

# The future of working from home in the public sector: What does the evidence tell us?

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created a working from home experiment for the public sector. This paper examines what might happen next as countries move towards a COVID-normal environment. Since the academic literature on public sector agencies and working from home since the onset of the pandemic is scant, we focus on the non-peer-reviewed literature as our evidence base. This paper identifies the main issues public sector agencies need to consider as new ways of working emerge. The key facets are emerging preferences for hybrid working, productivity and remote working, and impacts of working from home on employees, especially gender equality. We highlight a range of emerging challenges, including how to maintain productivity, the need to redevelop employee value propositions to attract and retain employees in this changing landscape, and the risks of proximity bias. We conclude by identifying questions to be addressed in subsequent research.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in large sections of the workforce working from home, including in the public sector. By late March 2020, Australian public service (APS) employees had been directed to work from home (Williamson et al., 2020), and at the peak of pandemic lockdowns, 56% worked from home (APSC, 2020). Hybrid working, where employees divide their time between work and home, is predicted to become widespread (Lund et al., 2021). While hybrid working had been talked about for some time, it was not widespread before the advent of COVID-19 lockdowns. For example, in pre-pandemic 2019, only 15% of lower level (APS) employees worked from home, although around one third of senior employees did so APSC, 2019. The pandemic therefore created the opportunity for a significant experiment. However, there is a possibility that public services may revert to traditional forms of working with staff returning to pre-pandemic work practices (Williamson et al., 2020).

In this paper, we consider what the future of work might look like for the public sector. We highlight challenges public sector organisations, managers, and employees need to consider as workplaces move into a 'COVID-normal' era. Academic literature on public sector human resource management in a pandemic context is virtually non-existent as the research base typically takes time to catch up to current practice (with a few exceptions, e.g. AlMazrouei & Zacca, 2021; Schuster et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020). We therefore focus on non-peer-reviewed literature to identify themes and issues that should be considered. The topics of the paper are employee preferences for hybrid working, the impacts of working from home on employees (especially gender equality), employee productivity and retention issues, and how managers managed their teams during the pandemic. In the first section, we discuss the methodology used to conduct this evidence review. We then present the findings based on the evaluation of non-peer-reviewed literature, focusing on employees and managers, before concluding by considering implications for public sector organisations.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

Given the magnitude of the homeworking experiment, it is unsurprising there is a huge lay literature exploring all facets of the change. A simple Google search undertaken in October 2021 yielded almost 4 billion results and Google Scholar returned approximately 4 million search results, with the vast majority not within the peer-reviewed literature. Publishing in peer-reviewed literature takes time, consequently we are yet to develop an evidence base, although one is emerging. There are valuable sources of data on this topic outside the peer-reviewed literature, thus for this paper we followed Godin et al.'s (2015) protocol on undertaking a non-peer-reviewed evidence review.

This literature is produced by governments, academics, and businesses, is not constrained by commercial publishers, but produced by organisations as an adjunct to their core business (Godin et al., 2015). We explored Google and Google Scholar for articles from the start of 2020 to mid-2021. Following this, we undertook more targeted searches of relevant Australian government websites; the International Labour Organisation and the OECD; consultancy firms; Australian human resource organisations; think tanks; and finally, reports released by academics. Articles selected were required to be based on evidence and not simply opinion, which excluded many news items, blogs, and commentaries.

Using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021), we reviewed the non-peer-reviewed literature identifying themes and comparing analyses across the team, working towards a point of general agreement on the key issues in the literature. The categories developed were as follows: working from home and the public sector, prevalence, industrial relations, impact on managers, impacts on teams, employee engagement, productivity, return to work, and gendered impacts. We focus on three themes for this paper: employees' experience of working from home during the pandemic (especially gender), productivity, and managing remote workers as these are most relevant to the context and priorities of public sectors.

### 3 | EMPLOYEES AND REMOTE WORKING

As organisations consider forms of working in a 'COVID-normal' environment, the emerging research shows that employees have a clear preference to continue a hybrid form of working. This option is becoming an employee retention factor, indicating it is important to organisations' value proposition. However, good management is essential to avoid the possible risks, and ensure that hybrid work is safe and beneficial to all. We examine the literature on employee experience, before turning to the role of managers later in this paper.

#### 3.1 | Employee preference for working from home

Forty-five per cent of Australian workers agree that changed attitudes to remote working will transform the way people work in the next 3–5 years, with only 10% favouring a 'traditional' work environment (PwC, 2021). This trend is international, with respondents to a large-scale U.S. survey reporting that working from home was destigmatised as a result of the pandemic (Barrero et al., 2021).

Workers in Australia's largest state, New South Wales (NSW), indicated a preference for 2–3 days per week working from home. This mirrors findings from a global survey, which also found that respondents wanted to work from home 2–3 days (Iometrics, 2020). However, women are more likely to value working from home than men, who prefer working in the office more days per week in hybrid models (Dishman, 2021; Pelta, 2021). As such, proximity bias—where managers preference employees who are in their immediate vicinity (Diemar, 2021)—risks entrenching systematic gender bias unless carefully managed (PwC, 2021).

Despite the dangers of proximity bias, many survey respondents stated they will take or leave a role based on flexibility. Almost a third of respondents to a 2021 McKinsey survey indicated they were likely to leave their organisation if required to move back on-site, with 52% of employees preferring a flexible working model (Alexander et al., 2021). There was a strong preference for remote work from those with caring responsibilities (Alexander et al., 2021). A 2021 survey of 2100 workers found 60% of women and 52% of men will look for a new job if they are not able to continue working remotely, and 69% of men and 80% of women stated that remote work options were key factors in evaluating any new job (Pelta, 2021).

### 3.2 | Positives and negatives of working from home

A survey of Flemish workers in May 2020 found respondents mainly attribute positive characteristics to working from home. Two thirds indicated that overall job satisfaction increased with teleworking (Baert et al., 2020). Almost two thirds of respondents (64.6%) believed working from home improved their work–life balance. Half of respondents thought telework minimised both work-related stress (48.4%) and chance of burnout (47.6%)—these findings were particularly pronounced for women and older workers. However, some feared telework diminishes promotion opportunities and weakens ties with their colleagues and employer (Baert et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). In a survey from the NSW Innovation and Productivity Council (2020), employees ranked lost opportunities to socialise as the worst aspect of working from home.

While in-person networking decreased during the pandemic, the incidence and duration of meetings increased. Using data gained from over 3 million employees, DeFilippis et al. (2020) found employees spent an additional 13% of work time in meetings during the pandemic. The length of the average working day has also increased by 48 minutes. This was achieved through time saved on commuting (Ramani & Bloom, 2021). This is arguably a reallocation of employees' personal time to work time and an increase in hours worked, suggesting a blurring of work and family and an increase in digital intensity through longer meetings.

An increase in hours has implications for reconciling work and caring responsibilities. In late 2020, more women (46%) than men (38%) reported it was difficult balancing work and family while working from home (Baxter & Warren, 2021). Women also undertook a higher proportion of unpaid work before the pandemic, a dynamic that increased during the pandemic (EIGE, 2021). During the 2020 lockdown period in Australia (where the lengths of lockdowns varied between Australian states, with Victoria experiencing numerous and lengthy lockdowns), 40% of parents who worked from home reported always or often actively caring for children while working, with a further 28% passively caring for children. However, 54% of families indicated mothers did most of the care, with 38% equally split between spouses and fathers having majority care just 8% of the time (Hand et al., 2020).

## 4 | PRODUCTIVITY AND WORKING FROM HOME

Our findings highlight some of the drivers of workplace productivity when employees work from home or hybridly. Whether productivity increases or decreases when employees work from home is a concern of organisations (Productivity Commission, 2021). The key message that emerged during the pandemic is that overwhelmingly managers and employees considered their productivity was the same, or higher, during this period.

By the end of 2020, surveys of employees and managers globally were consistently revealing self-reported increases to productivity and efficiency. The OECD found 60% of managers indicated the key benefit of working from home was increased productivity (OECD, 2021). However, just under 80% of managers flagged that difficulty in working as a team was affecting productivity, with 38% indicating that better coordination of schedules was needed (OECD, 2021). A mid-2020 survey of 12,000 professionals in the United States, India, and Germany found 75% of employees felt they had maintained or improved productivity in the first months of the pandemic, particularly on individual tasks (Dahik et al., 2020).

In Australia, workers reported an increase in productivity, with Colley and Williamson (2020) reporting almost 90% of APS managers surveyed believed their team's productivity had increased or stayed the same during the pandemic. These patterns are repeated across a range of sources, with 70% of workers reporting the same or higher levels of productivity when working from home (Hopkins & Bardoel, 2020). Government research found that 82% of workers felt they were as, or more, productive when they worked from home (NSW Innovation & Productivity Council, 2020). The Productivity Commission (2021) notes that as hybrid working evolves, innovations and identification of successful strategies that enable hybrid working will limit the risks of decreased productivity.

All these sources demonstrate that productivity did not decrease as employees worked from home and it may have even increased during the pandemic. Increased productivity, as well as the other benefits that accrue from working from home, is largely dependent on managerial capability and practices (OECD, 2020), a topic we turn to next.

## 5 | MANAGING REMOTE WORKERS

During the pandemic, the challenge of managing a fully remote team was a key concern. While most managers believed remote work was undertaken to a level that surpassed expectations, a minority of managers struggled with implementation and technological issues (Ozimek, 2020). Large-scale mixed-methods research in Australia found managers were faced with a range of increased job demands as a result of working from home. These included relational and technological demands, increased workloads, work/life conflict, and adapting to outcomes-based performance (Lundy et al., 2021). Other Australian research also suggests that managers are adapting to measuring performance based on outcomes, rather than solely relying on traditional output measures (Colley & Williamson, 2020).

A 2020 survey of 1200 people from 24 countries found 40% of managers expressed low confidence in their ability to manage remotely (Parker et al., 2020). Managers also experienced difficulties managing underperforming employees. However, researchers found that poor performers pre-COVID were likely to continue poorly performing during the pandemic, suggesting 'poor performance was more about fit and motivation than working from home itself' (Forbes et al., 2020, p. 20).

While some managers may have struggled, for many, their relationship with their teams improved and research showed increased mutual trust between managers and employees. A global survey reported that collaboration and trust from management were key aspects of effectively working from home, where employees felt better able to manage distractions and think creatively (Iometrics, 2020). Where managers indicated they trusted staff who directly reported to them, a U.K. study found that 43% of managers thought productivity had increased with remote work compared to 34% of those with low trust (Chartered Management Institute, 2020).

In moving towards a COVID-normal environment, the non-peer-reviewed literature highlights the importance of managers in communicating plans for the future. Data from a 2021 McKinsey survey show employees feel communication is lacking about employer plans for remote work, especially regarding guidelines, policies, and expectations (Alexander et al., 2021). Where organisations have clear communication with their employees, well-being and productivity increase; conversely, where it is absent, employees are nearly three times more likely to report burnout (Alexander et al., 2021). Regular communication with teams, provision of adequate resources,

and a demonstrated commitment to well-being can increase psychological safety and well-being (Lundy et al., 2021).

## 6 | IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Based on the evidence analysed, we now turn to examine implications of working from home and hybrid working for public sector organisations.

A key challenge is managing employee expectations and preferences to work in a hybrid arrangement. While some APS agencies may be encouraging employees to return to their usual workplace, researchers (Alexander et al., 2021) have recommended consideration be given to developing an employee value proposition that stresses the availability of flexible/hybrid working arrangements. Research shows that staff will consider leaving if not provided with reasonable flexibility (Alexander et al., 2021). Hybrid working for many is becoming formalised and nuanced. Researchers have identified various types of hybrid working, from fixed frequency of days and times in the office; fixed amount of time working in the office, but attendance is flexible; and fully flexible, with employees choosing where and when they work (Hopkins, 2020). Organisations should consider their employee value proposition and forms of hybrid working simultaneously.

Public sector agencies are encouraged to rethink notions of productivity and how this is measured. The emerging research (Lundy et al., 2021; Colley & Williamson, 2020) suggests that managers assessed performance on outcomes during pandemic lockdowns. Continuing this approach would more closely align the public sector with emerging best practice, which focuses on employees contributing to value creation (Koss, 2020). Changing this focus can contribute to increased performance, innovation, increased employee engagement, and greater stakeholder satisfaction (Koss, 2020). Performance measures dependent on just output are becoming irrelevant.

Organisations must examine occupations and job families holistically to determine which can be undertaken flexibly and in which locations and how tasks can be performed at various times. One Australian state government has reviewed its 'flexible by default' approach, whereby every job has some form of flexibility (Victorian Public Sector Commission, 2021). This approach could be extended to determine which jobs, and parts of positions, can be performed at home or remotely.

Research shows working from home and hybrid working can lead to work/family spillover (Ramani & Bloom, 2021), and managers require support to ensure staff do not work long hours. While flexible hours are highly valued by employees, working outside standard bandwidth hours may trigger overtime and penalty rates in industrial instruments (Williamson & Pearce, 2022). The public sector may need to reconsider what a standard 'day' looks like and how this can be regulated. Well-managed hybrid working can increase flexibility available to employees, with consequent benefits to organisations (Baird et al., 2021). Increased flexibility can assist public sector agility and has the potential to increase women's workforce participation and gender equality (WGEA, 2021). However, as our review shows, hybrid working also has the potential to disadvantage some employees—including women and those with caring responsibilities. A key challenge for managers is to make sure that staff who come into the office are not advantaged over those who are 'out of sight, out of mind' (PwC, 2021, p. 4).

The literature also highlights the challenges for managers of remote or dispersed teams, finding that managerial capability in managing remote workers should be improved (Parker et al., 2020). Managers may need to adopt a more intentional approach to management to ensure performance remains high. 'Intentional leadership' is a practice whereby managers consciously and

reflectively manage teams (Kubicek, 2012). This process involves being mindful of time, capability, and growth (Kubicek, 2012). As public sectors emerge into a COVID-normal environment, intentional leadership would see managers actively considering who works from home, or in the office, which tasks can be done synchronously and asynchronously, and how to measure performance based on shared understandings of the constituents of high performance (Timmes, 2021).

## 7 | CONCLUSION

A wealth of non-peer-reviewed literature has emerged on working from home as organisations explore different forms of hybrid working. The literature provides lessons on a range of issues, including good management practices, how to maintain employee productivity, and the risks around discrimination and gender equality. We acknowledge the limitations of this paper, in not being able to review other critical areas such as workplace health and safety, employee surveillance, and the impact of technology on remote working. This brief evidence review also gives rise to a range of new research questions, including the fundamental question of will public sectors embrace this new-found flexibility and enable employees to continue working from home? Have the changes wrought by the pandemic become formalised—or is the public sector likely to maintain path dependency to re-establish pre-pandemic ways of working? Additional questions include: what is the impact of hybrid working on managerial practices, employees' careers, and gender equality? How can productivity be maintained and increased within hybrid teams? Overall, the literature examined in this brief review aims to assist public sector organisations while setting a robust research agenda for public sector agencies and academics.

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