The Future of Work Quality After COVID19: A Focus on Flexible Working

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ARC Laureate Fellow
Director, Centre for Transformative Work Design • Future of Work Institute
Curtin University

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Please note: the findings presented need to be considered as preliminary
The Future of Work Quality After COVID19: A Focus on Flexible Working

ARC Laureate Fellow Sharon K. Parker
Good work design makes life better.

Our vision in the Centre is to transform work, through work design, to create better lives for workers, more effective organisations, and a flourishing society.

We engage in many interesting projects to pursue this vision, which come together in the form of six research streams.
Remote Working in Australia

Relatively low prevalence
- ABS- 33% engaged in flexible working (but inflated as includes people who work at home ‘to catch up’).
- Estimates 9% - <20% (“Chosen few”)

Why so low?
- Management challenges
- Important of interaction
- Famous failed remote experiments

Most people
Not “people working from home” but “people at home trying to do their work in a pandemic”
- Less choice
- More people (even unsuitable work)
- More intense
- Home schooling/ child care issues
- Other challenges
Thrive at Work at Home Research

With Drs Caroline Knight, Anita Keller

Survey of people working during COVID

Time 1 (mid April 2020) N = 1492
Time 2 to Time 4 (weekly)
Time 5 to Time 8 (monthly)

- 46% Male
- 54% Female

Age Range
- 20 – 72 years.
  - This includes:
  - 26% Aged 20-30 years
  - 53% Aged 31-40 years
  - 11% Aged 41-50 years
  - 10% Aged over 51 years

Level of Education as a Percentage
- Post graduate degree
- Bachelor degree
- TAFE or industry qualification
- Secondary school

Participant Numbers by Industry
- Activities of extraterritorial... Other service activities
- Art, entertainment and recreation
- Human health and social work...
- Education
- Compulsory social security
- Public administration and defence
- Administrative and support services...
- Professional, scientific and technical...
- Real estate activities
- Financial and insurance activities
- Information and communication
- Accommodation and food services...
- Transportation and storage
- Repair of personal and household...
- Wholesale and retail trade
- Construction
- Sewerage, waste management and...
- Water supply
- Electricity, gas, steam and air...
- Manufacturing
- Mining and quarrying
- Agriculture, forestry and fishing
More than three times the ‘usual number’ of people with poor mental health in our study

Is this just ‘the pandemic’?
Productivity

How productive do you think you are compared to 'normal' (before Covid-19)?

Is this just ‘ill-suited work’?

![Bar chart showing productivity levels]

- Much less productive this week: 5.7
- Less productive this week: 23.1
- About as productive as before: 33.7
- More productive this week: 30.8
- Much more productive this week: 6.6
“the content and organising of tasks, activities, relationships, and responsibilities within a job or role, or set of jobs/roles”

Parker, 2014
Parker, SK & Knight, C. Higher order factor structure of work characteristics. In prep.
Why does work design matter?

Mental health
- e.g., depression, burnout

Motivation & performance
- e.g., job satisfaction, creativity, core task performance, proactivity

Learning & growth
- e.g., skill development, use of talent

SMART

Over 5000 articles!

See
Linkage Analyses (approx. 770 people working from home 4 + days) suggest powerful role of SMART work on performance indicators.

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- **SMART**

- **Correlations**

  - 0.15-2
  - 0.2-3
  - 0.3-4
  - 0.40 above
Varied, interesting, meaningful work in which you use and develop your skills.

“There’s never a dull moment…I like the variety”

“This job teaches me a lot”

“Its boring, so much time waiting”...

@wetransformwork
Unstimulating work at home quite prevalent
Effects of unstimulating work at home

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Low task variety is a problem

Underload is especially problematic for mental health & performance
Example Individual Actions
“Job crafting”
- Increasing job autonomy
- Increasing job challenge
- Learning new skills
- Cognitive crafting

Example Leader Actions
• Encouraging job crafting
• Redistributing tasks to different team members
• Keeping tasks ‘in house’
• Encourage learning from each other
• Creating meaningful projects
Work in which you are clear about your goals/responsibilities, get feedback, & know where your job fits in the big picture

“Regular appraisals help you to improve or to give you feedback if you did well”

“Sometimes when you feel tired, you get emails or stars to tell you thanks. You feel appreciated”

@wetransformwork  transformativeworkdesign.com
Working From Home Challenges With Mastery
- Lack of clarity about expectations e.g., for hours
- Less feedback
- Disconnection/ not understanding how things fit together

47% lack feedback; 37% lack clear goals & objectives
Working From Home - Challenges With Mastery

Likely to have important consequences

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- Feedback linked to lower burnout & higher proactivity
- Clarity linked to lower mental ill-health, lower procrastination, and higher core performance & adaptivity
How to Increase Mastery When Working At Home

**Individual Actions**

- Ask for clarity if unsure of what to do
- Proactively seek feedback on your performance

**Leader Actions**

- Ensure people are clear about how you want to work together (e.g., hours of availability, new norms, etc)
- Build feedback into virtual meetings (don’t wait for appraisals)
- Discuss the bigger picture (e.g. competitors, clients, etc)
Autonomy over when, how, where you do your work, and influence over decisions that affect your work

“What I want in my next job is a unit with some autonomy to make decisions... I’m exiting...”

“Every new thing that’s centralized is another blow to innovation”
Risks of Low Agency Work - When Working From Home

• Prior research shows the benefits of remote work for productivity and well-being come from greater autonomy at home. Appears true here.

“Even though I usually have scheduling autonomy, it feels greater because I can take breaks and use time completely as I see fit”

“It is great being able to take regular breaks”

“The flexibility to stay home when feeling slightly unwell or tired or when my child is sick without feeling guilty not going into the office”

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Decision Making Autonomy

- **Strongly disagree:**
  - 3.5
  - 3.8
  - 2.8

- **Disagree:**
  - 9.4
  - 12.1
  - 9.5

- **Neither agree nor disagree:**
  - 18.2
  - 18.2
  - 15.6

- **Agree:**
  - 38.3
  - 37.1
  - 40.6

- **Strongly agree:**
  - 30.6
  - 28.9
  - 31.5

*This week, the job provided me with significant autonomy in making decisions.*

*This week, the job allowed me to make a lot of decisions on my own.*

*This week, the job gave me a chance to use my personal initiative or judgment in carrying out the work.*
Working From Home Challenges
- Many employees feel micro-managed

“My manager tends to micromanage more with WFH arrangements which can be demotivating and affects morale and motivation. In one-on-one daily manager check-ins there is a tendency to focus on what hasn’t been done rather than what has been achieved.....”

About one third of workers report being “monitored too much” and their manager “keeping close tabs via frequent checking”
Working From Home Challenges

- Many employees feel they are expected to be “constantly available”

Large numbers of people feeling pressure to be ‘present’ at all times & to work outside of hours
One reason that managers’ monitor too closely & expect people to be constantly available is they don’t trust their employees’

Focusing just on the managers....

About one third of managers report a lack confidence in their employees to do their work
38% of managers (N=215) believe the performance of remote employees is usually lower than that of people who work in an office/work setting.
How to Increase Agency For Workers At Home

**Leader Actions**

- Don’t expect constant availability or instant responses
- Trust your employees – motivate vs control
- Manage by outputs (results) & rather than inputs

- 53% report being judged by results

**Provide support**

- Wang, Lui, Parker (in press) of Chinese workers in lockdown Support reduced procrastination behavior
Having social contact with others, being supported and part of a team, and making a difference to others.

“Being part of a good team is so important”
“You get put down a lot for the way you look..
You’re constantly getting told how S*** you are...
You support each other to get through”

Dancer
Working From Home Challenges

- Social isolation & loneliness
- Professional isolation
- Co-ordinating via virtual teams

Loneliness

*Working from home can be rather *lonely*... Harder to feel energised – miss the external stimulation, talking to colleagues...I miss helping people with advice and support.... I miss laughing & hearing stories about colleagues’ dogs and kids. *As an introvert, this has been the most surprising aspect of working from home*”

Co-ordination

“Our team is definitely less of a team right now. .....the times where you might just pull someone in for their opinion. **That doesn’t happen nearly as much anymore** so I can imagine over time strategic vision or direction would just fall by the wayside”

“**Resolving issues** isn’t as easy when you’re unable to turn around to a colleague to discuss face-to-face.”
### Working From Home Challenges

Colleague support is especially important for mental health. Managers’ support is key too.

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How to Increase Relational Work For Workers At Home

**Individual actions**

• Actively plan to connect with people
• Orchestrate ‘water cooler moments’
• Build high quality connections
• Job crafting social resources
• Continue to focus on professional development
• Support your colleagues

**Leader actions**

• Provide emotional & practical support, one on ones, check ins
• Provide development opportunities to all eg via challenging tasks, projects
• Learn the skills for managing virtual teams (e.g., some informal chat, participation of all, etc)
• Enable ‘water cooler’ conversations

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5. High quality connection (And we’re not talking about the Internet)

Professor Sharon Parker discusses how to go beyond simple connection between colleagues in

@wetransformwork transformativeworkdesign

2. Set up your team for success during COVID-19 crisis

Professor Sharon Parker gives managers three tips for setting a team to work well:

1. Provide support | 2. Discuss how to work together | 3. Don’t forget the b
The biggest challenge is having enough time.

Most people don’t realise that surgeons see things and deal with difficult situations, like where someone is terminally ill.

Having emotional, cognitive, workload & other demands that are experienced as tolerable
Working From Home Challenges

- Home-work interference (kids home from school)
- Technology hassles
- Poor communication

“Differentiating work and home space – work seeps into non-work time and spaces; It’s harder to shut down. There can be less distinction between work and personal life when I work from home, making it harder to shut down and more likely that I will overwork”

“Technology issues can severely impact productivity. It is a lot harder for a corporate IT team to support remote access with so many different possible points of failure being introduced by working from home (local network, router, NBN/ISP, gateway into the corporate network, etc)”
How to Ensure Tolerable Demands For Workers At Home

**Individual Actions**

- Self-compassion
- Build “SMAR” (e.g., ensuring you have support, etc)
- Have breaks & engage in recovery
- Segmentation or integration strategies
- Share domestic responsibilities

**Leader actions**

- Observe for signs of stress
- Providing support
- Allowing flexibility and autonomy
- Establish boundaries & norms
- Help to address technology demands

9. Are you a Zoom Zombie? How to take control of your virtual meetings

4. To dress or not to dress: Getting into a Work Mindset

Professor Sharon Parker discusses a key challenge of remote working - the loss of greater autonomy (agency). She describes research about how office dressing

3. Be kind to yourself: Self-Compassion in Difficult Times

7. Switching Off: Recovering After A Long Day At The Desk
## SUMMARY – the powerful role of SMART work during remote working

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<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to be available</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficiary contact – T1</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague support – T1</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial support – T1</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task significance – T1</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>not tested</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload – T1</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work-Family Conflict – T1</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work-home interference</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional demands – T1</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor communication – T1</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hassles – T1</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correlations
- .15 to .25
- .26 to .34
- .35 to .40
- .40 above
ARLINGTON, VA, April 3, 2020

Gartner CFO Survey Reveals 74% Intend to Shift Some Employees to Remote Work Permanently

Nearly Three in Four CFOs Plan to Shift at Least 5% of Previously On-Site Employees Permanently Remote Positions Post-COVID 19

A Gartner, Inc. survey of 317 CFOs and Finance leaders on March 30, 2020* revealed that 74% move at least 5% of their previously on-site workforce to permanently remote positions post-COVID 19.

“This data is an example of the lasting impact the current coronavirus crisis will have on the way companies do business,” said Alexander Bant, practice vice president, research for the Gartner Finance Practice. “CFOs, already under pressure to tightly manage costs, clearly sense an opportunity to realize the cost benefits of a remote workforce. In fact, nearly a quarter of respondents said they will move at least 20% of their on-site employees to permanent remote positions.”
Working From Home Survey
Attitudes towards working from home
(N=614 WFH most of the time, wave 4)

- I am keen to work from home at least some of the time: 73.3%
- I am more confident I can do my job effectively working from home than I was before COVID-19: 61.3%
- I have developed the technological skills needed to work flexibly since COVID-19: 69.8%
- I have developed the communication skills needed to work flexibly since COVID-18: 65.5%
- I have improved my time management skills since COVID-19: 54.9%

% who agree or agree strongly to statements about desire to work from home in the future, and skills learned.
Working From Home Survey
Impact of WFH on commuting
(N=614 WFH most of the time)

0-300 minutes commuting time saved per day.

Average saved= 78 minutes each day (SD= 60 min)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage Choosing These Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extra time working</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra face-to-face time with family or friends</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra virtual time with friends and family</td>
<td>19.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extra exercise or hobbies</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra sedentary activities (e.g. reading, TV)</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra time home schooling children</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More social media</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More time sleeping</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra time on domestic duties</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
No – let’s not throw the baby out with the bathwater!

Although society as a whole has adopted remote working policies and seemingly ended the centralized office, this shift in the workforce means more than just working from home.

Although the office was once deemed as the necessary hub of collaboration and productivity, many experts are now claiming the end of the workspace. Even major companies are pivoting towards a more distributed workforce, with Twitter offering its employees the ability to work from home indefinitely and Facebook revealed it expects at least half of its workforce will be in remote positions in the next few years.

While some companies may not fully commit to the remote workforce, a hybrid of in-office workers and remote employees could become more popular. Many experts argue that an office is necessary as humans need socialization to remain productive and mentally healthy.
Key Takeaways

Rather than focus whether working from home or office is healthier and more productive, some combination of both gives best of both worlds, according to Pre-COVID remote working research, and this is likely to be true in the future.

So we need to better gear up for mixed models of working. Which means:

Work in both places needs to be well designed. In this study, around about one third lacked SMART work, with consequences for well-being and productivity.

Help others working remotely by creating SMART work through leader behaviors, HR practices, and well-designed technology ("top down").

Help yourself make own work SMARTer through own actions and crafting ("bottom up").
Resources available!
And more findings from the survey

transformativeworkdesign.com/working-from-home
Thank you!