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Flexible work post-COVID

Introduction

Australian and international research shows that flexible work promotes both women and men's workforce participation, employee satisfaction and productivity. The COVID pandemic disrupted the way we work and has illustrated that traditional ways of working, which placed great value on presenteeism, are now firmly in the past. These major changes to employees' preferences about different workplaces, work time and patterns are here to stay.

Flexibility in employee work time, patterns and locations is beneficial for both employers and employees and can improve gender equality in the workplace and the home.¹ It has also been associated with greater employee wellbeing and reduced exhaustion, burnout, and fatigue.² Flexible working has been associated with:

- Improved organisational productivity
- An enhanced ability to attract and retain employees
- Improved employee well-being
- An increased proportion of women in leadership
- Future-proofing the workplace

There is potential that the sudden shift to remote working during the pandemic may have had unforeseen negative consequences for gender equality, with the lines between work and home becoming more blurred. However, when managed wisely, access to flexibility has the potential to boost women's workforce participation and provide more equitable access to male-dominated industries and occupations, including in leadership roles.

Likewise, men have been working from home for an extended period during the pandemic and have now experienced the different demands of family, care and domestic work. This experience can lead to greater appreciation of domestic demands and the value of flexible working.³ Furthermore, this means that men's engagement in flexible work during the pandemic has the potential to change gender norms at work and at home for good.

WGEA data shows that the COVID pandemic has created widespread support for flexible working, amongst employees and employers alike. While COVID has shown that flexible work has great potential to reduce gender segregation and increase female workforce participation, concerns about the gendered impact on domestic work and unpaid care remain.

At a time when organisations explore options for returning to the office, it is crucial to consider how flexible work can continue in a way that attracts and retains talent, while promoting gender equality and wellbeing for all staff. As we look to tomorrow's workplace, whether the workplace is a physical location or remote, let's ensure flexible working is embedded in organisational culture, supported by strong policies and strategies.



WGEA 2020-21 data: Organisations embrace flexible working during COVID

In 2021, the WGEA collected data from private sector organisations with 100 or more employees on the uptake of flexible work arrangements due to COVID. The dataset represents over 4 million Australian employees. Preliminary analysis of the 2020-21 data provides some interesting insights into flexible working in the Australian workplace during COVID.*

Nearly four in five employers have a formal flexible work policy or strategy. Larger organisations were more likely to have formalised flexible working arrangements compared to small and medium organisations: 94% of organisations with 5000 or more employees reported that they have formalised their flexible working strategy. However, there was an overall upward trend in the number of organisations of all sizes that had formalised flexible policies or strategies. Female dominant industries were slightly less likely than male dominant and mixed industries to report having a formal strategy or policy on flexible work arrangements. They were also less likely to offer telecommuting/ remote working (89%) compared to male dominant (95%) and mixed industries (94%). This may be a result of female dominated industries, such as Health Care and Social Assistance and Education and Training, offering significantly more part-time and casual employment opportunities that may not be recognised in a formal flexible working policy or strategy.

The data also indicates that many of the organisations that do not offer formal flexible working arrangements are still likely to offer informal arrangements to their employees. During COVID, 63% of organisations allowed all managers to make informal arrangements with their team and a further 25% of organisations allowed some managers to make informal arrangements with their team. In total, less than 2% of the organisations that reported to the WGEA did not offer their employees any kind of formal or informal flexibility.

WGEA data indicates that access to flexible working arrangements has increased. When asked whether COVID made it more likely that flexible working arrangements would be approved, 65% of respondents said that both women and men were more likely to be approved for formal flexible working arrangements.⁴ The industries that reported the highest likelihood that flex would be approved as a result of COVID were: Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (74%), Arts and Recreation Services (74%), Information, Media and Telecommunications (71%), Construction (71%) and Healthcare and Social Assistance (69%).

Flexible work arrangements encompass a broad range of options and are not only limited to remote working. In terms of the types of flexible work employees have access to, organisations were more likely to report that they provide access to carer's leave (99%), unpaid leave (98%), part-time work (96%), flexible hours of work (95%), telecommuting/remote working (93%) and time-in-lieu (92%). Organisations were less likely to provide job sharing (64%), compressed working weeks (56%) and purchased leave (43%). However, access to these different arrangements in both a formal and informal capacity has increased during COVID, particularly in telecommuting and remote working.

The 2021 data also shows an upward trend in the number of organisations that reported having a target set for engagement in flexible working arrangements, including specifically for men. It is promising to see that more organisations are aware of the important role flexible working has in challenging the gender norms at work and at home.

COVID and the shift to flexible work

The COVID pandemic has disrupted the way many employers and employees engage in flexible work. With little advance warning, many employers either encouraged or required employees to work from home in response to the social distancing requirements set out by the Government. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS's) Household Impacts of COVID survey found that of Australians who were working in September 2020, 31% were working from home most days. This compares to 12% who reported working from home most days prior to the COVID restrictions in March 2020.⁵

The pandemic also changed the way families cared for their children. As a result of COVID restrictions, 43% of Australians caring for children reportedly spent more time on childcare activities.⁶ This increase in time spent caring for children is likely a result of children staying home from school or childcare during the COVID

* All figures cited in this analysis are preliminary and may change in time



lockdown, which impacted approximately three quarters of Australian's who care for children (76%).⁷ In order to care for children at home, parents or carers engaged in a range of flexible work arrangements including working from home, working reduced or changed hours or taking leave.⁸

Despite the increased rate of both women and men working from home, many studies suggest that women continued to undertake most unpaid care responsibilities throughout this time. The ABS Household Impacts of COVID survey found in May 2020 that women were three times more likely than men to look after children full-time on their own.⁹ A study on Life During COVID by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) found that prior to COVID, 54% of respondents reported that mothers always or usually cared for children, compared with 8% of fathers. During COVID, these figures change only slightly, with 52% of respondents indicating that mothers always or usually care for children, compared to 11% of fathers.¹⁰ These studies suggest that, despite a broad shift to working from home for all employees, cultural assumptions about who should be engaging in care work remain firmly entrenched.

Recent research reflects on some of the challenges that employees had to navigate during the pandemic, particularly while working from home. National and international studies found that the shift to working from home during the pandemic resulted in a blurring of work-life boundaries for many workers. For example, a survey from the AIFS found that during COVID, 40% of parents reported that they always or often 'actively' cared for children while working and a further 28% reported 'passively' caring for children while working.¹¹ The OECD cautioned against the risk of "hidden overtime" as a result of the "fusing of work and personal, family and social life" while telecommuting or working from home.¹² A study of US and European workers also found that employees who worked from home felt a greater requirement during COVID to be constantly available in order to prove their value to their employer in lieu of showing their commitment through their presence in the office.¹³ This was particularly problematic in workplaces where 'presenteeism' or a preference for employees to be physically present in the workplace was valued by employers.¹⁴ These challenges are not unique to the pandemic and have been recognised in literature on flexible work prior to COVID.¹⁵

Despite the challenges, numerous studies have identified widespread support for ongoing flexible work arrangements. A WGEA study from 2020 found that 92% of respondents wanted to access some form of flexible work arrangement after the pandemic ended.¹⁶ The ABS found in June 2021 that working from home and spending more time with family and friends were the two most common aspects of life Australian's wanted to see continue after COVID ended (33% respectively).¹⁷

The Australian Productivity Commission also found that employees wanted to work from home and enjoyed benefits such as reduced commute time and travel costs.¹⁸ Employers were more likely to cite their concerns about the possible negative impacts on culture and teamwork. However, the Australian Productivity Commission reported that a sudden and widespread switch to remote working had not materially impacted on employee's productivity and that productivity could even increase if widespread remote working continued.¹⁹

Analysis by NSW Treasury also linked widespread flexible working because of the pandemic with an increase in women's labour force participation. Mid-way through 2021, the state of NSW enjoyed stronger than expected employment rates, largely due to higher labour force participation by women and older age cohorts – with NSW female labour force participation reaching a record high of 61.7% in May 2021.²⁰ The 2021 Budget paper No.1 states: "Another likely driver of increased workforce participation among women is greater workplace flexibility and the accelerated digitisation of the economy. This is particularly beneficial for women, who may have a greater share of parenting or carer responsibilities and otherwise would be unable to enter or re-join the labour force."²¹

It is evident that the pandemic has created widespread support for flexible working, amongst employees and employers alike. While COVID has shown that there is great potential to reduce gender segregation and increase female workforce participation, concerns about the gendered impact on domestic work and unpaid care remain. As organisations explore options for returning to the office, now is a crucial time to consider how flexible work can continue in a way that attracts and retains talent, promotes equality and wellbeing for all staff.

Flexible working boosts gender equality

There are several persistent drivers of gender inequality in the Australian workplace. Some of the best-known drivers are industrial and occupational segregation, ingrained gendered norms and stereotypes, a lack of women in leadership, discrimination and the inequitable distribution of unpaid care and domestic work.



Women have traditionally been responsible for most unpaid care and domestic work.²² To accommodate these responsibilities, women are:

- less likely to be employed in a full-time capacity
- more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace
- less likely to have professional development opportunities
- more likely to reduce their working hours
- more likely to take leave
- more likely to change their job or stop work altogether.²³

Women continue to face additional challenges when it comes to balancing unpaid care work with paid employment. Employers who promote flexible work for all staff and at all levels of the organisation can assist employees to promote greater cohesion of work and life responsibilities and facilitate greater career progression for women.

Pre-COVID research shows that women are more likely than men to request flexible work arrangements to accommodate unpaid care responsibilities.²⁴ Whereas, men are more reluctant to request flexible work arrangements due to the perceived or actual impact on their career progression, and when they do request flexible work arrangements, they are more likely to be refused.²⁵ This perpetuates the entrenched association of flexible work with unpaid care responsibilities, which is assumed to be 'women's work'.²⁶ Workplaces that have formalised flexible work arrangements can help to disrupt this misconception and promote more equitable uptake of flexible working arrangements. It has long been theorised that if men can utilise flex to participate more in care and domestic work, then women's workforce participation could also be boosted.²⁷

Flexible working arrangements are not just for people who have caring or domestic responsibilities. Evidence has linked improved employee well-being with increased utilisation of flexibility. A recent survey conducted by PwC in 2020, 'What Workers Want', found that 22% of respondents valued employers that support their wellbeing above all other factors.²⁸ Beyond Blue cites workplace pressure as a leading risk factor for high rates of depression among Australian men.²⁹ Flexible working arrangements could be one way of alleviating this pressure and promoting employee wellbeing. Employers need to take measures to ensure that flexible arrangements such as remote working respect the lines between work and life, to ensure employee safety, health and wellbeing.

Flexible work arrangements can also promote more gender diversity in senior roles. Women's career progression can be hindered by the inaccessibility of flexible work arrangements at a management level or by assumptions that a desire for flexibility equates to a lack of commitment to work.³⁰ Employers can help to dispel this assumption and encourage more women into senior roles by offering and role modelling flexible work arrangements at all levels of the organisation and ensuring that professional and career development opportunities are available to staff who engage in flexible work.

WGEA data also indicates that male dominated industries are much more likely to employ full-time workers than part-time or casual workers.³¹ Given that women are more likely to value the ability to work flexibly, this attachment to the full-time worker archetype in certain industries could be contributing to gendered industrial and occupational segregation. More widespread flexible working arrangements, including part time, casual or job-sharing opportunities in these industries and occupations could be an effective way to combat segregation while simultaneously promoting diversity and expanding talent pools.

Actions for employers

Employers have a clear role in managing how this new, flexible way of working unfolds across Australia. By taking early and strategic action and setting clear work and life boundaries, employers will not only reap the benefits of flex by improving retention and growing their talent pools, but they can also support their employees to enjoy the benefits while limiting negative consequences.

1. Make “All Roles Flex”

An “All Roles Flex” model creates an expectation that all staff, regardless of their role or position in the organisation, can work flexibly. This model takes an “if not, why not” approach, that assumes all requests for flexible arrangements will be approved and if they cannot be approved, the employer must provide a reason related to significant business impact.³² This model encourages employers to work with their employees to identify what they need to work flexibly and better manage their work and life commitments.

During COVID, many workers shifted to working remotely and the data shows that many employees want to continue remote working some, or all the time in the future.³³ However, remote working doesn’t suit everyone and may not be possible for all occupations. Many industries that require employees to be on site or deliver face-to-face services can explore different flexible work approaches with their staff. Options to accommodate flex within these industries include:

- Flexible rostering arrangements so that staff have more control over when they work
- Shift-swapping options or an app to assist staff in changing their roster on shorter notice
- Part time work arrangements that allow workers to choose the days they work.

Organisations should also take steps to ensure that biases are not holding employees back and that all managers continue to provide feedback and promotion opportunities to staff who work flexibly and remotely.

2. Trust your people

Trust is an important aspect of a flexible working arrangement. With many staff working remotely during the COVID pandemic, workplaces that traditionally emphasised and valued presenteeism as a measure of staff engagement have had to shift their focus to being more trust-based and outcome-oriented. International studies have shown that trust-based work practices have been associated with greater productivity and worker efficiency.³⁴ Within the Australian context, studies have clearly shown that during the pandemic, many staff felt their productivity either stayed the same or increased while working remotely.³⁵

A trust-based culture is underpinned by the expectation that an agreement will be upheld, as well as a belief or confidence in an employees’ competence. Trust is also developed around a person’s commitment or good will. Flexible workers often work at different locations and times from their manager and team. This requires a shift in how teams connect and communicate.

3. Role model flexibility by Managers and Leadership

As we emerge from the COVID pandemic, it is important that managers continue to model flexible work arrangements. This can be a powerful way of demonstrating successful flexible work and dispel misconceptions about flexibility being incompatible with management and leadership roles.³⁶ Furthermore, men role-modelling flexible working can have the potential to change gender norms at work and in homes for good.

Role-modelling flexibility and proactively providing training, professional development and career development opportunities to staff working flexibly can assist in promoting greater gender diversity in leadership roles. Role-modelling flexible work, in conjunction with strong, consistently positive statements about the benefits of flexibility to achieving the organisation’s goals, also sends a clear message about your organisations commitment to make flexible work arrangements available for all staff.

4. Communicate effectively

Effective communication is crucial to maintain productive flexible teams and ensure that flexible workers don’t become isolated from their colleagues. In the post-pandemic workplace, it is important to deliberately establish communication patterns to ensure that information flows freely within your team and all staff are included and valued. This will assist in normalising adaptive and flexible communication within your organisation.³⁷ Here are a few examples of communication patterns that work in some teams:

- Update projects daily via a collaborative project management software tool or a phone call
- Conduct handovers weekly via a written update and audio recording
- Conduct team meetings weekly via face-to-face meeting or videoconference, or a hybrid
- Consider an equal standard for meetings in hybrid environments



- Ensure that when conducting hybrid meetings (both face-to-face and videoconferencing) all staff are given an opportunity to contribute and participate –screen sharing, or virtual whiteboards could assist with this
- Ensure out-of-office notifications are handled by an automatic email response and phones are diverted to a team member
- Ensure all team members understand that no response is expected for emails received outside of a staff member’s working hours.

5. Acknowledge the adjustment

Your team may need some help adjusting to the post-pandemic workplace. Some staff may be apprehensive to return to on-site working, while others may be eager to get back into the workplace. Promoting flexible options can help to address staff concerns. Be proactive about supporting and maintaining flexible and inclusive work arrangements. To help staff, outline a clear vision of how your team will benefit from ongoing flexibility. Team members can often see issues that are less visible to managers, so take note of these issues and try to address them. This will help each member of the team to align with the post-COVID change. Constructively address negative assumptions and attitudes and ensure that all voices are heard. Give time and encouragement to those having difficulty, and overall, work with your team to help them adjust.

6. ‘Log off and check out’ at home and in the office

Research indicates that employees who work flexibly, particularly those who work remotely, are more likely to work overtime and to feel that they must be available 24 hours a day.³⁸ This is due to a blurring of boundaries between their workplace and their home, and a perceived need to prove their value to the organisation in lieu of being present in the office or during standard work hours.³⁹

This blurring of boundaries has been a challenge for some employees during the pandemic. Coming out of the pandemic, it is important to establish boundaries with your employees, to ensure that they can log off and disengage completely from work at the end of the day. You can set these boundaries by:

- Making sure employee working hours are marked in team calendars
- Not emailing or contacting employees outside of their work hours
- Modelling non-contact outside of your own working hours
- Creating a broader culture of respect for staff working hours among internal and external stakeholders. One example of how you can do this is by including a message in your email signature that outlines your standard working hours and states: *I support flexible work arrangements and do not expect you to reply outside your usual hours.*

For more actions and ideas see:

- WGEA’s [Manager flexibility toolkit](#)
- WGEA’s [Employee flexibility toolkit](#)

Remember

The Fair Work Act 2009 established that some employees have the right to request flexible work. Employees who make a request must receive a written response within 21 days. Read more on the Fair Work Ombudsman site. Managers should note that flexibility may cause other legislation to become relevant in areas such as pay and conditions, equal employment opportunity and other matters. Your obligations under the relevant laws may surprise you. For example, Work Health and Safety legislation may not be the same in your state or territory as in other states and territories. Be sure to find out what your obligations are. You may want to ask your organisation’s human resources area to provide you and your team with an induction in the relevant areas.



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