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RETURNING TO THE WORKPLACE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: ATTITUDES AND CONCERNS OF AUSTRALIAN WORKERS

A BRIEF REPORT FROM THE COVID-19 WORK AND HEALTH STUDY

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BACKGROUND

The workforce has seen a large migration towards working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift resulted from restrictions on gatherings, physical distancing requirements, and government directives mandating employers to support working from home arrangements in situations where work could be performed from home during lockdowns (Griffiths, 2020a). Where the risk of SARS-CoV-2 community transmission decreases, restrictions ease meaning that some at-home workers can return to their usual workplaces whilst adhering to modified working conditions to reduce risk of workplace transmission.

The Monash COVID-19 Work and Health study surveyed a large group of Australians four times during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The survey asked people questions about their work, mental and physical health, social interactions and finances. During the third survey, undertaken between July and September 2020 we asked 1145 workers about their attitudes towards returning to the workplace, on advice and information received from their employer, and on their perceived risk of being infected with COVID-19 in their workplace. During this time period workplaces around Australia were gradually re-opening, with the exception of the state of Victoria which was in the midst of a second wave of COVID-19 cases and extended community lockdown.

This brief report presents the number and percentage of workers selecting different responses to survey questions. The sample is not representative of the national workforce, and for this report we have not adjusted estimates by demographic or other characteristics. This report provides a simple overview of study findings, and results should be treated accordingly. For more information about the study please view the full study protocol available online (ANZCTR, 2020) and/or the description of the study cohort (Griffiths, 2020b).

FINDINGS

In our sample, 20% of workers reported that they were working from home all of the time and a further 11% reported working from home part of the time. A total of 58% reported working from their usual workplace, whilst 11% were employed but were not working.

Slightly less than half (45%) of workers reported that they had received clear direction from their employer about returning to their usual workplace.

Around half of workers described their workplace as an environment with a low risk of infections, a quarter described their workplace as having a moderate risk, and a quarter of workers thought their workplace was at high risk for infection.

While most workers (62%) reported thought that workplaces were not re-opening too soon, the majority (87%) also reported at least one concern about workplaces re-opening. These concerns can be categorised as being related to risk of infection and interaction with others, impact on job role, and impact on home life.

RISK OF INFECTION AND INTERACTION WITH OTHERS

The most commonly reported concerns in our sample were related to the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and risk factors that have been clearly linked with viral transmission. Specifically, one in two workers were concerned about becoming infected with COVID-19 and about infecting others. Nearly half were worried about colleagues coming to work while sick, and about maintaining physical distance from members of the public. One in three reported being concerned about maintaining physical distance from work colleagues, while a smaller percentage (14.6%) reported worry about being pressured to continue working even when feeling sick.

Several workplace conditions were also rated by respondents as being of concern. Three in ten workers reported being worried about appropriate cleaning of the workplace, while fewer (12.8%) reported concerns about access to soap or hand sanitiser. Nearly one-quarter reported being worried about travelling to and from work on public transport.

IMPACT ON JOB ROLE

Some workers reported being worried about impacts on their job role. More than one in five reported being worried about how changes to the workplace would affect their ability to work, while one in six reported uncertainty about what their job would involve upon returning. A smaller group were concerned about the loss of ability to work from home.

TABLE 1. ATTITUDES TOWARDS WORKPLACE RE-OPENING AND RISK OF COVID-19 INFECTION

	Number of Workers (Total=1145)	Percent (100.0%)
Do you think workplaces are re-opening too soon?		
Yes	293	25.6%
No	704	61.5%
Not Sure	145	12.7%
Thinking about workplaces re-opening, are you worried about any of the following things?		
Getting infected with COVID-19	568	49.6%
Infecting someone else with COVID-19	564	49.3%
Work colleagues coming to work while sick	556	48.6%
Maintaining physical distance from members of the public	522	45.6%
Maintaining physical distance from my work colleagues	385	33.6%
Appropriate cleaning of my workplace	331	28.9%
Reduction in the time I can spend with family / friends	271	23.7%
Travelling to and from work on public transport	264	23.1%
How changes to the workplace will affect my ability to work	258	22.5%
Uncertainty around what my job will involve when I go back	195	17.0%
Impact on my roles and responsibilities at home	179	15.6%
Pressure to continue working even when feeling sick	167	14.6%
Access to soap or hand sanitiser	146	12.8%
Losing the ability to work from home	142	12.4%
I have no concerns	149	13.0%
Overall, what do you think is the risk for COVID-19 infection in your workplace?		
Low risk	563	49.2%
Moderate risk	268	23.4%
High risk	295	25.8%
Not sure	19	1.7%
COVID-19 testing / cases		
Someone in my workplace has had a COVID-19 test	752	65.7%
Someone in my workplace has tested positive for COVID-19	82	7.2%
	Number of at-home workers (N=379)	Percent (100.0%)
Working from home (at least some of the time)		
I worked from home prior to the pandemic	203	53.6%
I currently work from home	379	100.0%
I expect to be working from home (at least some of the time) in:		
1 month	356	93.9%
3 months	316	83.4%
12 months	232	61.2%

IMPACT ON HOME LIFE

Returning to the workplace impacts work-life balance and responsibilities at home. Workers were apprehensive about changes in home life as workplaces re-open, with 23% concerned about spending less time with family or friends, and 16% concerned about the impact on responsibilities at home.

FUTURE INTENTIONS

We also asked people about their intentions to work from home in the future. From the 379 people working from home, 54% worked at home prior to the pandemic. However, 94% reported that they would likely be continuing to work from home in 1 month, 83% in 3 months and 61% in 12 months.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Most workers in our sample have at least one concern about workplaces re-opening. The most common concerns related to risk of workplace viral transmission, but many workers were also concerned about the conditions in the workplace, impacts on their job role and impacts on life at home. Many at-home workers expected to continue working from home for periods of months or more. Workers and employers should navigate the path of re-opening workplaces under eased restrictions with flexible arrangements and clear governance incorporating the concerns of workers. Future analysis of our study data will examine changes in attitudes to workplace re-opening over time, and also examine attitudes and concerns in sub-groups such as older/younger workers, people with different household situations, and workers across different industries.

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