positions in a broader range of locations. Just over a quarter agreed with this statement. Almost half did not know whether this had occurred. This is an area worthy of further examination, particularly as the public sector considers decentralisation of agencies.

Flexible working is changing. From being mainly centred around flexible working hours, it is now broadening to not only include remote working, but is also impacting on the way work is being conducted. Working from home during pandemic lockdowns hinted that public sector work could be undertaken differently. 'Surge' teams of employees from various agencies were formed to address the challenges of the pandemic and resulting policy and administrative work required^[44]. Not only were agencies and work configured, the nature of work changed, with some being done synchronously, and other work being done asynchronously.

The future of work is hybrid. As we stated in our last report, we have witnessed enormous change from managers and organisations being resistant to staff working from home, to a revolution based around remote working. The revolution continues.

Conclusions

As the world commences a third year of living and working through the pandemic, organisations and employees have learnt many valuable lessons about how to work from home successfully. Employees and managers welcome the opportunity for increased time at home due to reduced commuting time. They are also adjusting to online communications, and online meetings are now the norm. Employees value working from home so much their clear preference is to work hybridly into the future, for two or three days a week. The majority of managers support this preference, however, the imposition of caps limiting the amount of time employees can work from home may be stifling managerial prerogative and employee choice. The cap on working from home also highlights tensions as agencies grapple with changing ways of working, while ensuring business continuity and stability within workplaces.

The benefits of working from home are accompanied by downsides. Our findings show an increased number of employees working longer hours, and COVID-fatigue and burnout were widespread at the time of the survey. Workplace health and safety issues will therefore continue to be at the forefront of issues being addressed by organisations, with an increased focus on employee wellbeing. When the pandemic recedes and employees are able to work hybridly, the burnout associated with working from home during a pandemic is also likely to decrease. The positivities associated with this form of working may then be able to be fully realised.

Our research has shown that managers and employees consider that they are just as productive, if not more productive working at home than at their usual workplace. However, our findings also highlight some disconnections between managers and employees' experiences of working from home. In 2021, employees considered they were more productive working at home than their managers did. However, we have also found that productivity was, at the very least, being maintained throughout 2021. This is no mean feat, as many managers and employees told of experiencing burnout and fatigue.

Further research

Our findings highlight a range of questions needing to be researched to ensure optimum performance for agencies. These include: what is the optimum amount of time to work from home in a hybrid working arrangement? How do managers manage remote teams, on a daily basis, to ensure peak performance, but also to make sure equality and diversity are maintained? What will happen to offices as workforces become hybrid? What are the longer-term impacts of hybrid working on employees' career opportunities and on workforce diversity? What are the longer-term impacts on health and wellbeing? How will organisations need to change their EVP to attract and retain employees?

It is crucial to generate answers to these questions, to ensure the APS continues to be agile and productive, through the myriad of changes and challenges wrought by the pandemic.

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A/Prof Sue Williamson is one of Australia's leading experts in public sector gender equality. Sue's most recent research examined the future of flexible working in the public sector, and she has also researched how public sector employees worked from home during the pandemic in 2020. Sue has also focused on how middle managers can progress gender equality, identifying barriers and offering solutions on ways forward. Sue publishes extensively on these issues, in both academic and non-academic media. Sue was awarded the 2020 Rosemary O'Leary award from the International Research Society for Public Management for the best article published on public sector and gender equality in 2020. She was also a Telstra Business Woman of the Year Finalist for the ACT, in Academia, in 2017.

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
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