ACTU
australian council of trade unions

Working from Home Report

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic destroys lives and ravages our economy epidemiologists and doctors have made it clear that the virus spreads where people congregate, and workplaces have been found to be the primary source of many significant infection outbreaks. An important measure taken by Governments to contain the spread of COVID-19 has been ensure those who can work from home should do so.

Keeping workers in productive employment but performing work remotely in targeted industries has been an excellent strategy for keeping the population safe and containing the spread of the virus while mitigating job losses and keeping the community and the economy functioning. This has been an important change to the world of work with both positive and negative consequences. There are many positives of increased working from home including a reduction in commuting time, greater working time autonomy leading to more flexibility and higher productivity. But there are also disadvantages including the tendency towards excessive working hours, to create a dysfunctional overlap between paid work and personal life, increased stress, and risks to health and safety.

Regardless of where work is conducted, it is important to ensure that all workers have certain rights and protections. With the increase in working from home it is vital that the rights and benefits of those affected, including those still working at the employer's premises are not less favourable than what they were prior to the move to home-based work, and that working from home not be grounds for discrimination.

The ACTU has conducted a Working from Home survey of over 10,000 workers over 9 weeks. The results of the survey found there have been significant challenges for workers that have been working from home. An overwhelming 81% of workers said that they would like to have the option of performing all or most of their work from home if they were provided with enough support. It is this support required to make working from home sustainable that much of this report will focus on.

All workers deserve to be paid for the work they do, to be safe and have a decent work life balance.

The survey results show that many home workers are working more hours, not getting paid for all hours worked, incurring significant work-related expenses, suffering mental health problems and have a worse work life balance. The ACTU Working from Home Survey shows:

- 40% are working longer hours, many 5+ extra hours per week
- 90% not paid overtime or penalty rates
- Average $530 per person additional expenses incurred
- 30.9% said they have an increased workload
- Almost half (49%) of those working from home have experienced some form of mental illness
- A significant imposition on work life balance with most workers starting before 8.00am and one in three working up to or past 9.00pm

However, our survey also reveals that many workers report an increase in productivity from working at home. Without substantial change it is doubtful whether workers will share the benefits from this productivity increase.

We first discuss the dramatic increase in the frequency of home working, the empirical and international evidence before analysing the results of our survey.

The number of people working from home[1]

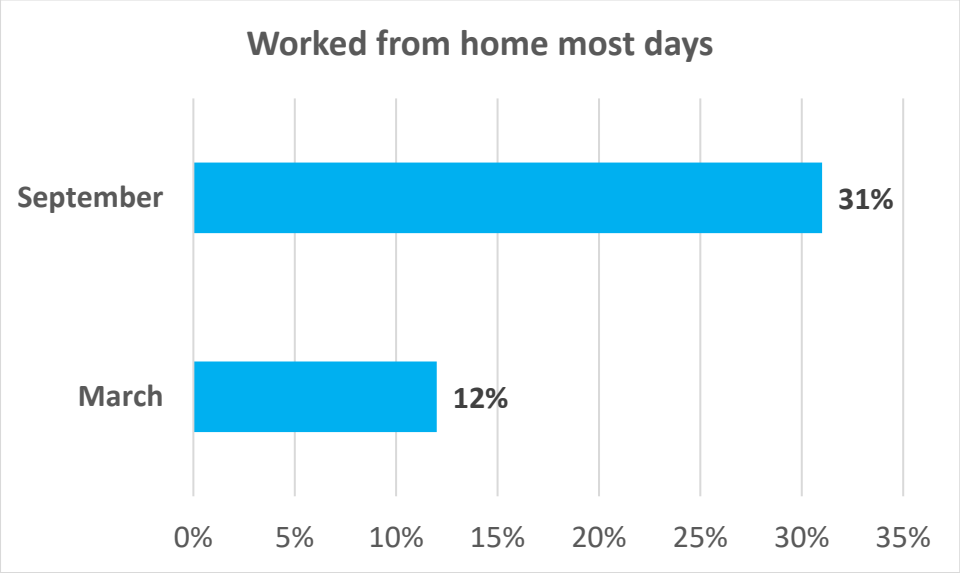
Data from the ABS released on the 13th October 2020 shows the number of people working from home during the pandemic had increased significantly. The survey asked people to reflect on how often they worked from home prior to COVID-19 restrictions, and their work from home frequency over September. Australians with a job reported that prior to the COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020[2]:

- 12% worked from home most days
- 10% worked from home at least once a week
- 6% worked from home at least once a month.

In September we can see the frequency of working from home had increased significantly, Australians currently with a job reported:

- 31% worked from home most days
- 9% worked from home at least once a week
- 6% worked from home at least once in the month.

Figure One: There has been a significant increase in the frequency of those working at home most days



Source: ABS, Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, September 2020

Many more Australians are now working from home regularly. It is likely this change is here to stay.

[1] ABS, Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, September 2020
https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/household-impacts-covid-19-survey/latest-release
[2] Ibid

The positive effects of working from home

Workers report a reduction in commuting time, greater working time autonomy leading to more flexibility, a better overall work–life balance (for some) and higher productivity to be among the positive effects of working from home. These benefits flow directly to employers who benefit from increased worker motivation and reduced turnover as well as enhanced productivity and efficiency. Employers also benefit from a reduction in the need for office space and associated costs.

There has been an astonishing acceleration in the use of technology. Research from AlphaBeta found that Australian companies have on average increased their adoption of some digital technology during the COVID 19 period of the past seven months by as much as the previous 10 years[3].

According to AlphaBeta, nearly 9 in 10 Australian firms adopted new technologies to improve their business continuity during COVID; with 13% of businesses saying technology tools were essential to continued operations[4].

The adoption of technology tools supported 3.2 million workers who would otherwise have been unable to perform their roles in compliance with social distancing rules. 1.6 million of these workers may have been completely unable to work without the technology tools[5].

A substantial increase in the uptake of technology and a reduction in commuting times has the potential to improve national levels of productivity.

Will working from home improve productivity?

The economist John Quiggin believes we might have stumbled upon a massive opportunity for a microeconomic reform, yielding benefits far greater than those of the hard-fought changes of the late 20th century.

He notes that the average worker spends an hour on commuting every workday:

> *'If working from home eliminated an hour of commuting, without changing time spent on work or reducing production, the result would be equivalent to a 13 per cent increase in productivity (assuming a 38-hour working work). If half the workforce achieved such a gain, it would be equivalent to a 6.5 per cent increase in productivity for the labour force as a whole.[6]'*

Quiggin notes that these productivity improvements would be far greater than the radical microeconomic reforms of the 1990s, including privatisation, deregulation, and national competition policy.

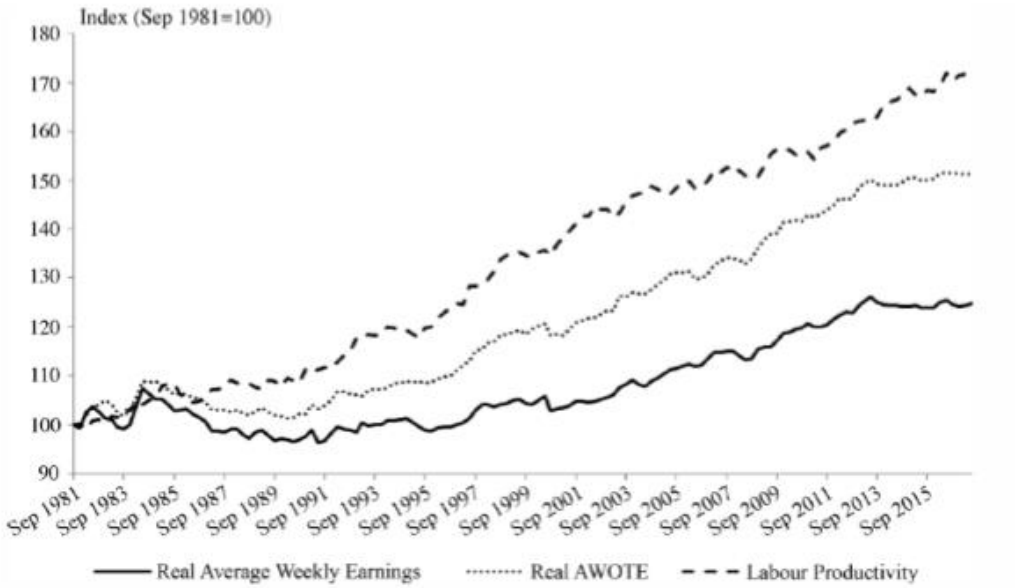
The ACTU Working from Home Survey suggests that improvements in productivity have already materialised with almost half (47.7%) of home workers reporting they were more productive.

[3] *'Building Australia's digital resilience: How technology strengthened Australian business during COVID and beyond'* AlphaBeta part of Accenture, 2020
[4] ibid
[5] Ibid
[6] https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-07/working-from-home-coronavirus-big-productivity-increase/12628764

Will workers see any of the benefits from increased productivity?

Despite the potential increase in productivity it is not clear that workers will see the benefits. For many years workers have been denied the pay increases they deserve. Most productivity benefits in the last few decades have gone into higher profits (Figure two).

Figure two: Australian real wages and labour productivity have decoupled since the 1980's



Note: Productivity is defined as GDP per hour worked. The increase in part-time employment over the period has slowed down the growth of RAWE.
Source: ABS (2017a, 2017b).

Source: Reproduced from Emeritus Professor Joe Isaac 'Why Are Australian Wages Lagging and What Can Be Done About It?' *Australian Economic Review*, July 2018

The ACTU supports measures to boost productivity. Indeed, faster productivity growth should be supported by all sections of society. This is how the wealth of our nation is increased and our medium-term growth potential will be determined by current productivity performance. The real questions are how we should go about boosting productivity growth and how is this increased productivity shared throughout the economy.

One way to have a major boost to Australia's productivity is to continue and expand our working from home arrangements in ways that are sustainable and beneficial to all. In contrast the notion that we need to cut workers' rights, job security and entitlements in the name of additional labour market "flexibility" to generate higher productivity is a tired and failed theory. All the recent hard evidence suggests that our labour market is too flexible, jobs are too insecure, and low labour costs are reducing the incentive for investment in innovative production process that are required to boost productivity.

In plain language an increase in productivity means that the amount of output produced by a worker in a set period of time, like an hour, is greater than it was previously. For this to happen the worker is either faster or smarter at what they are doing. Increasing the skills and motivation of the workforce is a key ingredient in boosting productivity. The combination of inputs from workers and capital investment delivers productivity growth.

While it is extremely difficult to determine what proportion of any improvement in productivity results from faster or smarter work; better technology; or improved management the ACTU survey of workers combined with the AlphaBeta data on the uptake of digital technology indicates that working from home is having a lasting beneficial impact on productivity.

During the pandemic, the share of national income going to labour is at the lowest level since 1959[7] (61 years). The ABS has made a point of highlighting that Government subsidies to firms have translated into a higher profit share for the national economy.

If there is a productivity increase from working from home, we need to ensure that the benefits do not all flow to increased profits. Workers deserve their fair share of productivity increases. Where productivity gains are achieved, they should be shared with the workforce through collective bargaining.

As part of their comprehensive and evidence-based research the OECD have closely monitored trends in wages and productivity. A key finding in the Economic Outlook for November 2018 was that:

"Several OECD countries have been grappling not only with slow productivity growth but have also experienced a slowdown in real average wage growth relative to productivity growth, which has been reflected in a falling share of wages in GDP. At the same time, growth in low and median wages has been lagging behind average wage growth, contributing to rising wage inequality. Together, these developments have resulted in the decoupling of growth in low and median wages from growth in productivity[8]"

Australia is included in the OECD's analysis on countries that see a decoupling in wages from growth in productivity. Any increases in productivity do not automatically translate into benefits for workers. Without intervention it is highly unlikely that workers will share in the benefits of improved productivity flowing from working from home.

The disadvantages of working from home

The disadvantages of working from home include the tendency to lead to longer working hours, to create an overlap between paid work and personal life (work–home collision), and to result in work intensification.

Working Longer Hours

The fact that working from home can be performed flexibly has potential effects on the number of hours worked. Employees are not bound to employer's premises as a fixed workplace, but rather are able to perform work related tasks at any place and any time. This creates opportunities for both more flexibly arranged or *substitutional* hours and longer or *supplemental* working hours. The distinction between *supplemental* hours and *substitutional* hours becomes blurred.

The international evidence on homeworkers and overtime

Data from the UK Labour Force Survey provides detailed information on overtime among teleworkers from before the pandemic. According to this data[9], the number of hours of overtime worked is higher for teleworkers (9.8 hours per week) than for office workers (8.4 hours per week).

[7] ABS, Australian National Accounts: National Income, Expenditure and Product, June 2020

[8] OECD, Economic Outlook, 2018, p 2.

[9] UK Labour Force Survey

Moreover, the overtime of teleworkers is seldom remunerated: 80% of overtime done by teleworkers remains unpaid (an average of 7.8 hours), compared to 60% of overtime done by office workers being unpaid (an average of 5 hours)[10].

Not only can working from home be a supplemental addition to normal working hours, it is also often informal and unpaid – another indicator of the blurring, elastic boundaries between substitutional and supplemental hours, and hence between work and private life. One major reason for these blurring boundaries is the increased availability of employees for work outside normal working hours by means of information and communications technology (ICT). In Finland, according to its quality of work life survey, in 2013 65% of teleworkers reported that they had been contacted about work-related matters outside normal working hours, mostly via email. Over one-third (35%) reported that such contacts had been made several times during the reference period[11].

Similarly, in Spain, 68% of Spanish workers confirmed that they receive emails or phone calls beyond normal working hours[12]. In Sweden, more than half of the respondents of a survey (53%) of both mobile and non-mobile workers were available after normal working hours, even daily[13]. In addition, 31% agreed 'completely' or 'to a certain degree' that they often check work emails after normal working hours.

A new empirical study entitled '*Collaborating During Coronavirus: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Nature of Work'*[14] explored the impact of COVID-19 on employee digital communication patterns through an event study of lockdowns in 16 large metropolitan areas in North America, Europe and the Middle East. Using de-identified, aggregated meeting and email meta-data they found significant and durable increases in length of the average workday (+8.2 %, or +48.5 minutes), along with short-term increases in email activity.

Interestingly much of the international evidence from both before and during the pandemic concur with our ACTU Working from Home Survey. Many home workers are working longer hours and are not paid for it.

Workers have a 'Right to be disconnected'

Digital connectivity brings with it extraordinary capacity for data collection and micro-management as workers leave data trails behind them. This data combined with algorithms and artificial intelligence can be used by employers to make employment related decisions leading to work intensification and unreasonable intrusion into private matters. While 67% of responses to the ACTU survey found that work performance expectations were unchanged, 22.4% of responses reported that their employer's performance expectations had increased. While 1 in 5 (21.7%) said that their employer monitored their performance remotely, another 40.7% did not know if this was happening.

10 Ibid

[11] Sutela, H. and Lehto, A.-M. (2014), Changes in working conditions 1977–2013, Helsinki.

[12] Randstad (2012), 'Technologies destroy the boundaries between private and work life', 12 April 2012.

[13] Unionen (2011), 'Having the office in one's mobile phone', Unionen, 2011

[14] '*Collaborating During Coronavirus: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Nature of* Work' Evan DeFilippis, Stephen Michael Impink, Madison Singell, Jeffrey T. Polzer, 2020 ; https://www.nber.org/papers/w27612

Workers' data protection and privacy has been the subject of considerable policy development and activity internationally including by UNI Global Union which has developed a comprehensive policy titled *Top 10 Principles For Workers' Data Privacy And Protection*[15]. These principles to be applied to ensure an ethical and sustainable use of data are:

Surveillance and Performance Monitoring:

1. Workers must have access to, and influence over, data collected on them
2. Sustainable data processing safeguards will be implemented
3. The data minimalization principle must be applied
4. Data processing must be transparent
5. Privacy and fundamental rights must be respected
6. Workers must have a full right of explanation when data is used
7. Biometric data and Personally Identifiable Information (PII) must be exempt
8. Equipment revealing employees' location should not be used unless there is an intrinsic need for doing so
9. A data governance body should be established with union representation
10. All of the above should be implemented in a collective agreement

Internationally, issues of constant connectivity and digital surveillance have led to a new policy approach, known as the *'right to be disconnected'*, which attempts to limit the negative effects of working from home by protecting employees' non-working time to address these work–life conflict and well-being issues.

The 'right to be disconnected' and related policies have emerged in response to some common issues that have recently arisen due to the diverse and new shape of the world of work. One of them, recently termed 'work without end' is linked to the growing importance of new technologies in our professional lives. The potential for 'work without end' appears to be more likely to occur with those working from home. Indeed, while work that is independent of time and place has the advantage that workers can organise their work themselves based on their individual situation, there is also an inherent danger that there will no longer be respect for the boundaries between paid work and private life. Some of these dangers have be borne out by the ACTU Working from Home Survey.

Australia needs a new Working from Home Charter of Rights

Regardless of where work is conducted, it is important to ensure that all workers have certain rights and protections. With the increase in work from home it is vital that the rights and benefits of those now working at home not be less favourable than what they were prior to the move to home-based work, and that working from home not be grounds for discrimination.

Greater attention will be needed to address the possible implications of working from home on work-life balance, particularly for those with carer responsibilities. The ACTU survey results found that 39% of women and 38% of men working from home also had carer responsibilities and about 60% of these workers were now spending more time as a carer. The potential overlap between paid work and personal life can have negative effects for workers (particularly women, who still undertake the largest share of care-related tasks), but also for employers if it negatively impacts productivity.

15 http://www.thefutureworldofwork.org/media/35421/uni_workers_data_protection.pdf?utm_campaign=revue_fortnightly_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Revue%20newsletter

Different work organisation between working at home and working from the employer's premises requires the capacity to treat each situation differently but equally. Desirable change to facilitate working from home should not be used to undermine the rights and entitlements of those who work from the employer's premises. Managing these possible tensions through collective dialogue and agreement is critical. This dialogue and eventual agreement is also essential for implementing specific occupational safety and health measures for working from home.

It is clear from the empirical international evidence and the ACTU survey that there can be both significant advantages of working from home and significant disadvantages. The potential benefits of working from home include; increased flexibility to balance work and family responsibilities, time savings due to the lack of a commute, improved job satisfaction, and overall productivity gains as people can choose how best to carry out their work.

There are also potential problems associated with working from home, including the encroachment of work into the personal sphere, increased work related expenses, feelings of isolation, stress and depression, and other health and safety risks from working in an unsuitable environment, including risks of cyber-bullying and domestic violence.

A Working from Home Charter of Rights can ensure that no worker is disadvantaged, works in an unsafe environment, works unpaid hours, has a good work life balance, and is properly connected to work related dialogue and decision making.

A new Working from Home Charter of Rights should incorporate:

1. **Rights at work:** all time paid, work related expenses, performance monitoring, shared productivity gains
2. **A safe place:** risk assessment, mental health, ergonomics, violence bullying, hierarchy of controls
3. **Work/life balance**: carer's responsibilities, excessive hours, privacy, the right to disconnect
4. **Better Together:** join and be represented by the union, connected to co-workers, supported by the employer
5. **Maintenance of existing job quality across workplaces**; protections are designed to suit the workplace and working from home is not used to undermine protections elsewhere

Summary Results ACTU Working from Home Survey

Our Working from Home Survey was open for 9 weeks and had 10,100 responses. Most responses were from women (63%) and there were high proportion of public sector, services, and educational workers. An overwhelming 81% of workers said that they would like to have the option of performing all or most of their work from home if they were provided with enough support.

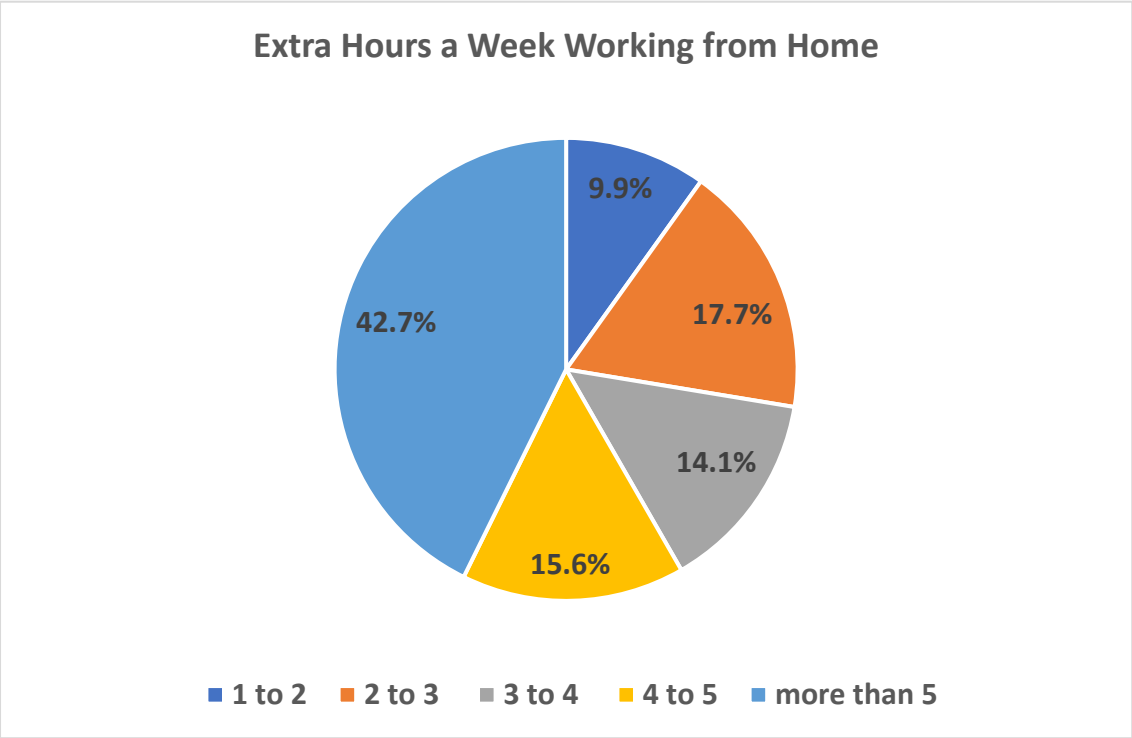
Many of the disadvantages of working from home identified in the academic literature are supported by our survey. Many home workers are working longer hours, incurred significant expenses and 90% are not paid overtime or penalty rates.

Our survey showed that for home workers:

- 40% are working longer hours, many with 5+ extra hours per week
- Much longer spread of hours
- 90% not paid overtime or penalty rates
- Average $530 per person additional expenses were incurred
- 22% have their performance monitored remotely and 41% do not know
- 47% are more productive working from home

We can see from the figure below that, of those working longer hours, 42.7% are working more than 5 hours a week and 15.6% are working 4 to 5 hours extra a week. Close to 60% (58.3%) are working more than 4 hours a week.

Figure three: Share of those Working from Home who were working more hours per week



Source: ACTU Working from Home Survey, 2020

Health and Safety

There are considerable health and safety concerns for home-workers including around mental health. Strikingly almost half (49%) of workers in our survey had experienced some form of mental health issue. These can include debilitating issues like stress, anxiety, depression, or self-harm.

The survey showed the following.

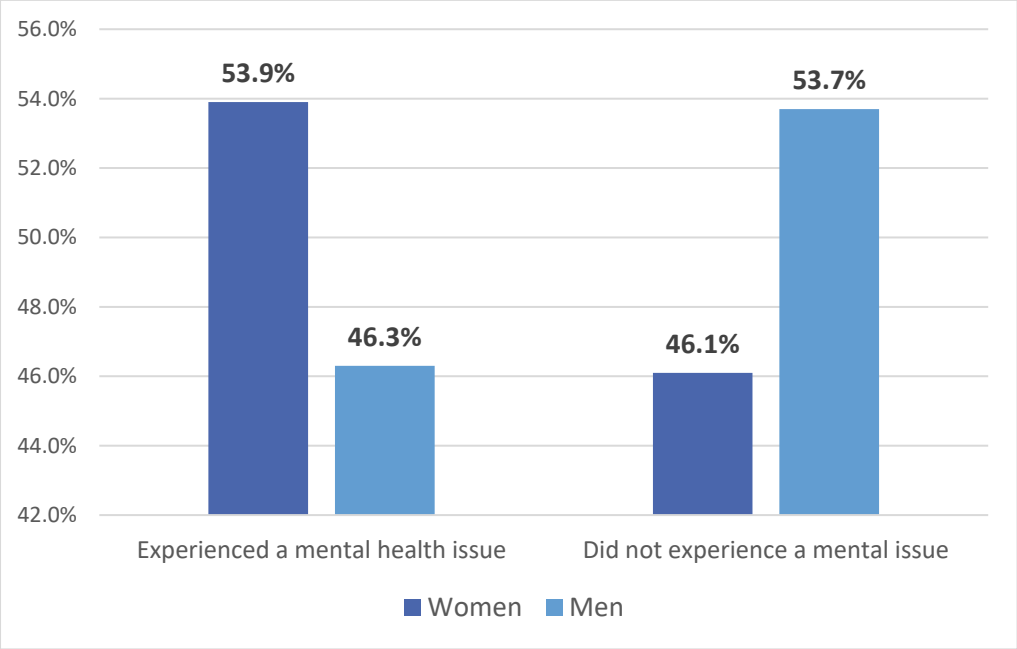
- 49% of home-workers are experiencing mental health issues (women 53.9%, men 46.3%)
- 48% are having difficulty separating work/home life
- 42% do not have a suitable workstation or equipment
- 26% feel unsupported by the employer
- 3% reported online bullying or harassment
- 2% said they were exposed to family or domestic violence

Women were more likely than men to experience mental health issues when working from home, with 53.9% of women compared with 46.3% of men experiencing mental health issues.

Those in casual work were more likely to indicate they were experiencing mental health issues (57%), particularly those who had been at their employer less than 12 months (61.73%). Part-time workers were also slightly more likely to say they had experienced mental health issues than full-time workers (54.1% compared with 49.2%).

It is evident from Table One that a significant number of workers have reported problems that they have faced while working from home.

Figure four: Experienced Mental health issues while working from home



Source: ACTU Working from Home Survey, 2020

Table One: Many workers have reported serious issues they have faced while working from home

	Total	Female	Male	Female minus male
Mental health issues, such as stress or anxiety	49.1	53.9	46.3	7.6
Working in isolation	48.6	50.1	52.7	-2.6
Problems achieving a healthy separation between work and home life	48.0	50.2	50.4	-0.2
Concern about contracting COVID-19 or passing it to another person	38.5	41.3	38.0	3.3
Lack of a suitable workstation and/or other equipment/resources	36.4	38.9	36.0	2.9
Increased workload	31.9	33.3	33.1	0.3
Longer hours of work	28.7	30.1	29.9	0.2
Juggling increased caring responsibilities for children and/or elderly parents and/or people with disability	24.6	26.4	25.3	1.1
Lack of support from colleagues/managers	23.5	25.3	23.6	1.7
Trying to balance home schooling with working from home	17.9	19.2	18.4	0.8
Changed duties	15.6	16.2	16.8	-0.6
Financial stress due to reduced income	8.0	8.0	8.5	-0.5
Exposure to online bullying or harassment	3.2	3.3	3.3	0.1
Exposure to family or domestic violence at home	1.7	1.8	1.7	0.1

Source: ACTU Working from Home Survey, 2020

Work Life Balance: People are working earlier and later than they were before the Pandemic

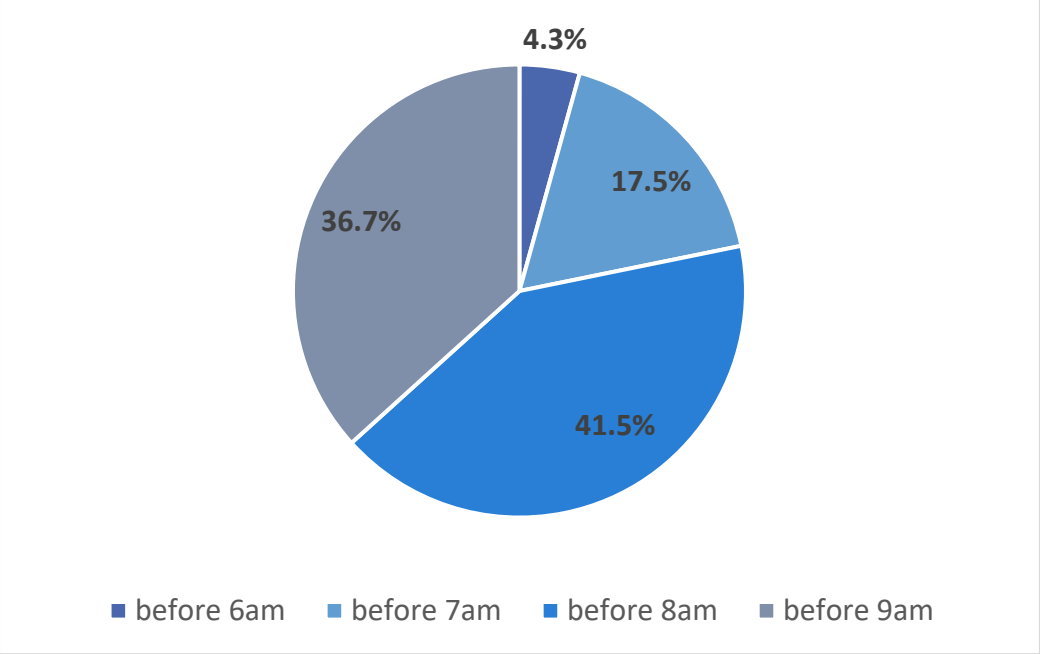
The encroachment of work into the personal sphere is a problem for many who are working from home. Our ACTU survey shows there are significant concerns by workers around work life balance.

- Most start before 8.00am
- 1 in 3 work up to or past 9.00pm
- Women are working both earlier and later than men
- 56% are not working set start/finish times
- 60% are spending more time as a carer
- Only 2% have decreased unpaid domestic duties

Over half, (55.9%) of respondents to our survey who are working from home said they were working earlier in the morning or later in the evening than they were before the pandemic.

On the question of whether workers are staring earlier, 52.1% of respondents working from home said they were working earlier (before 9am). Almost two thirds (63.3%) of those who said they were working earlier said they worked before 8am or earlier. 21.8% of those who said they worked earlier worked before 7am or earlier.

Figure five: Percent of those Working from home and worked early



Source: ACTU Working from Home Survey, 2020

Half (50.4%) of all respondents working from home said they worked later than 5pm up until as late as after 11pm. This was slightly more for women (52.2%) and slightly less for men (49.5%). The results suggest that women are more likely to work a wider range of hours than men. If we look at all respondents, 44.6% of women respondents are working early, from before 6am up to before 9am, whereas the equivalent for men is 40.7%. 45.4% of female respondents worked late, between after 5pm and after 11pm compared with 39.7% of men.

Working from home brings with it an increased risk of working life impinging on non-working life and the encroachment of work into the personal sphere. It is important that working from home occurs with legal and reasonable limits on working time. Regulations and limits around working times are a fundamental protection for employees. This means that:

- Flexible work arrangements must be based on employee choice and control.
- Employees must have a right to disconnect from work.
- Workers must not be encouraged or rewarded for being constantly connected.
- Records regarding employee working hours including breaks, starting and finishing times, must be kept and made available for inspection by a properly authorised person when required.

Insecure Work

Our laws and institutions should be designed to protect everyone, especially those most vulnerable to exploitation. The basic premise of labour law is that a power imbalance exists between the individual worker and the employer. That imbalance is particularly pronounced for non-standard workers. Whether workers are in insecure work arrangements makes a substantial difference to whether home-workers are working additional hours, experience mental health issues and are more likely to have caring responsibilities.

- Long term casuals are more likely to be working extra hours (47% to 41% overall)
- Short term casuals are most likely to report mental health issues (57% to 49% of FT)
- Part timers & casuals are more likely to have caring responsibilities (71% to 55% of FT)
- Casuals more likely to spend more time on carer responsibilities (64% to av 55%)
- All workers from different modes of engagement had the same low chance of actually being paid penalty rates or overtime (90% unpaid)

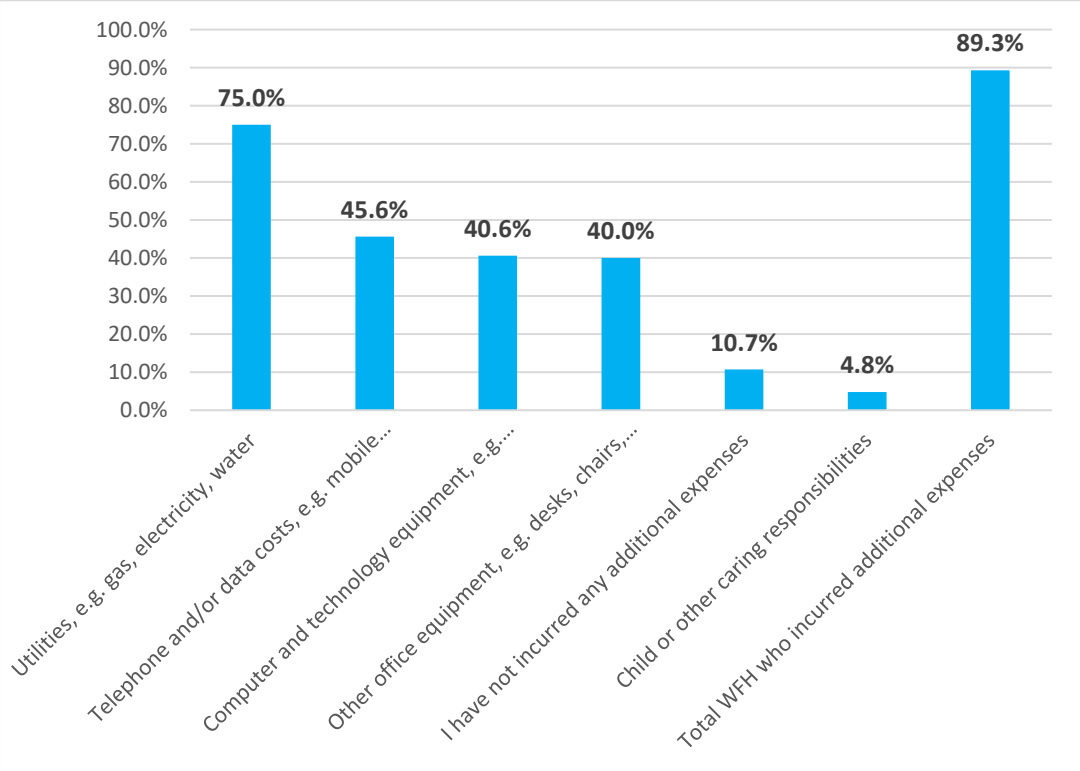
The low rate of home workers actually being paid overtime or penalty rates is a deep concern. A clear policy conclusion from our survey is the need to ensure that all hours that are worked are paid for. This is of particular concern for long term casuals who are working additional hours.

Non-standard home-workers are likely to be working more hours and many are doing so on an unpaid basis. Even before the COVID19 crisis insecure home-based outwork was particularly common in the textile, clothing and footwear industry, where it accounts for most of the Australian clothing manufacturing[16]. It is also increasingly common in-service sectors such as telemarketing. These workers must be protected from exploitation.

Homeworkers have incurred additional expenses while their wages stagnate

Almost 90% of those working from home have incurred additional expenses. Three quarters of workers in our survey reported increased utilities costs, 45.6% reported increased telephone and data costs, 40.6% reported increased computer and technology equipment costs and 40% of workers reported increased costs of office equipment. This can be seen in Figure six below.

Figure six: Share of Workers from Home who had to incur additional expenses

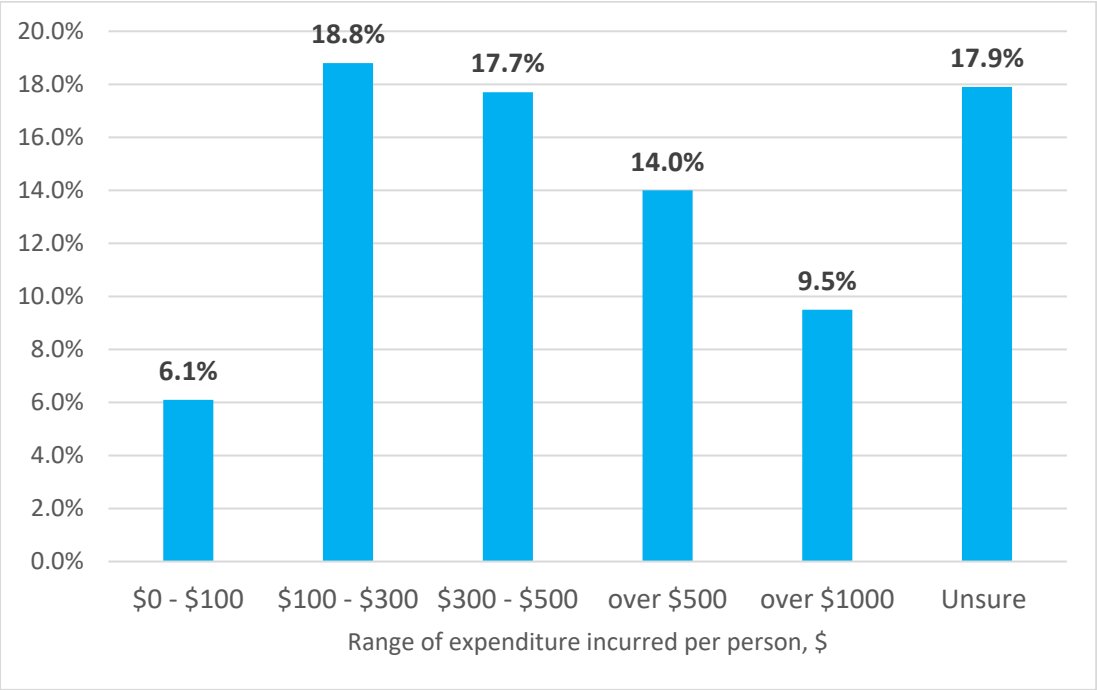


Source: ACTU Working from Home Survey, 2020

[16] 'Lives On Hold: Unlocking the Potential of Australia's Workforce' The report of The Independent Inquiry Into Insecure Work In Australia, ACTU, 2012

Over a third (36.6%) of those working from home said they had additional expenses between $100 and $500 with an average of about $530 per person working from home.

Figure seven: Homeworkers have incurred additional expenses



Source: ACTU Working from Home Survey, 2020

With almost 90% of survey responses indicating that home based workers have incurred additional work related expenses and between 78% and 97% reporting that these costs were not reimbursed by the employer, it is apparent that for a significant proportion of working from home arrangements there is an accompanying cost shifting from employers to employees (Table 5). While 75% of survey responses said that they incurred additional utility costs while working from home, only 7% of these additional expenses were reimbursed by the employer. The reimbursement proportions only marginally increase for office equipment (11%) and telephone and internet costs (13.8%) and the most likely costs to be reimbursed by the employer was 2.1.9% of computer and technology equipment.

Table 2 Additional expenses fully reimbursed by employer

	No Percent	Yes Percent	Total Percent
Computer and technology equipment, e.g. mouse, keyboard, monitor, cables	78.1	21.9	100
Other office equipment, e.g. desks, chairs, lumbar supports	89.0	11.0	100
Telephone and/or data costs, e.g. mobile phone, home internet	86.2	13.8	100
Utilities, e.g. gas, electricity, water	93.0	7.0	100
Child or other caring responsibilities	96.9	3.1	100

It is the responsibility of the employer to ensure that appropriate equipment, systems, and technology to support remote working are properly installed, are functioning, and maintained and that workers have the required training to operate those systems.

For digital work, there is a need for the employer to ensure workers are aware of increased data protection and cyber security risks for home workers and should provide suitable software and training to ensure necessary understanding of, and compliance with, data protection policies.

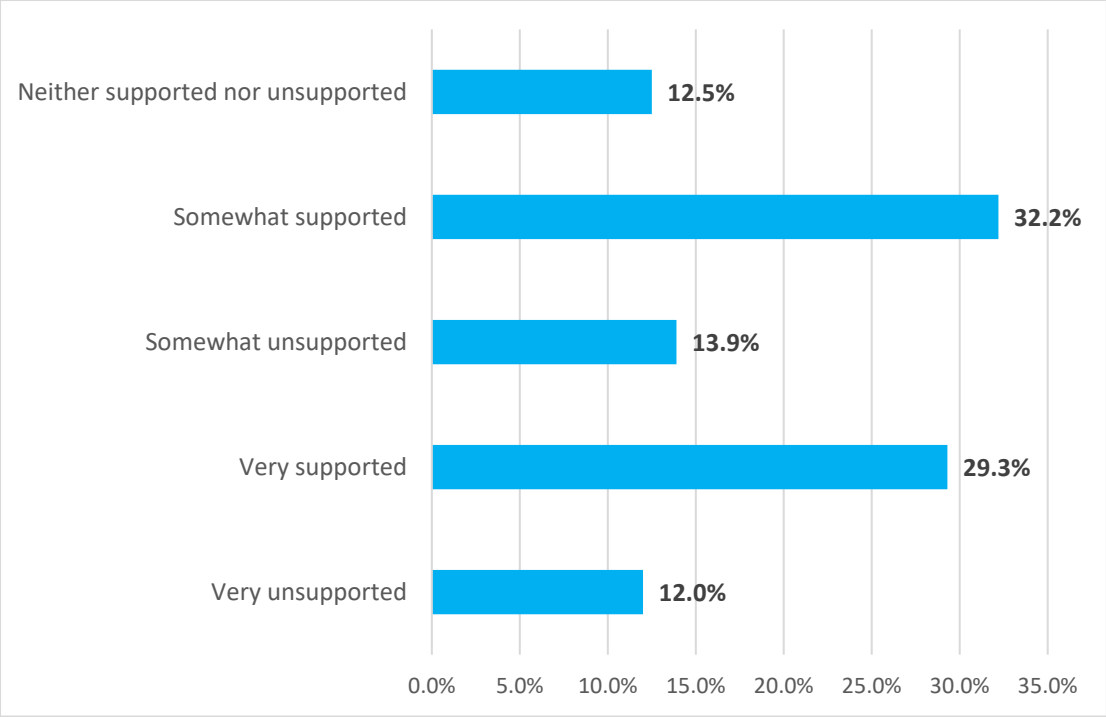
Workers should be provided with any other training required to carry out their job while working from home at the employer's cost just as they would while working on the employer's premises. There is a need for employers to take responsibility for insuring the equipment which is used. The cost of both one-off and recurring expenses that the employer would normally be responsible for on-employer provided premises should still be the responsibility of the employer when workers are working from home.

There is a need for the employer to provide an adequate allowance or full cost reimbursement for all work-related expenses including heating, cooling, and lighting, stationery, equipment, amenities, telephone, and internet expenses.

Isolation and lack of support from the employer

On top of the financial expenses incurred by home-workers many workers feel unsupported by their employer. The figure below shows that a quarter of workers feel somewhat or very unsupported.

Figure nine: Many workers feel unsupported by their employer



Source: ACTU Working from Home Survey, 2020

With a quarter of workers feeling somewhat or very unsupported by their employer there is clearly a need for change.

50.1% of women working from home and 52.7% of men working from home said they experienced working in isolation. By comparison, of the survey responses from people not "mostly" working from home 14.7% of women and 13.6% of men experienced isolation. This indicates a very significant differential which gives rise to the need for specific policy responses from employers.

Working from home brings new challenges about ensuring that workers are not isolated and have the full support they need to stay connected to co-workers, are properly supported by their employer and can fully realise the potential benefits of working from home. This requires specific measures to be in place that take into account the differences between working from home and working on the employer's premises.

With fewer incidental interactions with co-workers and employers, it becomes necessary to reinforce structured inclusion for those working from home.

Working from home arrangements should encourage and facilitate an employee's right to union representation and advice. Unions have industrial and representational coverage of employees working from home as well as the capacity to incorporate these workers into collective processes to ensure that they have a voice and can participate in a variety of activities that make work better for both the home worker and those at the employer's premises.

Both those working from home and their union should have access to resources, including digital and connectivity resources required to effectively communicate.

Any disputes or grievances that arise in connection with a working from home arrangement will be subject to an independent dispute settlement process which includes arbitration where the matters cannot be resolved through discussion between parties.

Conclusions

The growth in home-based work is a vital part of the response that state governments and firms are taking in the face of containing a public health crisis. It is now apparent that in a post-pandemic economy, working from home will continue to be a viable and popular form of work organisation.

However, our analysis shows there have been disadvantages for home-workers including working additional unpaid hours, cost shifting from employers to workers, acute health and safety issues and a worsening work life balance.

With the shift to working from home, both during and after the crisis, it will be necessary to ensure that home-workers are provided the same rights and benefits as if they were working at their employers' site, including equality of treatment in remuneration and other working conditions. Our work indicates that there are five key areas that should be addressed in securing efficient and sustainable working from home arrangements. They are:

1. Workers' rights at home
2. Work Health and safety
3. Work life balance
4. Connection and support
5. Job quality across all workplaces

To protect home workers, Australia needs a new Working from Home Charter.