

Pros and cons of working from home

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In Australia, prior to the pandemic, approximately 24% of employees were engaged in some degree of work from home. This figure jumped to 41% during the COVID-19 pandemic, with higher rates in those states with severe lockdowns.

As many of us continue to work from home despite much of the COVID restrictions having been removed, a new report from La Trobe University on effective strategies to combining work at home with work at the office, school, factory or shop provides much-needed advice.

Published in *Industrial Health*, the study led by Associate Professor Jodi Oakman—head of the Center for Ergonomics and Human Factors at La Trobe University—identified optimal working strategies from people working from home during the pandemic.

Managers and non-managers from a range of sectors were invited to participate in focus groups.

According to Associate Professor Oakman, most participants' experiences were more negative than positive, in part due to extreme lockdowns including curfews, with childcare and school closures compounding their work from home experiences.

Some of the negative aspects of work from home during the pandemic identified in the report include:

- Blurring of boundaries (working longer hours and on weekends), invasion of privacy (using webcam and private phone for work), and work impinging on caregiver responsibilities
- Both managers and non-managers reported exhaustion associated with increased working hours and long periods of work without taking leave
- Negative physical health outcomes such as increased musculoskeletal pain and weight gain
- A decrease in productivity, due to negative mental well-being effects of work from home
- A feeling of isolation and disconnect from work, particularly for those living alone in lockdown who could not socialize

- Negative financial impact for employees resulting from increased utility bills and purchase of additional equipment

Positives included:

- Improved work-life interaction, particularly for employees that were not in mandatory lockdown situations—including flexibility to accommodate parenting responsibilities, [household chores](#), dog walking and exercise
- Improved access to networking and professional development opportunities through online conferences and seminars that were previously inaccessible due to overseas locations
- Increased team bonding due to online meetings, which provided insight into private lives of employees
- The introduction of online communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom resulted in improved communication within teams and between departments, as well as cross business collaboration
- Productivity increase—due to staff working longer days and not being distracted in the office—contributed to the positive financial impact for employer organizations

However the study found that effective workplace-initiated strategies to optimize work from home included management support of flexible work hours; provision of necessary equipment with ICT support; regular online communication; performance management adjustments; and manager training.

More information: Jodi OAKMAN et al, Strategies to manage working from home during the pandemic: the employee experience, *Industrial Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.2486/indhealth.2022-0042](https://doi.org/10.2486/indhealth.2022-0042)

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