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WORKING FROM HOME DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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

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BACKGROUND

Large numbers of people working from home (WFH) has been one of the many unique features the COVID-19 pandemic. While originally a temporary measure designed to reduce the spread of COVID-19, for many workers WFH remains a feature of their working life. A recent report from Arizona State University presents global data on future intentions of employers with respect to WFH (1). This survey of 1168 companies across 31 countries observed that the majority (63%) of employers intended to allow their employees to work from home full-time through the 2021 calendar year, while a slightly larger proportion (69%) describe their anticipated future work environment as either a hybrid virtual/workplace approach (41%) or an entirely virtual or remote working arrangement (28%).

Working from home became more common among Australian workplaces throughout the pandemic and this trend may continue post-pandemic. In September 2020, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that 31% of workers worked from home most days, compared to 12% pre-pandemic (2). WFH has remained more frequent into 2021, with 41% of workers surveyed by the ABS reporting WFH at least once a week in February 2021, compared to 24% in March 2020 (3). Understanding the experiences of workers who have been WFH will help inform the operation of workplaces in the future, as businesses and workers assess the benefits and drawbacks to WFH. Many Australian workers who were WFH have now returned, at least in part, to their usual workplaces, albeit within a modified working environment.

This report summarises, at a high level, the experiences of WFH and returning to workplaces among participants enrolled in the COVID-19 Work and Health Study. The study enrolled a large group of Australian workers early in the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were asked to complete surveys on their health and working circumstances on four occasions during 2020. In each survey participants were asked if they were currently working, and whether they were working at their usual workplace, WFH, or a combination of both. Other questions relating to WFH and working in their usual workplace were included in some surveys.

This snapshot report presents the number and percentage of workers selecting different responses to survey questions. As noted in prior reports, the study sample is not representative of the national labour force and thus findings should not be extrapolated nationally. This report also has not adjusted estimates by demographic or other characteristics, and is intended to provide a high-level overview of findings related to WFH and returning to workplaces. The full study protocol is available online (4) and a description of the study cohort and methods has been previously published (5).

In this brief report we address four research questions:

- 1) How did working from home in our study cohort change over the course of 2020?
- 2) Did working from home vary by demographic characteristics such as age, gender, state of residence and education?
- 3) What were the experiences of study participants who were working from home during 2020?
- 4) What measures are employers implementing for workers transitioning from home and returning to their usual workplaces?

FINDINGS

A total of 2603 Australians consented to participate in the study and completed a baseline survey (i.e. Survey 1). Of these, 2105 gave consent to take part in follow-up surveys (i.e. Surveys 2-4). The study included people who had lost their jobs, those who had lost work but were still employed, and people whose working hours had not been reduced.

Questions regarding WFH were limited to respondents who reported that they had worked in the past week. Also, some participants dropped out of the study during the course of 2020, meaning that there were more respondents in the early surveys than in the latter surveys. This means that the number of respondents varied between surveys, as people moved in and out of work during 2020 and due to survey incompletions.

OVERALL TRENDS IN WORKING FROM HOME

The proportion of respondents who were WFH decreased during 2020 from 43% WFH in some capacity at Survey 1 (during March-June 2020) to 31% by Survey 4, which was conducted in the last 3 months of 2020 (Table 1). The proportion of respondents exclusively WFH also declined from 29% at Survey 1 to 17% at Survey 4. The proportion of respondents who were exclusively working from their usual workplace increased from a low of 53% at Survey 1 completed during the height of the first wave of the pandemic in Australia, to 65% at Survey 4. Much of the change in WFH in our sample occurred between the first and second surveys.

TABLE 1. WORKING FROM HOME DURING 2020 IN THE STUDY SAMPLE OF AUSTRALIAN WORKERS.

Q/ Are you working in your usual workplace, or working from home?	Survey 1 (Mar to Jun 2020)	Survey 2 (Apr to Jul 2020)	Survey 3 (Jul to Sep 2020)	Survey 4 (Oct to Dec 2020)
	Number of responses (%)			
Usual workplace	793 (53%)	758 (63%)	709 (62%)	687 (65%)
Working from home	430 (29%)	267 (22%)	252 (22%)	179 (17%)
Both usual workplace & working from home	212 (14%)	127 (11%)	127 (11%)	104 (10%)
My usual workplace is home	N/A	N/A	N/A	46 (4%)
Other	64 (4%)	49 (4%)	48 (4%)	47 (4%)
Total Number of Working Respondents	1499 (100%)	1201 (100%)	1136 (100%)	1063 (100%)

Questions about WFH were asked to all participants WFH in any capacity (whether only WFH, or also working at their usual workplace) so statistics and responses in this report reflect this.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THOSE WORKING FROM HOME

The characteristics of workers who were WFH in any capacity at Survey 1 and Survey 4 were compared (Table 2). In our sample, women were more likely to be WFH at Survey 1 but slightly less likely at Survey 4. Those aged 35-44 years were the most likely to be WFH at Survey 1 (50%) and Survey 4 (42%), while workers aged 18-24 years were by far the least likely to WFH at Survey 1 (18%) and Survey 4 (12%). There was a strong trend between having a higher level of education and being more likely to be WFH at both time points. Respondents who had not completed high school were the least likely to be WFH. Those who were employed in full-time work before the pandemic were the most likely to be WFH at Survey 1 (48%) and Survey 4 (38%), while those who were employed as casual workers before the pandemic were only half as likely to be WFH at Survey 1 (26%) and Survey 4 (19%). Victorian respondents were the most likely to be WFH at Survey 1 (48%) and Survey 4 (44%), while respondents from Western Australian and South Australia were the least likely to WFH at Survey 1 (33%) and Western Australians least likely at Survey 4 (17%). There were large reductions in the proportion of respondents WFH in all jurisdictions except Victoria between Survey 1 and Survey 4.

TABLE 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS WHO WERE WORKING FROM HOME AT LEAST SOME OF THE TIME AT SURVEY 1 AND SURVEY 4.

Participant Characteristics	WFH at Survey 1	WFH at Survey 4
	(Mar to Jun 2020)	(Oct to Dec 2020)
Number of responses (%)		
Gender		
Female	358 (44%)	178 (31%)
Male	283 (41%)	151 (35%)
Age in years		
18-24	22 (18%)	8 (12%)
25-34	120 (47%)	53 (34%)
35-44	151 (50%)	77 (42%)
45-54	170 (46%)	91 (35%)
55-64	142 (38%)	78 (27%)
65+	37 (42%)	22 (37%)
Education		
High School (not completed)	15 (13%)	8 (11%)

High School (completed)	50 (26%)	25 (19%)
TAFE / Trade Certificate	132 (32%)	66 (23%)
Undergraduate Degree	209 (51%)	101 (37%)
Postgraduate Degree	235 (65%)	121 (52%)
Employment Status (pre-pandemic / late 2019)		
Full-Time	449 (48%)	227 (38%)
Part-Time	116 (39%)	58 (29%)
Casual	66 (26%)	41 (19%)
State / Territory of Residence		
Victoria	242 (48%)	154 (44%)
New South Wales	179 (44%)	87 (32%)
Queensland	111 (41%)	42 (24%)
Western Australia	43 (33%)	15 (17%)
South Australia	35 (33%)	15 (20%)
Tasmania / ACT / NT	32 (41%)	16 (27%)

EXPERIENCES OF WORKING FROM HOME

At the fourth survey conducted in the final quarter of 2020, we asked respondents some additional questions regarding their interactions with employers, their perceived productivity while WFH, and their work environment (Table 3).

Seventy percent of those spending at least some of their time WFH did not recall receiving any advice or instruction from their employer about maintaining their health and safety whilst WFH.

Around two in five respondents reported that their work productivity had not changed while WFH. Another two in five reported that they were more productive at home, while one in five reported that their productivity was worse than usual while WFH.

Less than half of those WFH were working from a dedicated office space in their home (45%). The next most common home-based workspace was a kitchen or living room (22%), a spare room (14%), while another 14% were working in multiple locations and a further 6% were working from a bedroom.

TABLE 3. EXPERIENCES WHILE WORKING FROM HOME AT SURVEY 4

Survey Question	Number of responses (%)
Q/ Have you received any advice or instruction from your employer about how to remain safe and healthy while working from home?	
Yes	219 (70%)
No	96 (30%)
Q/ Do you think your ability to complete your daily work tasks is better or worse while working from home?	
Better than usual	119 (38%)
Worse than usual	66 (21%)
No change from usual	132 (42%)
Q/ Which of the following best describes your working environment at home?	
I am working from a dedicated office space	141 (45%)
I am working from a kitchen / living room	68 (22%)
I am working from a spare room	44 (14%)
I am working from multiple places in my house	43 (14%)
I am working from a bedroom	20 (6%)

We also asked respondents to report the nature of non-work activities they were spending their time on. Table 4 includes a summary of responses in those WFH at least some of their time and those exclusively working from their usual workplace.

Respondents who were spending at least some of their time WFH were more likely than workers in their usual workplace to be spending time on housework or gardening, and caring for someone. Some activities didn't differ between those WFH and those in their usual workplace, such as spending time with family or friends.

TABLE 4. TIME ON ACTIVITIES WHILE WORKING FROM HOME AT SURVEY 4

Q/ Are you spending more time than before COVID-19 on any of the following activities?	Working from home	Working from usual workplace only
	Number of responses (%)	
Housework or Gardening	145 (44%)	143 (31%)
Exercise	117 (36%)	144 (31%)
Leisure activities such as reading, gaming, television	139 (42%)	160 (35%)
Caring for someone (a child, family member or friend)	99 (30%)	86 (19%)
Spending time with family or friends	117 (36%)	171 (37%)
Studying	62 (19%)	64 (14%)
None of the above	53 (16%)	152 (33%)

We also asked respondents to report their experience WFH prior to the pandemic, and their future intentions regarding WFH (Table 5). Forty-five percent of those who were WFH during the pandemic did not spend any time WFH before the pandemic. However, only about a third of that number (16%) were planning to stop WFH altogether within a year. The majority of workers were planning a mix of WFH and onsite work in the future, with 41% of workers saying they were planning to spend some of their time WFH and 19% most of their time WFH. Just 11% reported an intention to exclusively work from home in the future.

TABLE 5. WORKING FROM HOME IN THE PAST AND FUTURE PLANS

Q/ How much of your working time did you / do you plan to spend WFH?	Pre-pandemic (Oct to Dec 2019)	Planned for in 1 years time (Oct to Dec 2021)
	Number of responses (%)	
All of my time	33 (9%)	35 (11%)
Most of my time	21 (6%)	61 (19%)
Some of my time	149 (40%)	133 (41%)
None of my time	168 (45%)	52 (16%)
Not sure	1 (0.3%)	40 (12%)

RETURNING TO USUAL WORKPLACES

We asked participants a set of questions about their usual workplace. The majority of respondents (87%) reported that their employer had a COVID Safe plan, but 12% reported that their employer did not have a plan or that they were not sure if a plan was in place (Table 6).

A minority of workers (15%) reported that they had avoided going into their usual workplace, or had chosen to work fewer hours because of concerns about safety. The vast majority of respondents (84%) reported no avoidance of the workplace for these reasons.

When asked whether people considered their workplace to be high or low risk, two-thirds of respondents reported that their workplace was low risk for COVID-19 infection. One in seven (14%) reported that there was a high risk of infection in their workplace.

TABLE 6. RETURNING TO THE WORKPLACE

Survey Question	Number of responses (%)
Q/ Does your employer have a COVID Safe Plan?	
Yes	852 (87%)
No	73 (7%)
Not Sure	53 (5%)
Q/ Have you avoided going into the workplace, or chosen to work fewer hours, because you feel unsafe?	
Yes	121 (15%)
No	682 (84%)
Not Sure	10 (1%)
Q/ Overall, do you think your workplace is high or low risk for COVID-19 infection?	
High risk	115 (14%)
Moderate risk	196 (24%)
Low risk	494 (61%)
Not sure	8 (1%)

The fourth survey also asked participants who were working from their usual workplace at least part of the time, to report on a range of measures that their employer may have put into place in order to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection in the workplace. Almost all respondents (99%) reported that at least one measure had been put in place (Table 7). The most commonly implemented measures involved workplace hygiene/cleanliness such as hand washing and cleaning of the workplace, and measures to promote physical distancing and reduce the number of people physically in the workplace. Less common measures included access to extra leave, and requirements to wear masks or other personal protective equipment.

TABLE 7. WORKPLACE MEASURES TO REDUCE COVID-19 INFECTION RISK

Q/ Thinking about your workplace, which of the following measures have been put in place to reduce the risk of infection with COVID-19?	Number of responses (%)
Improved access to soap or hand sanitiser	717 (91%)
Discouraged from coming to work while sick	697 (88%)
Requirements to maintain physical distance from others	671 (85%)
Additional cleaning of my workplace	636 (80%)
Restrictions on visitors entering the workplace	519 (66%)
Masks or other personal protective equipment have been provided	458 (58%)
Cap on the number of workers allowed in the workplace	438 (55%)
Encouraged or required to wear masks / face coverings	385 (49%)
Encouraged or required to wear other personal protective equipment (e.g., gloves, gowns)	224 (28%)
Access to COVID-19 pandemic leave	216 (27%)
Staggered work hours / days in the workplace	212 (27%)
Increased access to sick leave / carer's leave	152 (19%)
None of the above	10 (1%)

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Remote work has been a feature of the pandemic, in Australia and in many other nations. This descriptive study demonstrates that there has been a decline in the proportion of workers in our study sample working from home over the course of 2020. However, working from home was still common, with over a quarter of those surveyed towards the end of 2020 still working from home in some capacity. Importantly, we observe that the majority of respondents also reported an intention to maintain at least a partial work from home arrangement in the future. These future intentions were very different from the situation respondents reported pre-pandemic, in which a much smaller proportion of respondents were working from home.

If these intentions are carried through, there will be large flow-on effects for workers, employers and society. The largest effects are likely to be observed in occupations where working from home is more viable such as office workers. Long-term changes in working from home will require further adaptation including in both home-based environments and workplaces, with ramifications for occupational health and safety policies and the health of workers in general. An increase in people working from home will also result in fewer people travelling to and from workplaces. This will have implications for transport systems, for communications networks, for local community infrastructure, and for occupational health and safety practices. For example, the Arizona State University study of employers released in May 2021 reported that 45% of employers intended to reduce or downsize their physical workspace or no longer offer a physical workspace in future (1).

Many respondents reported improved productivity while working from home, in addition to a greater engagement in leisure activities. In terms of physical working from home environment, the majority of respondents did not have a dedicated office space at home, and we observed a variety of home office arrangements including proportions of people working from spare rooms, bedrooms, and multiple locations throughout their home.

Almost all workers who had returned to their usual workplace reported at least one measure had been put in place to reduce the risk of infection with COVID-19. Some of these measures demonstrate compliance with public health measures in general, whereas some workplaces have implemented additional measures such as staggered working hours. However, around one in six workers had avoided going into work because they felt

unsafe, and one in eight reported that their employer did not have a COVID-Safe Plan or that they were unsure if such a plan existed.

A fifth survey is currently underway in the COVID-19 Work and Health study. This will provide further information on working from home among study respondents. Future analysis of the data collected in the COVID-19 Work and Health study will examine the impact of working from home on mental and physical health. This may provide further insight into the health and wellbeing implications of working from home, and evidence that can support new or modified workplace and health systems, services and policy to support a healthy future workforce.

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