



Key working from home trends emerging from COVID-19

A report to the Fair Work Commission

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The contents of this paper are the responsibility of the authors and the research has been conducted without the involvement of members of the Fair Work Commission.

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List of abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
ASU	Australian Municipal, Administrative, Clerical and Services Union
Commission	Fair Work Commission
HILDA	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia
IPC	Innovation and Productivity Council
MJA	The Medical Journal of Australia
NSW	New South Wales
US	United States
WFH	Work/working from home
WGEA	Workplace Gender Equality Agency

1 Introduction

1.1 Objective

The objective of this report is to identify important work from home (WFH) trends emerging in Australia in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. WFH is a form of teleworking, a term used to describe work conducted remotely, rather than from a fixed office or place of employment.

The report discusses findings from a range of different research projects, which were conducted between April–October 2020, with sources of data including:

- Swinburne University of Technology;
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS);
- Roy Morgan;
- Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA);
- NSW Innovation and Productivity Council (IPC); and
- Australian Institute of Family Studies.

1.2 The impact of COVID-19 on Australian employment

Research conducted by Roy Morgan in July 2020 illustrates that two-thirds of working Australians (67 per cent) have experienced 'a change to their employment' due to the impact of COVID-19. Examples of some of these changes in working conditions include being stood down, having reduced hours, and having businesses slowed or stopped completely. However, the most significant change to employment due to the pandemic was found to be a move towards WFH.

Table 1: Employment changes mentioned as impacting on workers because of COVID-19

	<u>May 2020</u>	<u>July 2020</u>
Now working from home	4.3 million (28%)	3.9 million (25%)
Having work hours reduced	3.3 million (22%)	3.2 million (21%)
My business has slowed or stopped completely	2.9 million (19%)	2.3 million (15%)
Had an increase in their work hours	1.9 million (12%)	2.0 million (13%)
Stood down for a period of time	1.7 million (11%)	1.5 million (9%)
No work available	1.3 million (9%)	1.2 million (7%)
Had their pay reduced for same number of work hours	880,000 (6%)	960,000 (6%)
Been made redundant	490,000 (3%)	620,000 (4%)
Have taken leave to avoid loss of pay	680,000 (4%)	480,000 (3%)
Some other change to employment	1.3 million (9%)	1.3 million (8%)
TOTAL Had a change to employment	11.2 million (72%)	10.4 million (67%)
NO changes to employment	3.5 million (23%)	4.2 million (27%)
Was not employed prior to COVID-19	730,000 (5%)	860,000 (6%)
Working Australians	15.4 million	15.5 million

Note: The figures in each column add to over 100% as many respondents mentioned more than one employment change they have had because of the coronavirus.

Source: [Roy Morgan \(2020\), *Two-thirds of working Australians have had their employment impacted by COVID-19 – Victoria, NSW & Tasmania hardest hit*, August, Article No. 8501.](#)

This report will investigate the impacts of this move towards WFH in more detail, describing the key challenges, benefits, gender effects, and implications for health and wellbeing, in addition to future predictions for this trend.

A unique aspect of this report is the inclusion of primary research findings from an April–May 2020 survey of Australian employees WFH during lockdown, conducted by the authors (Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020). The survey collected demographic information from the participants, asked about their current WFH experiences, the management strategies that were being employed, the impact it has had on their health and wellbeing, and how likely they believed they would continue WFH in the future.

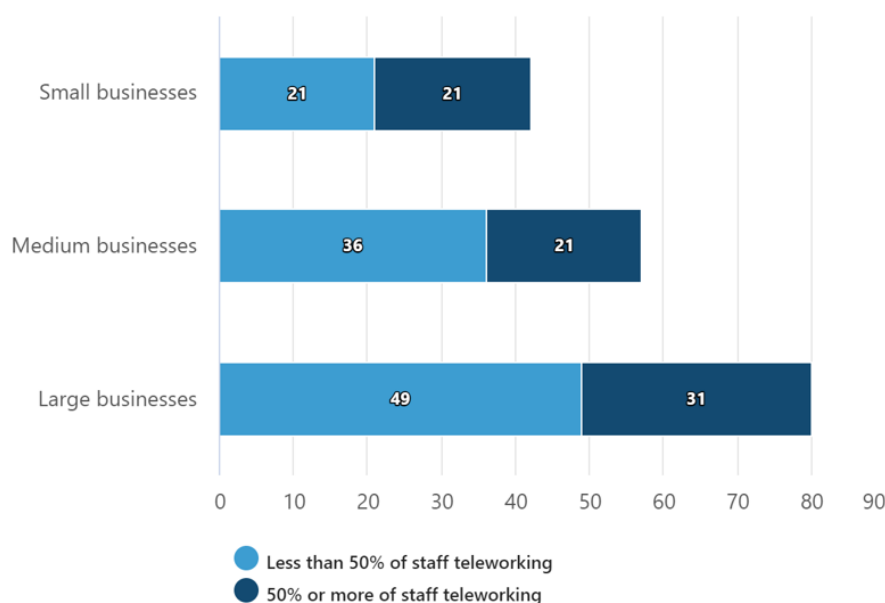
The survey involved a total of 364 Australian workers, took between 10–15 minutes to complete, and was approved by Swinburne University of Technology's Human Research Ethics Committee.

2 Key Australian WFH trends arising due to COVID-19

A Roy Morgan report indicated that over 4.3 million people (32 per cent of all working Australians) had been WFH since the COVID-19 pandemic shut down large parts of the Australian economy. These findings were based on interviews with 9905 Australians aged 14+ years, conducted in April–May 2020, of which 6637 were working Australians.

The report found that working women (33 per cent) were slightly more likely than men (32 per cent), to be working from home during this period, with significantly different WFH rates found between different age groups. People aged 35–49 years (38 per cent) were found to be the most likely to be WFH, closely followed by those aged 25–34 years (36 per cent), and 50–64 years (33 per cent). Far less likely to be WFH were workers at the furthest ends of the age spectrum, with only one-in-five of those aged 65+ years (23 per cent) currently WFH, and only one-in-six (17 per cent) of those aged under 25 years.

A [September 2020](#) telephone-based survey by the ABS found more than two-in-five employing businesses (43 per cent) currently had staff teleworking, compared with 28 per cent before COVID-19 (see Chart 1). Large businesses (80 per cent) were almost twice as likely as small businesses (42 per cent) to have any employees teleworking, and were also significantly more likely to have the majority (50 per cent or more) of their workforce currently teleworking (31 per cent) compared to small businesses (21 per cent) (see Chart 1).

Chart 1: Employing businesses with employees currently teleworking, by employment size

Source: [ABS, Business Indicators, Business Impacts of COVID-19, September 2020](#)

The [September ABS household impacts of COVID-19 report](#)¹, a monthly longitudinal study which collects information from around 1500 Australians, asked participants to reflect on how often they worked from home in the last four weeks compared to the period before COVID-19 restrictions. Australians with a job, who were surveyed using online forms and telephone interviews, reported that prior to the COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020:

- 12 per cent worked from home most days;
- 10 per cent worked from home at least once a week; and
- 6 per cent worked from home at least once a month.

By comparison, in the four weeks prior to 11 September 2020, Australians who currently have a job reported:

- 31 per cent worked from home most days;
- 9 per cent worked from home at least once a week; and
- 6 per cent worked from home at least once a month.

The [October update](#)² of the Household Impacts of COVID-19 survey found that two in five (41 per cent) of Australians with a job were still WFH at least one day per week, during the previous four-week period, with those in Victoria (50 per cent) and NSW (44 per cent) the most likely to be WFH in October.

¹ ABS 'Household Impacts of COVID-19', *September 2020*

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/household-impacts-covid-19-survey/sep-2020>

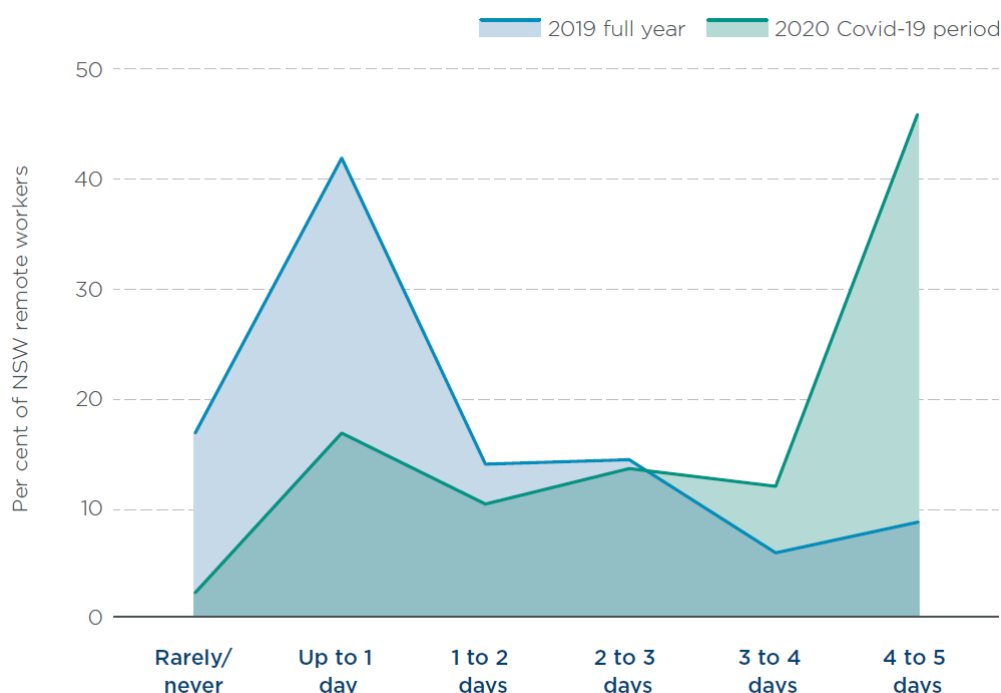
² ABS 'Household Impacts of COVID-19', *October 2020*

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/household-impacts-covid-19-survey/oct-2020>

Similarly, a recent NSW Innovation and Productivity Council (IPC) report³ which surveyed 1500 NSW workers between August-September 2020 to understand their experiences of and attitudes toward remote working, estimates that around 60 per cent of NSW workers did at least some remote working in 2019. However, they did not do it very often, on average less than one day each week.

COVID-19 then pushed matters to the opposite extreme, and during the pandemic it was common for those who could WFH to do it full-time, and the report estimates that the overall proportion of NSW workers who were WFH rose from 18 per cent in 2019, to 43 per cent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chart 2: Proportion of remote working in NSW (2019 vs 2020 COVID-19 period)



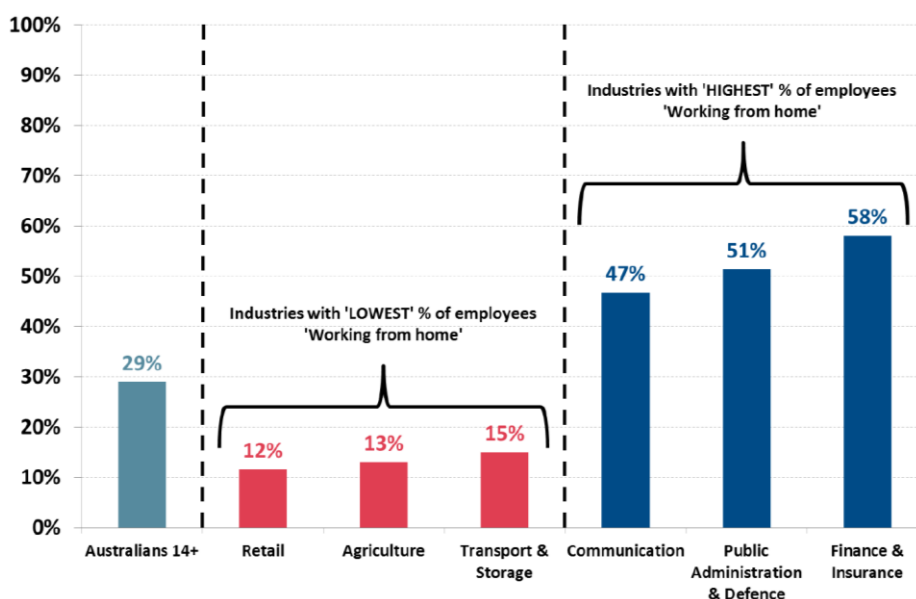
Note: The '2020 COVID-19 period' covers June to September 2020

Source: [IPC Remote Working Survey 2020](#)

2.1 WFH by industry

The Roy Morgan [survey](#) conducted in April–May 2020 confirmed a significant variance in WFH rates across different industries. More than half of those employed in Finance & Insurance (58 per cent) and Public Administration & Defence (51 per cent) were found to be WFH, and just under half of those working in the Communications sector (47 per cent). However, WFH levels in more 'hands-on' industries were found to be significantly lower. Fewer than one-in-six Australians working in Manufacturing (16 per cent), Transport & Storage (15 per cent), Agriculture (13 per cent) or Retail (12 per cent), had been WFH (see Chart 3).

³ NSW Remote Working Insights: Our experience during COVID-19 and what it means for the future of work <https://www.treasury.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/Full-Report-NSW-Remote-Working-Insights-Report-1-2020%20%281%29.pdf>

Chart 3: Working from home by industry, top 3 & bottom 3 industries

Note: Roy Morgan multi-mode survey of Australians conducted from the weekend of April 17–19, 2020 through to May 29–31, 2020, n=9905 including 6637 working Australians, aged 14+ years.

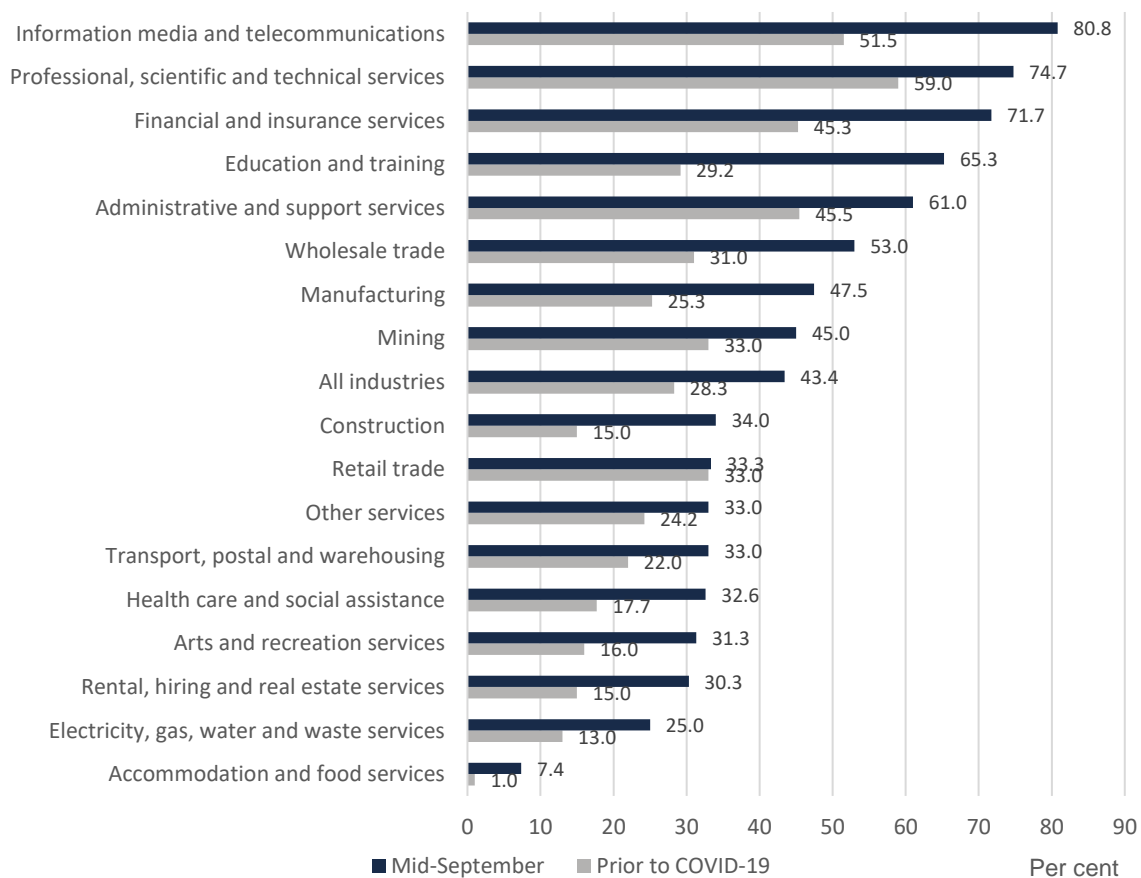
Source: [Roy Morgan, June 2020, Article No. 8451](#)

ABS Business Indicators data⁴ compared the proportion of employees teleworking in September 2020, by industry, with pre-COVID levels (see Chart 4). The most significant increases were identified in Education and training (29.2 per cent to 65.3 per cent), Information media and telecommunications (51.5 per cent to 80.8 per cent), and Financial and insurance services (45.3 per cent to 71.7 per cent). The industries experiencing the least change were Retail Services (33.0 per cent to 33.3 per cent) and Accommodation and Food Services (1.0 per cent to 7.4 per cent). However, all industries were found to be impacted to some extent, with increases in teleworking reported across the board (see Chart 4).

The Roy Morgan and Business Indicators findings both identify similar trends, of high WFH rates in sectors like Finance and Insurance, Administration, and Communications, compared to much lower WFH rates in ‘hands on’ industries, like Retail and Transport.

⁴ ABS ‘Business Indicators, Business Impacts of COVID-19’, *September 2020*
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/business-indicators/business-indicators-business-impacts-covid-19/sep-2020>

Chart 4: Proportion of businesses with employees teleworking, prior to COVID-19 and mid-September, by industry



Note: Excludes those that did not know the proportion of employees teleworking

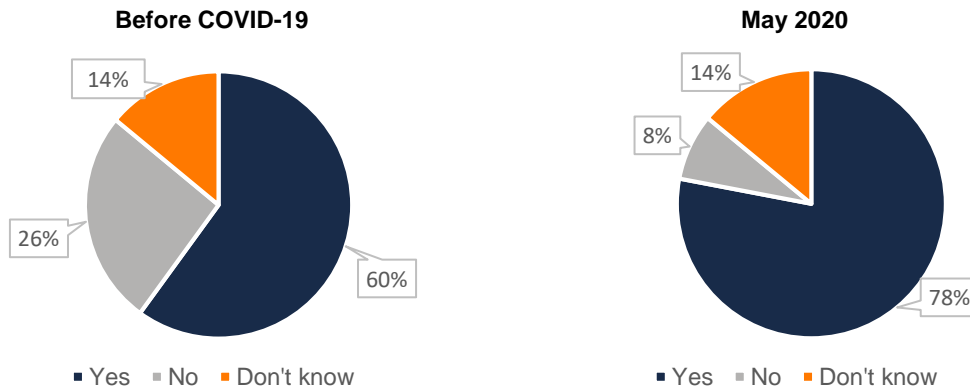
Source: Fair Work Commission (2020), [Information note – Working from home](#), 1 October.

2.2 Presence of WFH policies

Results from the Swinburne University of Technology online survey indicated there had been a significant increase in the number of organisations with a formal WFH policy, due to the emergence of the pandemic.

Prior to COVID-19, around only 60 per cent of Australian organisations reported having a formal WFH policy, whilst 78 per cent had one in place by May 2020 (see Chart 5). At the time of the survey, 8 per cent of organisations still did not have a WFH survey, and 14 per cent of participants did not know if their organisation had one or not.

Chart 5: Increase in WFH policies due to COVID-19



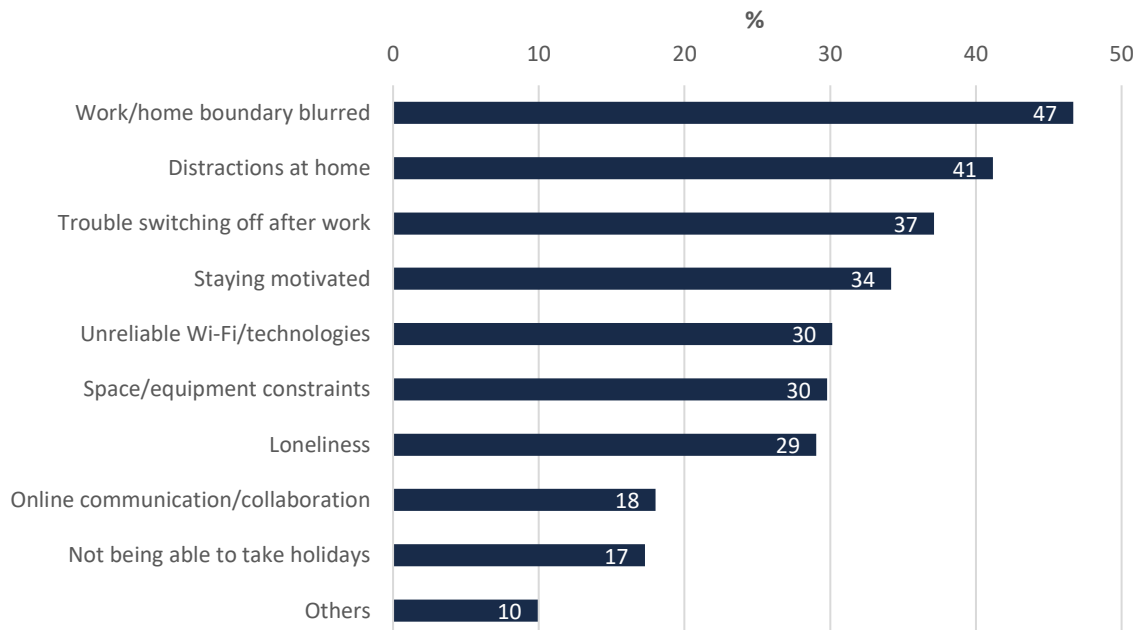
Source: [Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020](#)

2.3 Challenges and benefits of WFH

The recent transition to full-time WFH, due to the impact of COVID-19, has resulted in a range of both challenges and benefits for workers (see Charts 6 and 7).

Almost half (47 per cent) of the participants in the recent [Swinburne survey](#) indicated that they were struggling with the ‘blurring’ of the boundary between work and home life, more than two-in-five (41 per cent) found distractions at home to be a challenge, whilst more than one-third had trouble switching off after work (37 per cent) and staying motivated (34 per cent).

Chart 6: Challenges of WFH during COVID-19

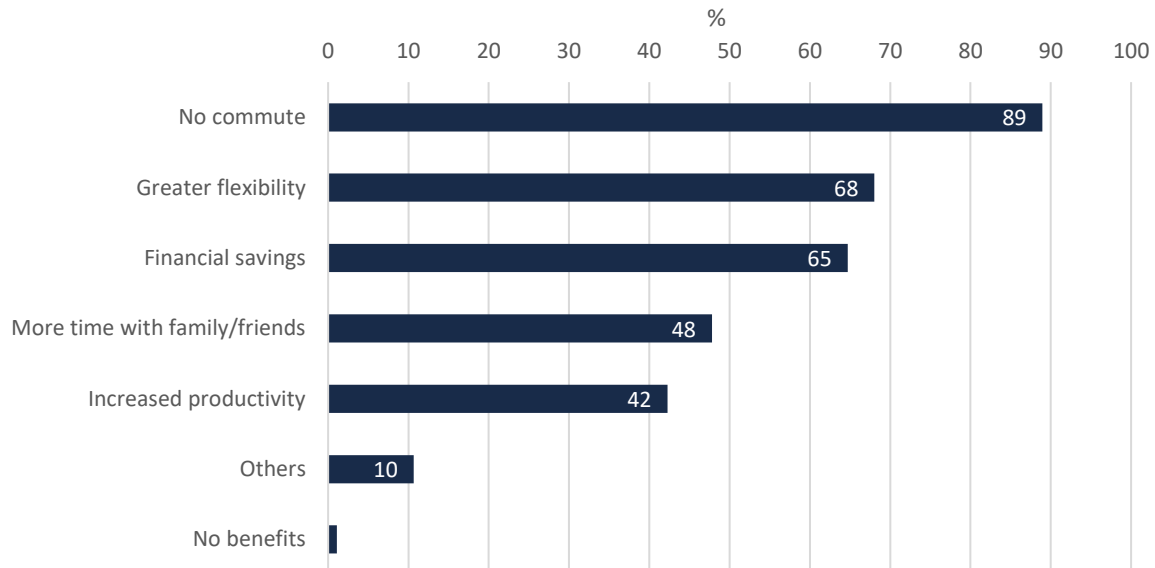


Source: [Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020](#)

Despite the many challenges of WFH during COVID-19, workers were also able to identify a range of benefits. Almost 90 per cent of those WFH full-time during COVID-19 saw a benefit in not having to commute to work, around two-thirds felt this arrangement allowed them greater flexibility (68 per

cent) and led to financial savings (65 per cent), whilst almost half (48 per cent) said it enabled them to spend more time with family or friends.

Chart 7: Benefits of WFH during COVID-19



Source: [Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020](#)

Previous research in 2019 from [Hopkins & McKay](#)⁵ illustrates that not having to commute saves the average Australian worker 2 hours per day, or 10 hours per week.

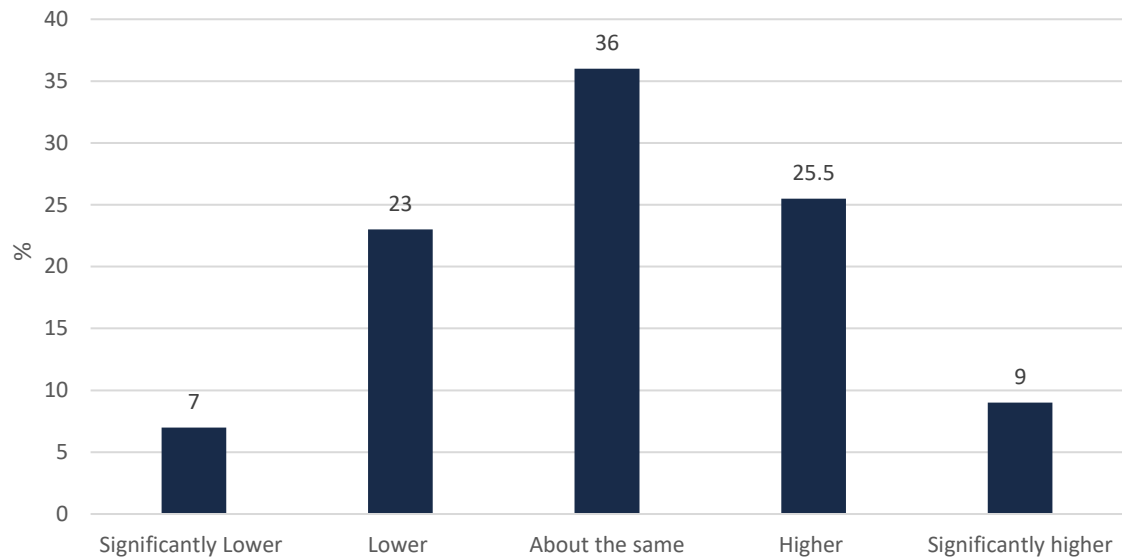
2.4 Productivity whilst WFH during COVID-19

From a productivity perspective, the transition to WFH due to COVID-19 has led to mixed results (see Chart 8). Around one-third of participants (34.5 per cent) felt they were more productive when WFH, but a similar number felt they were less productive (30 per cent), whilst the remaining third believed their productivity level was about the same as normal (36 per cent).

To better understand why some participants were more productive WFH during COVID-19, whilst others were less productive, simple correlations were performed and confirmed a number of trends. Significant relationships were found to exist between higher productivity and:

- those who are given clear work expectations – e.g. structure, responsibilities, precise objectives and performance measures;
- workers who create daily goals and build structure into their day; and
- those who receive encouragement to create a routine and establish a space that is work specific.

⁵ Hopkins, JL & McKay, J 2019, 'Investigating 'Anywhere Working' as a Mechanism for Alleviating Traffic Congestion in Smart Cities,' *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, Vol. 142, May, pp. 258-272
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0040162518301549?via%3DIihub>

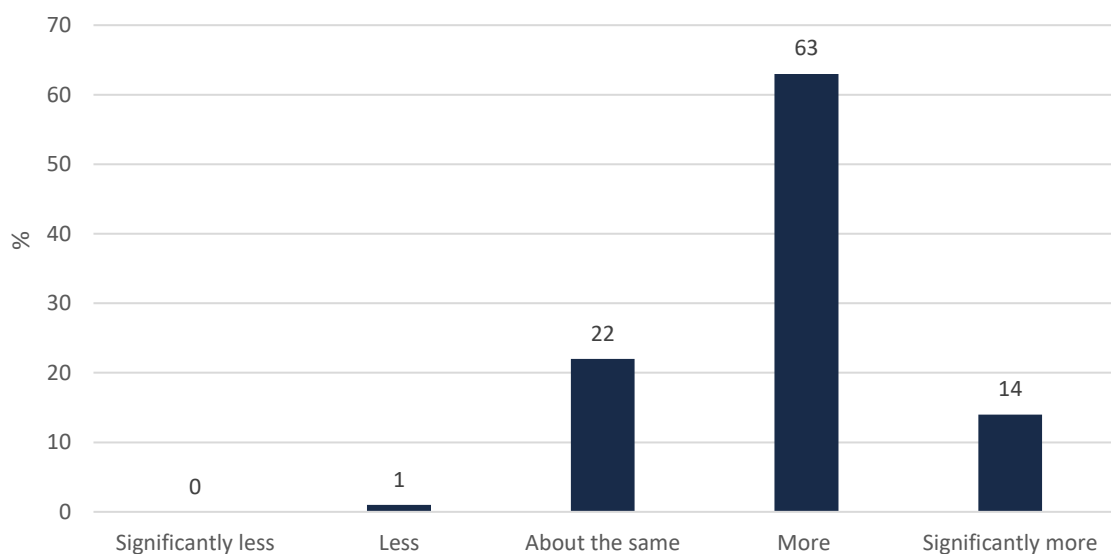
Chart 8: Worker WFH productivity levels during COVID-19

Source: [Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020](#)

2.5 Future WFH predictions

As part of their [September 2020](#) telephone-based survey, the ABS asked if they expect staff to continue to telework once restrictions are lifted and conditions stabilise, and three-in-ten employing businesses (29 per cent) reported that they did.

Similarly, more than three-quarters of Australian managers (77 per cent) in the Swinburne survey believed their staff will WFH either more (63 per cent), or significantly more (14 per cent), in the future than they did prior to COVID-19 (see Chart 9).

Chart 9: Future WFH predictions from managers

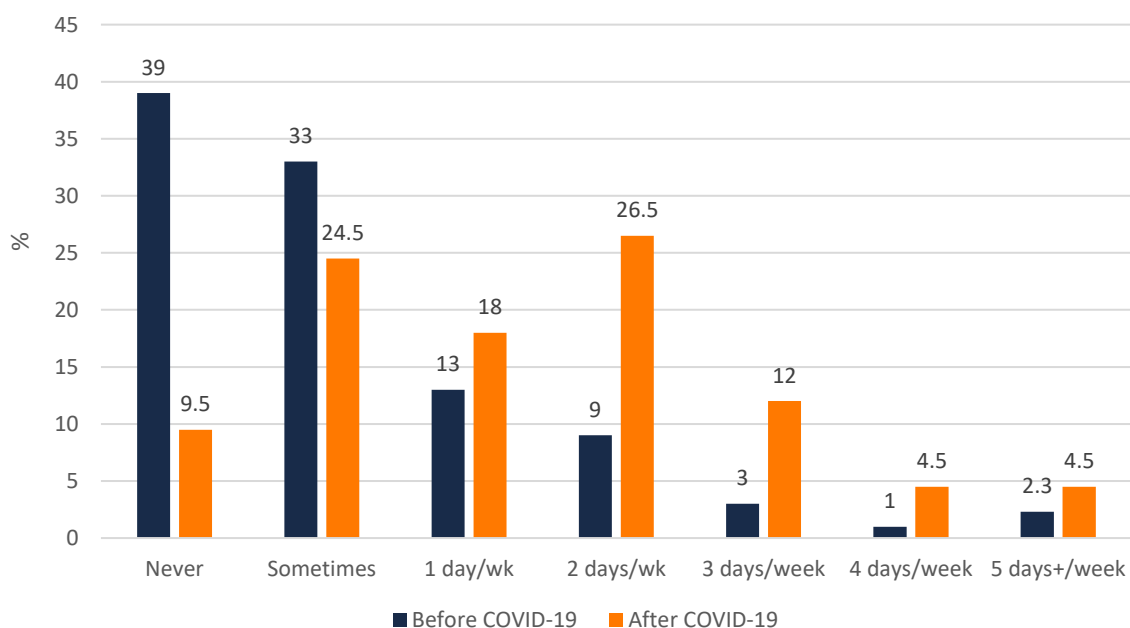
Source: [Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020](#)

Management perspectives on future WFH trends are particularly important, as they are often the decision-makers when it comes to addressing applications for workplace flexibility lodged by employees.

With regards to the employees themselves, the same study found that whilst nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of workers did not WFH on any kind of regular basis prior to COVID-19 (less than 1 day per week), only 10 per cent now believe they will not WFH again in the future.

The median number of days that workers expect to WFH in the future, once all COVID restrictions have been fully removed, was found to be 1 day per week (compared with the pre-COVID median of 'sometimes').

Chart 10: Worker future WFH predictions



Source: [Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020](#)

Whilst WFH during COVID-19 is an extreme case, with workers being forced into WFH full-time in order to contain the spread of a pandemic, WFH should not necessarily be regarded as an all-or-nothing practice. The recent NSW Innovation and Productivity Council study⁶, found that whilst only 5 per cent of us can perform all our tasks remotely, half of us can work remotely for at least two days a week.

It found that NSW workers like WFH, but also value working together in person, with a hybrid model of blending both work types being the preferred arrangement. Once all COVID-19 restrictions have been removed, the report believes that the key challenge will be finding a flexible mix of workspaces, policies and practices that caters to these preferences.

⁶ NSW Remote Working Insights: Our experience during COVID-19 and what it means for the future of work <https://www.treasury.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/Full-Report-NSW-Remote-Working-Insights-Report-1-2020%20%281%29.pdf>

3 Gender differences in WFH

Research by [Roy Morgan](#) analysed those in the workforce who had experienced a change in employment due to COVID-19 which resulted in WFH, and found that women were slightly more likely to be WFH than men. Given that women may face additional burdens during WFH, due to the likes of unpaid work, it is pertinent to understand whether women have different experiences than men when WFH.

Turning to international findings, [Catalyst](#)⁷ has identified two major factors impacting women and work during COVID-19 which are:

- occupational/sector segregation; and
- unpaid work.

These and other factors are discussed in the sections below.

3.1 Occupational segregation

Globally, women are over-represented in occupations and sectors hit especially hard during the pandemic.

Based on 2018 data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey (Wave 18) pre-COVID, Table 2 provides data on the prevalence of working from home arrangements for employees by occupation. The main findings show that:

- The highest proportions of employees that had worked any usual hours at home were Managers and Professionals, followed by Clerical and administrative workers. Machinery operators and drivers, Labourers, and Community and personal services workers had the lowest proportions.
- The highest proportion of employees with home-based work entitlements were Managers, Clerical and administrative workers and Professionals, while Labourers, and Machinery operators and drivers had the lowest.

⁷ Catalyst. Covid-19's detrimental effect on gender equality: Quick take. August 19, 2020. <https://www.catalyst.org/research/covid-19s-detrimental-effect-on-gender-equality-quick-take/>

Table 2: Working from home arrangements, by occupation, HILDA survey 2018

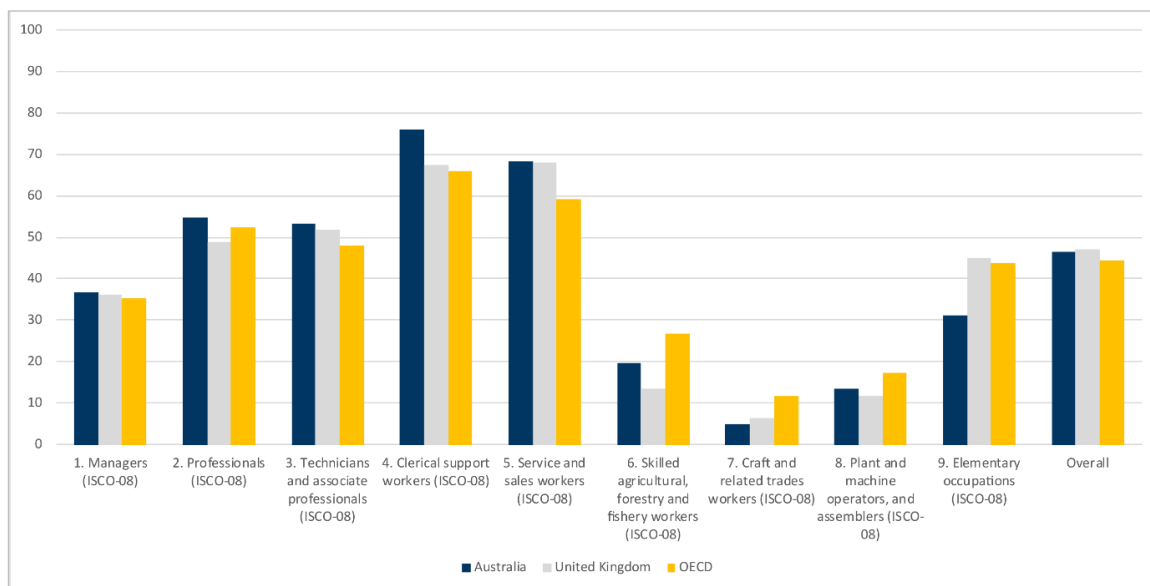
	Any usual working hours worked at home (%)	Have home-based work as a workplace entitlement (%)
Managers	45.5	53.2
Professionals	39.1	44.9
Technicians and trades workers	11.7	18.6
Community and personal service workers	5.7	11.5
Clerical and administrative workers	14.5	45.3
Sales workers	8.2	10.9
Machinery operators and drivers	3.6	6.2
Labourers	4.1	5.5

Note: ^Proportions are based on employees that work ‘any usual working hours’ at home. For example, 39.1 per cent of Professionals work from home, and 42.1 per cent of these employees have a formal working from home arrangement with their employer.

Source: Fair Work Commission (2020), [Information note – Working from home](#), 31 August, Table 2; HILDA, Wave 18.

Analysis by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) found that Australia has very high female representation within the Clerical support workers occupational category (see Chart 11). Female representation nears 80 per cent, making this occupational category female-dominated, and Australia’s female representation is notably higher than the UK and OECD average.

Chart 11: Comparison of the female composition of occupations (by ISCO category) within Australia, the UK and OECD



Source: [WGEA \(Segregation in Australia's Workforce Fact Sheet\)](#)

Among Australian Clerical and administrative workers, the decline in employment in the ABS Labour Force survey for the May quarter 2020 was the lowest of all occupational groups (–0.9 per cent), while there was a relatively small increase in the August quarter 2020 (0.4 per cent).⁸ Although women are disproportionately represented in sectors impacted by COVID-19 job losses in Australia, the issue of unemployment may be less significant than for those who work in other types of occupations. Indeed, some U.S. evidence suggests WFH is more consistent with white-collar occupations in non-manufacturing industries, which may cushion against unemployment, and increase the probability of women remaining employed during the pandemic.⁹

3.2 Unpaid work

The unequal burden of unpaid care and household work has long affected women's labor force outcomes and has relevance in the Australian context. The closure of schools and childcare has amplified existing disparities in unpaid care work, which has universally fallen more heavily on women. Since April 2020, [WGEA](#) has been monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on the Australian workforce, and emerging data has shown that men and women are being impacted differently by the global health pandemic. More women than men are reporting spending more time caring for children and adults and doing household chores.

A study of 1536 parents in dual-earner couples in Australia, conducted by [Craig and Churchill](#) during lockdown in May 2020, found that absolute daily hours in housework and household management were higher for mothers than fathers (3.09 vs. 2.4 hours during COVID-19), and higher than before the pandemic (2.13 vs. 1.66 hours). The study found that Australian fathers had significantly lowered the gender gap in both active and supervisory care of children. Before COVID-19, mothers averaged 3.41 daily hours in active care of children, compared to 2.21 daily hours for fathers. During COVID-19, fathers' hours went up to 3.64 hours per day whereas mothers went up to 5.13 hours per day. However, women were more likely than men to do more housework and household management than men, suggesting that during the pandemic, men preferred to increase their time with children rather than doing household work. The survey revealed that women reported their subjective experience of time pressure to be lower during the pandemic than before, as the rigid time pressures of leaving for work, picking up children from school, cooking dinner, and helping with homework, bathing etc. were absent.

The recent annual survey commissioned by the Centre for Future Work at the Australian Institute asked whether, for those workers with additional caring responsibilities, their employers had made time allowances to account for these responsibilities.¹⁰ Consistent with [Craig and Churchill's](#) (2020) study, men were more likely to say their caring responsibilities increased more than women (30 per cent, as compared to 25 per cent for women), but this change occurred relative to a lower baseline. However, the survey also found that men were more likely to get flexibility to discharge increased caring responsibilities from their employer and retain the same pay (57 per cent), compared to women (39 per cent).

⁸ Information Note-Clerks Award and COVID-19 (September 25, 2020) <https://www.fwc.gov.au/documents/documents/awardmod/variations/2020/am202095-information-note-clerks-award-250920.pdf>

⁹ Brynjolfsson, E., Horton, J.J., Ozimek, A., Rock, D., Sharma, G., & TuYe, H-Y. (2020). Covid-19 and remote work: An early look at US data. NBER working paper 27344. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w27344/w27344.pdf

¹⁰ Nahum, D. (November, 2020). Work and Life in a Pandemic: An Update on Hours of Work and Unpaid Overtime Under COVID-19, The Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute.

According to [UNICEF](#), the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the gender gap around unpaid care work globally. For example, according to an April 2020 survey of 1025 partnered, different-sex US parents conducted by [Carlson, Petts and Pepin](#), it was seen as a mother's responsibility to find and create educational content for children. This increases women's workload on top of existing childcare and housework responsibilities. Homeschooling has become a new domestic task for many families in the time of COVID-19 and has mostly fallen on women's shoulders.

Preliminary findings from the [Swinburne University survey](#) found that while WFH during lockdown, women were also more likely than men:

- to feel too tired after work to enjoy the things they would like to do at home; and
- to experience an increase in anxiety, as a result of COVID-19.

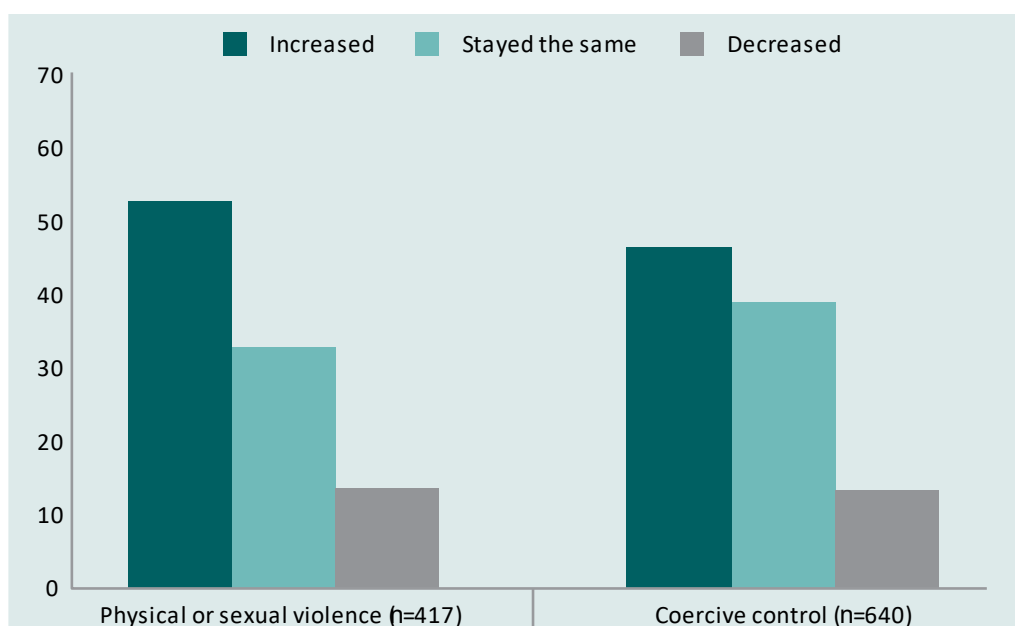
It is reasonable to postulate that the increased time women spend on unpaid care work could have contributed to women experiencing greater tiredness and increased anxiety.

3.3 Domestic violence

An [Australian Institute of Criminology](#) online survey of 15 000 Australian women, conducted during May 2020, found that the prevalence of domestic violence by a current or former cohabiting partner had increased. This study found that the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the start of domestic violence for many women. Of those women who had experienced either physical or sexual violence from a former or current cohabiting partner prior to February 2020, 53 per cent reported an increase in frequency or severity (see Chart 12). Alarming, the survey found 47 per cent of women who had experienced coercive control before and/or after February 2020, said the abuse had increased in frequency or severity. The [Australian Institute of Criminology](#) statistical bulletin identified a range of contributing factors for this increase and the severity of domestic violence during the pandemic, including:

- victims and offenders spending more time together;
- increased social isolation and decreased social movement, which may restrict avenues for women to seek help;
- increased situational stressors associated with domestic violence (e.g. financial stress and job insecurity);
- offenders feeling out of control due to situational factors and using violence and abuse as a means of creating a sense of control; and
- increased alcohol consumption among domestic violence perpetrators.

Chart 12: Changes in frequency or severity of physical or sexual violence during the COVID-19 pandemic



Note: Changes in the frequency or severity of physical or sexual violence or coercive control among women who had experienced prior domestic violence, by type of violence experienced in the last three months (weighted data, %).

Source: [Australian Institute of Criminology](#)

An implication of this finding is that women should have some degree of choice as to whether they work from home.

3.4 Childcare

When it became apparent that many frontline workers were women who would be unable to work without childcare, the [Federal Government](#) announced on 2 April 2020 that any family whose children are enrolled in an approved child care service which remains operating, will be able to access fee-free child care. According to a 2016 article in the [Social Policy and Administration Journal](#), Australian childcare is amongst the most expensive in the world (nearly five times the European average), so this intervention was welcomed. Free childcare was available from 6 April 2020 until 28 June 2020.

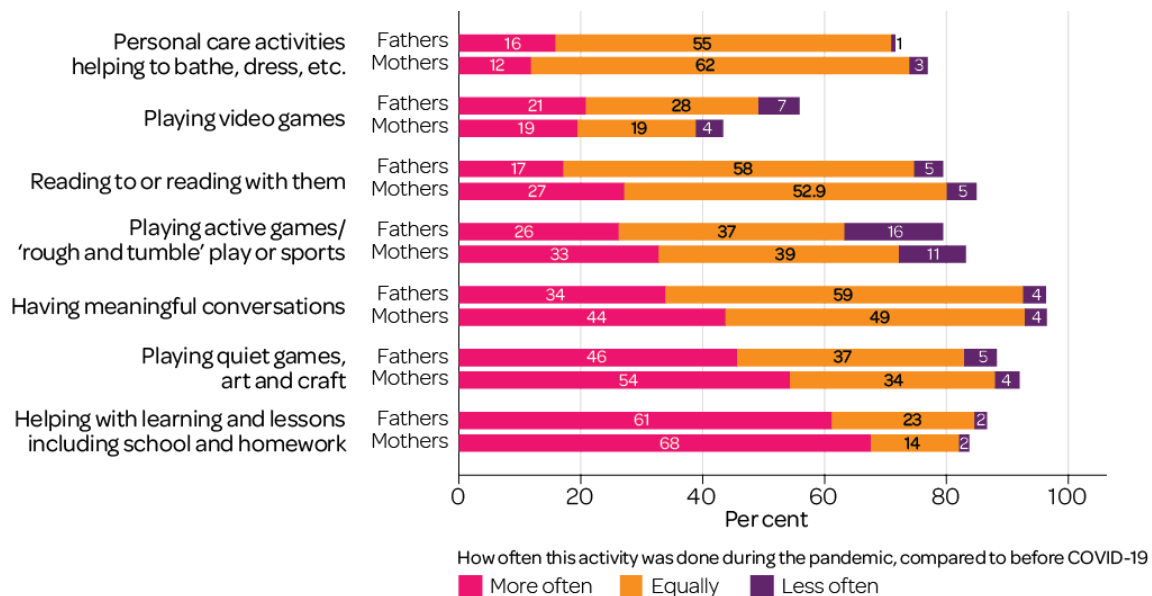
However, according to a May–June 2020 [AIFS survey](#) of 7306 Australians, the adjustment to unprecedented lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures (particularly in Victoria), has meant informal care via grandparents and family networks has often been unavailable (32 per cent of parents used grandparent or other informal care before COVID-19 and 9 per cent during), and many parents WFH have been struggling to reconcile their job and care responsibilities.

3.5 Time parents spent on activities with children

The restrictions in place across Australia in response to the pandemic have meant families are spending much more time together and parents are doing more with their children. Remote learning was introduced for many children and across Australia parents had to help their children

with their school lessons. An [AIFS survey](#) found that many fathers are WFH more, or working reduced hours, and are available to spend more time with their children than usual. More than six-in-ten (61 per cent) fathers reported spending more time helping with learning and schoolwork in response to the pandemic.

Chart 13: How the pandemic affected how much time parents spent on activities with children



Note: The balance of each bar is the percentage who said this activity was not applicable.

Source: [Australian Institute for Family Studies](#)

4 Health and wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing will be one of the major issues facing leaders in the post-pandemic world, according to a June 2020 survey of 34 000 Australian and New Zealanders by employee engagement company [Peakon](#), and interviews with CEOs featured in the [Harvard Business Review](#) in May 2020.

4.1 Mental health

The August 2020 [ABS Household Impacts of COVID-19](#) survey captured information on emotional and mental wellbeing which found that:

- almost half (46 per cent) felt nervous at least some of the time;
- two in five (41 per cent) felt restless or fidgety at least some of the time;
- two in five (41 per cent) felt everything was an effort at least some of the time;
- one in four (24 per cent) felt hopeless at least some of the time;
- one in six (17 per cent) felt so depressed that nothing could cheer them up at least some of the time; and
- one in six (16 per cent) felt worthless at least some of the time.

The October Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey¹¹ found more Australians reported experiencing one or more personal stressors in the last four weeks due to COVID-19 during October 2020 (38 per cent) compared with June 2020 (24 per cent). Specifically, loneliness was the most commonly reported personal stressor due to the impact of COVID-19 experienced in the last four weeks. Twice as many Australians reported experiencing loneliness as a source of personal stress in October compared with June (19 per cent compared with 9 per cent). A similar proportion of people reported experiencing loneliness in April 2020 (22 per cent).

At the time of the October survey, most states and territories were in later stages of easing restrictions, with the exception of Victoria, where strong restrictions were in place after the second wave of COVID-19 emerged from mid-June 2020. It is not surprising that Victorians reported larger differences in personal stressors experienced than the rest of Australia. One in two (49 per cent) people in Victoria reported experiencing one or more of the selected personal stressors in October 2020 due to COVID-19 (compared with one in three (34 per cent) in the rest of Australia).

While the above information is not specifically related to WFH, it does indicate that many Australians were experiencing feelings associated with poor emotional and mental wellbeing during the pandemic and lockdown conditions were likely to exacerbate these issues.

The [MJA](#) conducted an online survey of 13,829 adult Australian residents, between April and May 2020, which sought to identify mental health changes in comparison with pre-pandemic levels.¹² The report found that:

- clinically significant depressive symptoms were reported by 27.6 per cent of respondents, which is more than six times higher than Australian rates for 2015 (3.7 per cent);
- anxiety was reported by 24.5 per cent of respondents, well above rates found in an earlier American survey (16.97 per cent);
- however, more than half of survey respondents were optimistic, a result driven by those with no direct experience with COVID-19, no job loss, and not finding restrictions too difficult.

In August 2020, the Victorian government announced a \$59.7m funding boost for mental health services,¹³ noting that:

- there had been a 33 per cent increase from 2019 in young people presenting to emergency departments for intentional self-harm, and a 10 per cent increase for all adults;
- there was a 19 per cent increase in presentations for urgent and emergency medical services over a six-week period; and
- there was a 29 per cent increase in the demand for mental health support by telephone.

¹¹ ABS 'Household Impacts of COVID-19', *October 2020*

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/household-impacts-covid-19-survey/oct-2020>

¹² Mental health of people in Australia in the first month of COVID-19 restrictions: A national survey.

<https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2020/mental-health-people-australia-first-month-covid-19-restrictions-national-survey>

¹³ Mental health system to get funding boost as Victorians struggle under weight of coronavirus burden.

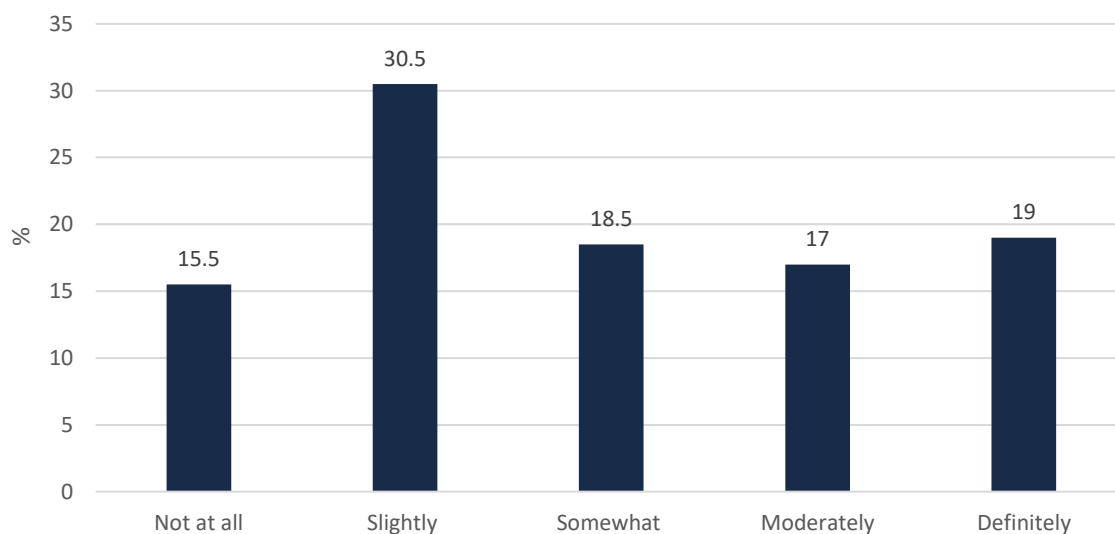
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-09/coronavirus-crisis-hitting-mental-health-of-victorians-hard/12539152#:~:text=The%20Victorian%20Government%20will%20provide,the%20stress%20of%20the%20pandemic>

In general, pre-pandemic studies of WFH suggest its effects are beneficial, as found in a meta-analysis of 46 earlier studies.¹⁴ The meta-analysis found WFH improved perceived autonomy and job satisfaction, reduced work-family conflict and turnover intentions, and reduced role stress. A crucial difference in the current period is that WFH arrangements are often involuntary, unplanned and all-encompassing, in the sense that physical workplaces became inaccessible and there was a lack of flexibility in terms of where work tasks could be performed. Hence, COVID-19 related WFH may be creating disadvantages which did not exist in the past and will disappear in the future.

The mental health results presented above suggest as much. Similarly, a recent poll of 2000 United States (US) teleworkers found 56 per cent reporting increased work stress and 62 per cent feeling pressured by their employer to work longer hours than previously, including being available in non-standard working hours.¹⁵ Another survey, of 1000 office workers split across the US and four European nations, found one in three employees reporting reduced morale, being distracted during the work day, and stressed out at work due to WFH, while a survey of almost 4000 employees and business leaders in Australia and 10 other nations found work hours either increasing or staying the same due to WFH.¹⁶

Respondents in the [Swinburne University](#) survey were also asked whether they had experienced an increase in anxiety due to COVID-19. Only 15.5 per cent reported no increase in anxiety, suggesting it is or was a severe problem.

Chart 14: Have you experienced an increase in anxiety, as a result of COVID-19?



Source: [Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020](#)

¹⁴ The good, the bad, and the unknown about telecommuting: Meta-analysis of psychological mediators and individual consequences. [https://goal-lab.psych.umn.edu/orgpsych/readings/10.%20Work-Life%20Balance/Gajendran%20&%20Harrison%20\(2007\).pdf](https://goal-lab.psych.umn.edu/orgpsych/readings/10.%20Work-Life%20Balance/Gajendran%20&%20Harrison%20(2007).pdf)

¹⁵ The stress of working from home is getting to most Americans. <https://nypost.com/2020/09/03/the-stress-of-working-from-home-is-getting-to-most-americans/>

¹⁶ WFH has left workers feeling abandoned. So they're making their own plans for the future instead. <https://www.zdnet.com/cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.zdnet.com/google-amp/article/wfh-has-left-workers-feeling-abandoned-so-theyre-making-their-own-plans-for-the-future-instead/>

Given this question was asked directly in terms of COVID-19, we cannot attribute increasing anxiety to WFH *per se*.

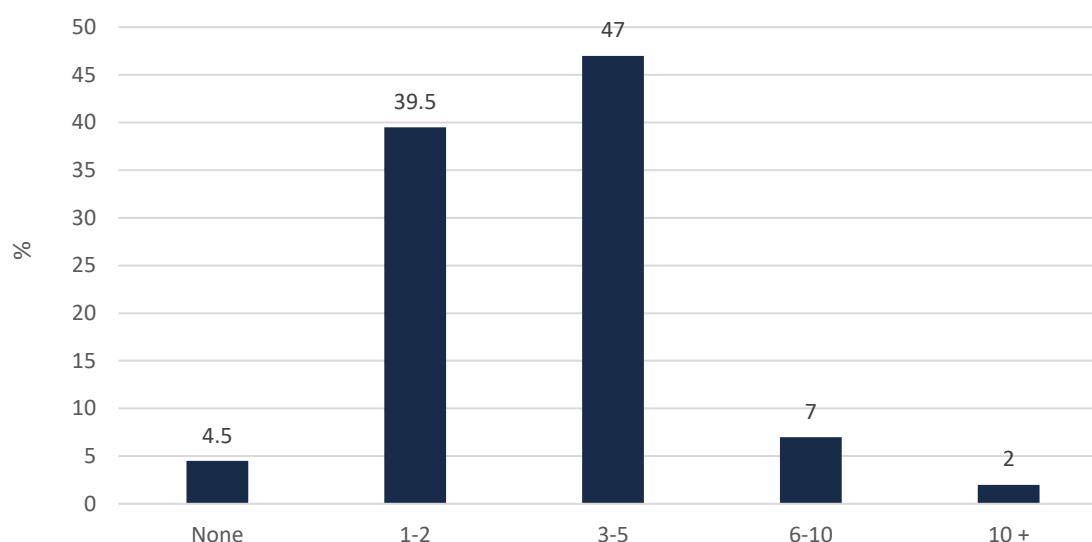
An important response to these new sources of work stress is to provide greater structure to both work and non-work time.¹⁷ A recent survey by SAP ANZ, reported in the [Australian Financial Review](#),¹⁸ describes how they run online events—ranging from yoga sessions to virtual happy hours—to help staff stay connected and engaged.

4.2 Wellbeing

The Commonwealth Department of Health has provided a guide for people to look after their wellbeing and mental health while WFH which includes looking after one's physical health, staying connected, developing routines, taking breaks, reaching out to others, and seeking support.¹⁹ The Swinburne University study provides insight into a range of wellbeing factors.

Nearly 50 per cent of those surveyed were taking 3–5 breaks per day.

Chart 15: Number of breaks taken per day whilst WFH during COVID-19



Source: [Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020](#)

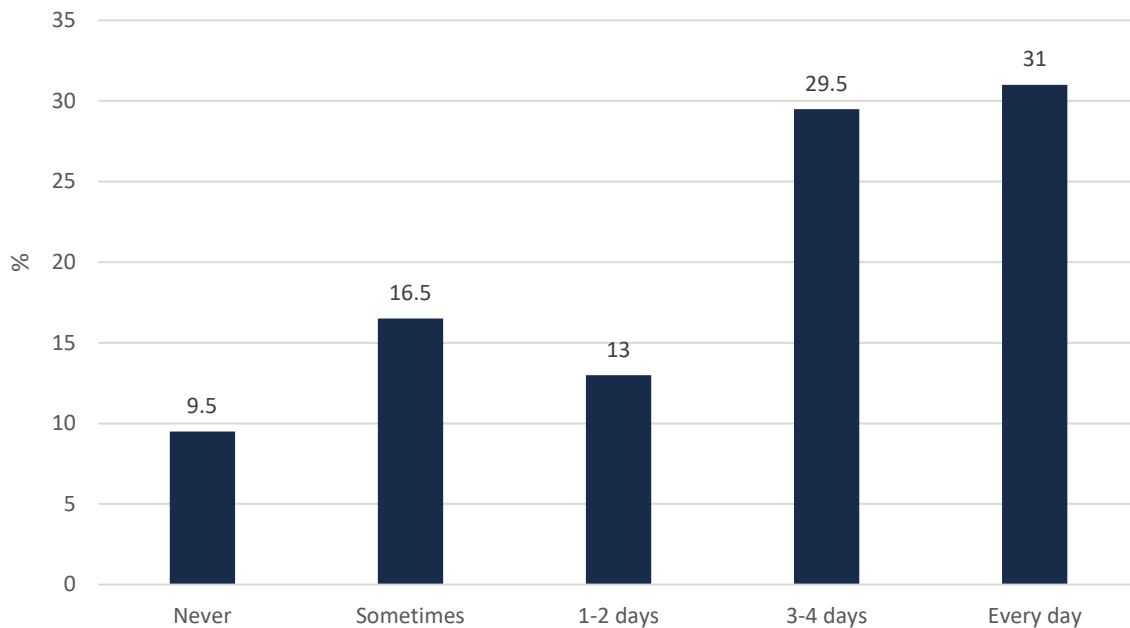
Participants in the Swinburne University survey were also asked how often they were exercising per week, for a minimum of 30 minutes, whilst working from home during COVID-19. Similarly, over 60 per cent of the sample were exercising either every day or up to 3–4 days per week.

¹⁷ 'Make your bed' to get through lockdown: Deputy Chief medical officers. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/make-your-bed-to-get-through-lockdown-deputy-chief-medical-officer-20200908-p55tms.html>

¹⁸ Boddy, N. (2020). Employee wellbeing could define post-pandemic leadership., Australian Financial Review June 24 <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/careers/this-issue-could-define-post-pandemic-leadership-20200604-p54zbh>

¹⁹ Looking after your mental health during coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/ongoing-support-during-coronavirus-covid-19/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-covid-19-restrictions>

Chart 16: Exercise habits whilst WFH during COVID-19



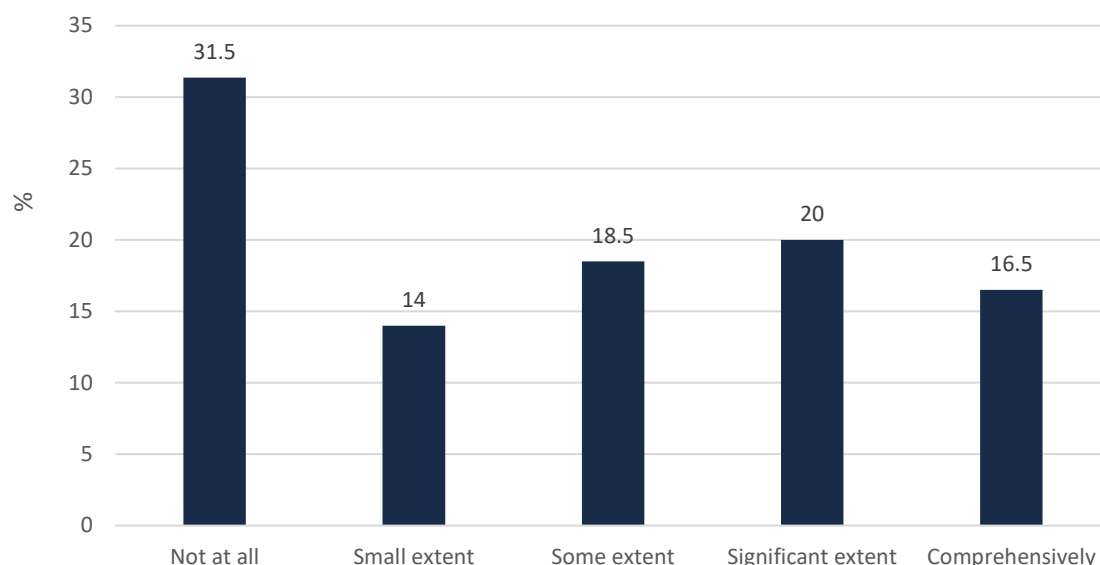
Source: [Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020](#)

4.3 Home offices

Not everyone's experience of WFH is the same. A recent survey by software giant SAP ANZ, reported in the [Australian Financial Review](#)²⁰ found that while employee morale was positive overall, there were barriers to working from home for staff. One in four (26 per cent) said they did not have a computer desk, one quarter said they had problems connecting to internet networks at home, 23 per cent said they had limited private space, and one in five said they did not have an external monitor. Some employees do not have a dedicated space at home and feel embarrassed about the room they work in.

Participants in the [Swinburne](#) University survey were also asked to what extent their manager/supervisor/organisation had provided them with guidelines on how to set up their home workstation correctly. Just under 40 per cent of respondents received guidelines to a significant extent or comprehensively, and more than three in ten (31.5 per cent) received no guidelines.

²⁰ Boddy, N. (2020). *Employee wellbeing could define post-pandemic leadership*, Australian Financial Review 24 June.

Chart 17: Management guidelines for WFH setup

Source: [Swinburne University of Technology, May 2020](#)

Other participants in the [SAP ANZ](#)²¹ study reported that they lived with elderly parents with dementia, so needed to keep their cameras switched off because their parents could be unpredictable. Not all employees are sitting in front of a lovely bookshelf, or in a quiet peaceful space, and thus might feel uncomfortable about putting their Zoom camera on, prefer to use a fake background, or remain on mute during meetings because of home distractions.

WFH during the pandemic raises the issue of the availability of an appropriate and safe place from which to perform work. The recent Centre for Future Work report found 77 per cent of those working at home indicated that they had an appropriate and safe workspace at home²². However, 14 per cent of those working from home indicated that their home workspace was not appropriate and/or not safe; and the remaining 8 per cent did not know or were not sure. Under the Commonwealth Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (and equivalent state legislation), the employer has a duty of care to protect the health and safety of their employees regardless of the location of employment. Thus, employers have an obligation to ensure the significant group of home workers who were not able to confirm that their workspace was secure are informed and supported in improving their physical arrangements.

5 Conclusions

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread in the early months of 2020, the Australian government, like many other countries, initially sought to contain the pandemic in large measure by supporting WFH. As a result, around one-third of all Australian employees were WFH by June 2020, and that figure has been fairly steady since, with 33 per cent of employees reporting mainly WFH as of September 2020. Further, results from the Swinburne University of Technology survey found both managers

²¹ Boddy, N. (2020). *Employee wellbeing could define post-pandemic leadership*, Australian Financial Review 24 June.

²² Nahum, D. (November, 2020). *Work and Life in a Pandemic: An Update on Hours of Work and Unpaid Overtime Under COVID-19*, The Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute.

and employees holding expectations of a permanent increase in WFH as a result of recent experiences.

WFH tends to be concentrated in occupations and industries which fit remote working generally: white collar jobs, and non-manufacturing industries. Women were also slightly more likely to WFH, and furloughs and job loss may have occurred less frequently where WFH was effective.

According to the Swinburne University of Technology survey, formal WFH policies among the sample of WFH workers increased from 60 per cent to 78 per cent coverage. That finding is also consistent with a permanent increase in WFH.

Given that much recent WFH was involuntary and combined with lockdown restrictions and other commitments (such as home schooling), it is not surprising that challenges were common. The [Swinburne University of Technology survey](#) indicated that almost half of respondents faced 'blurring' of the boundary between work and home life, approximately two-in-five faced distractions at home during work, and more than one-third had trouble switching off after work and staying motivated.

However, the same survey found that many employees also recognised a number of benefits of WFH, including the lack of commute, greater flexibility, and financial savings. Those benefits would likely continue indefinitely under long-term WFH and may enable employers to utilise WFH to attract a broader pool of prospective employees.

Much of the evidence covered in this report suggests that WFH during the COVID-19 lockdown had negative effects for gender equity. It suggests that women's burden of unpaid work (in addition to paid work) increased during the lockdown, particularly in terms of housework, but also for fathers and mothers providing expanded time for home schooling. The latter should have eased after restrictions were lifted and children returned to school, but there is little evidence to suggest that gender equality in housework will. Most troubling is the increase in domestic violence. Although we hope that the lifting of restrictions will reduce the prevalence of domestic violence, there is some possibility that continued WFH at expanded levels in the future may be linked to domestic violence.

In general, the lockdowns were associated with a significant deterioration in mental health, including increases in anxiety, depression, and self-harm. Some research suggests that work stress may also have increased and, to the extent that stress is related to WFH, WFH itself may have contributed to poor mental health. However, many employees reported that WFH during COVID-19 enabled them to exercise regularly, and there was a sense that other challenges would ease once lockdown conditions were removed.

In conclusion, there is evidence that continued heavy reliance on WFH will be more effective for all involved if: a) employees have sufficient resources in the home and structure and guidance from employers in terms of a WFH policy; b) work schedules are such that most employees are not on-call 24/7 at a minimum, or have relatively fixed hours; and c) WFH is voluntary for employees. With these conditions in place, the results included in this report suggest that many employers, employees, and their families, would likely benefit from WFH in the future.

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