

Remote working made Australians less productive: survey

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Australians forced to work from home at the onset of the pandemic say the experience was a hit to their productivity and led to no measurable increase in job satisfaction.

The findings are from the 2020 edition of the Melbourne Institute's Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey

[<https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/hilda>], released on Monday.



Rate Money's head of marketing, AJ Kavanagh, said working from home during the pandemic made him less productive. **Dominic Lorrimer**

The survey [<https://www.afr.com/policy/hilda-survey-finds-inequality-is-not-on-the-rise-in-australia-20150713-gib6p8>], which tracks 9500 households and 17,500 individuals, was primarily conducted in August and September 2020, during Victoria's protracted lockdown and provides an insight into how the pandemic changed the way Australians live and work.

The survey reveals a sharp, but not unexpected, lift in remote working between 2019 and 2020, with the proportion of Australians working mostly from home increasing to 21 per cent from 6 per cent.

The biggest jump was in the ACT, where one in three workers said they worked mostly from home, with the territory's high concentration of office jobs particularly amenable to remote working.

Nationally, the biggest lift in remote work [<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/return-to-office-plans-unravel-as-workers-rebel-20220512-p5akog>] occurred in white-collar industries. Fewer than one in 10 financial services industry workers said they worked mostly from home in 2019, but this figure leaped to almost seven in 10 in 2020.

Productivity hit

Remote working did not make people more or less satisfied with their job, though, despite benefits like a reduction in commuting time and greater autonomy.

It could have also reduced productivity.

The average worker who started or increased working from home in 2020 said they were less productive at home than in the office [<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/onus-on-the-individual-how-these-companies-are-making-wfh-work-20221102-p5buz2>].

About 42 per cent of respondents reported lower productivity from home, while 24 per cent said the shift had made them more productive. One in three people said the place of work made no difference.

“This average negative effect is not surprising given many Australian workers in 2020 were suddenly faced with the requirement to work from home without necessarily having access to dedicated work spaces,” researchers Mark Wooden and Trong-Anh Trinh wrote.



Melburnians were the unhappiest people in 2020. **Eddie Jim**

“In short, productivity effects of working from home may be more favourable in non-pandemic times, when childcare and schools are open and when workers can choose whether or not to work from home.”

Marketing professional AJ Kavanagh is convinced that being forced to work from home during the pandemic in 2020 made him less productive.

Then 25, Mr Kavanagh was working as a support officer for home loan provider Rate Money, which specialises in loans for the self-employed.

Mr Kavanagh said he felt like he had “no finishing time” when working from home as he had no clear boundaries between work and leisure.

“The one thing I really struggled with throughout the lockdown was not being able to differentiate between what is work and what is home,” he told *The Australian Financial Review*.

“In terms of [the negative effects on] mental health and productivity, that was probably the biggest one.”

It was also his first job in the industry, meaning he had to learn the ropes and pick up a whole new vocabulary without the option of walking over to a more experienced colleague to ask a quick question. And interruptions were common.

First corporate gig

“It’s embarrassing enough being 25 years old and living at home with your mum. But you’ve just started a corporate gig, and you’re in a big team meeting on Zoom, and your mum comes in with a cup of tea on camera,” Mr Kavanagh said, with a laugh.

“That happened numerous times. She didn’t care at all, or didn’t take any notice.”

Mr Kavanagh now lives in his own apartment and is back to working five days a week in the office, where he finds it easier to manage the sole employee under his supervision as head of marketing.

The camaraderie with his colleagues also helps him get motivated for the week, he said. And his desk is far more comfortable and better equipped.



Australians feared there was a high chance of going to hospital in 2020 because of COVID-19. **Wayne Taylor**

The report also provides an insight into how Australians coped with the first few months of the pandemic, when jobs were being shed and fear of the virus [<https://www.afr.com/policy/health-and-education/why-the-panic-could-be-worse-than-the-pandemic-20200227-p5454g>] was running high.

Nationwide, just 0.5 per cent of participants had reported a COVID-19 infection at the time of the survey.

But respondents perceived there was a 39 per cent chance of needing to go to hospital in the event of a COVID-19 infection.

The figure was above the true likelihood of an unvaccinated person being hospitalised with the original strain of COVID-19, which was around one in 1000 for a 30-year-old, according to ANU infectious diseases expert Peter Collignon.

Locked-down Melburnians were Australia's unhappiest people in 2020. About one in three Melburnians aged over 15 reported in 2020 their life was much worse because of the COVID-19 crisis, compared to 17 per cent nationally.

Landlords were less forgiving than banks, the survey shows.

About 11 per cent of renters attempted to suspend payments due to the financial pressure of the pandemic, but half of these requests were refused.

Borrowers had more luck. Banks refused fewer than one in 10 requests to hit pause on mortgage repayments.

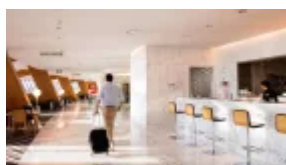
Close to one in four workers surveyed received JobKeeper [<https://www.afr.com/rear-window/jobkeeper-wasted-40-billion-not-27-billion-but-who-s-counting-20211012-p58zeq>], with record amounts of government stimulus generating the largest fall in inequality in the survey's 20-year history.



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