

# Working from Home in the Australian Public Sector Before, During, and Post-COVID-19



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## Synonyms

Telecommuting; Telework; Virtual work; Working remotely

## Definition

<i>Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Pandemic</i>	An infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. An epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting many people.
<i>Public sector</i>	Government and all publicly controlled or funded entities that deliver public programs, goods, or services.
<i>Telework/ Teleworking/</i>	A flexible work arrangement where employees perform all

*Telecommuting* (“working from home”)

or a substantial part of their work while physically separated from their employer’s location.

## Introduction

Based on the number of cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) outside China having “increased 13-fold . . . more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries, and 4291 people having lost their lives, and thousands more fighting for their lives,” the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared on 11 March 2020 that COVID-19 was a pandemic (WHO 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic continues unabated to wreak havoc across the globe, with the confirmed count of COVID-19 infected cases at 132,046,206 (including 2,867,242 deaths) on 8 April 2021 (WHO 2021). Global interventions adopted to stem the spread of COVID-19 have resulted in international and state border closures, cessation of international and domestic flights and transit, supply chain disruptions, mass closures of businesses and employee layoffs, panic buying, social distancing, enhanced personal hygiene practices, and mandatory and self-isolation. These interventions have individually and collectively dramatically affected the way people typically work and live their lives (Sharma et al. 2020). Governments across the world have also been forced to make timely and what could be perceived as apparently contradictory decisions, policy changes,

nationwide broadcast messages, and advice notifications. Understandably, such apparent contradictions have been contingent on the ever-changing, latest available information regarding the increasingly wide-ranging impact of COVID-19, the identification of mutated and more virulent strains of the virus, and the availability and effectiveness of vaccines (Williamson et al. 2020).

When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, national and state governments, employers, employees, and citizens generally remained optimistic that the impact of COVID-19 on “life as we knew it” would be minimal. Governmental messages such as “to go about . . . regular life and business as much as possible” were issued to the general public and reinforced such optimism (Morrison 2020a). However, in very quick succession, those messages were replaced with governmental requests to remain at home, and if possible, work from home (Morrison 2020b). Across the globe, business sectors, including the public sector, directed their employees on a previously unimaginable scale, and at short notice, to commence working from home, in what has been toted, the “world’s largest work-from-home experiment” (Banjo et al. 2020). In 2020, it is suggested that “a veritable revolution happened in global job markets,” which has continued into 2021, where it is currently estimated that “55% of businesses globally offer some capacity for remote work,” and 18% of the workforce work from home on a full-time basis (Marinova 2021). Notwithstanding, a survey in 2020 of the Australian Public Service agencies, which employed 1.2 million public servants (Burton 2020), identified that “64% of public servants were working from home” (Dingwall 2020).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated “lockdowns” globally, millions of public servants have been working from home. Many of those affected public servants, governments, academics, and news media outlets have questioned and speculated whether widespread working from home could become the post-pandemic “new norm” (FourNet 2020). This chapter investigates the working from home history, perceived benefits and challenges, and the likelihood that widespread working from home

could occur in the Australian public sector post-COVID-19. In this chapter, the terms “working from home,” “teleworking,” and “telecommuting” are used interchangeably.

## History of Working from Home

While teleworking was considered by employers in the 1950s, until the introduction of affordable personal computers and portable modems in the early 1970s, the practical application of teleworking was not feasible (Hill et al. 1998). From the 1970s and into the 1990s, teleworkers that worked from home typically were under an arrangement with their employer to accommodate the integration of work and family care responsibilities (Hill and Fellows 2014). With increased availability, portability, and use of computing and communications equipment, and a corresponding dramatic reduction in cost, the emergence of teleworkers on a larger scale materialized (Hill et al. 1998). However, despite flexible working practice adoption in the new millennium (Cassidy and Parsons 2017), employers remained disinclined to sanction working from home due to uncertainty as to whether gains would outweigh losses (ABS 2019). Such uncertainty stemmed from contradictory findings regarding performance and productivity improvement (Martin and McDonnell 2012) and perceived challenges associated with employee isolation, communication and supervision, and questionable employee commitment (de Vries et al. 2018). Hence, pre-COVID-19 adoption of teleworking had been restricted in the Australian Public Sector and was atypical, as evidenced by only 10% of public servants in Australia in 2013 teleworking, and by 2019 less than 15% (APSC 2019).

## Perceived Benefits of Working from Home

As with any change in working conditions (such as working from home), motivations, perceived benefits, and drawbacks exist for both employers and employees and need to be balanced in favor of

both parties, lest this work arrangement would not survive long. A range of benefits have been purported to interest public sector employers sufficiently to consider allowing employees to practice teleworking. Such benefits have been identified as reduced organizational expenses (rent, telephones, utilities, equipment, etc.), enhanced workforce productivity due to “lack of interruptions, increased concentration, increased motivation, employee satisfaction, a better employee dedication, increased work energy by reducing time and disruptive elements,” reduced absenteeism due to “diseases, family events, and adverse weather conditions,” and mitigation of the risk of spreading contagious diseases throughout the workforce resulting in productivity loss and business disruption (Lupu 2017, 696).

Research has identified that 86% of employees have expressed a preference to work from home (Stahl 2018). Therefore, it is important to understand what factors have motivated such a high level of employee preference for working from home. One of the most important factors (benefits) mentioned by employees that motivated them to desire to work from home has been the autonomy and opportunity for flexible scheduling of their daily activities and to work according to their personal needs (Lupu 2017, 696). Further, as a result of not being required to commute to/from the office, commuting time was eliminated (time-saving) and commuting stress reduced, resulting in more available time to spend with the family and be productive. Financial benefits have also been identified as accruing to employees who worked from home, such as savings on fuel, other forms of transportation, parking fees, and preschool/child care, etc. It is also important that mothers provide family support while still working (Wienclaw 2019), and employees living great distances from their employer were still able to be employed (Lupu 2017, 695).

### **Perceived Challenges of Working from Home**

Fear persists among many managers in the public sector regarding telecommuting “despite the

mounting evidence that shows telecommuting is beneficial to both employers and employees.” Those fears tend to stem from a number of factors. Management perceives that telecommuting is uncharted territory; therefore, it will be unmanageable and daunting. Notwithstanding, informally, telecommuting has already been underway for years in most organizations, with employees using their mobile phone and computer at home to check emails, finish work at home, make and take work-related phone calls to/from work, etc. “The fact is that we’re already working remotely because of the integration of technology and mobility in our lives, but we (employers and employees) are just not formally acknowledging it as such.” Realistically, “nobody only works at their desk in their on-site office anymore.” Management also perceives that telecommuting only benefits employees. Notwithstanding, studies have clearly identified that both employers and employees benefit from such flexible working arrangements, in spite of setup costs in equipping employees and adequacy of technology to work from home, trust, productivity and performance “issues,” and the “growing pains” experienced. Generally, those perceptions have been shown to be unfounded, and costs to be far outweighed by reduced operating costs, increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, and increased staff and organizational flexibility (Sutton 2014).

While public sector managers’ fears are noted, it is pertinent to acknowledge that manifold challenges exist for employees when teleworking, none the least being that they are unsure as to what to expect and what to do, as no clear-cut rules typically exist. Further compounding this significant challenge is that employees commonly report that from day 1 of working from home, they are confronted with technology glitches such as unreliable Wi-Fi, reduced Internet speed, frequent disconnections from corporate networks, poor quality video meetings, and printers and scanner that malfunction, all which adversely affect employee productivity and promote immense frustration (Leprince-Ringuet 2020).

Many teleworking employees also strike trouble maintaining a structure in their day and working normal business hours; hence, they find

themselves not completing required work during the day and then being forced to work evenings or weekends. Further, no clear division exists between workspace and personal space, with employees often feeling that their home is no longer “a place of relaxation, safety and security” where one can slip out of “work mode” and into “relaxed mode” and “switching off,” because there is always the sense of necessity to “finish one last thing” or “check one more email.” Working from home, employees also find themselves surrounded by distractions such as TV, household chores, family, and friends, which all prove challenging and can affect their productivity. As well, employee supervision and direction from superiors dramatically reduced with limited guidance provided as to what to do, feedback on progress, reprioritization of goals, and the like. Employees often find themselves craving guidance from the bosses they use to complain about (Davis 2021).

Communication and coordination can also be challenging when working from home. While it is difficult enough undertaking productive face-to-face meetings and coordinating a team of employees’ efforts, when employees are working from home, those activities become that much more difficult. Because of the heavy reliance on nonverbal cues in communication, when working from home, those nuances are removed when communicating via email, phone, video conferencing, and the like; hence misinterpretation and conflict can result. When working from home, the whole work dynamic has changed. So, how is an employee’s performance to be monitored and measured and against what standard? Because many managers lack answers to this question, they tend to resort to a basic tracking metric of how long the employee has logged onto their computer. The length of time an employee physically sits at a desk does not necessarily equate to output and goal achievement. Employees who work from home require very clear and simple performance indicators to guide and monitor their performance (Davis 2021).

Social isolation when working from home each and every day takes its toll. Because human beings are social by nature, without the opportunity to socialize they can become lonely and

starved for communication. Also, when working from home and not surrounded by ambitious colleagues, it is easy “to slip into a rut,” feel comfortable, and lose the motivation, drive for and sight of important objectives. In summary, while employee telecommuting comes with a myriad of perceived benefits, “with every benefit comes a challenge” (Davis 2021).

### **Working from Home and Returning to the Workplace during the Pandemic**

Shortly after the WHO’s declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, state governments across Australia required public servants to work from home. Each state adopted differing approaches to employees working from home. In some instances, states were generous in providing extensive online resources, funding consumables and utilities, and management of employee fatigue, and if the whole job could not be undertaken from home, accrued annual leave was not required to be used. Conversely, other states were less generous and adopted more hardline approaches requiring that if an employee “could not be fully productive, they should take leave,” implemented “working from home on a trial basis,” and instructed that “employees with young children could not work from home, but could work less than full-time work hours.” The disparate responses provided by state governments demonstrate the differing degree of “acceptance or resistance to the practice of working from home” (Williamson et al. 2020). Further, “the timing and messaging of the transition out of the pandemic also indicated resistance” with Australian Government advices appearing to be contradictory (Williamson et al. 2020) – on 8 May 2020, a roadmap was released which encouraged employees to continue to work from home (Australian Government 2020), and the same day, an advisory was issued for employees to plan the transition back to their workplaces (Australian Public Service Commission 2020). In May and June 2020, state governments staged the return of employees back to their regular workplace based on the workplace being deemed

COVID-safe, a “hierarchy of need,” decisions by agency heads based on whether the employee delivered a critical service, and the employee’s preference to continue working from home (Williamson et al. 2020).

## Conclusion

The Australian public sector (as with many public sectors across the globe) has a history of being risk-averse and notoriously slow (resistant) to change, and when change has occurred, it typically has been incremental (and “safe”) and not radical (“higher risk”). It is also commonly reported that pre-pandemic considerable resistance was evidenced by Australian public sector management to employees working from home and other flexible working arrangements; while in contrast, employees were generally desirous of working from home. Such resistance by management has been openly espoused to be founded on concerns regarding technical difficulties of working from home, employee productivity and performance, and an absence of a culture of trust (Williamson et al. 2018, 2020). However, with the rapid and wide-ranging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic requiring an immediate, radical response from the government, management resistance to employee’s working from home was for necessity and expediency sake somewhat “side-stepped,” and working from home for employees was implemented across the Australian public sector. It is suggested that once the immediacy of the pandemic has passed, normalization of public servants working from their workplaces, and restricted pre-COVID-19 levels of employees working from home, will be reinstated. It is further suggested that for any major consideration by the government for employees to work from home, extensive governmental review of managers’ and employees’ experiences with working from home pre, during, and post-COVID-19 would be required, and necessary policies needed to be developed, therein delaying any possible consideration for operationalization or extension of prior work practices. Finally, because the concept and practice of working from home

are such radical diversions from perceived “normalized” public sector work practices, and continue to be resisted by management, it is considered questionable as to whether large numbers of public sector employees would post-COVID be offered the opportunity to work from home. This then begs the question as to how the government expects to “put the genie back in the bottle”? Public sector employees have received the liberating “taste” of working from home, and then under instruction, are simply expected to return to the bureaucratic “norm” of their workplace, as though nothing had happened or changed. It will be interesting to see how this scenario pans out. . .

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Alternative/Flexible Arrangements](#)
- ▶ [Coordination and Collaboration in Crisis Management](#)
- ▶ [Employee-Friendly Practices](#)
- ▶ [Flexible Organizations](#)
- ▶ [Leadership in the Remote, Freelance, and Virtual Workforce Era](#)
- ▶ [Organizational Ergonomics](#)
- ▶ [Organizations and Environment](#)
- ▶ [Work-Life Programs](#)

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