

# Strategies to manage working from home during the pandemic: the employee experience

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**Abstract:** Many Australian workers were mandated to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a qualitative approach, this study aimed to identify optimal work from home management strategies, by analysing the experience of Australian employees working from home (WFH) during this time. A purposive sample, drawn from the Australian Employees Working from Home Study, of managers and non-managers from a range of sectors, was invited to participate in focus groups. Data were analysed using thematic analysis and mapped to the work-systems framework approach to determine strategies implemented to support WFH. Most participants' experiences were more negative than positive, in part due to extreme lockdowns including curfews, with childcare and school closures compounding their WFH experiences. Effective workplace-initiated strategies to optimise WFH included: management support of flexible work hours; provision of necessary equipment with ICT support; regular online communication; performance management adjustments; and manager training.

**Key words:** COVID-19, Management, Work health and Safety, Wellbeing, Working from home, Australian workforce

## Introduction

Since the 1970s, working from home (WFH) has been acknowledged as a legitimate work practice, to varying degrees, across organisations worldwide<sup>1)</sup>. Working from home encompasses arrangements that may include employees who are engaged in manual offsite labour (e.g., machinists) and those that are information and communications technology (ICT) dependent such as office workers (known

as teleworkers). Although no standardised definition of telework exists, the International Labour Office proposed a definition of “the use of ICT – such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers – for the purposes of work outside the employer’s premises”<sup>2)</sup>. This definition becomes problematic when considering nuances such as whether the telework is in addition to a usual day in the office (e.g., work at home after hours), incidental (e.g., occasionally working the day at home to accommodate caring responsibilities), or whether the telework is compulsory or voluntary.

The percentage of ICT dependent employees engaged in WFH arrangements, either in a hybrid (working partly at

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the place of employment and partly from home) or full-time basis, has dramatically increased since the 1970s<sup>1,3</sup>). In the US, teleworker numbers grew by 102% from 2005 to 2014<sup>4</sup>). In Australia, approximately 24% of employees were engaged in some degree of WFH before the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>5</sup>). This figure jumped to 41% during the COVID-19 pandemic, with some Australian jurisdictions experiencing higher numbers of employees WFH due to tighter lockdown restrictions<sup>5</sup>).

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the way we work, with many professional, managerial, and ICT dependent workers around the world shifting to WFH immediately following the World Health Organization declaration of a pandemic on March 11, 2020<sup>6</sup>). Lockdowns, travel bans, stay at home orders, and workplace and school closures, have become standard practice to contain the pandemic's spread<sup>7</sup>). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many WFH arrangements remaining involuntary; however, with rising vaccination rates supporting increased community freedom and a need to adapt to a new 'COVID normal' situation, organisations will need to optimise work arrangements (that include WFH), to meet organisational and individual needs. A shift from pre COVID-19 practices in work, health and safety (WHS) will be required as many traditional WFH arrangements have been disbanded. However, qualitative insights to understand the real-world experiences of employees undertaking mandated WFH, to underpin the development of optimum strategies to support workers, remains limited.

Pre COVID-19, numerous studies examined the advantages and disadvantages of WFH, and identified mediating factors in the relationship between WFH and outcomes for employees<sup>8</sup>). The nature of the WFH arrangement contributes largely to the experience of the employee; those engaging in WFH after a day in the office (catch up work after hours) are less likely to experience advantages, compared to employees who work from home part-time or on an ad-hoc basis during normal work hours<sup>9</sup>). Potential advantages gained from WFH are lower levels of stress, greater sense of wellbeing, and improved capacity to provide caregiving<sup>10–12</sup>). Disadvantages related to WFH are increased work–family conflict, increased fatigue, and negative impacts on colleague collaboration/ informal interactions<sup>13, 14</sup>). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, very few studies explored the phenomenon of mandatory WFH during normal hours.

Research examining the involuntary WFH experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, has reported on the potential negative effects of the mandated experience, but little is

known about the types of strategies being implemented to ameliorate these effects and optimise WFH for employees and organisations<sup>4, 15–18</sup>). Ideally, strategies should optimise organisational functions and work conditions for employees, thereby aligning duty of care requirements and work, health and safety (WHS) compliance with commercial imperatives, to the benefit of all stakeholders, taking into account all levels within the workplace system<sup>8</sup>).

This paper reports on the qualitative component of a larger mixed methods research program, the Employees Working from Home (EWFH) study, which aimed to gain insights into the experiences of employees WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic, and identify effective management strategies that contribute to optimisation of the employee experience<sup>19</sup>). For the purposes of this study, WFH refers to the situation where employees are regularly engaged in telework (either compulsory or voluntary), predominately undertaken during normal working hours.

## Method

### *Design*

A qualitative descriptive study<sup>20</sup>) was undertaken in order to gain a comprehensive insight into the experience of employees WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Participants*

Sampling and recruitment for the EWFH study have been described elsewhere<sup>18</sup>). Briefly, convenience sampling was used to recruit a sample of Australian adults aged 18 or more years who WFH two or more days per week during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruitment occurred via Facebook's paid service, professional and personal networks, the La Trobe University Facebook page, and LinkedIn. The sample for this study was drawn from questionnaire respondents who agreed to be contacted to participate in follow up focus group discussions. Purposeful sampling was undertaken to sort participants into five homogenous focus groups<sup>21</sup>): 1) managers; 2) people living alone; 3) women with children living at home; 4) people residing in the states of Western Australia or Queensland; 5) others who were non-managers and residing in states other than Western Australia or Queensland (general). Focus group composition was based on specific demographics to optimise the flow of conversation. Residents in the states of Western Australia and Queensland experienced very limited COVID-19 restrictions compared to the rest of Australia, so they were not included in the same groups as residents in other states who experienced extreme lockdowns. Victoria

had gradually emerged from lockdown during November 2020, but restrictions were in place on the numbers of people allowed to work in offices. Selected participants were emailed a link to an online booking system which allowed them to register for a specific focus group on a first come first served basis, until six participants had registered for any one focus group. All focus group participants were provided with an online grocery store voucher in recognition of their time.

A total of seven focus groups were held, one for each of the groups outlined above and an additional one for managers and a general group. A total of 32 participants were engaged in the focus groups. Reasons for registered participant non-attendance included work commitments (n=6), and an apology (no reason provided [n=1]). One participant

did not contact the researchers. Characteristics of participants and focus groups are outlined in Table 1. Focus groups were held in November–December 2020.

Ethics approval was obtained through La Trobe University Human Ethics Research Committee, approval number HEC20388.

#### Data collection

Focus groups were used to enable participants to direct the flow of information and recount a broad range of experiences; this method of data collection was chosen as it provides an opportunity for participants to fully articulate their experiences in their own language, in an interactive context that can elicit previously unthought-of responses<sup>22</sup>). The researchers developed guiding questions covering the following topics: transitioning to WFH (e.g., ‘how are you managing WFH?’, ‘what are the challenges and benefits of WFH?’), workplace support (e.g., ‘how supportive are your supervisor(s) and/or co-workers?’), performance indicators (e.g., ‘did your job role change?’), technical support (e.g., ‘how was the technical support that you received?’), and the future (e.g., ‘what would be your ideal work arrangements?’). Due to participants’ widespread locations and COVID-19 related restrictions, focus groups were conducted online using the Zoom (Zoom video communications Inc, 2021) meeting platform. Focus groups were scheduled during the lunch period or after business hours with two researchers, JO and NK, facilitating each of the sessions. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

#### Data analysis

NVivo software (version 20.1.4) was used to support data analysis. Focus group transcripts were divided evenly between five members of the research team who independently used an inductive process to develop codes and apply them to the data within their allocated transcripts. Two researchers collaboratively consolidated all the codes into the themes and sub-themes. A workplace systems framework (Fig. 1) was used to guide coding of transcripts. The aim of the systems model was to identify the level within organisations that strategies were being implemented, to assist with identifying gaps in what was being offered, for future inclusion in policies and procedures to support WFH.

Given the challenges to WFH in a non-professional role (e.g., trade or hospitality), in this paper we have opted to refer to any non-WFH workplace as ‘office’ rather than ‘usual’ workplace. Throughout the results, quotes are attributed to one of the focus groups rather than individuals

**Table 1. Participant Characteristics**

	All (n=32)
Age (years)	Number (%)
26–35	8 (25)
36–45	12 (37)
46–55	7 (22)
56+	5 (16)
Gender	
Female	21 (66)
Male	11 (34)
Children at home	13 (41)
Job Role	
Manager	9 (28)
Professional	17 (53)
Clerical /Administrative	5 (16)
Community & Personal Service	1(3)
Workplace sector	
Arts & Recreation Services	1 (3)
Construction	1 (3)
Education & Training	10 (31)
Electricity/gas	1 (3)
Healthcare & Social Assistance	2 (6)
Information, Media, Telecommunications	2 (6)
Manufacturing	1 (3)
Professional, Scientific & Technical Services	8 (25)
Public Administration	5 (16)
Retail Trade	1 (4)
Size of workplace*	
Small	4 (12)
Medium	5 (16)
Large	23 (72)
Type of sector	
Public	17 (53)
Private	10 (31)
Not for profit	5 (16)

\*small <20 employees, medium 20–200 employees, large >200 employees



Fig. 1. The system of workplace factors affecting workers' health, safety, and performance. (Adapted from Macdonald, Munk, and Evans, 2003; Figure 1.).

in order to protect the confidentiality of participants.

## Results

Three themes, each with corresponding sub-themes, were identified: outcomes for employer organisations and employees, factors influencing WFH outcomes, strategies facilitating positive WFH outcomes. Throughout the results section, sub-themes are bolded and italicised. Data saturation was deemed to have been reached. As supported by previous research, seven is a suitable sample size for focus groups.

### 1. Outcomes for employer organisations and employees

Many participants disclosed information about the physical, mental, and productivity effects of WFH (Table 2). Working from home outcomes were varied, and sometimes contradictory, due to differing COVID-19 restrictions across geographical locations; participants located in cities where schools and childcare were closed, reported more negative outcomes. For example, **improved work–life interaction** was a widely acknowledged positive outcome, particularly for employees that were not in mandatory lockdown situations, and included flexibility to accommodate parenting responsibilities, household chores, dog walking, and exercise. However, WFH also resulted in **negative work–life interaction** for employees, due to blurring of boundaries (working longer hours and on weekends), inva-

sion of privacy (using webcam and private phone for work), and work impinging on carer responsibilities; this contributed to **negative mental wellbeing effects** such as exhaustion, burn out, lack of motivation, and conflict with colleagues. Both managers and non-managers reported exhaustion associated with increased working hours and long periods of work without taking leave; due to the lockdown restrictions (curfew, 5km movement radius, and stay at home rules) there was a reluctance to use annual leave to alleviate the work-related fatigue.

*I think there's definitely some fatigue, there's definitely screen fatigue with us, with our kids, everyone's sick of looking at themselves. Focus group 7*

In addition to wellbeing outcomes, there were **negative physical health outcomes** such as increased musculoskeletal pain and weight gain.

*lack of activity too I sort of noticed. My back really started tightening up throughout ... this is probably to do with looking at a screen and just not breathing as much and getting up and walking around. Focus group 3*

**A negative financial impact** for employees was reported; this resulted from increased utility bills and purchase of additional equipment. Conversely, there was a **positive financial impact** reported for employer organisations.

*So I know ... there is [sic] some organisations, they have a more backward culture, that they need to have people onsite, but economically, financially it's not the preferred option [it's better] if you can have people working from their homes. Focus group 7*

**A productivity increase**, due to staff working longer days and not being distracted in the office, contributed to the positive financial impact for employer organisations.

*I've loved how productive I can be with the lack of interference. Working in an open-plan office, it can be really noisy. People see you, they come over and ask you a question - a lot of those interruptions have disappeared. Focus group 3*

Managers reported they did not anticipate or expect increased output.

*We didn't push them, so if they would [usually] do, let's say a hundred jobs a day, literally they were turning out two hundred jobs a day. Focus group 4*

Conversely, a **decrease in productivity** was also reported, due to negative mental wellbeing effects of WFH. While there was **decreased incidental collaboration/net-**

**working between staff** that potentially contributed to the decrease in productivity, the introduction of online communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, resulted in **improved communication within teams and between departments**, as well as **cross business collaboration**.

*...weirdly now we feel way more connected, because we've had a lot more meetings and seen a lot more faces that we never would have before and have developed new relationships, which has been I think a really good bonus from working in this way. Focus group 2*

The online meetings, which provided insight into private lives of employees, reportedly **increased team bonding**. Despite this, **a feeling of isolation and disconnect from work** was associated with WFH, particularly for those living alone in lockdown who could not socialise. However, for some, WFH **improved access to networking and professional development opportunities** through online conferences and seminars that were previously inaccessible due to overseas locations.

*I actually went to a three-day online conference, which in fact planned to be in Auckland, which I had decided not to go because I'd have to pay for it and the fares, but because it was online it was only \$75 so I went for the whole thing... Focus group 2*

Other positive outcomes for employer organisations that were related to adoption of new technology were the **up-skilling of staff** (necessary for adoption of new technology), and **improved business processes**.

*...now it's all online, we improved the system, we cut the process and improved everything. So, I guess in a way, going online and working remotely improved the workload too, and the jobs for everyone. Focus group 4*

## 2. Factors influencing WFH outcomes

Sub themes of the 'factors influencing WFH outcomes' theme were mapped to the workplace systems framework (Fig. 1). Influential factors were identified in all levels of the workplace systems framework: individual worker, physical environment, task and equipment, organisation and job design, and external. Sub themes (bolded and italicised in text) are discussed under the relevant workplace system level.

### Individual Worker

Participants' ability to **adjust to change** varied. Some were anxious about new systems such as software platforms, but most overcame their reservations and were satis-

fied with the changes. Having to self-manage their time and workload independently at home was challenging for some participants.

**Self-imposed pressure** was experienced by several participants who felt they had to respond immediately to work demands and provide validation of their WFH productivity.

*It definitely creates a pressure within me to be highly responsive to my colleagues. So, if they do send an instant message and I'm out for a walk or I'm going to get coffee or whatever, I won't wait to get home and reply, I'll reply because I don't want my taking advantage of flexibility to be misinterpreted... Focus group 1*

With the greater flexibility of WFH and no daily **commute** for participants, additional time was potentially available for work or leisure, yet for some this was insufficient to accommodate **household demands**. When not in lockdown, participants used the flexibility associated with WFH to accommodate domestic responsibilities such as managing laundry, taking children to school or attending appointments. However, during lockdown family demands, particularly those associated with young children at home, placed additional stress on many participants who found it challenging to balance work and family demands.

*...we have had a staff [member] who resigned, had huge pressure because she's a mum of two young kids. ... she wasn't coping, long hours and increased amount of work... Focus group 7*

Participants' **preferred WFH/office balance** influenced their experience of WFH. Most preferred a hybrid WFH model with some days in the office. Many had previously sought to work from home, but their workplaces had not supported WFH arrangements. The ability to work from home felt like a win and led to expectations that management support for WFH would continue after lockdown restrictions eased.

*A year ago our executive team very much didn't trust employees to be able to work from home. They've seen that it works ... So, I would imagine in my department that most of us will be able to work from home one or two days a week and work in the office three or four days a week...It's been a quantum shift for us. Focus group 3*

Others, particularly those living alone, preferred to work in the office full-time as "it's been really hard not having those personal interactions during the day" (Focus group 3), in addition to challenges delineating work and home demands.

Table 2. Participant reported WFH outcomes

Employee outcomes	Employer outcomes
<b>Negative</b>	
Financial impact	Decreased productivity
Feeling of isolation & disconnect from work (particularly those living alone)	Decreased incidental collaboration/networking between staff
Physical health effects	
Mental wellbeing effects	
Exhaustion and burnt out	
Lack of motivation	
Conflict with colleagues	
Work-life interface	
Blurring of boundaries	
Invasion of privacy	
Difficult to meet parenting/caring demands	
<b>Positive</b>	
Work-life interface	Improved communication within teams, between departments & cross business
Flexibility in hours to accommodate parenting/caring responsibilities, household chores, dog walking & exercise	
Less commuting/more free time	Financial benefit
Improved networking & professional development access	Improved processes
	Upskilling staff
	Productivity increase
	Increased team bonding

### Physical Environment

Negative aspects of the physical environment at home included **distractions** from household members and pets, compounded by the **lack of a dedicated office space**.

*So, I was working at the dining room table and my friend's boyfriend was working on the couch, and he loves to chat so he would be talking to me while I'm trying to work and I would have to say to him, "Shall we have a quiet hour and try and just work?" and that would last maybe three minutes and then he would say something else. Focus group 5*

As one participant stated "... we're now living at work, not working from home..." (Focus group 4) which was amplified by a lack of dedicated appropriate workspace, creating blurred work-life boundaries.

The **lack of informal communication** normally experienced in the office was a negative aspect of WFH – participants missed networking and collaborating opportunities

that occurred through these informal contacts, which contributed to the outcomes discussed in theme 1 (Outcomes for employer organisations and employees; isolation and disconnect from work, decrease in productivity).

*The things that you come up with just organically by having a chat with someone, and you start to feed off each other and then you come with a great solution to something. ...they're things that don't necessarily happen in this environment. Focus group 2*

### Task & Equipment

**Equipment provision** by employers contributed to a positive WFH experience, as reported in theme 1. Many participants were able to take home equipment from their office and were provided with easy access to ICT support. Positive experiences related to adoption of software systems, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and new internal communication and administrative systems.

*They were very good at providing technical sup-*

*port. They appointed more [ICT support] people...you would call them, and they would assist you [from] their respective homes. Focus group 2*

The inability to take office equipment home (and having to buy their own), delays accessing internal files (due to VPN and server issues), a lack of timely access to **ICT support** and, for some, difficulties with internet connections, had a negative impact on outcomes.

*In terms of IT we have to actually be able to connect to anything linked to the department, you have to access the VPN so then that slows down your internet connection, then you have to disconnect from that if you want to be in a Skype meeting or a Teams meeting, and then you have to reconnect to it if you want to access it again, and that's quite annoying. Focus group 5*

**WFH tasks involved increased sedentary behaviour** due to lack of incidental exercise associated with moving around the office and commuting. As mentioned in theme 1, this contributed to poorer reported physical health (weight gain and musculoskeletal pain). This created challenges for several participants who used timed breaks, standing desks, and lunchtime exercise sessions to counteract their increased sitting.

**Task workload increased** for some participants, in part due to reduced staffing (as a result of COVID-19 related business decline), and for others increased online meetings detracting from time spent on other tasks.

*... the number of meetings skyrocketed ... to the point where I actually said to my manager at one point "can we please have a dedicated day of no meetings or a timeframe, no meetings after 4", to which ... I was told "no, it's too hard, we need to have these conversations". Focus group 7*

Others had a decreased workload due to the COVID-19 pandemic business impact; for example, the leisure/fitness sector which could not conduct in person activities.

Organisation & job design factors

**Employer attitude to WFH** varied between organisations. Some organisations remained resistant to WFH and demanded staff resume work in the office when lockdown ended. This created stress for those staff members wanting to continue WFH.

*My challenge is some of the respective managers... who are absolutely against people ... working from home. The first opportunity that the word was you can get back to work, [their*

*response] was "bring them back, I don't really care". Focus group 4.*

Other organisations embraced the WFH model, even if they had opposed WFH pre-COVID-19. This provided opportunities for staff to combine WFH with office days, thereby achieving a favourable work–life balance.

*It feels like the power's shifted all to us in terms of setting our own hours and deciding what we want with this. Focus group 5*

The shift in business direction caused by COVID-19 resulted in some participants being made **redundant, changing roles** or having to assist colleagues in other areas.

*... as of that meeting, effectively we stood down nearly ninety percent of our workforce ... we suddenly shifted to a skeleton staff model. Focus group 4*

Changes in roles were accepted by staff to varying degrees with some more willing to accommodate changes than others.

*... some people weren't happy, I guess, to be used in other department, but unfortunately, if you don't have much to do and you want to keep your job, you have to be flexible. Focus group 6*

Implementation of major role restructures during the mandatory WFH period was viewed as demanding and unhelpful.

*We have another senior manager who took the opportunity during this period to create an incredible amount of change in the actual structure of how people worked. They stayed in their roles but the structure of how they actually did their day-to-day tasks was varied dramatically, and it was one thing after another that was implemented, which really wasn't that helpful. Focus group 7*

There was a level of tension for some between 'business as usual' (BAU) and doing the extra tasks imposed by the COVID-19 changes.

**Initial workplace transition to WFH** was a varied experience and influenced the ease of adjustment to WFH. This transition was smoother when businesses already had appropriate technology and equipment available such as the provision of equipment and ICT support and, had previously adopted a hybrid WFH model.

Many businesses made **logistical adjustments to accommodate WFH**. These adjustments occurred throughout multiple departments impacting many processes, for example, ICT, WHS, finance, performance, training, and operations. Adjustments included ICT changes (new software

platforms, increased ICT staff, enabling staff to take home equipment), providing WFH payments, WHS procedure adjustments, changes to key performance indicators (KPI) reporting and expectations, and developing/updating policies (online meeting etiquette, WFH expectations).

As discussed in theme 1, many of the logistical adjustments had a positive influence on employee wellbeing, particularly the increased ICT support, financial payments, option to take home equipment, and assessments of home workstations.

*We engaged a physiotherapist to be able to provide virtual workstation assessments to help people to make sure they were all setting themselves up properly. Focus group 1*

However, problems arose when businesses did not provide workstation assessments.

*The amount of time I was sitting was ridiculous, and I actually was experiencing some pain symptoms, so I set myself up ... a standing workstation, which is wine boxes, jigsaw puzzles, boxes, it's a very ad hoc arrangement. Focus group 6*

Performance management adjustments for some business involved regular informal catchups with staff while others adopted a micromanagement or surveillance approach that was unwelcomed by staff.

*... [there is a] working from home register that was supposed to be updated daily. When we first started we were updating it daily or weekly, you'd look back at your week and that kind of stuff and ... last week it probably took me the best part of three hours. Focus group 5*

**Transitioning to a hybrid model** of work arrangements created some challenges for employers in terms of complying with ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, and accommodating staff preferences for WFH days (i.e., rostering staff in the office on their preferred days). The use of hot desks in the office created anxiety for some returning staff and logistical issues for management, who needed to ensure that social distancing was achievable in shared spaces including staff kitchens and bathrooms. Some workplaces developed rostering schedules to reduce the daily number of staff in the office, which worked well and was being considered for BAU.

*We did return as a hybrid model. We had one or two people in the office each day. So, we had a schedule that we set up. And we've spoken as a team, and this is just our team, about moving towards something like that permanently. It ac-*

*tually worked really well. Focus group 2*

A challenge for employers accommodating staff using the hybrid WFH model, was the provision of two workstations – one at home and one in the office. Many participants had taken their office equipment home for the mandated WFH period and were expected to return it when this ended, so staff using the hybrid WFH model would be required to regularly transport equipment between sites.

**Organisational culture** impacted participants' WFH experience. The most commonly raised factor was management support – participants who had supportive managers (e.g., did not micromanage, supported flexible work hours, trusted their staff) reported this as a positive experience.

*Rather than getting irritated messages saying, "Why weren't you at your desk at set times and why weren't you replying to messages?" constantly, it's accepted that there's a bit more fluidity in the system and it's the end goal and the targets you're trying to get towards that matter more than just the constant instant messaging side. Focus group 2*

Some participants suspected their managers did not trust them, leading to a sense of being unsupported.

*A lot of people complained about the fact that they just got this feeling that they're not being trusted – that people wanted to monitor them to see are you working ... was it 7.5 hours a day? Focus group 2*

*One colleague had a manager who wanted her - when she was working from home - to keep 15 minute time logs of what she was doing; so every 15 minutes, to log what she was doing. Focus group 6*

Underlying perceptions of support was the level and type of management communications to staff. Some workplaces communicated via phone almost daily while others relied on less regular contact. Regular and useful communications were considered supportive.

*But the one thing my boss did was he started a 15-minute one-on-one just welfare, "How are you going?" every week. He found it really important to understand what was going on in our personal lives or our homelife or how we're travelling when it comes to Covid and everything that's happening. Focus group 5*

Some participants perceived that having less regular contact with their managers was an indication of unsupportive management.

*...every second Monday I have a one-on-one*

*with him, sometimes it doesn't happen... I understand that he's busy, but if you commit to a one-on-one with your staff then you should maintain that, particularly when we are working from home. Focus group 5*

At times, increased communication from management was seen as negative rather than positive, and for some, disruptive.

*I almost feel like we were a bit over-communicated with lots of regular Zoom-ins with the leadership teams, and lots and lots of communication, which of course was great, but I think there was a bit of an element of Zoom fatigue. Focus group 6*

Overwhelmingly participants reported an ongoing increase in the communication within their workplace when WFH. The increased interdepartmental communication and cross business collaboration reported above was attributed to managers willingly and regularly utilising software communication platforms.

*By March we were all using Teams, so that's our primary platform. The reason that I really liked Teams was you could have whole [organisation] communication but then I could have individual meetings or groups with my actual staff members... we've started catching up more frequently... it's just provided this chance of cross business collaboration. Focus group 4*

With WFH, team dynamics changed for many participants. There were attempts, with varying success, to maintain social contact and team building through online activities and social gatherings.

*We've organised basically a weekly social team catch-up ... it went really well, but it's actually been pretty strongly attended by most of our team. We've got some really good team building activities and I feel like I almost know my colleagues better by having something a little bit more concentrated in terms of a social event at the end of the week. Focus group 3*

*I've been on some Zoom drinks or Zoom coffees and they're usually reasonably large groups, anywhere from five to 15 people, and they're just awkward. Everybody's already sick of being on Zoom, everybody's tired, no one can be stuffed really. So, it's just a bunch of very tired people staring dead-eyed into a screen. Focus group 1*

Some participants were able to communicate regularly

online with colleagues and maintain a close supportive working relationship, while others found the lack of face-to-face contact meant teams became less cohesive and more conflicted.

*... the interaction, that casual interaction, have a coffee together, the chitchat about what you did on the weekend or let's do something fun and just engage. We just didn't have any time for that and that was a really bad impact on the team. I personally feel that it's lost some connection ... Focus group 7*

Attempts to mitigate negative physical and mental wellbeing outcomes (reported in theme 1) included webinar presentations, access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), regular health and wellbeing information emails, intranet resources, and individual calls to staff. Some participants did not appreciate the wellness emails, preferring phone calls.

*It was like oh no, just delete, delete, delete because I think we were getting one [email] every couple of days which I understand is a nice outreach, but it was driving us nuts because who's got the time to do it? ... maybe actually a call to every staff member from the wellness team, just one call in the whole nine months would have been much more impactful. Focus group 7*

#### External factors

The **pandemic** public health orders heightened the effect of other influences on perceived WFH related outcomes for participants, in particular the perceived stress and effects of social isolation. The negative mental wellbeing outcomes experienced by participants were in part exacerbated by stress due to closed schools and childcare, their inability to leave the house, socialise or holiday, the risk of COVID-19 infection, and job insecurities from COVID-19 economic impacts.

*You didn't have the social interactions with people after work because you weren't allowed to go and see them ... I'm not sure ... how much of what I'm commenting on is to do with work from home and how much it's to do with working from home coupled with however many weeks of lockdown. Focus group 3*

### 3. Strategies facilitating positive WFH outcomes

All participants reported strategies, both employer- and employee- initiated, that facilitated positive WFH outcomes (Table 3).

The employer-initiated strategy that was particularly

helpful was **manager support**. This encompasses the concept of trust-based work, where managers monitored workers without adopting stringent surveillance methods.

*Our employer has trust in us, that we're actually doing the work ... we have a certain amount of cabinets that we have to hand in each week. I think at that point then they'd start asking the questions if that wasn't being done, and from my end it hasn't been an issue. Focus group 2*

Some workplaces **provided managers with formal training/provision of guidelines** about remote management of staff, effective communication, performance review, and practical training about use of software.

*Very early in the piece, our HR teams were running a lot of webinars, particularly with leaders in the business, around how to manage a remote team, and talking to all those points, around every person's going to have a different circumstances, and how to be flexible, and allowing for a lot of people that would have had young kids at home. Focus group 6*

Examples of manager support included: weekly one-on-one check in phone calls with each team member, support of flexible work hours, acknowledgement of parenting and other caring responsibilities, reducing expectations, and approval of requested leave. One supportive manager reported:

*... home schooling came in. So, their tension levels and our tolerance of that had to increase of course ... and it was literally, "It's okay, we actually don't mind if you're not as productive. We just need you to be well and safe and taking care and joining in to all the calls we want you to join in on" ... nobody was putting any pressure on anyone. Focus group 4*

Underpinning the manager support were organisational directives that included an **adoption of flexible work hours, additional 'wellness' leave days, reduction in KPIs (formal and informal), and a policy to use email 'delay send'** so that emails were not sent after business hours. Where there was no formal directive, some managers developed an 'understanding' with team members that unmet KPIs would be overlooked, or that flexible hours would be supported.

*We work under a billable target arrangement ... and there was no formal communication about it, really. I think the business just knew we were not going to hit targets. It wasn't necessarily adjusted, but it was just an understanding that ...*

*"we know the situation you're all in", but no formal adjustments made. Focus Group 6*

Less clear cut were the strategies that sought to engage employees on a professional and social level. As discussed above, efforts to engage employees were both negatively and positively received. There were attempts of varying success to engage employees in **online social activities** for example, trivia games, but the consensus was that an online catch up could not compensate for the lack of in-person contact. However, some participants found online social activities beneficial.

*We have a weekly social one-hour, hour and a half, open-ended sort of catch-up where we might do something like ... a debate between team members ... or we also have a coffee catch-up in groups of three where we just have a half-an-hour phone call every week, which we rotate every couple of weeks, and that's been sort of really good and sort of exceeded my expectations in how we connect with each other. Focus group 3*

There was a view that responsibility for organising online social activities needed to be formalised to prevent one person being overloaded. In addition to stand alone social activities, the incorporation of a **social chat period during work meetings** provided employees with opportunities to engage and connect with colleagues. Participants reported that **weekly team meetings** were preferred to ensure workflow was not constantly disrupted. Some workplaces initiated a system whereby employees were **encouraged to meet a colleague for a coffee**, and they would be reimbursed for the cost.

Other practical support measures included **provision of all necessary equipment and accessories**, for example, mobile phone, computer equipment, and/or a **WFH allowance** that was either a one-off payment or a regular payment to cover additional incurred expenses such as increased utility bills. **Adequate information technology (IT) support** was also required to facilitate optimal WFH. Workplaces that experienced an increase in workload, **hired additional personnel** to reduce the pressure on existing employees.

To mitigate negative physical health outcomes, some workplaces scheduled **walking meetings**, implemented **guidelines to ensure regular screen breaks**, and provided **ergonomic assessments of the WFH workstation**. For those employees experiencing negative mental health outcomes, workplaces provided an **EAP**.

Employee initiated strategies to reduce negative physical

Table 3. Participant reported strategies implemented to optimise WFH

Workplace system level	Employer initiated	Employee initiated
<i>Individual</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EAP access</li> <li>• walking meetings</li> <li>• regular exercise e.g., online yoga before work</li> <li>• access to online professional development, conferences, and seminars</li> <li>• welfare phone calls with manager</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have a regular break in the day &amp; go for walk</li> </ul>
<i>Task &amp; equipment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adoption of software platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams)</li> <li>• employer provided equipment and accessories</li> <li>• employer provided WFH allowance</li> <li>• improving and refining systems/processes</li> <li>• implement systems restricting emails outside work hours</li> <li>• protocols for email (e.g., restricting outside work hours)</li> <li>• provision of work mobile phone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• turn off computer when children come home</li> <li>• use non-domestic background filter during online meetings</li> </ul>
<i>Physical environment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ergonomic assessments of WFH workstation</li> <li>• work-related travel replaced with online interactions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• physically separate workspace/barrier (e.g., shut door; work in another room)</li> <li>• standing desk set-ups</li> </ul>
<i>Organisation &amp; job design</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• training of managers to support WFH</li> <li>• adjusting performance management</li> <li>• manager guidelines to address staff psychosocial hazards</li> <li>• flexibility to ensuring scheduled breaks from screen use</li> <li>• management provision of extra leave days</li> <li>• flexible leave</li> <li>• additional staff if increased workloads</li> <li>• reduced productivity expectations – changed KPIs</li> <li>• workload management addressing WFH pressures and demands</li> <li>• guidelines around new practices etiquette (e.g., using headphones while online in office)</li> <li>• professional communication via weekly online meetings</li> <li>• team meetings incorporating social chatting</li> <li>• management support of flexible working hours to support domestic activities</li> <li>• manager support to schedule breaks in calendar to deal with domestic demands</li> <li>• provide annual leave to supervise children</li> <li>• management acknowledgement of parenting demands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• continuing same hours &amp; break times patterns as in office</li> <li>• start work early before children up to enable time with them later</li> </ul>

health outcomes included: having an *exercise break in the middle of the day* (e.g., walk or exercise class), having *regular screen breaks*, and *setting up a standing desk*. To avoid negative mental wellbeing outcomes, particularly those related to work–life interaction, employees implemented several strategies: *creating a physical barrier* if working (e.g., shutting the door), *scheduling work after hours* around childcare, *phoning a work colleague and keeping them online in the background while working*, maintaining *regular routine* as per pre-COVID pandemic, and using a *virtual background* during online meetings.

## Discussion

This study used a qualitative descriptive method to explore employee and employer experiences of WFH during

the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, and to identify strategies to optimise the experience for both employers and employees. To our knowledge this is the only qualitative study to examine the experiences of Australian employees WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of using a systems framework to identify management strategies to optimise WFH.

### Outcomes of WFH

Employers and employees reported a range of positive and negative outcomes related to WFH during the pandemic. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, several studies also found mixed impacts on employees' health and wellbeing<sup>8, 24–26</sup>. In many ways, mixed responses are not surprising given the diversity in home environments in which employees are attempting to work<sup>27</sup>. However, despite these

differences some common themes emerged on the benefits for employees, including improvements to work life interface due to decreased commuting and flexibility of working hours. In addition, a range of employer benefits are noted, some of which are distinctly different to the pre pandemic situation.

One finding that is potentially counterintuitive relates to the reporting of improved communication between departments and across the business. Due to the rapid adoption of online platforms, employees across different regions of an organisation were able to attend meetings without having to travel; this was associated with an increase in meeting attendance by rural and regional employees within organisations. The rapid shift to full time WFH forced organisations to think laterally about their information strategies and delivery of meetings and communication strategies, which resulted in some positive changes for many participants, and offers insights into new ways of team collaborations beyond the pandemic situation.

Whilst some employees reported improvements to their work life interface, this was not consistent for all; others reported feeling isolated and found challenges with boundary setting where the distinction between work and home life was blurred. Crafting of boundaries has been widely examined in a pre-pandemic situation<sup>28)</sup> where WFH was utilised as a strategy to support improvements to work life interface, but the imposition of the mandated working from home offers new insights into the challenges of full time WFH and what might be needed to optimise employees' health and wellbeing, and creation of sustainable working environments. Participants outlined a range of strategies they had used, but some found the separation between home and work challenging and were unable to devise successful methods to achieve a satisfactory work life interface. Multiple factors influence the success of boundary setting, including the availability of workstation space, number of people in the house, dependents requiring support with remote learning, and are consistent with research<sup>29)</sup> from a range of countries during the pandemic. An emerging challenge for organisations is the adoption of new models of WFH post pandemic, based on evidence collected during the pandemic which emphasises the importance of dedicated workspace and ability to work without interruptions, in addition to good quality organisational support to optimise performance and productivity<sup>29, 30)</sup>.

In relation to the mental and physical health impacts of WFH, some challenges exist with disentangling the current study findings from the broader pandemic environment. The study participants had been living through a series of

rolling lockdowns in addition to closures of schools and childcare centres. Most had been working at home for many months; as such these negative health impacts are likely to be influenced by multiple and interacting environmental factors including societal, organisational, and individual.

#### *Strategies implemented to optimise WFH*

The systems model used in the current study enabled an exploration of the level at which strategies were targeted to optimise WFH. Reassuringly, most of the strategies were at the organisational and job design level, thus addressing the systems of work rather than focussing on an individual's behaviour. Targeting the systems of work is consistent with good ergonomics and WHS practice<sup>31)</sup>, that is, focussed on creating an optimal work environment to support individual worker capacity rather than expecting employees to adapt to poor job design<sup>32)</sup>.

Fewer strategies were identified at the levels of the physical environment, task and equipment, and individual. However, the focus of the current study was not to record the number of strategies at each level to provide an indication of importance. For example, having a good quality workstation and internet connection are critical, as is good managerial and team support. The breadth and nuance of strategies to support workers with a focus at all levels within the workplace system should be the main goal and is consistent with development of good quality comprehensive policy and procedures to support WFH.

Beyond the current pandemic, some key challenges related to work design are emerging, and findings from our study provide insights into potential solutions. New ways of working involve hybrid work models with teams combining WFH with office-based work. Employers will need to consider how to ensure that teams are engaged equitably in meetings so those who are in the office are not afforded additional opportunities that are not available to all employees. Other emerging issues include provision of equipment for work and the office environment to minimise disruption, need for manager training to support managing distributed teams, and assessments of home office environments based on emerging evidence about importance of having a dedicated space for work.

In view of our findings, employers are positioned to realise substantial gains from employees WFH. Not only should organisations gain financially from supporting employees to WFH, but they stand to retain employees and attract recruits seeking flexible work arrangements that include WFH options, thus becoming an employer of choice

with the subsequent benefits<sup>33, 34</sup>). Conversely, organisations who do not offer WFH opportunities are likely to face resignations from employees who will make choices related to being able to WFH<sup>35</sup>. New guidelines are needed to support managers in considering requests to WFH beyond the pandemic, and to clarify the division of responsibilities between organisations and their employees. Mandated WFH during lockdowns has highlighted that many jobs can be done from home and do not require a continuous office presence, requiring a shift in attitudes from some employers. Organisations are likely to face some challenges in re-conceptualising how they manage future requests to WFH, which will need to take into account employee preference<sup>36</sup>.

#### *Implications for WHS practice*

Workplaces require policies and procedures to support WHS practitioners to administer systems which foster WFH; it is likely that several iterations of policies and procedures will be needed to accommodate the rapidly changing nature of contemporary working environments. Importantly, evaluation of implemented policies and procedures is required to ensure a fit for evolving ways of working and responsiveness to the needs of both employees and employers. An adoption of an organisation-wide mindset to embrace WFH as a standard ongoing practice, with a reliance on trust-based work as opposed to surveillance, provides opportunity for optimisation of productivity and employee wellbeing<sup>37, 38</sup>. Policies will need to capture employee choice in WFH given the range of employee preferences identified in the current study and by others<sup>39</sup>.

#### *Study strengths and limitations*

A major strength of this study is the collection of real-world insights from workers across a range of organisations, industry sectors, and geographic locations. However, the diversity can also be considered a limitation as participants were exposed to different lockdown restrictions (e.g., metropolitan versus rural employees; differences between state jurisdictions). Qualitative research utilising focus groups is highly intensive and necessarily involves a limited number of participants – in this study we also drew on a convenience sample which may not reflect all experiences of employees WFH. We refer to WFH outcomes, but we cannot infer causality due to the design of the study.

The sample size is in line with previous recommendations for focus groups, and the sampling strategy utilised ensured diversity through the inclusion of managers and non-managers; parents and non-parents; and those with dif-

fering living arrangements. Despite the limitations associated with focus groups, the rich data obtained and diversity of views provide substantial benefits.

Using the workplace systems lens to frame the analysis, is a strength and provides insights into future directions for the development of policies and procedures at different levels within the workplace. While this study is part of a larger body of work, this qualitative analysis provides a useful baseline for further research to explore the impacts of WFH in a rapidly evolving environment.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant alterations to standard work arrangements, with many employees mandated to WFH resulting in both positive and negative outcomes for employees and organisations. It is foreseeable that WFH will continue in some form as society adapts to a ‘COVID normal’ state. The challenge is for organisations to develop strategies to appropriately manage WFH and reap the potential benefits whilst ensuring employee health and wellbeing are optimised. Effective strategies may include provision of necessary equipment and support, regular communication, performance management adjustments (reliance on trust-based work rather than surveillance), and training for managers. Achieving the potential gains associated with WFH requires a holistic systems approach which takes into account all relevant work factors, with integration of WHS into policies and procedures to ameliorate any negative WFH impacts on employees.

## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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