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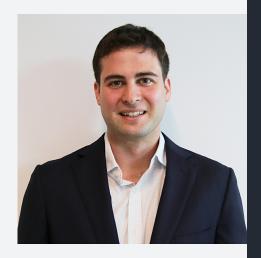
# 2.

# WFH DEBATE MUST REFOCUS ON PRODUCTIVITY



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Of the many impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, none have shaken the world of work as much as the shift to remote working and working from home (WFH).

Remote working in some form looks like it is here to stay. Yet there is currently a tension between employees wanting to work flexibly and employers increasingly pushing for a return to the office.

Balancing these different perspectives will be a key challenge over the year ahead. Managers now find themselves grappling with the nuance and complexity of new ways of working, as well as competing priorities and interests, as the remote-work experiment continues to play out in real time.

To allow this debate to disintegrate into a tug of war between firms and workers would be a missed opportunity. Instead, we should refocus on the productivity and participation gains that new ways of working could unlock, to get the right balance between diversity and inclusion, collaboration and innovation, and mental health and employee engagement.

Unlocking the productivity potential of WFH will require willingness from managers to experiment and commit to changes that make WFH more effective but also add value in the office. Further research and analysis will also be needed to learn more about the longer-term implications of new ways of working.

With labour productivity growth at its slowest pace in decades, now is the time to pull every lever at our disposal. Remote work needs to be part of the productivity discussion.

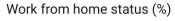
### The current state of remote work

Work done outside an employer's office (remote work or working from home) is clearly popular among workers. The latest ABS data show 37 per cent of Australian workers, including 60 per cent of managers and professionals, were working from home on a regular basis in August 2023, up from around five per cent pre-pandemic (Figure 1).<sup>28, 29</sup> This is broadly in

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### More than one-third of employed Australians now regularly work from home





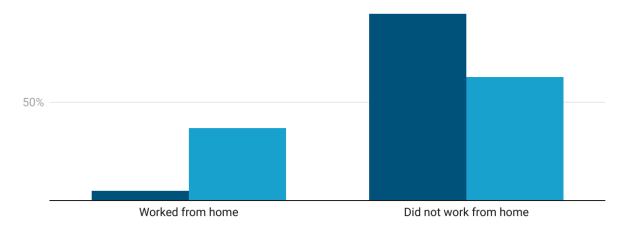


Chart: CEDA Analysis • Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (August 2023), Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016), • Created with Datawrapper

The latest ABS data show

**37**%

of Australian workers, including

60%

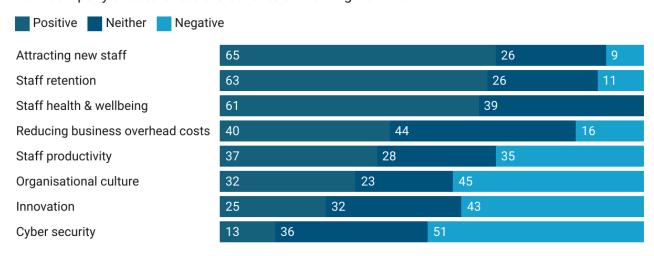
of managers and professionals, were working from home on a regular basis in August 2023 line with the Productivity Commission's estimate that 35 per cent of jobs can be done from home, and represents a dramatic shift that has important implications for Australia's overall productivity growth.<sup>30</sup>

Employers, however, are less enthusiastic. A KPMG survey of more than 1300 CEOs across 11 countries found that two-thirds of CEOs expect a full return to the office within the next three years.<sup>31</sup> A recent survey by the Australian HR Institute found the biggest source of pressure to return to the physical workplace was senior management (85 per cent) and boards (30 per cent).<sup>32</sup> While around two-thirds of directors believe flexible working arrangements are good for staff attraction and retention, only 37 per cent believe they are good for productivity and even less (25 per cent) believe they are good for innovation (Figure 2).<sup>33,34</sup>

This chart uses ABS data from the 2016 census and 2023 Working Arrangements survey.

## Directors back flexible work for hiring and retention, not productivity or innovation<sup>35</sup>

How company directors rate the benefits of working from home



Source: Australian Institute of Company Directors, Roy Morgan · Created with Datawrapper

With this clear discrepancy between firms and workers, the debate about remote work risks disintegrating into an industrial-relations tug of war. When such changes are driven by who is in a position of relative bargaining strength, rather than a shared understanding of the evidence, the outcome is likely to be suboptimal, not least because outcomes are not maintained through economic cycles.

Focusing on remote work as an industrial-relations problem misses a key opportunity to examine the potential effects on productivity growth, and what this means for our society more broadly.

### The WFH debate needs to refocus on productivity

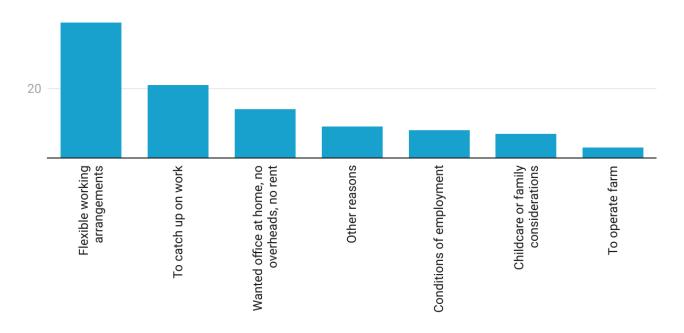
One reason why firms and workers have different preferences around remote work is because the productivity gains from working from home typically accrue at the individual level, while the productivity gains of bringing workers together in offices typically accrue to firms.

In surveys, workers often report that they are more productive at home than in the office and in 2023 almost 40 per cent of Australians said flexibility was their main reason for working from home (Figure 3).



### Flexible working is the main reason for WFH

Main reason worked from home (%)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics · Created with Datawrapper

In contrast, the productivity gains from working in an office typically manifest at the team or organisation level, are less tangible to workers and take longer to accrue. These include gains from collaboration, mentoring of junior workers and oversight of teams.

The overall productivity impact of remote work therefore depends on the net impact of a range of factors. The research in this area is still in its infancy and there is much to learn. Broad-based working from home is a relatively new phenomenon and more analysis is needed to understand the longer-term implications. Many of the studies conducted so far rely on data from the pandemic, subjective measures of productivity, or were conducted in developing countries. Participants in the WFH debate bring different perspectives and have different agendas, which can contribute to a sense of confusion and conflict.

Nevertheless, studies so far suggest that while fully remote work might be the most productive outcome at the individual level for some workers, it tends to reduce productivity at the firm level.

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since the pandemic.

In contrast, firms adopting a hybrid approach with some time spent in the office can achieve the best of both worlds, with firms generally experiencing no productivity loss and potentially some productivity gain.<sup>36</sup>

With growing acceptance and evidence in favour of hybrid work, a key challenge for firms over the year ahead will be to experiment and find the best approach for their unique teams and circumstances. Finding the best way to maximise overall productivity will be crucial, and managers will play a vital role. Robust data and analysis will be needed to support quality decision-making.

Three central considerations from a productivity perspective are the impact of working arrangements on (i) workforce diversity and inclusion, (ii) innovation and collaboration and (iii) employees' mental health and engagement.

### Diversity and inclusion

Firms benefit from hiring from a larger, more diverse group of workers as they are more likely to find a worker with the skills and talents to match the firm's needs. Diversity within teams also enriches the quality of inquiry, problem solving and decision-making.<sup>37</sup> For example, a large study undertaken by Boston Consulting Group found increasing diversity in leadership teams led to better innovation. It found firms with above-average diversity on their management teams had 19 percentage points higher revenue due to innovation. Remote work has also benefited boards, making it easier to attract directors from overseas or interstate. Previous CEDA research found that firms with more diverse boards also tended to be more dynamic.<sup>38</sup>

For some people, such as those with long-term health conditions or disability, parents of young children or other primary carers (such as those caring for elderly relatives), attending work in-person has been a barrier to workforce participation. Remote and flexible working has often been valued by these groups, but until the pandemic it was not always available. With flexible work now normalised in more occupations, workers with a greater need to work from home now have access to a broader range of jobs and opportunities.

CEDA analysis of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data Release 22,<sup>39</sup> which includes responses from the second half of 2022, has found that workers with a health condition or disability that affects their ability to work (an impactful condition),

women with children and carers have significantly increased their workforce participation in occupations that have made large transitions to remote work since the pandemic (or "WFH occupations"; Figure 4). We find that these groups have increased their labour force participation by significantly more than other comparable workers. This suggests that the pandemic acceleration of WFH and a strong labour market have contributed to overcoming barriers and stereotypes that have until now limited participation for these groups.

Our analysis also shows that WFH rates among the general population have caught up to WFH rates of workers with an impactful condition, women with young children and carers (Figure 5). In other words, WFH has levelled the playing field. These shifts can help the Federal Government achieve its new definition of full employment, where "everyone who wants a job is able to find one without searching for too long".<sup>40</sup>

These outcomes are a clear win for workers, employers and the economy, but may be at risk when the labour market inevitably softens. We must focus on maintaining these pandemic-induced benefits into the future.

### FIGURE 4

# WFH has contributed to a larger increase in labour force participation for some groups

Participation in working-from-home occupations

### **Carers**

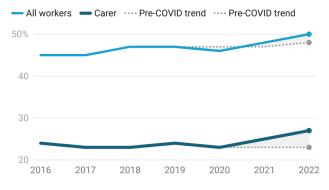


Chart: Analysis by CEDA • Source: Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey [HILDA] • Created with Datawrapper

### Impactful condition

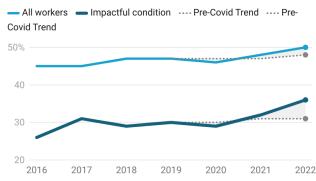


Chart: Analysis by CEDA  $\, \cdot \,$  Source: Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey [HILDA]  $\, \cdot \,$  Created with Datawrapper

### Women with children under four

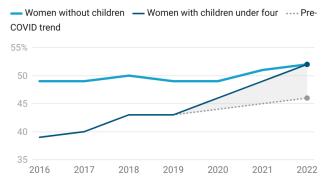


Chart: Analysis by CEDA • Source: Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey [HILDA] • Created with Datawrapper

### Women with children over four

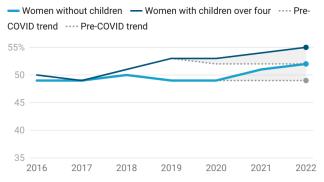
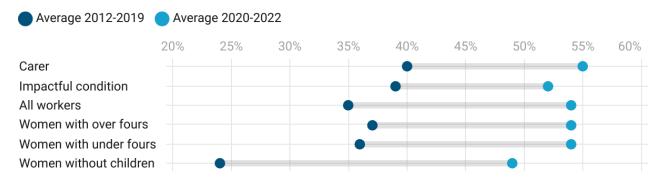


Chart: Analysis by CEDA • Source: Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey [HILDA] • Created with Datawrapper

### Rates of WFH are now similar across all groups of workers

Percentage of workers who WFH in selected WFH occupations



Source: Household Income and Labour Dynamics Survey Australia, 2023. • Created with Datawrapper

\*In Figure 4 and 5, we only consider the workforce outcomes of people in 'working from home occupations', these are occupations which reported large increases in working from home because of the pandemic, such as Managers and Professionals. Some occupations, such as farmers, have always had high rates of working from home, but are unlikely to be telecommuting. Considering only these occupations allows us to better understand the effect of telecommuting brought about by the pandemic.

### Innovation and collaboration

The evidence so far shows that in-person collaboration is better for innovation than virtual collaboration. One study published in *Nature* found videoconferencing inhibits the collaborative production of creative ideas by prompting a narrower cognitive focus (on a screen).<sup>41</sup> In contrast, the study found some evidence that videoconferencing could be more effective than in-person groups when it comes to selecting which ideas to pursue, which requires a narrower focus.

Employers have been concerned that working from home reduces the frequency of serendipitous interactions, or "watercooler moments", between colleagues. Serendipitous exchange of knowledge and ideas is also conducive to innovation and face-to-face interactions have been found to substantially increase knowledge flows. 42 Some businesses are trialling different ways to initiate "structured serendipity" across geographically dispersed workforces, such as scheduling "speed-dating" sessions or random coffee meetings as a way of establishing connections between colleagues who would otherwise not interact with one another.



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A related task that is often undervalued by workers is the mentoring of junior or less experienced staff. This is important in many roles that can be done remotely, even those with routine tasks.<sup>43</sup> Mentoring is important for building the productive capacity of junior workers, and happens more organically in person. Yet it is often overlooked by busy managers, especially if they are not directly rewarded for mentoring or coaching, and are instead focused on tasks that are more urgent or more directly linked to their own KPIs. CEDA's dynamic capabilities research found that managers are often too tied up with "business as usual" to focus on long-term capability building.<sup>44</sup>

All of this suggests that coordination of in-person office days is important for teams to maximise the benefits of hybrid working arrangements. Evidence also shows that teams suffer from lost collaboration as soon as one team member works from home.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, as more members of a team work remotely, there are higher attrition rates for those remaining in the office.<sup>46</sup>

### Mental health and employee engagement

Investing in the mental health and engagement of employees leads to increased productivity and better business outcomes. Poor mental health costs the Australian economy between \$12.2 billion and \$39.9 billion each year in lost productivity and participation.<sup>47</sup> Median compensation claims relating to mental-health costs tripled in just under 20 years to 2018-19, and could triple again by 2030.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, highly motivated and engaged workforces are also more productive.

Job design is critical to mental health and engagement. On the one hand, potential downsides of WFH can include loneliness, longer work hours and the blurring of boundaries between work and home. <sup>49</sup> These effects vary depending on gender, age and household circumstances. ii On the other hand, potential benefits of WFH include reduced commute time, a quieter working environment, less burnout and more autonomy.

Survey results indicate that levels of loneliness and poor mental health were not worse when people worked from home, while satisfaction with work-life balance improved.<sup>50</sup> The overall conclusion from this study was that there seemed to be no evidence of an increased risk to mental health for people who choose to work from home.

ii Productivity Commission. (2021). Working from home https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/working-from-home.pdf



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Research shows that good management can be the difference between positive or negative productivity outcomes when employees work exclusively remotely.

This is consistent with international research. For example, the World Health Organisation found a small but positive effect of flexible working arrangements on mental health.<sup>51</sup> There is also evidence that working from home reduces absenteeism and improves autonomy.<sup>52</sup>

Several studies have found that hybrid work arrangements are optimal for mental health. For example, in a 2023 Flexjobs survey of more than 5600 working professionals almost half said a hybrid work arrangement would best support their mental health.<sup>53</sup> Other studies have found similar results.

While the evidence to date suggests that WFH can have a positive effect on employee engagement and mental health, there is still much we don't know. More research and measurement will be needed, particularly into the long-term effects.

### **Good management is critical**

Good management will be critical as firms work to establish the most productive ways of working over the year ahead. For example, research shows that good management can be the difference between positive or negative productivity outcomes when employees work exclusively remotely.<sup>54</sup>

As more firms experiment and more research is done, our understanding of the most productive approaches will evolve. It will be up to managers to make remote working work in practice for their teams, to test different approaches and capture the information needed to make good decisions, and to bridge the gap in expectations between employees and CEOs where necessary.

What is clear so far is that hybrid work is much more complex to manage. Managing remote or hybrid workforces will require a high level of coordination of both people and tasks. Managers must be willing to experiment to find what works for their teams and organisations, and continue to adjust and adapt as circumstances change. They will also need new ways of monitoring employees who they cannot physically observe, based on objective measures of output rather than hours.<sup>55</sup>

All of this may be easier said than done. Even if managers figure out the most productive way of working for their team, implementation will need acceptance and willingness from employees to be successful.

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There is evidence that forcing workers into the office can be detrimental. One US study of S&P 500 firms with return-to-office mandates found they significantly reduced employee satisfaction and did not improve firm performance (profitability or stockmarket valuation).<sup>56</sup> This suggests that employee buy-in matters, and an alternative approach may be needed. Managers will need to consider this carefully. Communication with employees will be critical. Almost a third of organisations say they have not consulted with their staff about hybrid working arrangements.<sup>57</sup>

This increasingly complex and uncertain environment will require more dynamic managers. Previous CEDA research found that firms with more dynamic management capabilities had significantly better employee-related performance and productivity outcomes during the pandemic.<sup>58</sup>

Managers should focus their attention on the 'no regrets' changes that make WFH more effective, but also add value in the office. When it comes to the role of managers in the three key areas we have focused on in this chapter:

- Managers should recognise that WFH deepens the
  pool of available workers with benefits for diversity
  and inclusion, and consider what is needed to
  make this successful over the longer-term. With
  certain groups having a stronger preference for
  working from home, unlocking these diversity
  benefits may require more bespoke working
  arrangements, rather than adopting a 'one size fits
  all' approach.
- Given evidence that **innovation and collaboration** is more effective in person, when all team members are present, a challenge for managers will be how to coordinate and reward collaborative behaviours in hybrid workforces. This will involve using the lessons of WFH to drive new ways of communicating, clearer performance expectations, and more formal staff mentoring and development.
- It will be up to managers to optimise their hybrid arrangements in a way that supports employees' **mental health and engagement**. Management capability is one of the most influential contributors to improving mental-health outcomes for employees. <sup>59</sup> CEDA has previously proposed a framework for organisations that focuses on building strong foundations through good job design, strong management capability and a supportive organisational culture.



These layers of complexity are adding pressure on managers, who might also need additional skills and support. The Australian HR Institute has found that so far only one-third of organisations have provided any training to line managers on how to manage remote or hybrid working. 60 If this training gap is not addressed there is a risk that the benefits of remote work seen to date might be difficult to sustain over the longer term.

### The year ahead

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we worked at unprecedented pace and scale. This remarkable shift was made possible by firms and workers coming together to prioritise the greater good. While the health emergency has now passed, the greater good must remain part of the conversation if we are to unlock the productivity potential of WFH.

It is still too early to draw firm conclusions about the overall impact on productivity, but what we know so far is that remote work in some form looks like it is here to stay. Our analysis shows that WFH has been a clear win for diversity and inclusion. We must now focus on maintaining these benefits, even as the labour market softens. In contrast, there is some evidence that innovation and collaboration are more effective in-person, while uncertainty remains about the longer-term impacts of WFH on employee development, mental health and engagement.

For researchers and policymakers, consistent measurement and robust datasets will be critical to fully understanding the productivity implications of WFH over the longer term. High quality analysis will be essential to support high quality decision-making.

Employers will need to focus on what matters most for their businesses over the year ahead. Implementing changes that make both remote and in-office work more effective – such as clarifying performance expectations, formalising mentoring and developing the communication and management skills needed for success in a hybrid environment – will be a good place to start.

More broadly, while hybrid arrangements appear promising in terms of balancing productivity, participation and employee preferences, firms will need to experiment with different approaches to find what works for them. This will require new frameworks to capture the information needed to make informed decisions, being mindful that the best approach may change over time.

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Our analysis shows that WFH has been a clear win for diversity and inclusion. We must now focus on maintaining these benefits, even as the labour market softens. Navigating nuance and complexity will be a key challenge. Employers should remain willing to take risks and experiment – as they did to their great benefit during the pandemic – while they grapple with making remote working work for them over the long term.

Much of this challenge will fall to managers, who will need to bridge the gap between workers and leadership to find the best approach. Managers will need to be dynamic and able to respond to complex and evolving circumstances in their teams and organisations. Change will be the only constant in this challenge.

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