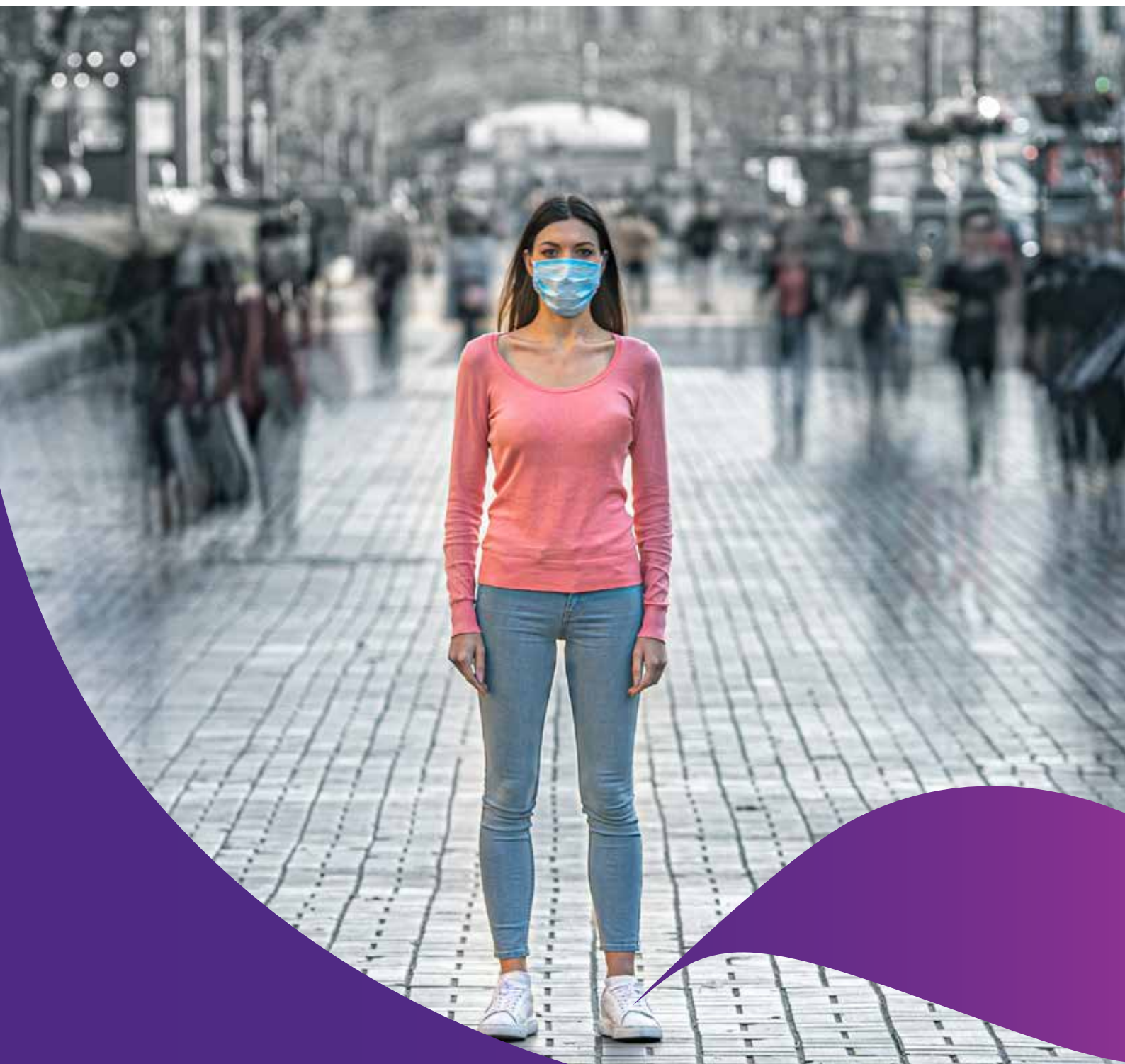


Experiences of COVID-19:

The pandemic and work/life
outcomes for Australian men
and women



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Foreword



Christina Yiakkoupis
NAWIC National Chair

At the start of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) and the Australian Gender Equality Council (AGEC) approached the University of Queensland Business School to conduct a nationwide survey to determine how this pandemic impacted the people of Australia. The pandemic has been classified as one of the most traumatic global events of the past 100 years and while it has impacted human life in every country of the world, everyone's experience has been unique.

Currently, with COVID cases on the rise once again, we are pleased to be launching this report which shines a light on the effects of the pandemic on work and life and hope that the recommendations can be implemented to improve conditions moving forward.

NAWIC was founded in Australia in 1995 and has evolved into the largest Women In Construction association in the country, with chapters in each state and territory supported by volunteers, sponsors, members and partners. NAWIC's vision is to create an equitable construction industry where women fully participate. We recognise that this includes not only women on the front line or on the tools but women at all levels of their careers.

While we were all aware that the pandemic was and has been a large disruptor to daily normal lives, the report provides findings that gender was one of the variables that determined the impact of the pandemic on an individual. The fact that in this day and age, the government providing stimulus packages during the pandemic didn't realise that the handouts were for industries where women are far less represented is disappointing. In order to find another way through these challenging times, women withdrew a higher proportion of their superannuation than men.

Unpaid household and care work increased more significantly for women and many more women than men left jobs or cut back hours in order to cater to the home, schooling and family requirements. Dealing with stress and career impacts of occupations being classified as essential and front line and adjusting to home schooling while attempting to work from home has disproportionately affected women. This has also impacted our future skills pipeline as there has been a reduction in the number of women enrolling in post school education.

However, as with anything, there is a silver lining. The general negative perceptions around flexible working arrangements were forced out the window, as businesses had no other option but to 'pivot' and adapt. Seeing a large increase in productivity, elimination of workplace commute, efficient use of time and allowing staff to be able to prioritise around their daily life requirements has set us up to be able to carry these arrangements forward into the future far sooner than if the pandemic hadn't hit. Many individuals and businesses were able to recognise transferable skills and adapt to other roles. Businesses were forced to be far more reflexive and to adapt to the requirements of putting their staff health and safety above all else.

In early 2022, NAWIC launched its own survey to see what the pressure points are for women in construction. The survey revealed that 82% of participants agree/strongly agree that the role of women in construction is changing for the better. 73% agree/strongly agree that they feel respected and valued as much as their colleagues. Whilst these figures are a step in the right direction, there is still a long way to go for women in the construction industry. 48% of participants stated they have received inappropriate or unwanted attention from colleagues during their career and 73% have experienced gender-based adversity within their construction career.

Diversity and inclusion projects may have taken a back step during the pandemic, however, with reports such as this one presenting crucial findings, recommendations to move us forward must be considered and implemented. The report makes 17 recommendations across 13 categories which include more accessible early childcare, flexible and hybrid working, mental health support, parental leave entitlements and addressing gender role stereotypes. When implemented, the recommendations will help to rectify the impacts of the pandemic and eliminate gender imbalances to create more equitable culture that will only aid to strengthen the entire country going forward.

Christina Yiakkoupis

Chair

National Association of Women in Construction

Foreword



Coral Ross
Chair
Australian Gender
Equality Council

Much has been written about the experiences and effects of the global pandemic COVID-19. But this excellent report provides a comprehensive analysis of the numerous reports, surveys and studies undertaken during the pandemic and overlays them with a national survey of 2,000 working men and women undertaken in June/July 2020 and through a series of 20 industry-based focus groups conducted between November 2021 and March 2022. It also details the history of the pandemic, the massive world death toll and the Australian experience.

This report explains how the pandemic disproportionately affected women with regards to employment, hours of work, personal experiences, health and questions industry groups about their lived experience and what the future holds for work in Australia.

Importantly, it makes 17 recommendations, including a National Gender Equality Strategy.

We know from several reports, including by the World Economic Forum, that when schools and childcare facilities closed it was mothers who undertook most of the additional unpaid care work and increased household work. Many women reduced their hours or ceased employment to undertake this increased care load. We also know that women were disadvantaged by being over-represented in industries less likely to be eligible for 'Jobkeeper' and that women were among the first to lose their jobs and withdrew a higher proportion of their superannuation savings than men. Women also had higher stress and depression levels, suffered increased rates of domestic violence and were more vulnerable in their employment. The flow on effect led to less women being promoted or taking part in learning and development opportunities.

This report details how "survival mode" thinking by governments and businesses diverted resources from diversity and inclusion programs and saw the demise of a "gender lens" to decision-making.

The findings have been beautifully illustrated by quotations from executives from a variety of industries, from Finance and Insurance, to Agriculture, Transport, Mining, Banking, Education and Training, Medical Retail and Trade, Professional and Scientific, Manufacturing, Telecommunications and Media, Arts and Recreation, Health Care and the Public Sector. It is clear from these comments that the executives gained a new understanding of the work-load undertaken by women outside the working environment and the consequential stresses.

And soberly, there is the warning of the potential for a 'second pandemic' pertaining to the ongoing mental health impacts and increased risks of suicide from social isolation and lockdowns. One executive from the Finance and Insurance sector detailed that before COVID less than 5% of their employees had accessed the company's employee assistance program (EAP) for stress and mental health issues. But in the last 12 months, this had blown out to over 30%.

There are positive outcomes. Notably, the establishment of flexibility in the work setting and that flexibility has been proven to increase productivity. Remote working also opened up the possibility of a 'sea' or 'tree change'.

The report highlights the need to monitor the implications for Workplace Gender Equality. And whilst the introduction of greater workplace flexibility will help women, it must not be at the expense of promotion, learning opportunities or undermining workplace gender equality.

The report concludes that the pandemic has created the greatest shift in the way in which work is carried out since the introduction of the computer and makes 17 recommendations across 13 categories.

Among the recommendations are a call for an increased investment in childcare and out of school hour care; funding for school psychologists and tutoring programs; mental health support; support for those industries worst hit by the pandemic and social support to areas overwhelmed.

Some of the unintended consequences of the pandemic also feature in the recommendations: the need to examine the impact of demographic changes to social cohesion and infrastructure and ensure support for Australian manufacturing so the country is not reliant on overseas imports. Plus, the report recommends that a gender lens should be applied to all future COVID-19 recovery strategies and legislation to equalise paid parental and carers leave entitlements to each parent.

But most importantly, the report calls for a National Gender Equality Strategy to address the fundamental issue of inequality and gender role stereotypes. If a Strategy had been in place, then these issues may have been averted.

Coral Ross AM

Chair

Australian Gender Equality Council

Disclaimer

Inherent Limitations

This report has been prepared by The University of Queensland Business School. The data used to produce this report comprises responses to surveys and focus group interviews undertaken by the research team and independent archival data comprising news media stories, reports, statistics and other documents accessed through the internet. While we have cross checked these sources in most cases, we have not sought to independently verify those sources.

No warranty of completeness, accuracy or reliability is made in relation to statements and representations made in the interviews or the independent archival data that have been quoted or cited in the report.

Third Party Reliance

Neither the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), the Australian Gender Equality Council (AGEC) nor any employee of the University of Queensland undertakes responsibility arising in any way from reliance placed by a third party on the information contained in this report. Any reliance placed is that party's sole responsibility.

Acknowledgements

This report is compiled using survey and interview data acquired by the research team and we wish to acknowledge the support given by those who participated in the survey and interviews. Findings from the data has been supplemented through access of archival data maintained by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Government Department of Health, Workplace Gender Equality Agency, World Economic Forum, United Nations, McKinsey & Company, Grattan Institute, OECD, Office of National Statistics, Equity Economics, Chief Executive Women and various news media outlets. The interpretation of these data and views contained in this report, however, are those of the authors and should not be attributed to those organisations listed above or their employees. This research was funded by the National Association of Women in Construction and supporting funds from the University of Queensland Business School.

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Experiences of COVID-19: The Pandemic and work/life Outcomes for Australian Men and Women

“...you know, it’s some of the stories you hear about that industry that really, really brings home how some people have been way more affected by the pandemic than others.” CEO – Education Sector



Introduction

On the 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a Global Pandemic¹. Since then, the pandemic has swept across the globe leaving no country unaffected, being described as one of the most traumatic global events of the past 100 years. In mid-2022 we continue to live with both the virus and the effects it has upon our lives. It has impacted global trade and supply chains and fundamentally changed the way we undertake work. The impact of the pandemic has varied because of an array of circumstances, most of which were beyond people’s control.

In Australia, we have been fortunate in our isolation and the response of the State and Federal Governments in being able to largely stave off the deadlier health impacts of the virus until our population could be fully vaccinated. Countries like the United States, for example, have surpassed one-million deaths² while both Brazil and India have both well exceeded half a million³. At the date of writing, Australia has had just over ten-thousand deaths, putting our death rate from the virus at one of the lowest in the world⁴ and one tenth the rate, per capita, of the United States.

While acknowledging the health crisis, this report focuses upon the impact of the pandemic response by government and businesses upon the lives of men and women across Australia. In undertaking the studies which inform this report we adopted a gender lens for several reasons, which are discussed shortly.

¹ <https://www.who.int/>

² <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/from-our-experts/u-s-officially-surpasses-1-million-covid-19-deaths>

³ <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/br>

⁴ <https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/coronavirus-deaths-in-australia-one-of-the-lowest-per-capita-among-worlds-rich-nations-c-995108>

However, as we explored the results of the surveys, and particularly after conducting twenty industry sector focus groups in late 2021 and early 2022, we came to understand that gender was one of many variables that heightened or lessened the impact of the pandemic upon individual lives. These variables have also been highlighted in the report.

Gender was considered a focus for the study based upon early reports of the impact of the pandemic upon men and women which consistently identified that women were being disproportionately affected⁵. For example, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) identified that women had experienced a greater reduction in hours worked at the beginning of the pandemic.⁷ The Grattan Institute reported that women were disproportionately represented in industries, occupations and forms of working, such as casual and part-time work, that had greater exposure to the negative impacts of lockdowns and the commensurate shutdowns of large parts of the economy⁸. Further, the World Economic Forum⁹, McKinsey¹⁰ and the OECD¹¹ all identified that when schools and childcare facilities closed, mothers undertook most of the additional unpaid care work and the increased household work caused by working from home.

Additionally, many more women than men, whose industry or job-role was not necessarily directly impacted by the financial impact of early lockdowns, reduced their work hours or left their jobs to undertake this unpaid domestic and care work¹². The early negative impact upon women was not just limited to employment and hours worked, but also caused a dramatic decline in the number of women versus men enrolling in post school education and training¹³.

Even in terms of the Federal Government's financial support response, women were disadvantaged by being overrepresented in work forms and industries less likely to be eligible for Jobkeeper. Also, they were less present in industries which were the beneficiaries of Federal Government stimulus, such as the Construction and Energy sectors¹⁴. Another financial disadvantage, already disproportionately borne by women in terms of negative retirement outcomes, was highlighted by reports indicating that women withdrew a higher proportion of their superannuation savings than men after the Federal Government changed superannuation rules to enable people to access their superannuation as an emergency measure¹⁵.

⁵ Madgavkar, A., White, O., Krishnan, M., Mahajan, D. & Azcue, X. (2020). COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects. McKinsey Global Institute. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects>

⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/gender-equality-women-employment-covid19/>

⁷ https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/COVID19_Australian_workforce_2020_O.pdf

⁸ Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

⁹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/gender-equality-women-employment-covid19/>

¹⁰ Madgavkar, A., White, O., Krishnan, M., Mahajan, D. & Azcue, X. (2020). COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects. McKinsey Global Institute. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects>

¹¹ https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/caregiving-in-crisis-gender-inequality-in-paid-and-unpaid-work-during-covid-19_3555d164-en

¹² Collins, C., Landivar, L., Ruppanner, L. & Scarborough, W. (2020). COVID-19 and the gender gap in work hours. Gender, Work & Organisation. 28(S1): 101-112.

¹³ Risse, L. & Jackson, A. (2021). Changing trajectory: Investing in women for a fairer future. Sydney: Equity Economics. <https://www.equityeconomics.com.au/report-archive/investing-in-women>

¹⁴ Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

¹⁵ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>

A further area of disproportionate impact upon women, largely caused by the increase in care and domestic responsibilities, coupled with greater exposure to financial penalties and isolation during lockdowns, were the growing number of reports early in the pandemic that indicated women were suffering higher rates of anxiety, stress and depression¹⁶ than men,¹⁷ as well as accelerating incidences of domestic violence¹⁸.

There are growing concerns that the structural inequalities, gender role stereotypes and biases present before the pandemic have acted to exacerbate the impact of the pandemic upon women^{19 20} and, to quote Sam Mostyn, President of Chief Executive Women, the "...pandemic has left women more vulnerable in their employment, their financial security, their mental health and their safety than they already were."



¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-and-the-different-effects-on-men-and-women-in-the-uk-march-2020-to-february-2021>

¹⁷ Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

¹⁸ https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/COVID19_Australian_workforce_2020_0.pdf

¹⁹ McArdle, H. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on women. ABC News. <https://www.ama.com.au/articles/impact-covid-19-women>

²⁰ Madgavkar, A., White, O., Krishnan, M., Mahajan, D. & Azcue, X. (2020). COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects. McKinsey Global Institute. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects>

Overview and Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to identify and examine the gendered impact of the pandemic upon men and women in Australia from March 2020 to June 2022. In doing so the report also explores the many additional variables, other than gender, that acted to cause individuals to have unique experiences of the pandemic.

From an industry and organisational perspective, the report examines the response to the pandemic, identifying changes to the nature and ways of working caused by it and what changes are likely to be permanent versus temporary.

To achieve its purpose, the report draws upon the results of a nationwide survey on the impacts of COVID-19 upon men and women undertaken in June/July 2020 immediately after the end of the first national lockdown. It then reports upon interviews undertaken with eighty-one men and women in twenty focus groups, representing Australia's nineteen industry sectors. These were conducted in the months following the end of the lockdowns in Australia in October, 2021. Questions asked of the interviewees were informed by the results of the original survey, as well as seeking additional views about what the future holds for work in Australia.

The report provides a timeline of events in Australia surrounding the pandemic in order to provide a context for its findings. Results of the National Survey (See Appendix 2) are then presented in this report, followed by an analysis of the responses to questions asked in the twenty focus groups (See Appendix 3) about their reactions to the survey outcomes and their industry's experiences of the pandemic. These responses were categorised into the following themes:

- The gendered impact of COVID-19
- Beyond gender, the complex and interacting variables that differentially impacted individual experiences of the pandemic
- Mental health and well-being consequences for men, women and children
- Challenges to the organisation of work including flexibility and hybrid working
- Other consequences of the government and organisational responses to the pandemic
- Work/life after the pandemic – What have we learned?

While much valuable statistical work has been undertaken on the impact of the pandemic, the rich accounts offered by the eighty-one individual participants, who have oversight of the nineteen ANZSIC Divisions or Industry groups in the Australian economy, offer a unique perspective into the lived experience of the pandemic by men and women in Australia. We have used extensive quotes from these eighty-one industry representatives throughout the report to bring human voices to these statistics.

Summary of Key Findings

Overview

This report on the 'Experiences of COVID-19: The pandemic and work/life outcomes for Australian men and women' uses data from a national survey undertaken in June/July 2020; a series of twenty industry-based focus group interviews undertaken between November, 2021 and March, 2022; and uses data and media reports from across the time of the pandemic up to June, 2022.

Gendered impact of the COVID-19 response

The response of Australian Federal and state governments, as well as organisations in various industry sectors, to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted upon each individual worker in numerous ways. In addition, the consecutive lockdowns, designations of essential industries and frontline workers, shifts in work patterns and the ways in which lives have been lived in 'COVID times', have also had a gendered impact. Overall, the pattern of results from the national survey and interviews strongly suggests that women were impacted to a much greater degree than men. These impacts were to their overall employment, hours of work, personal experiences with psychological health and wellbeing, and hours of domestic labour.

Women were over-represented in industries worst impacted by the first national lockdown and subsequent lockdowns. Women also represent a greater proportion of the more precariously employed casual, part-time and contract labour force, who were among the first to lose their jobs as businesses struggled in response to lockdowns. A disproportional number of women were not eligible for JobKeeper payments and were less likely to be the beneficiary of Government stimulus directed towards largely male dominated areas of the economy such as construction.

Lockdowns and school/day-care closures or limited accessibility to these due to the lack of 'essential worker' status, also saw women bearing a greater share of caring responsibilities, especially in relation to home-schooling. Many women, more so than men, reduced their hours or ceased employment to undertake this increased burden of care. With more couples working from home, and children at home due to school closures, domestic labour, beyond child care responsibilities, also increased for both men and women. However, women bore a disproportionate share of this increase. A flow-on effect of these extra burdens were widespread reports supporting women's decreased participation in promotion, learning and development opportunities during the pandemic.

The crisis caused by the pandemic lockdowns, and the focus upon shifting work into the homes of employees who were not essential front-line workers, was one often described as involving 'business survival'. Generally, this shift to a survival mode of thinking in government and businesses generally, diverted resources and attention away from diversity and inclusion programs, and in many cases a gender lens disappeared from Government and organisational decision-making.

As a result of the disproportional impact upon women's hours of employment, the commensurate financial impact and increased domestic labour burdens, it was reported, and external data supports the finding, that women also suffered disproportionately from the effects of stress, anxiety and depression throughout the pandemic.

Experiences of the pandemic: A complexity of factors beyond gender

While gender was a key variable within this study of how the pandemic impacted upon individuals, the study revealed nineteen intersecting variables that could either reduce or exacerbate the negative experience of the pandemic.

Key among these were 'essential worker'/'frontline worker' status, marital status, age and number of children, status of spouse, industry sector, employment type, eligibility for Job Keeper, previous experience of employees and organisations with remote working, home architecture and infrastructure, geographical location, frequency of lockdowns and access to childcare.

These factors acted in unique combinations for individuals, and to such a degree, that it is clear that nearly every Australian had a unique experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental health issues and outcomes

Reports of stress, anxiety and depression, alongside feelings of fatigue, exhaustion and being overwhelmed, especially in late 2021, were a key focus in interviewee responses. The mental health impacts of the pandemic were described as profound and widely shared across employees and managers alike. Every interviewee described a variety of themes: from general experiences of workplace stress and pressure, to the more serious and persistent experiences of exhaustion and emotional burnout. Very few people were unaffected emotionally or mentally by the pandemic. The length of the pandemic, not just in real time but also measured by the duration of lockdowns in various cities and the appearance of new COVID-19 variants, was reported as draining the resilience of Australian employees and managers alike.

Lockdowns and to a lesser degree, social distancing, pervaded both professional and personal domains. Nearly all interviewees described the experience of social isolation and organisations while attempting to combat this isolation used any means at their disposal to facilitate more connectivity.

The longer-term effects of poor mental health and wellbeing were also widely described by interviewees. They ranged from experiences of 'moral injury' caused through persistent fatigue and feelings of compromised values systems, through to experiences of suicidal ideation. Leaders also had to make life altering decisions for their employees, as well as bear the emotional burden of their personal struggles.

While media reports have rightly heralded the frontline heroes of the pandemic, leaders have also shouldered the emotional and mental burden of the crisis.

In response, organisations have mainstreamed mental health discussions and have increased the provision of a range of external support services and internal communications with employees and managers. There were divergent views around how long these efforts will remain a feature within organisations. However, given the profound nature of the impacts upon mental health caused by the pandemic, they are expected to remain into the foreseeable future.

Reports of increased marital breakdowns and incidences of domestic violence were a feature of many of the focus group interviews conducted for the study. These increased incidences were broadly related to the periods of the longer and more intense lockdowns that precipitated partners being in closer proximity than normal when they would be outside of the home for work.

The negative impact of the pandemic upon children's mental health and well-being were also widely reported. The impacts of the change to school learning for many children were challenging to navigate. As remote work and schooling persisted, the experiences of boys and girls produced various, often negative, outcomes with regard to mental health and wellbeing, which were exacerbated by the lack of mental health support services being available.

Flexibility and hybrid working

The adoption of remote/flexible working was the greatest change experienced as a result of COVID-19 in the workplace. This change was largely experienced by non-essential workers and those in essential industries where work could be undertaken remotely. There was a strong consensus among interviewees that the negative perceptions around flexible working held by organisations pre-pandemic, and particularly the negative attitudes of middle managers, had largely been dispelled. It was widely reported that the cause for increased flexibility around the nature of work had been pushed ahead, possibly by decades.

At the centre of this attitude shift was the 'silver lining' of increased productivity. While several disadvantages to full time remote working were highlighted, nearly all respondents noted that despite early fears, productivity had largely risen due to working from home. The consensus was that some form of hybrid working was the preference of employees and managers alike and its continuation was a very likely outcome of the pandemic.

The increase in productivity was driven by several factors. Most significantly was the elimination of the workplace commute, which in most cases freed up an extra one to two hours of time per day. The majority of employees allocated at least a proportion of this saved time to their paid work role. Equally as important in explaining the increase in productivity were factors that enabled people to be in control of how they prioritised when they worked and when other life needs could be attended to during the day. Employees restructured the time spent across the day, balancing their work/life needs in such a way as to maximise the efficient use of their time, working when they were most likely to be more productive.

Organisational responses

In the early months of the pandemic, the word 'pivot' became part of the business vernacular. These months were characterised by improvisation and rapid responses to allow the basic functioning of organisations to continue as they tried to understand the short, medium and longer term implications of Australia's response to the pandemic. Likewise, there was a scramble to digitise paper-based systems and to ensure remote access for online working for individuals and teams.

Uncertainty around lockdowns, border closures, supply chain disruptions, labour shortages and the vaccine rollout all impacted upon the timeframes of decision-making. Organisations gained a renewed appreciation for their core business and processes, ensuring that these received priority resourcing. For many businesses 'pivoting' was not simply a change in the ways of working and redirecting staff to these tasks, but often transformational shifts in strategy and market focus. Against the backdrop of uncertainty and ambiguity, strategies and plans had to be redrafted, enacted and redrafted. Planning horizons shortened dramatically. Many respondents expected that longer term planning would return eventually, but this was not in the immediately foreseeable future. In response, businesses have become more agile, pay much closer attention to the needs of customers and clients and have become much better at planning and being change ready. The pandemic proved that businesses can be far more reflexive than previously believed.

Recommendations

The following recommendations address the core issues that emerged from this analysis of the survey (Study 1) and focus group (Study 2) evidence:

1. Early Education and Childcare:

There must be greater investment in childcare including significant Child Care Subsidy reforms in line with global best practice policies. A preferable solution is the adoption of a fully state funded flexible, longer hours, early education and universal child care model for ages 0-5.

Out of hour's school care at all schools for ages 5-16 be considered and recognised as part of the response to investing in improved childcare and that greater investment by State governments be made in support of these services.

2. Children's Mental Health:

The Federal Government provide States in the longer term with funding for the appointment of a trained psychologist/therapist to all primary and secondary schools; and initially in the shorter term the allocation of a visiting psychologist across a number schools to monitor and support the mental health of children.

3. Children's Learning Outcomes:

A national review of children's learning outcomes during the pandemic be undertaken. Additional funding support to be allocated to the States to facilitate the immediate funding of tutoring programs to assist children whose learning was interrupted by the pandemic.

4. Flexible and Hybrid Working:

Responsive to a given organisational context, organisations adopt an output measures and purpose focus in approaches to the adoption of long-term hybrid working arrangements for their employees.

5. Continuance of Mental Health Support

Organisations continue to resource the mental health and well-being support of their staff as Australia emerges from the pandemic.

State and Federal Governments increase and secure the funding provided to on-demand mental health support organisations.

6. A Gender Lens on Recovery Investments

A gender lens be applied to all future COVID-19 recovery strategies to ensure that there are no unintended gendered consequences of investments made to progress the economy post COVID.

7. Rebuilding Australia's Social Fabric Outside of Work

Additional financial support, through grants, loans and tax incentives, be extended to those industry sectors worst hit by the pandemic such as the Arts, Tourism, Sports and Recreation, and to the educational and training pipelines leading into these industries.

8. Equalise Parental Leave Entitlements

To encourage a greater equalisation of the division of domestic labour, there needs to be a legislated equalisation of paid parental and carers leave entitlements to each parent, and an extension of superannuation entitlements to these payments.

9. Social Support Investment

Federal and State governments significantly increase funding of key, in-demand, social infrastructure, community support agencies and charities in the areas of counselling, food, accommodation and housing and domestic violence services.

Funding models for social infrastructure organisations need to provide greater assurance around their continuity of future funding by providing more multi-year grants and greater certainty around future funding decisions, to enable agencies to better plan their activities and retain critical staff in the longer term.

10. Address Gender Role Stereotypes

The Federal Government initiate a National Strategy for Gender Equality that addresses the fundamental causes of gender inequality in Australia.

Recommendations Cont.

11. Overhaul of Wage setting Mechanisms

The system for setting wages needs to be reviewed and include increased provisions around gender equality, especially in relation to the pay of care workers in the economy.

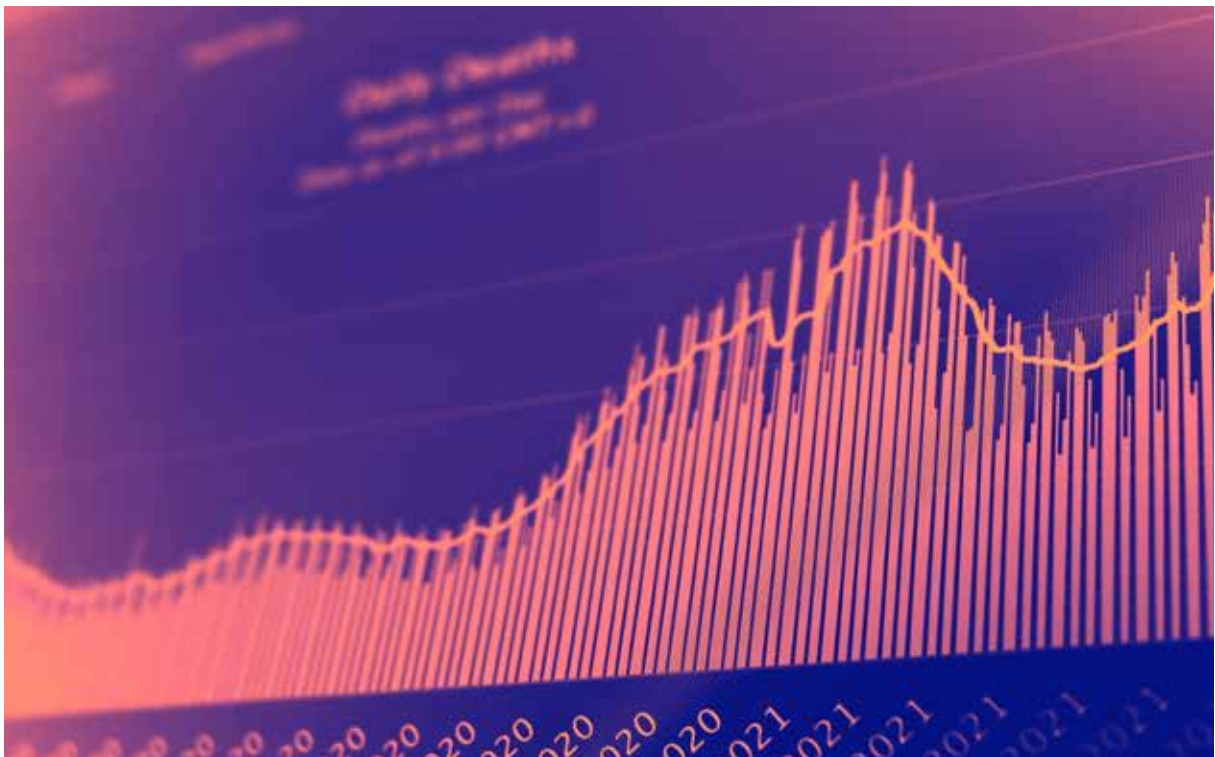
The Federal Government take further steps to recognise the value to the economy of unpaid caring work. Recognising and valuing the time devoted to unpaid care, and its contribution to the wellbeing of society, is essential in overcoming the unequal distribution of unpaid care work.

12. Review of Regional Infrastructure and Investment

Federal and State policy makers reconsider the impact that shifting demographics, caused by the pandemic, have had on the social cohesion and infrastructure demands within regional communities.

13. Exposure to Overseas Supply Chains

The Federal Government review policies surrounding the financial support of the manufacturing sector to ensure that Australia ceases reliance on overseas imports that have become key strategic inputs into numerous industries in the Australian economy.



Timeline of the Pandemic

Many of the varying experiences of men and women reported in the studies undertaken for this report, need to be understood through the lens of the unfolding pandemic from January, 2020 to the date of writing in June, 2022. To provide this context, a brief summary of the key dates and events of the pandemic is provided. The summary is taken from a collection of over 440 sources compiled by various authors, and validated by the research team, in an extensive and detailed ongoing “COVID-19 pandemic in Australia” timeline being maintained through Wikipedia²¹.

Timeline of the Pandemic

The first confirmed case in Australia of COVID-19 was identified on 25 January 2020, in Victoria, in a passenger returning from Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. As at the 30th June, 2022 there have been 8,132,210 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Australia. The vast majority of these cases have occurred since December, 2021 after the end of lockdowns and States reaching double vaccination targets. As of 30th June, 2022 there have been 9,918 deaths, with Victoria and New South Wales recording the highest fatalities with 3,417 and 3,170 respectively²² and over 80,000 hospitalisations.

On the 13 March, 2020, the Federal government, with each of the States and Territories, established the National Cabinet, declaring a human biosecurity emergency in response to the outbreak. On March 19, 2020, a super-spreader event occurred as infected passengers from the cruise ship Ruby Princess docked in Sydney harbour and proceeded to travel across Australia, causing a further 662 infections and 21 deaths²³.

Australia's borders closed to all non-residents on 20 March, 2020. Returning Australian residents were required to spend two weeks in quarantine hotels established for this purpose from 27 March, 2020²⁴. Many individual states and territories also closed their borders to other states, with some state borders remaining closed until late 2020, and continuing to periodically close during localised outbreaks throughout 2021.

State governments introduced social distancing rules on 21 March, 2020 and began to close “non-essential” services according to the definitions set out by each State government. “Non-essential services” included a wide array of food and beverage outlets, tourism operations, arts and recreation activities and sporting events. However, unlike the lockdowns imposed in many other countries across the globe at this time, Australia excluded mining, construction, manufacturing and many essential retail outlets such as pharmacies and grocery stores²⁵. While initially the number of new cases in the community grew sharply, these measures caused case numbers to decline by the end of April, 2020²⁶.

The Federal government, followed by State governments, made early decisions to pursue a zero-community spread COVID “suppression” strategy. This strategy aimed at keeping the virus out of the community until an effective vaccine could be developed and then delivered to the Australian population. This strategy broadly lasted until December, 2021. Operationalising this decision involved strict control over international arrivals, as well as State based responses to local outbreaks with customised geographical lockdowns usually based on suburban, council or State boundaries, coupled with exhaustive contact tracing of all COVID-19 clusters²⁷.

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Australia

²² <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/case-numbers-and-statistics#new-and-cumulative-cases> Retrieved 31st May, 2022.

²³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-30/border-force-ruby-princess-coronavirus-test-bungle/12505072>

²⁴ Schneiders, B. (2020). “How hotel quarantine let COVID-19 out of the bag in Victoria”. The Age. Retrieved 31 May, 2022.

²⁵ Knaus, C., Wahlquist, C., Remeikis, A. (2020). “Australia coronavirus updates live: NSW and Victoria to shut down non-essential services”. The Guardian Australia. Archived from the original on 22 March 2020. Retrieved 31st May, 2022.

²⁶ <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/case-numbers-and-statistics#new-and-cumulative-cases> Retrieved 31st May, 2022.

²⁷ Osborne, P. (2020). “Main points from national cabinet meeting”. The Canberra Times (24th July, 2020). Retrieved 31st May, 2022.

By early May, 2020 there was widespread optimism that the pandemic, at least in Australia, had been contained. On 6 June, 2020 both New South Wales and Victoria reported no new cases for the previous 24 hours.

However, a second wave of infections broke out in Victoria at the end of June, 2020. These were attributed to an outbreak at a Melbourne hotel quarantine facility. This second wave, though largely contained in Melbourne, was much more widespread and deadlier than the first. Victoria underwent a second strict lockdown which eventually lasted almost four months²⁸. This wave ended with zero new cases being recorded on 26 October 2020. No deaths from COVID-19 were recorded in Australia from 28 December 2020 until 13 April 2021, when one death occurred in Queensland²⁹. The experience of lockdowns across Australia varied significantly. For example, on the same day that Melbourne was entering a new lockdown, the Western Australian Government announced the State would move into “Phase 4” from 27 June, 2020 permitting some of the most relaxed restrictions in the country, which were to remain a feature of WA life for most of the pandemic.

On 26 October, 2020 the “second wave” ended when Victoria recorded zero new cases and zero deaths state-wide for the first time since 9 June, 2020, having endured a 112-day continuous lockdown.

The nationwide vaccination program began with the first doses of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine being administered in Sydney on 21 February, 2021³⁰. The country’s vaccine rollout, which fell short of the initial targets set by the Federal government, was described as slow, and was widely criticised in the media at the time³¹. Further COVID-19 cluster outbreaks occurred in various states in late 2020 and mid-2021, resulting in many brief “snap lockdowns” announced for various local government areas across multiple states to contain their spread. This was particularly the case as discreet variants of COVID-19 began to arrive in Australia after the first wave.

By the time of the outbreak of the COVID-19 Delta variant in June 2021 in New South Wales, almost half of Australia’s population, and most major cities, were in lockdown by early July 2021, with Melbourne having the unenviable record of being one of the most locked down cities in the world, having been under “stay-at-home” orders for a cumulative 262 days by October 16, 2021³².

On 18 June, 2021 in NSW, a COVID-19 Delta variant cluster in Sydney’s Eastern Suburbs had grown to 4 cases and by 25 June, 2021 the infections linked to this cluster had grown to 65, resulting in an initial lockdown for four Sydney local government areas³³. New South Wales recorded the “worst day” of its continuing COVID-19 Delta variant on 29 August, 2021 and the lockdowns across many of the wider Sydney area local government areas would end up lasting 106 days, only ending on 10 October, 2021³⁴. The last single day of lockdown in Melbourne was the 22nd October, 2021 after the end of its sixth lockdown since the commencement of the pandemic³⁵.

28

29 <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/case-numbers-and-statistics#new-and-cumulative-cases> Retrieved 31st May, 2022.

30 Dye, J. & Clun, R. (2021). “COVID-19 vaccines begin as Prime Minister receives Pfizer immunisation”. The Sydney Morning Herald (21st February, 2021). Retrieved 31st May, 2022.

31 Australian Broadcasting Commission. (2021). “Australia’s COVID-19 vaccine rollout – the forecast vs reality”. www.abc.net.au. 1 May 2021. Retrieved 31st May, 2022.

32 Australian Broadcasting Commission. (2021). <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-25/fact-check-is-melbourne-most-locked-down-city/100560172> Accessed 31st May, 2022.

33 Kevin, N. (2021). “More than 1 million people in Sydney locked down as 22 new COVID-19 cases confirmed”. ABC News. Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Retrieved 31st May, 2022.

34 Medical Express. (2021). <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-10-sydney-lockdown-days.html> Accessed 31st May, 2021

35 <https://www.news.com.au/national/victoria/news/melbourne-celebrates-end-to-victorias-sixth-lockdown-262-days-of-covid19-shutdown-measures/news-story/62a06fec6b608b703606a3eee587d6c>

The Federal government phased out its zero-COVID strategy and States began to lift most generalised public health restrictions after reaching 80-90% double vaccination of the population in November and December 2021. However, on the 28 November, 2021, NSW Health confirmed two returned travellers having tested positive for the new Omicron COVID-19 variant in Sydney, making them the first known cases of the latest COVID-19 strain in Australia. The COVID-19 Omicron variant drove a record rise in infections, leading to New South Wales having one of the highest infection rates worldwide by the 31st December, 2021³⁶.

Nonetheless, most public health restrictions were lifted in December 2021, after 90% of the Australian population were vaccinated. Despite this highly successful vaccination rate, and the efficacy of the vaccines administered in Australia which have proven to reduce the effects of the virus but not so much its transmissibility, Australia has seen dramatically escalating infection numbers and deaths. This has caused significant labour shortages across all industries as people have become infected and need to take time off work.

On 22 January, 2022, Australia exceeded 3,000 deaths related to COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. By 4 February, 2022, 4,000 COVID-19 related deaths were exceeded, and this number surpassed 5,000 by 23 February, 2022. The death toll stands at 10,842 as of 19th July, 2022. The rate of infection, shown in Table 1, since Australia began opening up in December, 2021, adds to sobering evidence of the impact upon Australia's workforce in the first six months of 2022.

Date	Cumulative COVID-19 Infections ³⁷
30th November, 2021	211,637
31st December, 2021	395,385
31st January, 2022	2,182,390
28th February, 2022	2,841,817
31st March, 2022	4,326,841
30th April, 2022	5,733,296
31st May, 2022	7,272,057
30th June, 2022	8,132,210

Table 1. Cumulative COVID-19 Infections 30th November, 2021 to 30th June, 2022

On 3rd March, 2022, with WA being the last state to open its borders, all border restrictions were removed for all vaccinated people, including non-citizens such as tourists and new immigrants, effectively opening Australia up to the world³⁸ and 'living with the virus'.

³⁶ "Australia's Covid surge in four charts: NSW now has one of world's highest infection rates". The Guardian. 31 December 2021. Retrieved 31st May, 2022.

³⁷ <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/case-numbers-and-statistics#new-and-cumulative-cases>

³⁸ <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/announcements/was-border-opening-thursday-3-march-2022#:~:text=WA%E2%80%99s%20border%20opening%20from%20Thursday%20%20March%202022,take%20effect%20from%2012.01am%20Thursday%20%20March%202022.>

COVID19



Gendered Results of the 2020 National Lockdown – Survey

In response to growing concerns about the impact of the response to COVID-19 across the globe and in Australia, the National Association of Women in Construction and the Australian Gender Equality Council approached the University of Queensland Business School to conduct a nationwide survey. The survey was to examine impacts that were beginning to feature in the media around the division of domestic labour, career impacts, stress and flexibility. In total 1931 men (n=240) and women (n=1691) completed the survey. The following is a summary of the results of this survey. More detailed descriptions of the sample, methodology, analysis and limitations of the survey can be found in Appendix 1 and a copy of the survey questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2.

Ways of working

As a cohort, men and women reported different patterns of work; women were much more frequently engaged in part-time employment compared with men within our sample and less frequently engaged in full-time employment and similarly engaged in casual work (see Figure 1).

When asked to reflect on their average hours of work pre- and post-pandemic onset, men and women reported largely consistent decreases in work hours overall pre and post. On average, men were working nearly three hours less per week relative to women who were working roughly one and a half hours less from March 1 to June 30, 2020. (See Figure 2).

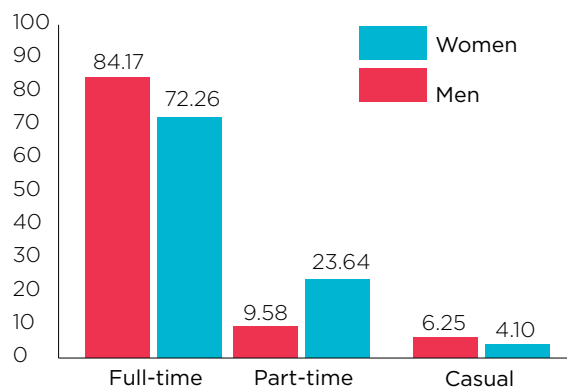


Figure 1. Full time versus part-time and casual working by gender

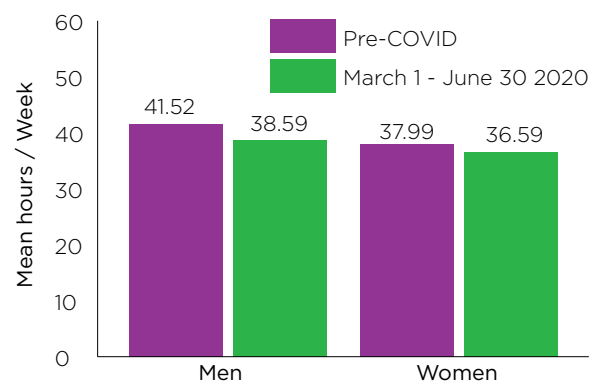


Figure 2. Hours worked pre and post COVID-19 lockdowns by gender

Unpaid care and domestic labour

Participants described varying amounts of time dedicated to unpaid care within the home. Men and women respondents were asked to estimate their personal average number of hours spent providing unpaid care within their homes each week during various time periods. Pre-COVID, women provided nearly double the number of hours in unpaid care. From March 1 – June 30, 2020, men provided about two-thirds of the number of hours in unpaid care that women provided. Interestingly, we also asked participants to estimate their partner's average hours of care provision. When comparing participants' estimates of their partners average amount of unpaid work within the household, men reported their spouses engaging in over an hour more than women reported their spouses engaging in (see Figure 3).

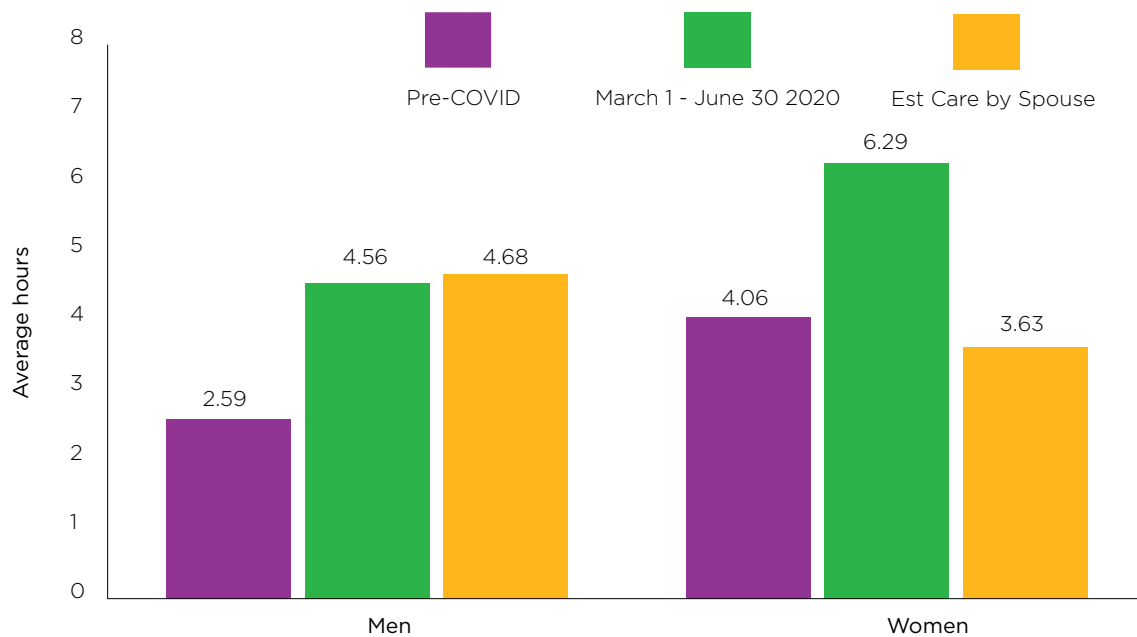


Figure 3. Care provided by gender pre and post COVID-19 lockdown hours per day

The story was slightly similar, though diverged in important ways, when participants were asked to describe their average hours contributing to unpaid domestic labour (excluding care) within the home. When asked to estimate their pre-COVID and March 1 - June 30 2020 average hours of domestic labour each week, men and women's contributions were largely along similar lines. On average, women appeared to do slightly more unpaid domestic labour within the home (see Figure 4).

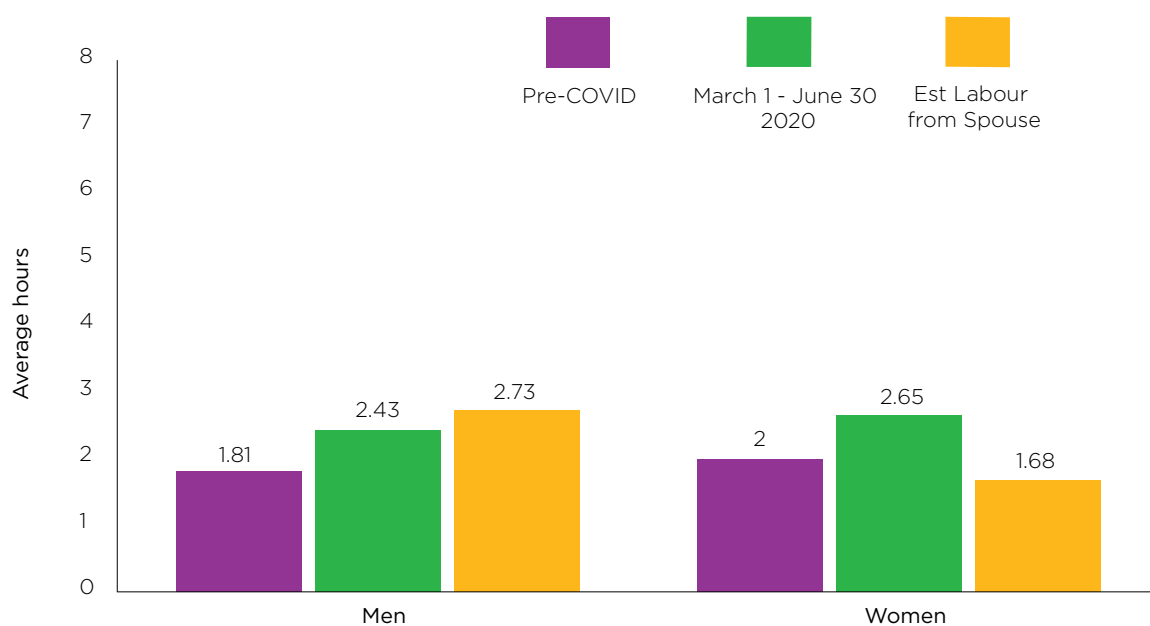


Figure 4. Domestic labour (non-care related) by gender hours per day



Anticipated job prospects

Participants indicated the extent to which they anticipated their likelihood of promotion prior to the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns, and the likelihood from March 1 to June 30 2020. Overall, women were more likely than men to expect they would be promoted. This belief was true in the context of pre-pandemic employment as well as post the first lockdown in March 2020 (see Figure 5).

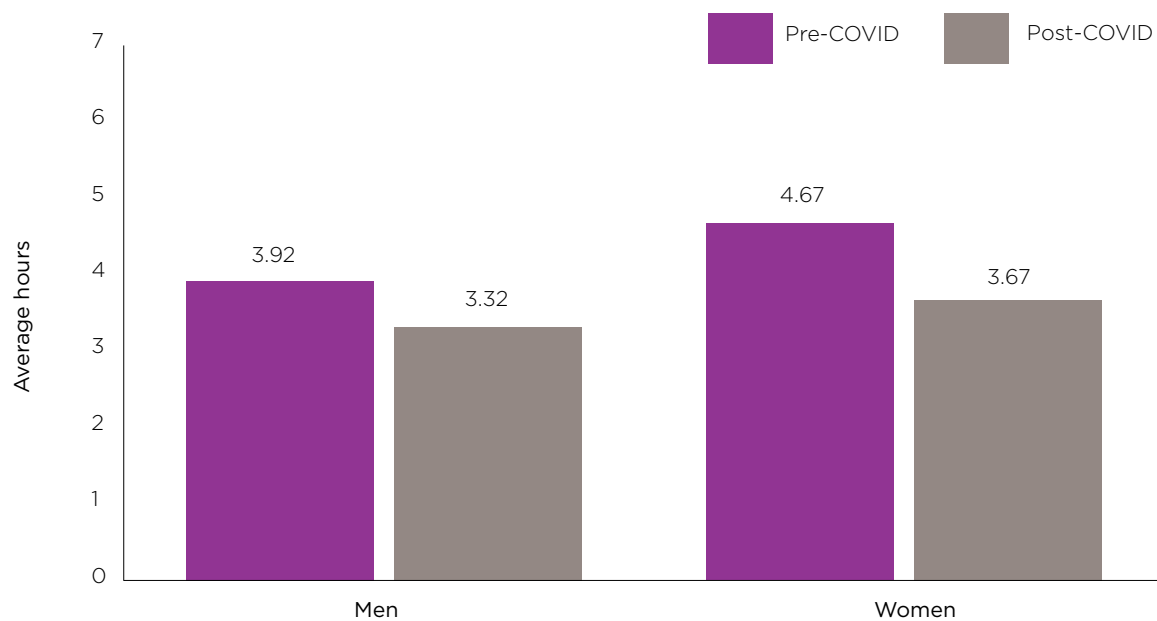


Figure 5. Anticipated likelihood of promotion pre and post pandemic by gender



Strategies for navigating the dual demands

Survey respondents indicated their portion of time spent working flexibly prior to the onset of lockdowns throughout Australia in March 2020. Overall, men and women worked similar proportions of their work roles in a flexible capacity, with approximately 22-25% of work hours undertaken in some form of flexible work arrangements. When asked to indicate their ideal proportion of time working flexibly (e.g., working remotely, working compressed hours), men and women indicated a preference for an increase, working between nearly 48%-55% of their work hours in the flexible mode (see Figure 6).

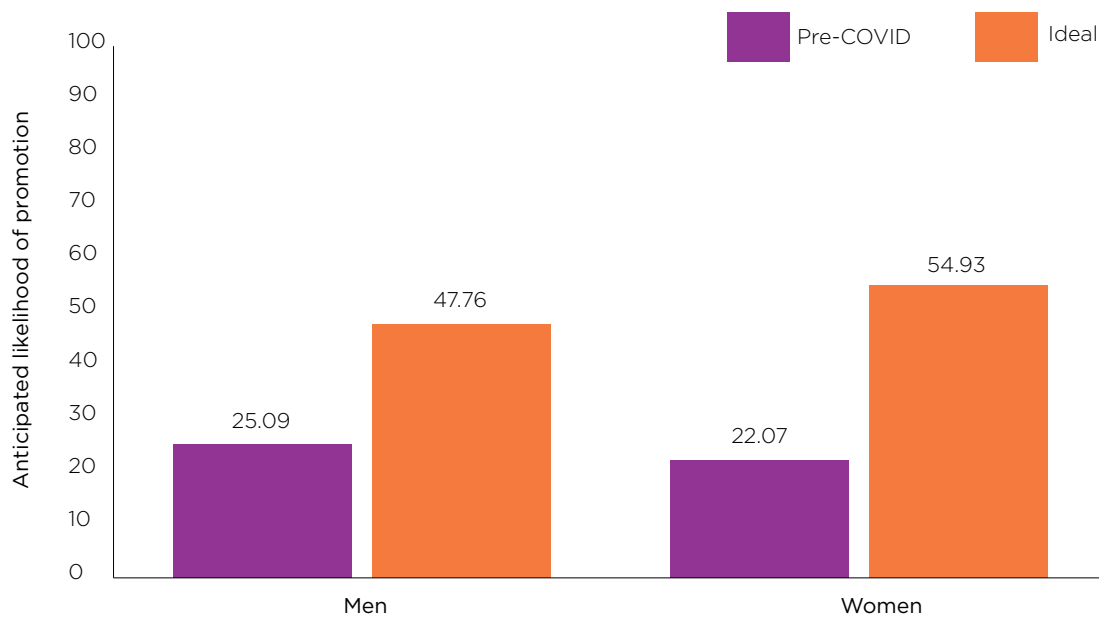


Figure 6. Percentage of time working flexibly and preferences to work flexibly, by gender



Mental health and wellbeing

Participants were asked to respond to a series of questions designed to measure average levels of stress. Overall, there were significant differences in the extent to which women reported feeling stress relative to men (see Figure 7). As can be seen both males and females reported levels between 4 and 4.5 that indicates above average levels of reported stress. However, women reported significantly higher levels than did men, indicating that the pandemic was having a greater impact upon the well-being of women relative to men.

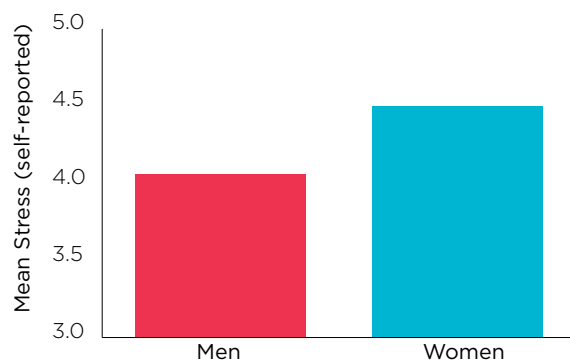


Figure 7. Mean stress levels by gender

Conclusions

Even early in the pandemic, women were feeling more stressed than men. Despite the data indicating that men were undertaking a roughly equal proportion of the additional labour brought on by the pandemic, women were starting from a much higher base. Therefore, what might have been left over as discretionary time available for women pre-pandemic was likely subsumed during the pandemic, leaving no time for other pursuits including ongoing education or additional time devoted to work. The findings about the levels of unpaid caregiving and domestic labour are supported by prior research on the disproportionate amount of time women contribute beyond paid work to the provision of care and maintenance of Australian households. While it was beyond the scope of this survey to explore the supportive infrastructure that households utilised (e.g., cleaning support, caregiving support, household maintenance), it would be interesting to understand the extent to which these supportive infrastructures were utilised in pre-COVID times by survey respondents, and the extent to which the removal of these supports through lockdowns contributed to the increase in amount of hours required by both men and women in the period of March 1 to June 30, 2020.



Understanding the Impact of the Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic upon Men and Women

To gain a deeper understanding of the results of the post national lockdown survey undertaken in June/July 2020, we undertook a series of focus group interviews with people from all of Australia's industry sectors.

The following sections of the report reflect the major themes to emerge from these focus groups. These centre on the gendered outcomes of the pandemic; the intersection of a of a broad array of factors acting to create more or less impact upon individual experiences of the pandemic; individual and organisational responses to working under lockdown conditions and wider pandemic impacts; the growing issue of mental health and well-being concerns; and how much is likely to change in the way we work and live in the years following 'living with the virus'. Demographic characteristics of the participants in the focus groups, and details of the conduct of the focus groups and data analysis, can be found in Appendix 1. The questions raised with respondents in the focus groups are available in Appendix 3.

Gendered Outcomes of the Pandemic

Focus group participants reported upon the unique impacts of consecutive lockdowns, with related shifts in work patterns and the ways in which lives have been lived. Overall, the pattern of results from these group discussions reveals that women were impacted to a greater degree with regard to shifting expectations around work within the home, their hours of work, and their personal experiences with psychological health and wellbeing.

The nature of work and life produced a larger impact on women through the increased burden of care throughout the household. This shift occurred regardless of women's working status. Women, and particularly mothers, who worked exclusively within the home experienced an increase in domestic and unpaid care labour. This was particularly the case where their spouse's work was relocated to within the home, while children were more at home with schools or day-care centres closing. Women who worked outside of their homes experienced these changes, while also juggling their own paid employment. As one Executive from the Finance and Insurance sector shared:

"I think it has certainly been a much heavier burden and harder in the general sense for women in families."

Women's increased paid/unpaid work demands within and beyond the home were judged by interviewees as contributors towards negative psychological impacts. Across the cohort of interviewees, the costs of pandemic-induced shifts in women's workloads were noted as precursors of poorer health and wellbeing outcomes among women. As one Executive from the Construction industry noted:

"I feel like there's a lot more women that actually have anxiety and depression at the moment, though I don't know whether men just don't articulate it, as well as the women that put their hand up."



Another Executive from the Finance and Insurance sector shared similar sentiments, linking the concerns around women's increased domestic labour with upcoming performance reviews. This interviewee stated:

"... men have had to pick up more on a day-to-day basis within the household, but so have women, and so, if you've got a disparity, which we know there is a disparity anyway, that meant the women are doing more. They've both increased, and that impacts more on women and you're hearing more men talk about it, but I think the bottom line is it is impacting women more and more. Then, what we're starting to think about is what does that mean for performance conversations, how have you performed for the last year? So is this going to have more of an impact on women because of those performance conversations and so it's something I'm certainly hoping doesn't happen, but it's something that we want to have an active conversation about."

The gendered impacts of COVID-19, and the related lockdowns and changing nature of work, produced profound impacts for women that span work, family and social domains.

Although the interviewee comments, shared above, reflect the global nature of impacts that span individuals' entire lives, interviewees also provided a more nuanced account of the uniquely gendered impacts the pandemic had on men's and women's lives. These nuanced accounts encompass the gendered impacts of the pandemic on employment experiences; the gendered shift in division of labour within homes; the effects of the pandemic on bias within the workplace; and the gendered impacts for mental health and psychological wellbeing at work. These impacts are investigated more fully in the following sections.

Gendered impacts of the pandemic on employment experiences

Women tend to adopt part-time or casual ways of working in greater numbers relative to men³⁹. As a proportion of the entire workforce, women are over-represented in more precarious forms of employment relative to their male counterparts, and the pandemic has largely exacerbated these differences. Women tend to be concentrated in industries that are lower paid, with a higher service orientation relative to men⁴⁰. Moreover, as a proportion of the entire workforce, women were more likely to have jobs within industries hardest hit by lockdowns or social-distancing measures⁴¹. The cumulative effects of these job characteristics produced large-scale impacts for women relative to men, and these impacts were compounded over time through subsequent lockdowns or increased social-distancing measures.

Interviewees described loss of employment or substantive changes to employment (i.e., full-time to part-time) for both men and women. Nevertheless, the impacts of job losses were heavily experienced by women. As one Executive from the Agriculture industry noted:

"[I] have seen an increased casualisation of the workforce (predominantly women) – women were the first to go and have not all returned to the workplace. [There is] increased fear around returning to workplaces as well as an inability to do so due to increased responsibilities at home."

It was also the case that industry-specific patterns of work and employment impacted upon women. In the case of Education, for example, one Executive from the Public Sector noted:

"I think from the educational sector, I think a lot of women had part time jobs, so a lot of them actually were the first ones to lose their jobs because they were mostly contracted."

³⁹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). (2020a). Australia's gender equality scorecard: key results from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's 2019-20 reporting data. Retrieved from: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/australias-gender-equality-scorecard>

⁴⁰ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) (2020b). Gendered impact of COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>

⁴¹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) (2020b). Gendered impact of COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>

Those women who worked part-time prior to the pandemic or worked in more precarious forms of employment (i.e., casual) were particularly susceptible to employment shifts and changes. The impacts of the pandemic on women's employment were also multi-faceted: for women, providing care within the home, or being older compounded the experience of disadvantage. One Executive from the Social Assistance sector relayed the experience of hearing from her social network that organisations were expressly rejecting women with children from their job candidate pools. The impact of career interruptions is widely understood to produce negative impacts on women's careers over the lifespan^{42 43}. Much of the existing literature has largely examined this in the context of motherhood or care, yet even the literature that explores this within the context of 'lifestyle' choices suggests the impacts remain deleterious to career progression⁴⁴. The extended duration of the pandemic, and the related career-interruptions for some women, could prove deleterious for future career outcomes, including superannuation contributions over the lifespan.

Some unique methods were used to avoid the possibility of unemployment where women had to find care for their children but were not deemed an 'essential' worker. Through the closures of standard supports (i.e., childcare, schools and after-school care, constrained mobility of grandparents), interviewees described drawing on novel solutions. In the case of one Executive from the Transport sector who was also a single mother, she described:

"I'm a single mum, so it's just my son and me. My school has said that I am not an essential worker, unless I need to actually go to a place of work, so therefore my son is not welcome at school, if I can work from home ... From a transport logistics perspective, the work has doubled, tripled, quadrupled from our work perspective ... I was very lucky; I had a bit of a deal with my next-door neighbour going on. He was a teacher ... and he said to his school, "I'm working from home, I'll do my classes over Zoom" he took my son and his three kids from nine to five, which allowed me to work. It was great because I was in a new role, stepping into a new role and a new situation and business model and I thought this isn't really working out, and I could have potentially been looking at unemployment."



⁴² Kirchmeyer, C. (1998). Determinants of managerial career success: Evidence and explanation of male/female differences. *Journal of Management*, 24(6), 673-692.

⁴³ McIntosh, B., McQuaid, R., Munro, A., & Dabir-Alai, P. (2012). Motherhood and its impact on career progression. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 27(5), 346-364.

⁴⁴ Schner, J. A., & Reitman, F. (1990). Effects of Employment Gaps on the Career of MBA's: More Damaging for Men Than for Women? *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(2), 391-406.

Gendered shifts in the division of labour

The division of unpaid care and domestic labour within Australia is heavily influenced by gender stereotypes and traditional attitudes about who is the primary caregiver. As a result, women assume a disproportionate share of childcare, elder care or community support relative to men and contribute more hours to the pool of domestic labour within the home⁴⁵ ⁴⁶. There is a 'second shift' for women in which they perform labour within the home to support the running of the home⁴⁷.

Women assuming the burden of care

In the case of caregiving, women were often contributing a greater number of hours within the home, outside of paid work, to the provision of care for children, elder parents, or extended family members throughout the early stages of the pandemic⁴⁸. The closure of schools meant that the responsibility of schooling was subsumed into the home, and largely by parents. In the case of casualised workforces, those women working in more precarious forms of employment dropped out of the workforce to provide care to children or to scaffold the home-schooling environment for children.

Within dual-income households, women were still disproportionately tasked with adopting the major share of caregiving or home-schooling, according to those interviewees included within this study. This situation was attributed to a variety of reasons including gender stereotyped role expectations (i.e., male breadwinner / female caregiver), spouses working outside of the home (i.e., essential workers) or maternal 'guilt'. Across various industries, for example Mining, Finance and Insurance, Construction, Executive interviewees noted that there were many, and varied, examples of women within their teams juggling the care of children alongside their paid employment throughout the pandemic. As one Executive from the Mining industry reported:

"...given that, you know, predominantly in Australia, we have this Western model of the female does most of the primary caring, it would certainly hold true that if there was a childcare requirement, you know, the females would have more of the load and have to deal with that."

Women's increased responsibilities relating to childcare were not limited to the provision of care. In addition, there was the active engagement within schooling as lockdowns extended or school closures remained in place. As one Executive from the Finance and Insurance industry described:

"I work in finance, but in the corporate office, and what I observed, is that most of the women were running home schooling."

This sense of women's increased workload outside of paid employment, and beyond their standard division of labour within the home, was described by one Executive in the Banking industry as follows

"Women were more affected. The feedback that we were getting from all our peers that are connecting with this; is as a result of the lockdowns, typically the woman of the household is taking on way more ... some bankers were saying that they now have a greater appreciation of what they're partners were doing with childcare and highlighting and amplifying the need of them [men] to contribute more."

The acknowledgement from men of the increased labour demands on women throughout the pandemic was not limited to any one industry. Rather, this sentiment extended across industries while women themselves described a greater awareness of care commitments. Indeed, some interviewees commented on the demands of the extra-curricular scheduling of children that occurred with the various lockdowns and social distancing protocols placed on communities. As one Executive from the Education and Training sector noted:

"I feel like I've been freed from a lot of things that I used to do in terms of like my kids sports, like they used to be very high performing sports people and [that would] involve me driving them like five times a week to two different activities. whereas now I'm just like, "I just don't want to do it anymore", and I'm not prepared to do it."

⁴⁵ Baxter, J. (2002). Patterns of change and stability in the gender division of household labour in Australia, 1986–1997. *Journal of Sociology*, 38(4), 399–424.

⁴⁶ Craig, L., Powell, A., & Brown, J. E. (2016). Gender patterns in domestic labour among young adults in different living arrangements in Australia. *Journal of sociology*, 52(4), 772–788.

⁴⁷ Hochschild, A. (1989). *The second shift*. New York: Avon Books.

⁴⁸ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) (2020b). Gendered impact of COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>

Women assuming the burden of domestic labour

Domestic labour encompasses the multitude of unpaid tasks required to maintain a household. Although some contend that this definition should encompass emotional labour⁴⁹, for the purposes of this study, we have focused on the pragmatic domestic tasks that contribute to maintaining an operating household.

The overwhelming feedback from interviewees suggested that women were largely tasked with undertaking a disproportionate amount of domestic labour throughout the pandemic relative to men. For some women, working remotely provided a sense of 'calm' by decreasing the additional demands that commuting to work placed on their time-management and capacities to complete the household tasks and responsibilities each week. As one Executive from the Construction industry remarked:

"I think you can't be productive in front of a computer for 10 hours a day so putting on the washing in between meetings or other menial tasks that you might be doing gives you that mental break from what's going on in your computer screen. But what I observed in the company that I work with was the men that rushed back into the office and that to me is an indicator of who actually takes up that burden of household work, whether you're working from home or not. The men just wanted to get away from that and back into the office, whereas for the women, it was like well, if I can do that odd lot of washing in between meetings and other menial tasks, then I'm not doing it in the evenings in my other time and so that time is then better-quality time for family and kids so that to me is big indicator."

However, the increased portion of domestic labour undertaken by women throughout the pandemic proved to negatively impact women's wellbeing. The dual demands of work and domestic labour contributed to feelings of stress, pressure and possible burnout. Women adopted a range of coping strategies in response to these competing demands. As one Executive from the Education sector explained:

"I have gotten quite burnt out in the past couple of months from taking on that [domestic labour] load and just reached a point where I just stopped doing all of it and it became quite a shock to my husband and we just lived in chaos and a pigsty for a few weeks, and now he does all of the washing and helps with dinners mostly because it just got to a point where I stopped. I feel like there's been a bit more equality sort of introduced out of that."

Other experiences of the division of domestic labour devolved through the course of the pandemic. What was previously a seemingly equitable split in responsibilities shifted so that women were tasked with increasing responsibilities relative to men. This is supported by a report by the Grattan Institute citing that, with the case of home-schooling, women were spending more time with their children than men⁵⁰. As one Executive from the Finance sector remarked with regard to one of her own direct reports:

"... they used to share the pickups after work from day-care actually and then school as well and somehow it evolved that scenario played out and the mum ended up doing all the pickups ..."



⁴⁹ Ashforth, B. & Humphrey, R. (1993). Emotional Labor in Service Roles: The Influence of Identity. *The Academy of Management Review*, 18(1): 88-115.

⁵⁰ Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). *Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women*. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

Loss of jobs and burden of care and domestic labour

With COVID, Australian men and women were required to adapt quickly to the amalgamation of childcare and schooling within the home, alongside external paid work. The dual burden of care and domestic labour shifted women's patterns of work in nuanced ways. Where some women retained employment and their spouses did not, the dynamics of care and domestic labour shifted in favour of women's decreased responsibilities within the home relative to their partners. On the contrary, where women's work patterns encompassed part-time or casual hours, or where women lost their jobs, they were tasked with care and domestic labour responsibilities.

This prioritisation of income earners translated in unique ways with what one interviewee termed as the "hierarchy of the home office" wherein space to work or study became 'prime real estate' within the household. As one Executive from the Finance sector described:

"... what I've been told, is that in most cases the male took that home office space and the female was working in the shared workspace with the kids that were working from home during lockdown."

The capacity to engage uninterrupted on work tasks impacts the quality of work outputs. Where employees had the capacity to produce high-quality work without having to manage care and domestic labour within the home, interviewees believed that there were downstream career benefits. As one interviewee from the Finance and Insurance industry noted regarding working within shared spaces in the home:

"... that [shared workspaces] then led to a whole lot of disruption and distraction, and how that manifested for women in banking and finance is that I had a number of women withdraw from leadership development programs over the past year, citing that they just couldn't juggle another thing. So, women started opting out from professional development, and I observed, and I also had feedback that a number of people were looking to leave the workforce, and some had decided definitely not to return to work as they were having a career break after new children and so they made a decision as a family that they would definitely keep one person at home."

Concerns are raised in several studies that the COVID 19 pandemic has resulted in women opting out of learning and development activities more than men. The Chief Executive Women census identified that more women were putting their professional aspirations on hold to deal with the additional demands on their time caused by the increased domestic caring load⁵¹. Evidencing this, the Grattan Institute identified that more than 40,000 fewer Australian women aged 25-44 were enrolled in study in May 2020 compared to May 2019, whereas enrolments for men actually grew by 35,000 in the same period⁵². Total female enrolments across all age groups exhibited a similar pattern, though men in other age ranges had also seen a slight decline. Across all ages, women comprised 78% of the total fall in enrolments in vocational and tertiary enrolments⁵³.

The experience of interrupted career progression for women was not unique to Banking and Finance. This interruption was also raised as problematic for women in Medicine for example, a context wherein career progression in certain specialties is often tied to 'ideal worker' prototypes that are reliant on workers being available, and having support within the home, with care and domestic labour to fully participate in the workplace.

⁵¹ Chief Executive Women. (2021). CEW Senior Executive Census 2021. <https://cew.org.au/topics/cew-senior-executive-censu>

⁵² Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

⁵³ Risse, L. & Jackson, A. (2021). Changing trajectory: Investing in women for a fairer future. Sydney: Equity Economics. <https://www.equityeconomics.com.au/report-archive/investing-in-women>

Men 'stepping up' to meet the demands of shifting care and domestic labour

Although the overwhelming consensus suggested women were disproportionately impacted by care and domestic labour demands throughout the pandemic, there were also various examples shared in the focus groups of men increasing their levels of care and domestic labour. These examples were not constrained to any one industry. Rather they reflected the unique choices within domestic partnerships that were made regarding the provision of care and the management of households. In some circumstances, the choices were organised along the lines of actual or potential income generation, whereas in others, this was organised around hours of work or career domains.

Interestingly, there also appeared to be a shift in those with young infants 'taking turns' to change nappies or to undertake feedings. Although smaller in number, this dialogue may be indicative of a generational shift in new parents' willingness to engage in more equitable distribution of care within the household, particularly as this relates to newborns.

Largely, the shifts towards men 'stepping up' to take on a greater proportion of care and domestic labour were linked to men having greater insight into the sheer workload of their partners in maintaining paid work, providing care to children as well as running a household. As one interviewee from the Mining industry reflected:

"... in the last 18 months because of working from home I suddenly have an insight into my wife's domestic world, and what she does, and she runs her own business. For me and my personal perspective I suddenly have a whole new appreciation of what she does, and I've had to step up and carry some of that burden. So, for me it's been a big change, but for her it's just more of the same and it's something she's had to do and has always been aware of, but I didn't really fully understand, so I think it's the changed perspective."

This shift was identified and commented upon at a workforce level, where interviewees noted the shift in male team members increasing their engagement with care and domestic labour tasks while working remotely. This was also noted in relation to the care provision of new fathers who had taken on nursing newborns in meetings or left to change nappies. As one Executive from the Transport industry remarked:

"I've had numerous dads with newborn babies, say 'Oh look I'm just going to go for a minute because it's my turn to change nappies' and they come back you know, and its par for the course you just go with the flow."



The effects of the pandemic on bias within the workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced workplace scenarios that within some industries favoured men or shifted attention away from gender equality to more operational issues. In response to these factors, amongst others, women have sought to 'shift gears' and reconsider their work and career choices to produce more meaningful outcomes for the ways in which they work.

In some professions, COVID-19 has brought about unique challenges and opportunities for professional advancement and development of technical expertise. One industry context in which this has occurred is within Healthcare and Medicine. In the case of Medicine, various technological advancements, and changes in the way medical care has been delivered, has been facilitative from a career standpoint. There are some suggestions that these opportunities have disproportionately benefited men relative to women. As one Executive from the Medical field noted:

"...they just take off seven people, all men, to lead the response ... previously, I might say, for example ... "well, is this gender balance, what are we doing to address this problem? It's not necessarily your fault. And maybe the seven best candidates were men, but why is that happening?" And I might discuss it, but now you feel almost a little bit wingy doing it because previously it was a really important thing, whereas now people are worried about their colleagues dying."

The de-prioritisation of gender equality was not limited to the Healthcare and Medical field. Indeed, the issue of women's progression in traditionally male-dominated industries, particularly into leadership positions or decision-making roles, was noted as being largely put aside throughout the pandemic response. As one Executive from the Retail and Trade sector noted:

"I think there are issues that were always there that have just been amplified because of COVID particularly around gender stereotypes of roles and responsibilities and those sorts of things ... I think and it's gone backwards in that sense that women have had to probably make more compromises and more sacrifices than some of the men because we've gone back to that typical household set up ... there has been more of an impact on women than upon men ... there's been a few things where we've made some steps forward which actually now probably have taken a backseat in particular that I think that's around leaders in the industry, because those industries have shrunk so there's less jobs available and, unfortunately, you know, women have been impacted by that."

In the case of the Mining industry, one interviewee noted that:

"I'm sure that some organizations have slowed or parked their gender balance or diversity agenda through the economic hardship of COVID, so we certainly haven't accelerated it. If anything, I'm sure that companies have back-slided for the last nine months and will have fallen behind on their female talent."

The long-term impacts of this delayed progress for various industry sectors were seen to extend beyond the immediate periods of pandemic recovery. As one Executive from the Health Care and Social Assistance sector explained:

"I'm not sure what will happen. I think from a gender point of view, it's going to be a big step backwards in WA. It already is, and that's going to be quite difficult to get momentum back again ... I just think that that's [gender inequality] going to blow out and be much, much worse post-COVID. I'm not 100% convinced that the momentum or that there'll be much drive to rectify that post COVID because I think people will be stressed, burnt out, wanting to see family and travel around the world."

Gender specific impacts on mental health and psychological wellbeing at work

While the broader implications of the pandemic on mental health are discussed later in the report, there were specific and unique gendered impacts of mental health described by interviewees within this study.

While women disproportionately suffered adverse mental health issues as a result of additional domestic burdens and greater likelihood of job/income loss, there were some exceptions. One example of an industry in which men were highly impacted, due to their over-representation, was aviation. In this industry, there were substantial layoffs with pilots, engineering crews, baggage handlers, and many support services being halted, constrained or shut down with the end of international travel.

Men within these industries experienced significant mental health impacts through the loss of their jobs. This was particularly the case of roles with fewer transferable skills such as pilots. The relationship between work and identity proved challenging to navigate for those who lost jobs, and whole cohorts of men were affected. Reactions to job loss in these circumstances ranged from needing to find 'meaning' or 'purpose' within a new position or role, to losing a sense of personal identity that was previously tied to the individual's profession and job title.

Moreover, the social networks of men within these industries were constrained, reducing the opportunity for identity-affirming conversations or activities. As one Executive in reflecting on the experience of pilots from the Transport industry shared:

"... the men lost their jobs and what they do, they need to find a job that has meaning [...] men try to move into an environment where they [have] a role where they can claim a title [...] the other impact would be in the actual amount of time that you have available, so with the quarantine effect the men seem to be battling spending so much time in quarantine and it makes them feel unworthy and not part of society and they're actually becoming quite aggressive. They've lost the sense of identity that comes with being a pilot."



Complex Variables Affecting COVID-19's Impact upon Individuals

While undertaking this study with a deliberately gendered lens, the data gained in the survey and focus groups were very clear that individual experiences of the impact of the pandemic were influenced by a complexity of factors, beyond the singular impact of one's gender. Table 3 presents the various factors identified that lessened or heightened the impact of the pandemic upon individuals, whether these were financial, mental health and well-being or the ability to undertake flexible work.



Label	Definition	Impacts
Essential worker/Essential Industry	<p>Government defined and subject to differing levels of testing requirements; quarantine requirements; family social distancing; social isolation.</p> <p>Essential Organisations/individuals comprised large sectors of some industry groups such as mining, energy, construction and transport; Or in the case of retail, only some parts such as pharmacies, liquor stores and fuel outlets.</p>	<p>This government defined designation had tremendous impact upon an individual's ability to work outside the home or not. Likewise, whether an individual was a front-line worker within an essential industry. Many non-frontline workers, even in essential industries, were also asked by employers to work from home. The mental health impacts for social isolation and the removal of traditional support structures were felt by non-essential, non-frontline workers. Likewise, essential front-line workers bore the fear and anxiety of accidentally transmitting the virus back to their families at home.</p>
Industry Sector	<p>Industry sector, like essential industries, produced nuanced effects for individual workers and employees.</p>	<p>While the impact is partially attributable to the essential/non-essential attribution above, the industry sector impact upon an individual was largely a factor of lockdowns and, to a lesser degree social distancing. Certain industries/sectors such as the Arts, Sport and Recreation, Tourism, Food and Beverage, Taxis and Rideshare, as well as large areas of non-essential retail, were decimated by the decline in service demand caused by COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing measures, while for others, such as financial services, were overwhelmed by increased demand.</p>
Community Perceptions of Potential Exposure to COVID-19	<p>Workers exposed to COVID-19.</p>	<p>There were widespread reports in the media and also relayed by respondents to this study of frontline workers being exposed to stigma by the community simply because of the perceived potential for the individual to be exposed to COVID-19. Reports of incidences in study were related to interstate truck drivers, nurses, doctors and FIFO in the mining industry. This was reported to have increased the range of stressors within their lives including bias and discrimination, bigotry or simply negative social interactions on the basis of perceived (or actual) exposure to COVID-19.</p>
Employment Type	<p>Hours engaged and terms engaged, within paid employment (e.g., full-time, part-time, casual and contract).</p>	<p>The casualisation of the Australian workforce over the past 30 years had a profound impact upon individual experiences, particularly early in the pandemic, for those in part-time, casual and contract roles who were far more likely to lose their job entirely or have their hours reduced. This was strongly influenced by working in non-essential industries.</p>
Previous Experience of Flexibility	<p>Hours engaged within employment outside of traditional face to face working directly attributable to new ways of working and the accessibility of work or where organisations had immature flexible working policies.</p>	<p>Despite the mostly positive response to flexible working caused by the lockdowns, many people new to flexible working initially found it more difficult to switch off after hours or to manage the freedom that comes from flexible working and/or working around distractions in the home. The 'need' to 'constantly be on' or available to check emails outside of traditional working hours caused a blurring of lines between work and family, adding to the stress experienced by these individuals.</p>

Table 3. Individual characteristics which alleviated or exacerbated the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

Label	Definition	Impacts
Change in the Scope of work	The job scope within various roles extended substantially for some due to various factors including job losses, streamlining business functions or departments.	The increased workload caused, for example by increased demand for financial services, or the decrease in staff caused by redundancies, had a similar impact upon individuals in the form of extra working hours and undertaking additional roles that they had not originally been employed to undertake. This produced a context wherein some individuals reported undertaking the roles of two people or expanding remit of task responsibilities well beyond the scope of their original salaried agreement, again creating additional stress. Many felt privileged to have a job and few were willing to complain, keeping this anxiety to themselves.
Profession/Salary and Labour Shortages	Financial incentives within some job families shifted throughout the pandemic offering some individuals the opportunity to secure salaries in excess of 160% of their traditional operating salary.	Greater mobility of employees was evidenced in some industries and job fields towards the end of 2021. As the lockdowns ceased, the economy began to accelerate, and the impact of international closures was beginning to be felt in earnest. This created a shortfall in the supply of certain in-demand skills. Likewise, certain professions were far more likely to be able to undertake work remotely, privileging them in being able to escape lockdowns and move to regional areas. These higher salaries and 'sea/tree changes' were reported as decreasing stress and anxiety for some individuals, but increased pressure for those in organisations needing to pay higher wages or deal with the effects of the 'great migration'.
Supportive Government payments (e.g., JobKeeper; JobMaker, State Government sector specific payments)	Social support payments designed to scaffold the earnings of those who may have lost earnings through lockdowns.	JobKeeper was the main financial net that saved many jobs during the early part of the pandemic and was available to organisations from April 2020 to March 2021. The financial entitlement was to support the payment of wages to employees. Eligibility was limited to 'employees' as defined by the Australian Taxation Office. Those not deemed 'employees' were ineligible, severely impacting these individuals as well as industries which are characterised by itinerant work forces such as the Arts.
Marital Status, Shared Housing and Accommodation Type	Relationship status (single, married, defacto).	Whether individuals were partnered or not, or shared their dwelling throughout the pandemic, as well as who was or was not at home due to front-line, essential worker status, produced unique outcomes. Singles who were not share-housing were particularly vulnerable to the impact of lockdowns, producing isolation and detrimental mental health outcomes. Couples in marital distress and prone to domestic violence, where work-status found both at home, were impacted by higher rates of marital breakup and increased domestic violence. This was exacerbated by smaller house/apartment sizes and floorplans that precluded quiet spaces. Experiences of people share-housing were similar, where smaller size and layout of homes contributed to social friction and reduced mental well-being. Even the experiences of people sharing in an apartment building, versus a unit was reported as varying greatly due to a small amount of green space in a unit backyard that would allow some outdoor exercise and distraction.

Label	Definition	Impacts
Parental Status and age of Children	Children within the family home; the number of children; their ages.	The number of children and their ages added unique layers of complexity to the shifting ways of working and living. Families with younger children described challenges in navigating the extensive care required throughout the day during work hours; and families with school-age or older children described substantial challenges in supporting and guiding the school-day coinciding with work hours. Parents with children in their late teens also reported issues in dealing with their children's social isolation from friends.
Free childcare / Childcare subsidy	Free childcare and increased subsidies for childcare proved instrumental to supporting families, particularly single-parent families for whom childcare was problematic under business-as-usual contexts.	The availability of cost-effective and suitable childcare supported many parents and families to remain connected to the workforce throughout the pandemic. This was particularly important within single-parent homes during lockdowns where the constrained movement of people throughout places impinged upon their normal support structures. Differences in eligibility based upon 'essential' worker criteria acted to preclude many individuals from accessing these services in several states and cities.
Geographical Location of the Individual and family	Primary location of living.	Country, state, city and council region-based differences in lockdown and social distancing measures produced differing outcomes for individuals and their families. The effects of geographical location were multi-faceted with those locations with more severe and lengthy lockdowns such as Melbourne and Sydney metropolitan areas impacted more heavily in terms of mental health outcomes. Likewise, the geographical separation of immediate family, based upon travel restrictions and lockdown areas, caused significant stress and anxiety to those separated.
Access to Central Electronic Infrastructure for Remote Team Work	Working outside of the traditional office structure produced unique consequences for the working lives of men and women.	Immediate working from home requirements produced a context wherein some individuals, teams and organisations were ill-prepared regarding basic technology and supportive infrastructure in their central office. Again, individuals working for firms with little or no experience in accommodating the technological architecture required for remote working in teams were significantly disadvantaged in being able to normalise work, particularly in the opening months of the pandemic.
Geographical Location of Business Units	Office/worksite locations and the impacts for those not in the same state or in locations with differing lockdowns / social distancing.	Those whose work involved travel or those who organised the logistics of travel were significantly impacted in terms of time/cost and mental health by the constant changes in lockdowns and their requirements, and the border closures and social distancing rules introduced by each of the states. The degree of exposure to multiple jurisdictions commensurately increased the time/cost and mental health burden on individuals. On the other hand, those who previously had to commute long distances or travel frequently, reported improved mental health outcomes from working from home.

Label	Definition	Impacts
Adequacy of Home infrastructure	Home office space; size of rooms, backyard; spare rooms; internet connectivity.	Home infrastructure is a key determinant of success in working from home. Where individuals had greater access to quiet working space, technology (suitable computers and necessary bandwidth), and work architecture (ergonomic chairs, desks) were better equipped to navigate the sustained lockdowns, social distancing or remote working requirements, creating less stress on their lives.
Exposure to Supply Chain Issues	Raw materials or manufactured goods required to undertake work.	A factor that was causing an increasing amount of stress, particularly for individuals in the construction, manufacturing and mining industries, but expressed by some across nearly all industry groups, was increasing frustration and disruptions to work with shipping delays and the cessation of production due to lockdowns in other countries. This was creating increased tensions with customers and contractors, often resulting in increased financial pressure.
Exposure to differing Time-zones	The time-zone from which work was undertaken.	Varied time-zones produced novel impacts for individuals which added an additional layer of complexity to the nature of work where the pandemic had created the need to be more or less in touch with different time-zones.
Migration and strain on some regional areas	Relocation of home: rural and regional community infrastructure.	Some mention was made across the study of the strains upon infrastructure and accessibility to services within some communities due to the significant influx of domestic migration during the pandemic.
Social cohesion and lack of Support Services	Shifts in the way people live and work, lockdowns, migration, and social distancing measures, have introduced various barriers to social cohesion within communities.	Increased experiences of loneliness, social isolation, increasingly polarised views, and greater social distance between individuals has produced a variety of community and individual-level impacts. These are exacerbated in some geographical regions due to a lack of accessibility to social support services, mental health services or outlets for social stress such as sport, arts, food and entertainment and other recreation. The extent to which an individual accesses these services to manage mental health and well-being is a factor in the impact of the pandemic upon them.



Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19 in the Workplace

A substantial focus within interviewee responses was the mental health and wellbeing of people within Australian workplaces since March 2020. Interviewees described a variety of themes ranging from general experiences of workplace stress and pressure from the persistent experience of fatigue and exhaustion, to the more serious experience of emotional burnout. Insights presented by the focus group participants largely described the waning resilience of Australian employees, and importantly, many spoke to the inadequacy of 'resilience' as a mechanism for explaining the ways in which some navigated the intervening time since March 2020.

Interviewees described experiences with instances of broad social isolation within their workforce, and a varied suite of strategies designed to facilitate increased connectivity.

The longer-term effects of poor mental health and wellbeing described by those interviewed ranged from experiences of 'moral injury' caused through persistent fatigue and feelings of compromised values systems, through to experiences of suicidal ideation. Executives who were interviewed for this study described personal experiences with colleagues, friends and peers who had either contemplated or completed suicide since March 2020.

In describing the mental health experiences of those within the Transportation and Logistics industry through the pandemic, one Executive commented:

"I think their mental health was just wrecked. Not a very professional word, but that's how I felt. That's how they [team members] were."

The sentiment of reduced mental health within entire workforces was not limited to any one industry, but rather spanned entire industries and workforce levels within industry. Many of the Executives interviewed for the purposes of this study described experiences of poorer mental wellbeing at all levels within their organisation. This situation was in spite of substantial supports introduced within organisations to improve psychological health and wellbeing within their workplace. As one Executive from the Retail and Trade industry described:

"Definitely, you can see, even senior leaders getting to a point where you know they're in tears at the end of a phone call or at the end of a meeting feeling frustrated or just exhausted, because they know they need to attend certain meetings to be able to uphold their duties and responsibilities in a senior role and you know, people taking a lot more mental health leave than I've seen ever before, so that's probably what I've witnessed the most is just the mental side, even though there's been a huge amplification of the materials that the business has provided to team members to read and we've had people come and speak to us, obviously virtually."

The varied and vast experiences within all industries represented within this study, symbolise the extensive impacts around the changing ways in which we have lived and worked since March 2020. Many interviewees described varied experiences of workplace stress and pressure with COVID-19, and these experiences are summarised below.

Workplace stress and pressure

Many of the Executives interviewed within this study described an increase in the absolute number of stressors within the workplace. All industries faced challenges that influenced workplace stress and pressure to some degree. In the case of some employees, there were varied experiences of stress. A subset of employees reported experiencing eustress, a type of positive stress that – in the right amounts and at the right times – can produce positive boosts to performance⁵⁴. Largely, however, the experience of workplace stress was characterised as being negative, producing inhibited job performance, and challenging team dynamics and interpersonal relationships.

A further complexity raised by interviewees was around their continued employment. On the one hand, employees were feeling pressured to perform and work to retain their employment, but they did not want to contribute to an organisation that may not have had their future interests at the forefront of its operational decision-making.

Everyday stress and pressure

Often the stress and pressure experienced by employees was attributable to several causal factors. These tended to be industry specific. In the case of one Executive from the Professional and Scientific industry, stress was linked to logistical challenges and misunderstandings between organisations and their customers:

“... there's generally a lot more work stresses, because of material and labor shortages on projects and clients don't seem to understand or are trying to ignore the fact that there have been impacts to the workforce.”

Broadly, the everyday stressors commonly identified across interviewees, largely comprised shifts in working patterns (e.g., timing, location, volumes) or job characteristics (e.g., tasks, clients, technical requirements). For some, these shifts and ‘pivots’ were energising and allowed for the development of new skills and capabilities. However, for many others, this was not the case.



⁵⁴ Simmons, B. L., & Nelson, D. L. (2007). Eustress at work: Extending the holistic stress model. *Positive Organizational Behavior*, 40-53.

Some employees experienced stress in response to the changing work requirements, and their inability to meet the novel demands brought about by COVID-19. In the case of border closures and constricted movement within states and local communities, there were many far-reaching consequences that produced substantial stress and pressure for individuals, teams and organisations. The constrained movement between states in Australia brought unique challenges, particularly for some who had cultivated professional relationships inter-state and were reliant on meeting customers across state lines.

The changing demands of work produced contexts in which certain jobs were no longer able to be completed. For others, the change in work patterns – particularly working remotely – provided a context in which there was a clear and definitive clash between work and family domains. The competing priorities within the same context, as experienced by employees working from home while simultaneously attempting to support the home-schooling of children, produced a context in which many reported substantial stress and pressure. As one Executive from the Finance and Insurances industry noted:

“I think in the last year there’s been a lot of very obvious impacts on everyone in terms of you know, working from home, blow outs in working hours, often you’d have the ability get out of the normal patterns, the normal separation between work and home, but now it’s harder to separate, so I think there’s a lot of sort of general experiences there ... There’s been enormous stress on families and great distress is still on within families.”

The stress produced by the collision of work and family domains was particularly stark within families where both parents / caregivers within the home were working. As one Executive from the Mining sector noted:

“What we saw there was an increased level of stress in regard to how, because a lot of them have younger children, how they were actually going to manage with both parents typically working, who would be in charge of the children ... And all that makes it harder than normal to live your life and that uncertainty or not knowing what to do and so many would ask for leave, which is fine, but then, over time, as it stretched out, their annual leave got chewed away, and then there was that level of I’m coming close to the end of permissible leave. How am I actually going to manage this so that added another layer of complexity to their family life and their stresses about how they were going to manage that ...”

Many interviewees noted that these feelings of stress and pressure in time-limited circumstances were manageable for most individuals. However, what became problematic over the course of the pandemic was the compounding nature of stress and pressure that when accumulated over time, produced feelings of being overwhelmed.



Feeling overwhelmed

The experience of being psychologically overwhelmed with the demands of work and life, was not specific to any single industry. There were multiple instances of interviewees describing themselves, their colleagues, teams or peers as being overwhelmed. As one Executive from the Manufacturing industry described:

“We’re just in the middle of our engagement survey at the moment, but what I would say is that there’s a rise in people feeling overwhelmed. That would be scoring higher this year than it did last year ... it could be, because we asked them to do more, but I think more generally it’s because of the pandemic. I certainly think stress levels are there, and is that appearing as domestic violence or other forms of abuse? We haven’t got any examples, but I’m sure that is.”

Another Executive from the Manufacturing industry also shared:

“... we’ve had lots of employees that have shown more extreme symptoms to do with stress and a lot more ladies reaching out for advice about how to deal with performance issues and that might be driven by stress, and results of our employee survey are showing people feel they have less control on their priorities and their work, and they feel overwhelmed.”

The feelings of being overwhelmed were broadly felt with Executives noting that it affected some employees who had never experienced mental health challenges prior to the pandemic. As one Executive from Information, Telecommunications and Media described:

“I know there are people in my team that have had to take mental health leave. People who have never taken that before, so I think the COVID impact is real and yet others are thriving.”

Although many Executives could relate to the psychological experience of fatigue and being overwhelmed, to those interviewed in the study its direct causes were not always clear. Overall, interviewees appeared more to be aware that people were experiencing many different impacts, in many different degrees, and were very aware that mental health was a clear and present issue for people in their organisations, and sectors more generally.

Uncertainty was a common theme amongst many of the Executives interviewed. Whether this sense of unknown was related to the workplace or the home environment, uncertainty produced negative impacts on peoples’ psychological health and wellbeing. Some interviewees linked the sense of uncertainty to the entire situation as a whole in that COVID-19 produced organisation- and industry-wide impacts in a short period of time that required individuals to operate under extremely ambiguous conditions. For some, this experience of uncertainty stemmed from job insecurity. As one Executive from the Finance and Insurance sector noted:

“I think that there’s a little bit of insecurity there around jobs, particularly in that first year in the first year we’re also running an organizational wide restructure from April till September so through that first year, very insecure about our roles, so we continued to work at a pace that we had pre COVID.”

There was considerable uncertainty produced by job losses within teams. Where individuals had lost work, others who remained were required to subsume the additional work into their existing roles. This situation brought about uncertainty regarding future work planning which compounded the existing sense of job insecurity. As one Executive from the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries sector stated:

“... I think the women who had ongoing roles they were like working harder, because they were taking up the work that was being left by others, and I think within the university sector, the educational sector was really hit hard because of COVID and so people were really scared of losing their jobs. So, they wouldn’t say anything, On the contrary they would silently cope, so I think a lot of people were being overworked and there was a lot of stress and you could feel like people were really just, yeah surrounded by uncertainty and then, when I moved to government, I think there’s also a lot of uncertainty ...”

There was also uncertainty identified surrounding exactly how organisations would navigate COVID-19 cases within the workplace. As one Executive from the Arts and Recreation sector described:

“I think there’s just still a lot of fear. It feels deeply uncertain ... We still have that kind of. It’s just here. There’s not a lot of understanding of how even within a company, like, we don’t really have an accurate idea now of what we would do if we have somebody come in sick ... everybody is just that little bit on edge.”

As organisations progressed towards operating within a framework of the ‘new normal’ wherein large parts of the Australian population were vaccinated, there was also a deep sense of uncertainty regarding autonomy and choice around being vaccinated. As one Executive from the Professional and Scientific industry shared:

“...there’s that kind of stress of you know, if they’ve chosen not to get vaccinated, now it’s not that you’re attacking someone, but people are feeling vulnerable for their family, and this is my choice and then other people saying well actually you sit with everyone else in the office, so now you’re putting other people at risk and there’s stress around that and what should be someone’s individual right, but then that affects the people who they work with and creates resentment towards people who are site based who were forced into getting it. And when I say forced, I mean at the end of the day, everyone makes a choice right, but is it really a choice if your livelihood is on the table for discussion, so not really.”

The outcome of this imbalance between job demands and resources to successfully complete jobs was a sense of fatigue for many interviewees and their peers.



Fatigue and exhaustion

The fatigue and exhaustion experienced by many individuals across the industries talked to within this study was pervasive, sustained and largely inescapable. As one Executive from the Manufacturing sector described when relaying the experiences of her team members leading into the Christmas, 2021 period:

“People were holding on by their fingernails and I wonder whether some of this ‘mass resignation’ stuff has come from people talking in that way, that they can’t do it anymore, they don’t want to keep going like this, because everybody’s overworking. I’m kind of hopeful that if people manage to get a break over the holiday period, I don’t know in some industries it’s going to be very hard, I mean look at Australia Post, I don’t think anybody’s going to be getting all their days there. But how in other places it might break the cycle of fatigue. That’s kind of my key question and get people back to really thriving.”

This same Executive proceeded to describe the ‘adrenaline’ that fuelled initial responses to the pandemic:

“... I think, interestingly, the fatigue really started to settle in about two months ago, like, for me, I just saw people who were just coping. So last year was kind of adrenaline and everybody was almost supercharged and then this year I’ve just seen this steady fatigue and we’ve just hit this wall back two months ago and everybody is just so over it and needing a break.”

One Executive from the Medical field described the deep sense of exhaustion and fatigue experienced within her industry:

“...there’s a lot of stress and anxiety that has surrounded COVID and the uncertainty COVID has produced. It has contributed to a lot of burnout and I think challenges at work and everything’s just harder ... but it’s added stress anxiety and exhaustion because you feel guilty because you’re not there, so you do an evening shift, so you’re finished, like, for example, I finished at 3am this morning but I want to get up with the kids to see them before they go to school, because otherwise I’m not going to see them, so that becomes tiring and there’s no let up and there’s no break ...”

Leadership responses to the fatigue and exhaustion were shared by interviewees with one Executive from Finance and Insurance services reporting:

“... even in conversations about coming up to Christmas and taking leave, you can see the fatigue is very visible, very tangible. You know, across businesses we interact with, they’re closing down for the first time ever, for Christmas and New Year, it’s saying to the entire team, we’re just exhausted, mentally exhausted, they just need to kind of reset, reboot, and so they are going to close for three weeks and they’ve never done that, before. And the same for us, yeah, we’ve extended our clients thinking to three weeks for as many of our people as we can, for exactly the same reason. People need a serious solid break and in the past, there has been an element, like self-imposed, but a real reluctance to take leave during COVID, and which you can understand, but I wonder whether people recognize the impact on themselves of the, just this kind of you know unbroken routine of stress during COVID and the sense of sort of Groundhog Day.”

For those professionals who had effectively been 'locked out' of work, such as Arts or Retail Trade, loosening restrictions produced unique circumstances of having suddenly 'too much' work, relative to periods of being locked down. This prompted a novel type of exhaustion and fatigue. As one Executive from the Arts and Recreation industry described:

"I think what also started to happen was when work did start to come up, they took everything on and so they've gone "Well, we've had a year of nothing, then a torrent" and so suddenly fatigue kind of hits in where you're kind of like, "well, actually my work life balance is now, we're usually pretty bad, but work life balance now is absolutely fucked." Excuse my language. Everybody is tired and it's like we keep talking here and going, it's only February and I just feel like this year is already as bad as the last two."

Another Executive also from the Arts and Recreation industry shared the impacts of this fatigue and exhaustion on the productivity of professionals within the industry:

"We've just done another one [survey] in January this year, finding that 53% of working artists are still having declines actually in their art making at the moment because of that declining mental health, exhaustion, capacity and needing to make money elsewhere."

There were important nuances in the manifestations of this fatigue and exhaustion. The experience of fatigue and exhaustion was reported by one Executive from the Finance and Insurance industry as different from the everyday behaviour within her team. One example she described was:

"I think you see it in very subtle ways. I know everyone's very tired, that's a given, but I just think you see it in people's reactions to things. Teary or angry a little bit more, you know disproportionate responses. Or maybe detaching I think, you do see there's definitely some differences in people's responses. But I think the problem is sometimes they're very subtle responses and you actually really need to look for them."

As described, much of the understanding surrounding individual experiences of fatigue and exhaustion required interviewees to lean more into their people management practices and work hard to develop an understanding of their team members' behavioural patterns. For those that were able to develop a robust understanding, there were increased opportunities for more tailored responses and solutions to experiences of fatigue.



Burnout

Interviewees described a range of experiences relating to burnout and ‘building resilience’ to stave off burnout. In between these negative experiences of burnout, were the organisational / institutional responses that many of those interviewed described as being among the benefits that these experiences produced and which related to deeper organisational change.

The negative experiences reported relating to burnout, were linked to the ‘psychological toll’ the pandemic had placed on the adaptability and capacity of individuals to consistently ‘pivot’, ‘adjust’ or manoeuvre into new ways of working and being. This had particularly challenged the wellbeing of interviewees and their teams. As one Executive from Arts and Recreation sector described:

“There’s a psychological toll on everyone who’s having to constantly use that word ‘pivot’. We try to say ‘pirouette’ in ballet, constantly pirouette to another direction. Do this, do that.”

The preceding circumstances surrounding burnout were not only linked to the persistent need for employees to pivot, or adjust, but also the need for women in particular to continue with their pre-pandemic responsibilities within the household, while also maintaining work within the home. As one Executive from the Construction industry described:

“I experienced that a lot of women had quite significantly burnt-out last year, towards the end of the year, there was a significant amount of burnout from the women and some of the men, but the women around me, and I really felt it for the first time in a really long time from the women around me, and I think that stemmed from the extra duties of trying to manage kids, family, household work and everything from home. I just wanted to make that point when we’re talking about stress that [it] was both stress, but also that burnout feeling.”

Perhaps most salient across many of the interviewees’ comments about burnout, was the feeling that employees were required to ‘cope and keep going’. As one Executive from the Finance and Insurance sector shared:

“... now is almost, I mean a really dangerous period because as others have said, I feel like we just had to cope, we had to keep going, and we had children in the home and we’re trying to keep on top of it, you just had no choice but to keep going and I almost feel like the dangerous period is right now. I said to someone, the other day I’m scared because I’ve got time to think and I’m scared about what those thoughts might be, but there is all of a sudden ... the time it takes, I guess, to start to understand what it is that we have just been through, and also to allow yourself that time. I feel like it’s now that everyone is talking to me in every meeting that they are feeling this burnout, is what I would call it, just burnout from having to just cope and keep going, keep going, keep going through the last couple of years yeah.”

As described by this interviewee, in the early to intermediate stages of the pandemic, leaders and teams were required to focus intently on their capacity to work and live in the immediate present. In the later stages of 2021, there was increased scope to consider the future around operating models within business and to reconsider new ways of working. This newfound ‘breathing space’ within organisations hasn’t necessarily been met with sufficient space to reconsider the mental health impacts or to plan for future shifts in the psychological wellbeing of the Australian workforce. Moreover, for industries in which there are existing mental health challenges, such as for long-haul truck drivers within the Transport, Postal and Warehousing industry, the absolute necessity of interventions that support improved psychological wellbeing is paramount. As one Executive from the Postal, Transport and Warehousing industry stated:

“... we’ve always had mental health or depression issues in our industry, and I think that this has only exacerbated that. We need to be very aware that this is going to be an ongoing thing, and we need to make sure that we don’t drop the ball with our guys as we come out of this, and that, as you say, it’s never going to change. There’s going to be still some ups and downs, but we need to make sure that we keep looking at them to make sure that they come out of it fine ...”

For workers within the Postal, Transport and Warehousing industry, the stressors throughout the pandemic were somewhat subtle, extending beyond traditional experiences of work within this industry. As another Executive shared:

“... drivers are going into these hotspots then coming back to their families, and that put a lot of pressure on trying to be safe and it's a whole different level of pressure...”.

This same interviewee explained:

“... we had a few instances of drivers that they just couldn't handle situations. Some of them actually had a breakdown because [they] just couldn't handle different new regulations. These are truck drivers. They know how to drive a truck.”

The need for employees to work in novel ways under sustained stress and pressure over quite extended periods of time, produced contexts wherein employees and teams were unable to cope with the new work demands given their available resources.

As leaders, many of our interviewees were required to advocate for their team members. In the context of mental health and psychological wellbeing, this was a new experience, with some of those interviewed feeling as though they had opened new lines of communication with their organisational leadership. As one Executive from the Finance and Insurance sector explained:

“... particularly the sales staff and what was interesting is the main theme had been a problem [they were] just so overwhelmed ... that that mental health side was a great concern and for the first time ever, I actually was brave enough to go back to the executive team, and I remember, I was on a 'Teams' conversation like this, where I literally said to them “by the way, we're having a huge problem with mental health in our teams and I think that needs to be addressed before we talk about anything to do with growth. But hey it's up to you.” What was really interesting is they took that on board straight away, and it was quite a lot of programs that came out of that.”

Not only was a conversation about mental health and psychological wellbeing quite novel for this Executive within her organisation, tangible action based on this feedback was also unique. As this same Executive described:

“Considering that even 12 months before that you would never talk about that to your Executive team. It definitely has changed for that and it's more the awareness and there's no stigma around it at all. If anything, if you see someone that is getting a bit stressed, most people will reach out to them to say hey we're here for you, this is all the things you can do blah blah blah so let's go whereas you never have that in the past.”

This proved to be symbolic of organisations' willingness to consider the psychological health and wellbeing of employees more broadly. This translated into interviewees feeling as though there had been shifts in the dialogue regarding the mental health barometer within workplaces. Nevertheless, the experiences of workplace interventions designed to reduce employee burnout and psychological distress were varied. As one Executive from the Health Care and Social Assistance industry shared:

“All of the support has been tokenistic. It's not the things that will reduce stress. You know, clear messaging and communication and a COVID plan would actually help. Access to leave when needed could also be a little bit better and practical solutions to overcrowding, like the two of the biggest causes of stress in emergency departments are overcrowding and no planning. It's not whether there's yoga classes available at seven o'clock in the morning, but it's dealing with the underlying issues that are you know, creating that moral injury; that burnout, because you can't do your job properly that's what's causing the stress and we kind of feel we've been fighting against that for so long and then now you crave leave on top of that.”

Although the increased dialogue in psychological health and wellbeing produced a variety of organisational responses with some more effective than others, there was nevertheless an increased willingness to openly describe some of the more challenging aspects of work under pandemic conditions. This openness to sharing the mental health impacts of shifts in workplaces was commented upon by interviewees from a broad range of industries. One Executive from Education and Training described an increased sense of latitude to share mental health experiences:

“I think it’s actually given us permission to speak about this in a more open way and everybody has been challenged by this so it’s sort of become like it’s something that we understand that we’ve all be going through the peaks and troughs as well, and some of us are struggling more at different times, but I know our staff have really appreciated when we’ve had openness and sharing about people’s mental health in this way ...”

The shift in greater openness around mental health conversations was felt at the leadership level within organisations. As one Executive shared:

“... it’s really opened up and normalized conversations in the workplace about mental health. I think about 10 years ago or 15 years ago and I can’t remember, like we’d have the occasional take a Mental Health Day, but I would just say it was a sick day, I would have never openly discussed mental health with my manager. I don’t think anyone really did talk about it and we wouldn’t have had staff meetings about mental health, but now, you know, my leadership team, is really, really focused on the positive need to help and assist and that sort of thing. It’s just really opened up a conversation amongst staff, we have a well-being committee as well, which I’m a part of and I do really like that, and even like social media it’s become a real focus and like a topic of discussion, which I think has been a positive.”

The experience of burnout was pervasive and not specific to any single industry, employee demographic or cohort. All interviewees shared a desire to reduce the deleterious effects of stress and pressure that contributed to feelings of burnout. Nevertheless, the responsiveness of individuals was hampered largely by organisational constraints or industry effects of the pandemic. There were several responses suggesting that the experience of burnout within organisations and teams was felt by women more than men, given their disproportionate (in general) unpaid workload beyond their professional workplace roles.



Social isolation

There is a breadth of workplace research that points to the psychological benefits of the social infrastructure within workplaces. Interpersonal relationships between team members offer a psychological buffer against stress and poor psychological outcomes^{55 56}. One of the core challenges of working remotely is the experience of social isolation. This cannot be negated through increased online meetings. Indeed, a 'zoom fatigue' was reported by many of those interviewed within this study.

Interviewees described various experiences of social isolation: those prompted by 'social distancing' requirements; and those inbuilt into various job roles or introduced through social distancing measures, as well as those experienced through the introduction of remote working. Some experiences of social isolation were heightened by a lack of technological skillsets (e.g., disparities in familiarity with online tools such as Zoom, Skype or MSTeams, for example).

The experience of social isolation was necessarily location-specific, with differing levels of 'lockdown' or 'social distancing' introduced within the various states. Many of the Executives interviewed within this study led teams across different geographical regions of Australia. One Executive from the Information, Telecommunications and Media industry with teams in Melbourne shared:

"Yes. I guess the first year of COVID I had teams in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, and in all States actually and Melbourne certainly had it tough and to the point that for my team, when we had cross collaboration sessions we all had to do them from home because it was actually depressing for the Melbourne [team]."

Working roles in which social isolation was inbuilt (e.g., truck driving) or introduced into via social distancing protocols (e.g., doctors), placed unique demands on workers. In the case of those within Transportation, one Executive described social isolation as problematic to the flow of accurate information for many:

"They spend so many long hours on their own with nothing else to think about and to talk to each other about all this garbage they've heard on the radio that morning and all of this stuff. So, they're all talking to each other about all this fake news going on, and then they're spending hours thinking about it, all this stuff. It's definitely not a good thing to find yourself thinking about all this all the time."

Whilst this level of social isolation was inbuilt into the role, there were other jobs in which social isolation was introduced. This experience of social isolation within roles in which there was previously considerable levels of social contact and close relationships posed unique challenges. These difficulties were further compounded by the demographic characteristics of different workforces. As one Executive from the Health Care and Social Assistance industry noted:

"I think the other area that has been difficult and is probably gendered because of the differential proportions of single women within medicine. And I've noticed particularly the mental health impacts on health workers who are single women living alone. I think single people living alone during lockdowns have had a difficult time generally, but more of my female colleagues are single than are my male colleagues."

⁵⁵ Greenaway, K. H., Haslam, S. A., Cruwys, T., Branscombe, N. R., Ysseldyk, R., & Heldreth, C. (2015). From "we" to "me": Group identification enhances perceived personal control with consequences for health and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109(1), 53.

⁵⁶ Jetten, J., Haslam, C., Haslam, S. A., Dingle, G., & Jones, J. M. (2014). How groups affect our health and well-being: The path from theory to policy. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 8(1), 103-130.

It is important to reiterate that the experience of social isolation was not uniform; there were multi-layered effects of various job demands, individual differences and workplace processes that contributed to different experiences of social isolation. These factors varied within departments in organisations, as well as between organisations and across different industries. Even within the one organisation, the experience of social isolation could be experienced very differently. As one Finance and Insurance Executive described:

“We have quite a few people that are in that older, 55 plus bracket and they are male and have very much struggled around not being able to be in the same space as their assistant. So, some of them don’t even know how to use ‘Webex’ or ‘Teams’ or anything so they couldn’t even see each other. So, we have [had] lots of conversations and try to support that connection to remain but we definitely had that problem a lot. The other thing that we did also find was the younger generation, as much as they were really productive at home, they had that FOMO, you know, the fear of missing out. They really missed the social part of being in the office. So, they were great at home, they got all their work done, there were less errors, all that sort of stuff, but they really struggled with not having the water cooler chat and not being in the kitchen for 20 minutes talking about the star signs they’ve read in the newspaper and those sorts of things, so really struggled in that space. And that was you know, generational, both male and females and I’d say the younger workforce between I would say, probably 21 to about 26 and single, and they were the ones that wanted to come back into the office before anyone else. It was very much interesting the people that live by themselves, wanted to stay connected with colleagues. And we needed to stay connected with them to ensure their mental health and that everything was going fine ... we were very aware of the people in our workforce, that work from home, the live by themselves group, and we definitely connected more with them, than other members of our team.”



Facilitating connectivity

Across the interviews, strategies aimed towards facilitating social support and interpersonal connectivity included more individualised approaches undertaken by managers and leaders, beyond those initiated at the organisational level (e.g., weekly check-ins, virtual social events).

One executive from the Finance and Insurance industry shared:

“... we do little things that we never used to do so as a company; last Friday we did a trivia over Teams and had a lot of fun, and they sent us all an uber eats voucher so we could order some takeaway have it at home and just stuff like that really helps and I felt that everyone really enjoyed it and we're talking about it right into this week ... little things like that definitely help but there's not much more you can do it's just reach out when you can.”

The more endemic outcomes of reduced social isolation and connectivity included concerns surrounding reducing the strength of the organisational culture. As one Executive from the Education and Training sector shared:

“... there's been some real challenges I think in terms of culture and connection of people, you know that social capital component and also we're [organisation] predominantly, not in this call, but predominantly in Melbourne as an organization and there's the anxiety about COVID is real, it's coming into the city, it's the challenge of that public space etc., guidelines changing all the time.”

The outcomes of social isolation over the longer term, including the more systematic depletion of organisational climate and culture, were experienced despite many of the organisation-level interventions described. Moreover, these effects permeated beyond the organisation into individuals lives.

Long term effects

The longer-term effects of stress, pressure, burnout, and social isolation were top-of-mind for many interviewees. As one Executive from the Education and Training sector explained:

“I feel that humans are resilient. But because of the extended levels of stress that there's going to be a lot of unprocessed trauma that I think it's going to take years for people to unpack and work through and I don't think it's going to be something that we bounce back from as quickly as we would like.”

That said, whilst also acknowledging the long-term potential of the pandemic in its impacts on employee mental health and wellbeing, some of those interviewed were more optimistic. As one executive from the Mining industry shared:

“Hopefully it's not going to be with us forever, there may be elements of it that we need to continue to manage, but how we adapt to change and still keep our sanity, and I think that's been a challenge for myself and the leadership team to be able to provide a positive mindset and positive culture and make sure everyone knows that they can come to work and be safe and healthy and happy.”

The future impacts of the changed nature of work and life throughout 2020-22 extended beyond the realm of mental health and wellbeing. Indeed, for some, it was observed that through the decimation of some industries, and some sectors, and the inability of many to engage in their primary domain of work, particularly those in the Arts, there were extensive impacts to self-belief, self-esteem and the sense that individuals could accomplish tasks and objectives. As one Executive from the Arts and Recreation industry shared:

“There is a lack of confidence, artists questioning their worth, and I guess what do they do? We had a conversation with two artists today, actually, who have a show that they made a few years back, and it's the show that they've wanted to make forever and then it hasn't really gone anywhere, and they were just questioning whether that was the end of it for them ... They're highly skilled, amazing acrobats, and it's really hard to hear them talk like that, that they're questioning themselves and their worth and whether it's going to be worthwhile continuing.”

The pandemic brought some unique impacts for various individuals and industries. For those within service industries (e.g., doctors, social workers, bank tellers), certain decision-making protocols were introduced that called upon individuals to make decisions about the lives of others. This new layer of responsibility introduced significant challenges to the psychological wellbeing for many workers, as well as challenges to their values and moral codes. Termed 'moral injury' within the academic literature, the experience describes a depletion of ones' core values and moral conscious that stems from being required to make decisions that are contrary to those values and moral beliefs. The persistent depletion of moral consciousness produces profound emotional shame and experiences of guilt. One Executive from Health Care and Social Assistance shared her experiences with navigating new protocols in her decision-making in the context of various lockdowns and the challenges this posed for her capacity to perform her role:

"...we've seen women in nursing homes wanting to die. Thinking that they were abandoned. That nobody cared about them anymore, they were lonely – "Just let me go, I want to die now, I don't want to live anymore and I'm not in any pain, or anything" – that would call in, say, an argument for assisted dying, but just the feeling of loneliness and uselessness of being not valued, of being isolated, and women living on their own, who have normally a huge network of friends, especially in those areas of hard lockdown. That network is really, really important for your survival, your friendship groups and when you're suddenly told, now when you've got police on the street saying no, you're not allowed to go out ..."

This same interviewee described her sadness in witnessing the profound loneliness that clients felt throughout the various periods of lockdown and social distancing:

"... the stress and the agony and the feeling of abandonment and loneliness that are experienced by women at that end of the life cycle has been really quite sad and the same for women with disabilities who are relying on people coming in to help them get over that whole issue around vaccinations and is it safe to come in."

For other interviewees, the experience of moral injury was linked to the lack of capacity or even skills of senior managers and executives within their industry to perform the necessary tasks to make peoples' roles easier, while also navigating their own personal stress and exhaustion. The experiences with moral injury extended beyond care-related occupations and industries. There were descriptions from within the Finance and Insurance sectors of customer service officers having to make decisions that challenged their own morals and values, as they were without latitude or options to intervene. As one Executive interviewed described:

"I think the story yesterday was you know this poor woman wants to stay in a house, but we can't approve the loan until the settlements through, so what does she do until then, she has nowhere to go. Just these heartbreaking stories and the stress and impact there."

Another interviewee described a situation in which they were tasked with terminating an employee's contract via remote teleconferencing technology, only for that employee to suffer a terminal medical episode online.

Suicide

The following section of this report describes experiences of suicide ideation and suicide completion. To both respect and preserve the privacy of interviewees who graciously described their experiences, we have withheld the industries from which the interviewees are from. Nevertheless, experiences shared transcend any single industry or job field, with these views representing a variety of industries.

Mental health experts warned of the potential for a 'second pandemic', describing the ongoing mental health impacts and increased risks of suicide stemming from sustained social isolation and lockdowns⁵⁷. Based on modelling and data from the SARS outbreak in 2003 from Hong Kong (a region heavily affected by lockdowns and social isolation), there were substantial concerns surrounding the suicide rates through the COVID-19 pandemic^{58 59}.

Experiences with suicide ideation and indeed completion was shared by a number of interviewees from various industries. At one end of the spectrum, some interviewees shared experiences of co-workers being hospitalised for mental health issues:

"I would say that my observation is that I think we're going to see a very long tailed recovery of organization resilience ... I mentioned the other employee who was in Victoria and single, no kids and you know was actually hospitalized with mental health issues."

Other Executives interviewed noted that challenges with mental health extended outside of their workplaces and teams to their personal social networks and relationships. Moreover, interviewees described feelings of surprise regarding those within their networks experiencing mental health challenges. As one Executive shared:

"One thing that I've noticed is that males in my life have been reaching out to me struggling with their mental health. I had someone really close to me who became suicidal this year, and so that was an ongoing stress to be monitoring that. Almost every male in my friendship groups and family is in need of male specific support ..."

Other interviewees shared close experiences with suicide completion, with one Executive describing the death of a close friend:

"One of my partner's best friends actually took his life earlier this year. He was dealing with bi-polar, and he needed support... we've been really struggling with significant mental health issues, particularly after that as well. But not having those critical family connections and the connections with friends that, you know, can ordinarily be there to help, that may have been a cause and I'm just saying that you need to have some people around you."

⁵⁷ Ganesan, B., Al-Jumaily, A., Fong, K. N., Prasad, P., Meena, S. K., & Tong, R. K. Y. (2021). Impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak quarantine, isolation, and lockdown policies on mental health and suicide. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 12.

⁵⁸ Chan, S. M. S., Chiu, F. K. H., Lam, C. W. L., Leung, P. Y. V., & Conwell, Y. (2006). Elderly suicide and the 2003 SARS epidemic in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry: A journal of the psychiatry of late life and allied sciences*, 21(2), 113-118.

⁵⁹ Ganesan, B., Al-Jumaily, A., Fong, K. N., Prasad, P., Meena, S. K., & Tong, R. K. Y. (2021). Impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak quarantine, isolation, and lockdown policies on mental health and suicide. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 12.

From an organisational perspective, many interviewees were people-leaders within their respective organisations. As Executives, they also shared experiences of suicide within their workforces. As one Executive described:

“... we [the organisation] had two suicides, both were male. There was a lot of mental health issues... It was an interesting thing to see how different people reacted to it. I think just suddenly not having anything and not having something to live for, really was devastating.”

Another Executive shared:

“In the beginning with the pandemic, we did notice that there was a lot more strain, I think, carried by people than I had ever seen before. Some people did not cope with it, and we did have a few incidences of staff, who unfortunately took their lives.”

There was a sense of fatigue for interviewees describing their experiences with suicide, alongside a strong sense that perhaps under normal operating conditions, this loss of life may not have occurred. Often descriptions of experience with suicide were coupled with dialogue surrounding the negative effects of social isolation and the importance of work relationships for scaffolding mental health and wellbeing, particularly for those individuals who live alone or have smaller social networks outside of their workplace.

Unintended consequences

When exploring mental health and wellbeing, many interviewees shared various unintended or unexpected consequences that the pandemic had produced. Some interviewees shared experiences with ‘survivor syndrome’ or guilt at retaining work and employment when many of their colleagues lost work, while other interviewees shared experiences of the increased uptake of Employee Assistance Program supports within their workforces.

When exploring the challenges of offering support to others, whilst also navigating through difficult work circumstances personally, one Executive from the Rental, Hiring and Real Estate industry shared:

“... it does put a lot of stress on the team members when they’re having to take calls from clients and act as though everything’s normal, but still have lots of things going on in the background, and nobody there to help ... But also, I know with the rest of the team, it does have a flow on effect and then I think there’s also a little bit of pressure on people that are working through this as well, and you’re incredibly grateful that you still have a job. I’m incredibly grateful that our industry has done well here, and you almost feel guilty, like you can’t sell it as having been challenging because it’s not as challenging as people that have been unfortunate to lose their job. So that’s just a tiny pressure, but you think oh I can’t really talk about that, but I think it really is important that we do, and our people are aware that we know it’s been difficult and it’s still difficult.”

Another Executive from the Arts and Recreation industry shared:

“There’s also that sense of which I think you’re sort of feeling a bit, it’s that kind of weird thing as well where you’re having survivor syndrome, if you are actually still working where there’s this incredible guilt, “well, I’m actually incredibly fortunate, but I’m shattered. All I want to do is run away and scream and have a holiday. But I can’t even see that coming.” I think that’s also how because, yes, we should all feel grateful and wonderful that we’re working, but we’ve also, it’s not like we’re not working within that as well. So, it’s a horribly tough time. It’s an interesting one.”

Consistent across industries was the challenge in navigating the balance between a sense of gratitude for having employment throughout the pandemic, against the difficulties working under new conditions. Although this tension was experienced differently, it was also the case that many interviewees described various supports that were utilised to assist. Some of these supports were part of organisations, such as Employee Assistance Programs, whereas others extended beyond in-house offerings. Nevertheless, those services offered internally saw a huge increase in uptake. In the case of one Executive from the Finance and Insurance industry, the pandemic drastically increased the use of EAP supports:

“... we have an employee assistance program to access stress and mental health issues advice and pre-COVID, less than 5% of our people accessed it. In the last 12 months it’s been over 30%, which is huge, and you know I’m very grateful and glad to have had this service and it’s quite incredible to think that about a third of our people have felt such stress. I worry about those who have not had access to counselling over this period ... There are probably a lot more that have perhaps used other online resources and so on, so there might be many more as well.”



**STAY
AT
HOME**

Physical Manifestations of Stress Related to COVID-19 at Home and at Work

Participants described a range of physical manifestations linked to challenges to the mental health and wellbeing of individuals attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic. These physical manifestations captured experiences of discord within family relationships within their household, marriage breakdowns and domestic and partner violence.

Discord within family relationships

Nearly all participants reported some degree of personal experience in navigating challenging circumstances within family relationships within their homes, whether this be with partners, children or extended family members.

The large majority of participants described challenging experiences around increased stress within intimate relationships in their family homes. This was largely consistent across groups, and reflected the challenging nature of lockdowns, job loss, work transitions and the general uncertainty surrounding the implications of the pandemic on family life.

Marriage and intimate relationship breakdowns

A subset of participants described either direct (i.e., themselves) or indirect (i.e., close family or friends) experiences with marriage breakdowns. These circumstances were made immeasurably more difficult through the lockdowns which precipitated employees' decisions to leave marriages or domestic relationships. These circumstances were compounded by working-from-home requirements within the lockdown that produced a context where the stress from work and home co-existed within the same living space.

Many of those interviewed had management and leadership responsibility of employees. Their roles provided unique insights into the circumstances of many employees that would not have occurred prior to the onset of COVID-19 within Australia. Interviewees described deep insights into the personal lives of their employees that produced a greater sense of responsibility than at any earlier time within their careers. One leader from the Professional and Scientific Services sector described:

"...in my office alone, I would say that 10% to 20% of women have kind of been going through disgusting horrible divorces and it's taken a toll on their ability to actually work as productively as they want to, and I feel like it's this cycle, where you know they're obviously dealing with massive stuff at home and then they're trying to come back and then they feel more stress about the fact that they're not as productive as they should be at work, and then they bring that to home and it becomes even worse, and it's almost a big spiral."

One executive from the Banking and Finance industry described experiences of team members having to navigate difficult conversations with clients attempting to leave marriages, but being hampered through financing rules, that in absence of COVID-19 and lockdowns might have been relatively straight forward to navigate. Instead, customers were faced with losing homes or access to safe housing.

Experiences of domestic and intimate partner violence

A small proportion of participants described direct (i.e., themselves), indirect (i.e., close family or friend) or peripheral (i.e., client) experiences of domestic or family violence. Although the direct experiences of domestic or intimate partner violence shared by participants was a small subset of interviewees, it was noteworthy that many participants shared indirect experiences of friends, family or co-workers who had reported the need for support, assistance or instrumental infrastructure in navigating through situations of violence. The increased rate of these instances was notable during the pandemic.

Evidence shows that incidences of domestic and family violence increase in times of crisis⁶⁰. In the Australian context, there was reportedly an 11% jump in calls to 1800RESPECT alongside a 26% increase in calls to MensLine, a free telephone service that supports men with concerns about anger management, family violence, or mental health concerns⁶¹. An Australian Institute of Criminology study also supports these statistics, revealing a significant rise in the prevalence of domestic violence experienced by women during the pandemic caused by social isolation and financial stress and exacerbated by increased barriers to women's ability to seek help. The study found that two-thirds of women reporting domestic violence incidents had noted that the violence had commenced or escalated in the first three months of the pandemic⁶².

As one Executive from the Finance and Insurances sector noted, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been substantial and deleterious for many women experiencing domestic and family violence. As this interviewee described:

"... I think the revelations that are coming out of this about what's actually the case for women in this country, I think we're only at the precipice of it and I'm really pleased to see some of the initiatives that the government is putting in place ..."

Those women or men experiencing domestic or family violence within the home during the COVID-19 pandemic were faced with unprecedented challenges in accessing supportive infrastructure that might assist them. In some cases, these supports were provided by team members within the workplace. One Executive from Administrative Support Services sector described the organisational supports and infrastructure available to assist team members in leaving situations of violence:

"A couple of my team members separated during COVID because of domestic violence issues and so we've tried to reach out as best we can to support them and to offer counselling and also more practical assistance and in the best way that we can, but even then, we have you know, being able to go and help them move out of their home you can't have too many people there..."

One Executive from the Health Care and Social Assistance sector explained:

"...the trouble is that we're seeing a massive increase in domestic violence reporting... for women, who are away from the abuser normally through a working week suddenly find the abuser in their home 24/7 and that has made a huge impact on everyday life."

⁶⁰ Jenkins, P., & Phillips, B. (2008). Battered women, catastrophe, and the context of safety after Hurricane Katrina. *Nwsa Journal*, 20(3), 49-68.

⁶¹ Doran M. Domestic violence services prepare for demand as coronavirus restrictions begin to ease. ABC News. 1 May 2020. Available at www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-01/domestic-violence-brace-for-demand-coronavirus-restrictions/12203178 [Accessed 1 June 2022].

⁶² Boxall, H., Morgan, A. & Brown, R. (2020). The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistical Bulletin 28. Canberra: Australian Government – Australian Institute of Criminology <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/sb/sb28>

Experiences of domestic and family violence also impacted those within industries that remained within pre-COVID standard operational environments. In particular, one Executive from Manufacturing described:

“...we have experienced an increase in mental health issues that are seen at work or we see manifested at work and during COVID and that includes some domestic abuse. We have had people come to work and be arrested at work for domestic incidents twice in recent months and we have had people trying to self-harm at work or domestic situations and we have people who are not allowed into the office who are begging to come into the office, so that they can get away from their domestic situation. So, we are definitely, definitely seeing that.”

One of the challenges highlighted by the changing location of work to remote-working was the lack of oversight that managers had with their team members. In some ways, leaders were given unprecedented access into the personal lives of their employees, but upon return to the normal conditions of working from the office, there were increased challenges in navigating the changed nature of leaders' roles. One leader from the Telecommunications sector described how the shifting dynamics produced an OH&S situation:

“... from an OH&S situation with people not having set days in the office and the need to have fire wardens and health wardens and CPR trained people ... For people's safety, knowing when people are expected to be there so if they are experiencing violence at home, and they have not turned up to work just having that level of understanding and visibility is actually it's very important and it's not just a time keeping exercise for organizations, it does have a lot of validity.”

Overall patterns and trends

Experiences were not limited to any one industry, nor to any specific demographic group comprising our sample. Rather, the negative experiences of stress and pressure permeated all industries and this reflects the indiscriminate nature of domestic and intimate partner violence statistics within Australia⁶³.

⁶³ Boxall, H., Morgan, A., & Brown, R. (2020). The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Australasian Policing*, 12(3), 38-46.



Impact of COVID-19 upon Children, their Families and their Education

"I don't know if it's [the lockdowns] going to scar them for life, I don't know if they're just going to give up on school. My kids didn't even want to go back to school at some point, they were like 'Mum now that I got the hang of it, I finish at 10 o'clock, why should I go into school and stay there till three?'"

The education experiences of children throughout the COVID-19 pandemic were severely impacted by lockdowns and remote learning. Victoria and New South Wales experienced more pervasive lockdowns and extended periods of remote learning, whereas the rest of Australia tended to have shorter 'snap lock-downs' and periods of remote learning, but with little notice to facilitate the adaptation to online methodologies for parents and teachers. There was also varying levels of capacity between the public and private schooling systems in their agility and pivot to online methods. This produced varied and unique experiences for many students, their parents and family units.

The quote outlined above from an Executive from the Public Safety and Administration industry, details the broader experience of many high-school aged students. Such learning circumstances characterised by compressed hours of learning via online modalities produced a context of lower motivation, less engaged learning, and decreased desire to participate in the learning environment. This could be contrasted by younger students who required greater hands-on support for learning, which was not always available. At the same time as students were navigating a 'new normal' of learning, parents were also working to navigate the changed learning environment alongside their children.

The nuanced experiences of mothers and fathers

There is little doubt that the experience of navigating through the multi-layered experiences of COVID-19 in Australia were challenging for parents. Not only were employees required to perform their working roles and to meet their ever-changing work demands, their responsibilities as parents also increased. As parents, they were faced with shifting conditions over the course of the pandemic around childcare, the roles of grandparents, access to childcare centres and schools, and alternate care arrangements. Layered on this, employees shifted to working remotely with little notice, being required to overhaul their working roles in some circumstances or being redeployed to entirely different work functions, while juggling the caregiving of children within the home. As one Executive from the Education and Training sector noted:

"... I think there's been a whole lot of things I've noticed with parents and again it feels to me like a bit of a kaleidoscope where the circumstances facing parents were changing all the time. So, there was the issue of whether childcare was open, which it tended to be open, more when the schools were closed in Victoria ... It was really, really tough and worrying about the physical and mental health of the kids. So, I don't know, it just felt such a jumble..."

Across the course of the pandemic, existing support structures that families had in place to support the care of children while parents worked, were often constricted or removed unless employees were essential workers. This depletion in support structures for caregiving produced various unintended consequences for employees.



The depletion of support structures

Within many households, there was a suite of support structures that underpinned the capacity of parents to engage in the workforce and their children's education and homeschooling in particular. The changing capacity of these support structures around the care of children through lockdowns, closures or ill health, for example, placed additional pressures on working parents. One Executive from the Education and Training sector described:

"Women in my team, who have young children, have been significantly challenged, I think, for numerous reasons, I think. Especially sort of in the states like Victoria with those extended lockdowns and that so there's no childcare available, also not an opportunity to utilize support from grandparents, you know, which can usually offer you, sort of, just space and time and I think certainly I've seen that it's almost just a compounding thing, if there's no let up, so it's just you from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to sleep. They're involved in something, they're engaged somehow in keeping things moving whether it's work, children, housework, and cooking and that's been I think quite overwhelming, at times, not having that release."

For many households, the supports provided by family (e.g., grandparents, aunts, or uncles) when removed through lockdowns hampered parents' abilities to actively engage with their work. One Executive from the Education and Training sector described the experiences of members within her team:

"... I've had that experience with people who've got young children on our staff and so much depends on whether they have somebody in their family close by that can lend a hand."

She went on to describe the experiences of employees with children which often depended on housing characteristics during periods of lockdown and social isolation:

"...and even breaking it down further I know that some of the stuff I talked about like the differences between whether they're in an apartment or they've got a little backyard for the kids. I've actually heard all of these variables talked about as making a huge difference. Things that we wouldn't have even known before. I just think about some of the people who are in the team that I lead and there is a male who has young children, but all of their close friends and families are in another country and so he's been very isolated without support, and so I would say it's been extremely, extremely, hard for him."

These experiences of dramatically shifting support structures for the care of children produced numerous unintended consequences. As one Executive from the Education and Training sector suggested, these impacts will only be fully realised for many employees through the course of upcoming career development planning or performance management reviews, particularly for women:

"... people are so focused on the now and that's one thing I've certainly noticed is that even thinking to the next few years become a huge challenge in education. It's unfolding still by the day, what they're dealing with they're just so completely consumed by the logistics of it, as much as anything, but the day to day is all that they can talk about right now, is this new adaptive challenge they're facing that they can hardly solve. So, thinking about their own professional development for next year or their vision of leadership or anything right now feels like just a bridge too far, it's just completely off their radar, they don't have the bandwidth or interest in it right now."

To the extent that employees, men and women, have had to refocus their attention and energy on work demands, and their children's education over the past two years, they may have missed opportunities for professional development and growth for the upcoming twelve to eighteen months.

Not only were interviewees themselves managing the changing standards of professional development and promotion throughout the pandemic for those they managed, they were experiencing these effects themselves. As Executives experienced the tensions between roles as parents, educators and employees, they too sought to most effectively juggle their competing priorities. As one Executive from the Retail and Trade industry noted:

"I'm going to be honest and I'm not going to put my hand up and say that we home-schooled our kids because we simply kept them occupied and did whatever we could to get by, because there was simply no way we could get through all the curriculum, on top of our day jobs and managing what we normally do. So, in terms of career progression, you know all of my team we try and promote them as much as we can, but I think there's been a whole two years of just trying to try and hold on and get through this and help each other out. That's a similar story across all of the places and industries I work across."

Other interviewees described the need to triage the various roles they played at different times to produce the most important outcomes for their work and their families. As one Executive from the Finance and Insurance industry noted:

"I remember one day saying 'I feel like all that I have capacity for at the moment is to keep my children mentally well', and so that was a huge pressure on top of doing my full-time job ... I hope to come through some of the challenges that the children have faced and be more aware and engage with the children and what they're going through in the years ahead, because I do feel like they had to mature beyond their years in the last two years. They've been privy to our work conversations and they hear us and see us at work, which they have never had to do before. So, all of a sudden, they became very aware of who we were in a working sense, and so I think as a parent that made you really think about what you do and how you present it. You know, you're in your work life and if that's who you want to be in it, and if your role modelling the best person for the children, they will have plenty to take away from that."



Age of children as a determinant of home-schooling experiences

The complexity of navigating caregiving responsibilities was felt differently by employees with children of different ages. For example, participants believed that those parents with younger children had qualitatively different experiences of caregiving within the home to those employees with older children.

One Executive from Other Services explained her experience of the impact that differing ages of children had on the changing demands of their roles as parents throughout COVID-19:

“...certainly my experience has been with the younger cohort of women with children. What I’m hearing is that it’s more the mum that has picked that up, it was more the female that, and I mean there’s a couple of examples I know of where it’s been a man, a little bit, but it’s my experience that it has been the female abandoned to that.”

Even in contexts where employees had entirely supportive partnerships within the home, the sustained impacts of lockdowns and changing childcare arrangements were evidenced in the reduced wellbeing of employees. As this same Executive from Other Services sector explains:

“I found it quite interesting being on Zoom calls with people who I knew, particularly this last lockdown with COVID and a lot of our key personnel within the Sydney Southwest hotspot area, and I remember being on one call with our CFO, who’s female and she’s got two kids around the same age as mine and so her husband was very helpful and did a really good job, but I remember, towards the end she had these bags under her eyes and she was so tired and you know doing a big job, trying to school from home, and then they had all these draconian measures where they’re only allowed out of the House for an hour a day at one point and it was just insane, so they’d go for a walk together for the one hour.”

Those interviewees who had younger children themselves, or whom had employees with younger children, noted substantial challenges with greater reliance by younger children on parental support to facilitate their learning. One interviewee from the Education and Training sector noted his own experience of navigating care and schooling, and reflected on his friends’ experiences, stating:

“... from my experience with people at work, and also my friends outside of work, in terms of the ages of the children, certainly, I found that my friends or people in my team with very young children or children up to sort of that prep/grade one, are really struggling because they have to look after the kids or the home-schooling and have no choice but to really get involved, whereas, once the kids get a little bit older they’re able to kind of go off and do the homework themselves and it’s more about just making sure they’re doing it. Then there are all the kids in their teens, the mental health impact of not being able to connect with their friends, but I think there is a different impact on the different ages of kids from feedback I’ve been getting.”

Many organisations adopted a variety of strategies to support their employees to juggle the multiple and competing priorities. As one Executive from the Finance and Insurance industry noted:

“We did a lot of communications, and with global markets we’ve been mindful of not starting meetings now before 9.30 and giving people a chance to get the kids online and on to devices and all of that type of thing and we had to provide a lot of flexibility with people. We saw a lot of people would basically put their ‘out of office’ on between the hours of ten and two or nine and three and they’d have to focus on the school work and then basically once home-schooling was finished, you’d see them come back online and start to pick up work. That meant now we’re working really late into the evening to get through their workload, like the work didn’t stop, it still kept coming and people had to change the way that works, then we also had technology issues. With suddenly 50,000 people kind of working from home or remotely working, bandwidth couldn’t cope. We then had people who couldn’t get into the network. So that impacted the capacity to be able to do their work effectively, but yeah lots of struggles. And I just think you know the different types of problems and even you know your older children who are stuck at home with you, massive issues as well as just different issues.”

The demanding workloads for employees produced contexts where the entire structure of the working day was changed to accommodate the caregiving responsibilities of parents. There were some employees, however, for whom this was impossible to do. As one interviewee from the Finance and Insurance sector noted:

“So schooling was one thing, and it was very hard, so I was hearing split shifts, so you know, particularly the females getting up early in the morning doing some work and getting the kids started and then trying to sort of juggle between the two, and so, in the end parents whether they both worked or single parents were just kind of like, ‘The kids are going to have to fend for themselves.’ The younger ones, those under school age and the early school age, it was unbelievably hard.

I’ve heard a lot of firsthand stories and I think for that group, it was just incredibly difficult, and I do have anecdotes of people leaving the workforce during that period, particularly when the second lockdown happened.”

As another Executive from the Finance and Insurance sector also contributed:

“I think the other area that we’re seeing is the number of people resigning and then it’s increasing the workload of everybody else right, and so everyone was already working so much and now they’re working so much more and then there’s errands and then you’ve got complaints and then it just feels like it’s escalating and then everyone’s like, ‘I can’t do my job’, probably because you’re not doing your job properly, and if there’s a little bit of, this sounds terrible, but it just feels like there’s a pressure cooker at the moment and I’m worried about that impact on people’s mental health, you know you’re getting emails at midnight and sure you used to, as you know, like that does happen every now and again, and whatever, but it just feels like the types of people I’m getting an email from at midnight, I go, I never would have seen that before. So, I do worry that we’re not at the end and yes, it’s just that exhaustion of people.”

As these interviewees note, the work demands did not reduce during the period that employees were navigating the dual roles as both educators and employees. Rather the hours of completing work shifted into what was previously considered as ‘after hours’. However, as the pandemic proceeded ‘after hours’ became extremely blurred for some. This experience increased the stress and reduced the mental health of many individuals and their capacity to effectively contribute to their children’s education and mental well-being.

The complex outcomes for the mental health of children

As remote work and schooling persisted, the experiences of boys and girls produced various negative outcomes with regard to their mental health and wellbeing.

As an Executive from the Finance and Insurance sector described:

“...I’ve seen in talking to a number of other parents of kids of this age and that it has been hit and miss ... when you didn’t have to have your camera on, the kids weren’t actually getting out of bed, and this is very much in Melbourne right, because of the extent of the lockdowns over such a long period of time. The kids wouldn’t get out of it and so they were in bed. Oh, they were waking up in the morning, ‘I’ll open my computer, I’ll hit on and I’m at school. I’m still lying down I’m in my pyjamas and you know, and then they’re staying up later. There’s so much screen time. There’s only screen time. So, no proper diet, sleep and exercise and so what do you get from that? You then have mental health issues. You have kids that can’t cope, and kids find it more difficult that they can’t regulate their emotions, and I mean certainly it hit our household, but I absolutely know that hit a number of households and we’ve had to make use of the mental health infrastructure around us, and you can’t get in to see someone anyway, because everyone else is trying to. So, it’s really a massive challenge and then that just puts stress on everyone. And certainly, what I’m seeing is when you have kids in their teenage years, they’re not interested in their parents anymore, right? So, and that’s where role models have to come in, adults who aren’t their parents that they will then look to, gravitate towards and they’re really important, but when you’re in lockdown you can only get out one hour a day. You don’t have that kind of community to support you as well.”

The complexity of this experience was not limited to this particular interviewee. Other interviewees described the changing nature of student education within schools and the various negative impacts upon student learning. As another Executive from the Finance and Insurance industry described:

“... my daughter is going to year 12 and what I’ve found, and I’ve been dealing with her teachers and staff, is that she’s lacking motivation. Her motivation has gone to like zero. She’s not as motivated and the way she looks at school now is quite different to pre-COVID because she’s been so used to, it was quoted before just in terms of like just lying in bed and not turning the camera on and pretending that you’re paying attention and stuff and months and months of that has trained her to accept that that’s okay and it’s an acceptable behaviour ... she’s struggling. She’s not as motivated anymore, she’s like questioning what the value of school even is ...”

The effects of social isolation on mental health and wellbeing were not limited to children of school age. Parents whose children had recently left school also noted the negative impacts of lockdowns. As one Executive from the Agriculture sector noted:

“... I saw my oldest struggle incredibly. Because at that age all they want to do is go out and be with their friends and they have no interest in being stuck at home with their parents and my older daughter in particular got really, really bad mental health issues. So much so that I had to kind of do an intervention and get around to medication and getting to a therapist and, you know, it’s really difficult to find one...”

Moreover, parents navigating the challenges of their reduced emotional resilience and poorer psychological wellbeing were still required to serve as both educators and employees. This produced circumstances for many employees where some additional flexibility was required. Interviewees noted their own need as leaders to be more adaptive, supportive and agile in responding to the various demands and stressors their team members were experiencing.

As an Executive from the Transport, Postal and Warehousing industry noted in her experience:

"... some of the women that work for me have got three kids and they've been home-schooling at home, as well as doing their job and I am extremely proud of how they have handled it. I think the important thing was keeping the lines of communication open so that they could have those honest conversations when they came to me and said 'Look, I am really struggling' and we were told very clearly at work to make sure that we gave people time off when they needed to have time off, even if it was a mental health day. I encouraged some of the people working for me that were struggling. I had one girl in particular, who was from interstate who just moved to Sydney as the lockdown started, she was living in a one-bedroom unit and didn't know anybody and it was really hard for her, so I think there were just so many different examples that we can talk about. How different people have been impacted but also the resilience of individuals as well."

Within families, there was significant variation in how children responded to the lockdowns and changing nature of schooling. As one Executive from the Information, Telecommunications and Media industry noted:

"... both my children responded differently. One thrived [while] the other one is still to this day, anxious about another lockdown because she's an extrovert [and] not a self-motivated learner ... I felt it probably more than my husband, a little bit as well, like he's amazing, but, yeah, I don't know whether that's just because I'm just more in tune and was very aware of the pressure cooker we were living in and how stressful work was, but that is something I never want to repeat. It'll go down as one of, not the highlights in my working career, but one of the most unique times in my life like I'm trying to juggle and be everything to everyone, where there was no formula for how to do this and everyone had their individual response and I think when you're a Mum and in a household like you feel really responsible for the people that you lead, you know your children that you care for and also all the four of us were at home 24/7."

You know the dog loved it, she's lived her best life during that ... when people say did you take up a hobby during COVID I say I actually had no time, I was working, seven days a week."

Interviewees were cognizant of the longer-term impacts of the sustained lockdowns and changing nature of schooling. This was particularly salient to interviewees who were in Victoria and New South Wales. As one Executive interviewee from the Public Administration and Safety industry described:

"I have a friend, her son finished High School and started university during COVID, so he didn't get his High School graduation and so he started off Uni on-line and he actually ended up in the hospital because he was depressed. He was [at home] all the time, he was looking forward to nothing, taking courses online means no-one celebrated finishing high school properly ... I don't know how these things will impact all students moving forward ... we don't know what the consequences will be."

One Executive from the Administrative Support Services industry described her experience of home-schooling and her concerns about her children's educational development:

"... when my son was in prep last year, he would bring his word book and go underneath the desk and just play there for a bit during lockdowns. But I know it has already impacted him in terms of his learning being able to get his sight words his sounds because as a five year old at the time he can't be online trying to educate himself and my daughter in grade two at the time, how is she going to go online and learn either and I didn't have time to sit there with a computer with her, so we did what we could but made sure to try and get my kids through happy and healthy."

If the experiences and insights of the interviewees in this study are reflective of the wider experiences of parents and children across the large parts of Australia that experienced numerous and prolonged lockdowns, there are significant issues in relation to children's educational attainment and ongoing mental health that will need to be considered moving forward.

Challenges to the Organisation of Work in Response to COVID-19

The early days of the pandemic were characterised by improvisation and rapid responses that allowed the basic functioning of organisations to continue. Uncertainty was the rule of the day. As the pandemic continued into 2021 and then 2022, new human resourcing and leadership issues emerged, as well as a growing recognition that many of the old ways of working were not going to serve organisations into the future.

Collaborative software, remote accessibility and survival

Driving much of the shift in working patterns, and in many ways responsible for the challenges to the way work is undertaken arising from the pandemic, was the increased dependence upon collaborative software and remote accessibility. Many of the respondents recounted the opening months of the pandemic as ‘a scramble to ensure accessibility to online systems’ and training in their use. As one executive from the Finance sector recounted ‘You know, we thought we had business continuity plans, and then we realized we couldn’t operate without getting 50 new PCs and laptops.’ Those organisations whose existing business plans and technology strategies contemplated remote access for workers were advantaged in the initial transition. However, many businesses were caught flat footed and needed to improvise and work with staff to overcome the technology shortfall. As one CEO in the Education sector noted:

“...so, we were surprised, in the last financial year, how we actually went above and beyond, and there was a real sense in 2020, though everyone was doing what it took, you know people were sent home without a laptop, we weren’t set up to have remote work and it took us a long time and we’re still grappling with it now, just making sure everyone’s got the right resources. But no complaints, it was amazing, people they just got in there and did what it took.”

Many interviewees noted that the opening months of the pandemic saw an emphasis upon efforts to digitise remaining paper-based systems and to capture necessary information onto shared platforms. In parallel, organisations were reorganising their workforces towards maintaining essential operations and ‘simply keeping people in work’. Several respondents in the Finance and Banking sector noted that to ‘keep people on’ in the first six to twelve months of the pandemic, people were moved from their substantive roles to where they were needed most rather than making people redundant.

Organisations gained a renewed appreciation for what was their core business, what were the core processes to support it and ensuring that these processes received priority resourcing. In this regard, the move to remote working on shared platforms enabled the pooling of staff in less affected areas of the business, either by task or geographical location, or for these staff to be directed towards areas of the business requiring additional support.

Many focus group respondents noted that ‘pivoting’ for many organisations was not simply a change in the ways of working and redirecting staff to these tasks, but often wholesale shifts in strategy and market focus. Many in the Arts and Recreation, Tourism, Retail, Education and Training, Airline, Food and Accommodation Services sectors reported that their markets had either ‘ceased to exist’ or that latent demand had to be quickly identified and serviced remotely before financial collapse. As the pandemic wore on into late 2020, it was reported by respondents that many organisations in these sectors were unable to survive or pivot sufficiently, resulting in their downsizing or closure and a resultant exodus of people in these sectors to those sectors less impacted by the pandemic.

Respondents from the focus groups representing these industry sectors recounted that those organisations that did survive, redirected their resources to developing new ways of delivering existing services to customers or identifying new markets and sources of revenue. For example, it was reported that much of the work undertaken by staff of organisations in the Education and Training sectors during 2020 were undertaken converting face to face delivery of courses and materials into online offerings. Likewise, in the Food and Beverage industry the pivot was towards takeaways, the delivery of meals and, due to social distancing and other regulations, a shift to alfresco dining where the opportunity presented.

As the pandemic continued into 2021/22, new issues began to confront businesses in relation to outsourced services and physical accommodation of workers. Focus group respondents, primarily from sectors comprising organisations nominated by States as essential industries, all recounted rising instances in 2021 where essential elements of their supply chain were significantly impacted.

Global supply chain issues are discussed in other areas of report. However, one effect of the various State based domestic border closures impacted upon firms with contracts for the supply of specialist labour. A feature of modern business is the outsourcing of non-core operating functions. However, where these outsourced human or other resources reside outside the State where the operation is being conducted, border closures and uncertainty over their imposition and lifting drove a need to source locally. One Mining sector executive summed up the impact on their business as follows:

“Unfortunately, we couldn’t find an easy way to get those personnel across the border in any sense, so we had to redraft some of our maintenance schedules and we had to also have a look at the skill sets of some of the contractors that were coming in to do planned maintenance slots, so one of the biggest things was keeping the mills online and so when the mills are not turning we’re not actually producing anything and so our preferred supplier was out of Queensland. But there were difficulties in getting them down and huge additional costs for a team to come to Victoria, just in case they got caught in a lockdown wrangle and basically had to go into isolation. So, we had to really do some clever rethinking of how we would actually continue servicing essential services for the mine site. In turn, that has actually led us to some good wins because we’ve discovered that there are other service providers that can actually provide a really good service within Victoria. It also meant we had to be more innovative and look for alternative ways of doing things with local resources to be able to look at things a little differently about how you can continue operation at full capacity.”

Finally, towards the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, there was the easing of restrictions across the country. Flexible working has not only made employees generally more productive, but a strong preference emerged among many workers and managers for this to continue, but in a hybrid mode. As noted later in the report, many of the focus group respondents reported that this has meant that overall space requirements for organisations have declined, resulting in consolidation of properties and leases on floor space. Likewise, new modes of working require different floor-space layouts, since priorities for hybrid working centre more around collaborative spaces and shared desks than do traditional nine to five, five days a week working environments.

The ‘Great Resignation’: Interruption of HR practices and organisational culture

Across all of the industry sector focus group respondents, there was a common theme around the disruption to inter-personal relationships caused by the impact of remote working upon some or all of their workforce. Primarily, these were caused by the lack of opportunities to interact face to face, highlighting the importance of human relationships and the social aspects of work.

Induction, on-boarding and appraisal difficulties were experienced by many respondents. Not only were there shortcomings in the reliance on written orientation materials but also there was an inadequacy of electronic collaboration tools to convey a sense of belonging or organisational culture. Several respondents noted the key role played by face-to-face ‘*learning through osmosis*’ or being able to see and hear first-hand the organisational culture in day-to-day operation and particularly values in action, that was absent throughout large parts of the period.

Likewise, several respondents commented that without being able to conduct a thorough on-boarding process, including not being able to physically deliver key resources such as computers in a timely way, many employees were not able to perform at the level expected by the organisation or by the employees themselves, creating additional stresses for the new employee, their colleagues and their manager. As one executive from the Construction sector reported:

“So, when we brought new people on and we, as a team are all working from home, what does that look like to them? How do you make that person feel part of the team when they’ve never really gotten to experience that team dynamic, do you know what I mean? What does that look like, or are you just hiring someone and leaving them at home by themselves kind of like with a laptop and a phone and saying, ‘we’ll see you on Teams’ or ‘we’ll I see you on Zoom’ kind of thing.”

In a similar vein, many respondents noted the awkwardness of trying to conduct the sensitive process of the appraisal interview over electronic media. While respondents reported that it was important to provide continuity to employees or a feeling of ‘business as usual’ in terms of regular appraisals, several respondents noted the importance of the subtle signals and body language which managers rely on in appraisal situations to gauge how feedback is being received and how to frame the remainder of the meeting. Likewise, they reported that managers were often left less certain as to whether they had achieved the ‘outcome’ they had intended by the process, compared to face to face appraisal meetings. This was even more the case where the manager was appraising a new employee whom they had not met in person before.

Team spirit, motivation and retention became increasingly difficult issues to manage as the pandemic and lockdowns continued. Retention or the ‘Great Resignation’, particularly in late 2021 and early 2022, became a significant issue for many of the focus group respondents with people leaving for an array of reasons which are discussed below.

Many respondents noted that in the first year of the pandemic there was a ‘surge’ by people recognising that extra effort was required to help their respective organisations survive the crisis. Though it is a generalisation, it was observed by several participants in industries less impacted by early lockdowns, that women leaders, at least in the early crisis stage of the pandemic, undertook more social support leadership than did men. Interestingly, according to the glass cliff phenomenon, women are more likely to be selected and ascend to leadership positions that involve crises and risks and are inherently more precarious. Males are more likely than females to be selected to leadership positions in successful organizations, while females are seen as more suitable for leader positions and be evaluated favourably during crises⁶⁴.

⁶⁴ Haslam, S. A., & Ryan, M. K. (2008). The road to the glass cliff: Differences in the perceived suitability of men and women for leadership positions in succeeding and failing organizations. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(5), 530–546.

At the same time, in those industries less affected by the lockdowns, few people were leaving their organisations as the uncertainty caused by the pandemic drove a pragmatic view about their work role as providing stability and security to their family or their ability to 'pay the rent'. As the pandemic wore on and either long lockdowns became a feature in Melbourne and Sydney or snap lockdowns became a feature in other States, a sense of 'weariness', 'disconnection', 'disengagement' and 'exhaustion' began to be the norm reported by respondents, especially in the last six months of 2021.

Many respondents reported that team spirit was significantly impacted by the constant interruptions caused by lockdowns. This impact was coupled with a sense that there appeared to be no end in sight for the pandemic, particularly with each new COVID variant that was being announced. As with issues surrounding induction and appraisal, it was reported that managers and organisational leaders were frustrated with the inadequacy of electronic media to influence team spirit and motivation.

Generally, most respondents noted the significant increase in the number of meetings and communications targeted to reach out to team members as some of the few remaining tools to combat declining team morale. Additionally, some respondents noted that organisational leaders and managers had taken to sharing quizzes, jokes or trivia in communications. Increased time spent online was often reported as enabling training in a different form, the sharing of ideas, facilitating the creative process and maintaining a sense of community that enhanced motivation, albeit in ways different than in face-to-face modes. As one senior executive in the Finance sector reported:

"I look back now on two years of lockdown and I think we've all done an awful lot to make sure that we all stay connected and sometimes that meant that we've had eight hours of meetings a day rather than actually doing any work, and I think that's made a significant impact into people's work lives, I think. That's another reason why people are so busy because there are a lot of meetings, particularly, I would say during the first lockdown versus the second. And you have to really question sometimes whether some of those meetings were important or not, but they kept us connected and they let everyone see that we were all in the same boat together.."

Despite the many efforts reported above by focus group participants, many reported that by the fourth quarter of 2021 and early 2022 they were seeing increased rates of resignation, on top of people who had chosen to leave Sydney and Melbourne during the lockdown for 'sea' or 'tree' change reasons.

Many noted that this 'Great Resignation' coincided with the economy bouncing back in late 2021. The demand for staff in many parts of their industry was seeing salaries soar and people being headhunted from their organisations. This had forced organisations to either increase their own salaries and where this was not possible, to examine other benefits, including ongoing flexibility, with remaining employees. One executive from the Education and Training sector noted that for many organisations it was the 'perfect storm'. Employees felt more disconnected than ever from their organisations. The long lockdowns and disruptions to lives had caused people to question their lives and careers and now as the country emerged from uncertain times, many firms were offering generous remuneration packages, often alongside highly flexible remote modes of working. Many focus group respondents noted that people were also responding quickly to organisations that were forewarning about a return to the old ways of working in 2022 by resigning.

Additionally, many respondents noted that the questioning of work/life balance had been brought about by a combination of increased time with family and the ability to work from home successfully, coupled with the long period of uncertainty and fear surrounding the pandemic. Many respondents reported shared conversations with employees and their own spouses around a reprioritisation of their working lives to 'what mattered most.' As one executive from the Finance sector noted:

"...and in terms of walking away from the industry, there are a couple of examples that I know of. We know it's been mentioned as the 'Great Resignation' and we keep hearing about the phenomenon. You know when things like this happen, it obviously makes people stand up and think well, what do I do with the rest of my life?"

Finally, some frontline sectors have been so intensively impacted for such a long period of time, that many respondents recounted witnessing a 'mass exodus' of workers from these areas. Of particular concern were comments by all of the respondents from the Healthcare sector reporting upon the emotional injury, burnout and trauma among clinicians. This is being reflected in the growing numbers of nurses leaving the healthcare system. By late 2021 it was estimated that nearly 20,000 nurses had quit the profession, giving up their registration to seek work in other sectors⁶⁵.



⁶⁵ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/pandemic-triggers-mass-exodus-of-critical-care-nurses-20211116-p5998i.html>

Leadership in the Crisis – More unsung heroes?

Leadership skills and good leaders are more valued in a crisis. Almost all of the focus group respondents referred to the challenges of leading people during the crisis of the pandemic. Many traits and characteristics of leaders were required: the ability to manage communications, mentor, and motivate and grow employees; prioritise core business; deal with ambiguity, rapid change and uncertainty; maintain adaptability and resilience; and deeply understand the varied contexts of their employees and the impact the pandemic has had upon them. Many of the respondents noted that it would be these types of leaders, who had emerged during the crisis, who would lead the new hybrid work environment of the future.

As many respondents noted, leading a completely hybrid or remote workforce pre-COVID was not a set of skills that was recruited for and was not well understood by most managers. During the early days of the pandemic, the critical issues for leaders were around survival and less around the ongoing leadership and personal growth of staff. Likewise, many respondents reported the 'surge' where employees responded to the crisis to help the organisation to transition and survive. However, as the pandemic continued into its second year, issues arose that acted to undermine staff morale, repositioning leadership as a critical factor in navigating the second half of the pandemic.

The first of these issues related to the quality of communications between leaders and employees. In addition, there was the management of the quality of communications between team members, especially as the increased stress of ongoing lockdowns took hold. The lack of face-to-face interaction drove the potential for unduly negative reactions or incorrect assumptions being reached in emails and virtual meetings. The onus was on leaders to be clear in their communications and to ensure they remained across team member communications to ensure that the quality of team relationships was not in jeopardy. As one executive in the Manufacturing sector reported:

"...people can overthink conversations or comments and things get escalated really quickly and I'm definitely seeing that at all levels, from my level right down through the organisation, just overthinking things and going off at the slightest provocation, because we don't have the same level of relationships established that we had previously".

Several respondents noted that leaders with greater interpersonal skills were significantly advantaged in both understanding and dealing with these communication problems and the deeper underlying needs of their individual team members.

A further issue involved the time pressures brought about by the crisis and increased workload in managing ever changing conditions, coupled with remote working. These meant there were fewer opportunities for informal chats and mentoring opportunities between managers and staff or leaders and mentees. Likewise, moving goal posts surrounding new strategies, changing markets and client/customer offerings in most industry sectors, meant that pre-pandemic performance metrics and KPI's were redundant. However, as many respondents noted, without overt communication from managers and leaders, employees were left to believe that they had to achieve pre-pandemic goals to achieve bonuses or meet performance and promotion criteria, creating extra stress.

In a significantly changed work environment faced with constant change due to lockdowns, supply chain issues and vaccine mandates, to name a few change variables, many respondents noted that it was not possible to redraft comprehensive performance criteria. Most organisations and their leaders whose business, workforce and ways of working had been significantly impacted, were reported as scrapping pre-pandemic KPI's. Nearly half of the focus group respondents reported that these had been replaced with a narrow set of output measures directly aligned to contributions towards core business outcomes. Many respondents noted that performance appraisals and similar processes had ceased during the pandemic, since previous KPI's and metrics were invalid. The constant challenges faced by organisations meant that there was little if any capacity to apply time to performance processes.

A third issue raised by most of the focus group members was the need for leader empathy, adaptability and resilience. As one executive from the Transport sector noted:

"...everything was changing so quickly. Processes that normally would happen didn't happen, and it was just things would change without any time to think deeply about implementing them. They didn't have time to process it at all properly and a lot of things were just improvised."

As a consequence, changes rarely went smoothly and the unforeseen consequences of decisions needed to be acted upon quickly by leaders. Likewise, a change in close contact/isolation/quarantine rules in one State or a new border lockdown could create the need for volumes of additional paperwork and new inductions by employees or contractors when working with other companies. It also meant learning new Government apps, reworking delivery contracts around time/cost due to delays in transport at border crossings and understanding the individual impacts upon employees in different states often with less than twenty-four hours' notice.

Many respondents reported that the personal burden of each decision in relation to a new change often weighed heavily upon their managers and leaders. This was because, through their close and ongoing contact with team members, they understood that in many cases these decisions would add to an already stressed, confused and overworked employee and contractor base. As one senior executive in the Manufacturing sector reported:

"...our plant manager for our flagship plant, as well as having some oversight on our other plants as well, has had to become everything to everybody, especially because everyone else isn't there. So, you know, people come to her and say 'Can I see my grandchildren this weekend?' and she has to work out through the ever changing rules, whether they will be able to come to work on Monday, because they saw their families and she bears the brunt of all the mental health issues as well, so she's not only managing the plant but she's HR and legal and a little bit of everything to everyone who are also managing children at home with home-schooling and scheduling around that, all that kind of stuff. But actually, she comes to work every day and meets those challenges."

Effective leaders with crisis leadership skills played a pivotal role in both the initial crisis and survival phases of the pandemic and later in managing the increasing stresses upon employees as the pandemic went into its second and third years. While much of the focus in the media has rightly been upon the contributions of frontline workers, as well as those individuals such as those in the arts, tourism and food and beverage industries who have been decimated by the lockdowns, the burdens upon leaders in this time have often gone without much attention.

Management of psychological and physical safety

One of the major themes throughout the industry focus group interviews was the management of psychological safety as the pandemic unfolded. The impact and priorities were somewhat divided along the lines of those working in front line production or delivery roles versus those working remotely, though shared issues of the pressures of home-schooling and fears surrounding catching COVID were shared by both.

Another shared feature was the open discussion of mental health issues between managers and staff and between staff members themselves. Many respondents noted that what had once been a 'taboo subject', particularly in male dominated professions, was now an almost daily check-in item done in a genuinely caring way. As one executive in the Mining sector reported:

"...we talked about the importance of maintaining our mental health, I mean, these are some of the most stressful times we have been through and I noticed that at work, some of the guys who would typically just climb into the rig and just go underground or whatever and walk away from something, were actually taking the time to have open discussions with members of their crew about how they were feeling and how they could help each other and you know, tough times for everyone, but I think it built more empathy within the team and understanding what each of them were going through on a daily basis."

As noted elsewhere in the report, increased stress, anxiety and pressure were felt throughout the pandemic. However, in the case of 'Critical Essential Workers' it was less the case of isolation causing psychological issues, as was the case for remote workers, but the need to ensure that COVID was not brought into the workplace or back to their families. Respondents in the Medical and Health Care sector noted the deep fear and guilt held by doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and carers of bringing COVID back home to their families, as did those respondents representing the Transport sector. Respondents from the Medical Sector reported that not only was there this fear but Personal Protective Equipment and social distancing protocols decreased their ability to connect with colleagues, peers and particularly with patients who were often navigating medically complex and emotionally charged situations.

An unforeseen and largely unreported phenomenon was created by the media reporting on the spread of the virus across borders by transport workers. As a consequence, interstate truck drivers were reported by respondents from the Transport sector as often being shunned at loading and unloading sites and in the case of these drivers, were being told by roadhouse staff that they were not welcome to eat or shower there. Respondents from the Transport sector also noted that compliance with the rules and regulations surrounding interstate truck driving often relies upon the private sectors provision of rest areas, food and showers at service stations. However, as this broke down at the height of the pandemic, there were simply not enough public rest areas with appropriate facilities to support truck drivers.

Organisational responses to these issues took various forms. In the Medical and Health Care sector, increased vigilance around personal protective equipment, extreme isolation of patients (at least early in the pandemic) and early access to vaccines were used to reduce anxiety. In front line roles, technology was used to substitute for the need to be face-to-face or to travel to site wherever possible to reduce numbers at these sites. Many organisations revisited their leave entitlements to ensure that there were entitlements to be paid on days when getting tested for or vaccinated against COVID 19.



As opposed to frontline workers in remote working environments, organisational responses primarily took the form of combating the effects of isolation and the stresses caused by changing work expectations, home-schooling and close, ongoing proximity to family. It is worth noting how many people were affected by these issues. During lockdowns it is estimated that nearly 60% of Australian workers were employed from home full time, as compared to 7% pre-pandemic. Additionally, parents had significantly reduced access to approved childcare and informal care arrangements such as those with grandparents, nannies and babysitters, meaning that work needed to be balanced with increased demands around the care and education of their children⁶⁶, as noted earlier in this report.

Organisational support initiatives took multiple forms. Many organisations provided access to mental health support services, organising informal on-line social get-togethers, arranging buddy systems or small group check-ins or, when lockdowns permitted, palates, mindfulness activities and yoga classes. Many respondents noted that whereas employees would previously have been reluctant to share that they had reached out to a support service, most were now more comfortable in doing so. They knew managers were going through similar issues and were also sharing their experiences and feelings.

Finally, some respondents noted that in 2022, as Australia emerges from the pandemic and the economy continues to accelerate, great care will need to be taken by executive leadership groups not to push an already mentally exhausted workforce to try to make up ground that may have been lost in the pandemic. As has been noted, perhaps alongside the move to remote working, the greatest impact upon people in this pandemic has been upon their mental health and well-being. Even at the time of writing this report, despite (and perhaps because of) the opening up of the country, COVID infection numbers and deaths are still high and organisations need to maintain their vigilance and support around mental health support.



Workplace Flexibility and Hybrid Working

Flexible working has traditionally encompassed a broad range of options with the single consistency being that flexible roles vary the traditional five-day, fixed hours work regime⁶⁷. Flexibility usually involves modifying one or more of the following with few people having full control over when, where and how they undertake their work:

1. Quantity of hours worked
2. Timing of when hours are worked
3. Sharing of hours worked
4. Where the hours are worked
5. Control/autonomy over the hours worked
6. Purchasing or selling time worked for leave

Views about flexibility changed in March 2020 as the scale of the pandemic was revealed and both State and Federal Governments grappled with how to arrest the spread of the virus. Within a few short weeks the country was in lockdown. What had previously been seen as an 'unthinkable' way for work to be undertaken by the majority of the workforce was the new norm. Nearly every non-essential, non-functional front-line worker was working from home and, due to various waves of the pandemic since March 2020 and the largely successful transition to working from home, many continue to do so.

The Great Divide - front-line, essential workers vs non-essential workers

While most Australian workers found themselves working from home for much of 2020 and 2021, especially those residing in Sydney and Melbourne, front-line, essential workers attended their regular places of work. A 'critically essential worker' was defined separately in each State, though definitions were nearly identical. Essential workers were defined as someone employed in one of the following industries, who must be in the workplace to do their job⁶⁸:

- health emergency services, including police;
- the resource sector;
- power/utilities;
- agriculture and fisheries production;
- freight and logistics;
- public transport;
- teachers;
- essential retail such as supermarkets and stores in remote locations/communities;
- major manufacturing, distribution, and critical supply chains (for example food and petrol).

For these workers, in terms of flexible modes of working, little changed during the pandemic. While some of those interviewed noted that some aspects of frontline work might be achievable remotely in these roles, there was broad consensus that flexibility was difficult to provide. As one executive in the Mining sector summarised *'you can't pack shelves, drive a bus or dig coal from behind a keyboard at home, front line workers are required on the front line.'*

The greatest changes in the ways in which work is carried out as a result of COVID-19 was therefore felt by non-essential workers and those whose roles could be undertaken remotely. As one focus group respondent from the Finance sector noted:

"I think there was a very fair argument that white collar workers have really you know, been the very, very lucky ones, who have reaped the benefits from COVID. So, I'm certainly not seeing people wanting to leave this industry altogether, but more likely people making decisions around their future career options and lifestyle choices and some changes to priorities by looking at which firms they might work for."

⁶⁷ McGuire, Kenney & Brashler, 2010 <https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=legal>

⁶⁸ https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202102/Essential%20Workers%20and%20Essential%20Providers%20List_2.pdf

Offsite working and flexibility

There was a strong consensus among all of the focus groups that the largely negative perceptions around flexible working embodied by organisations pre-pandemic, and particularly those in middle management, had been dispelled. Several respondents noted that they believed the cause of flexibility had been pushed ahead, maybe by decades. As one senior executive in the Construction sector, in relation to their office staff, stated:

“...how do you undo this now that everyone has had a taste of it and how do you argue against the increased productivity that has come from working from home, how do you do that?”

Many also noted that the ‘burning platform’ of the pandemic had forced change to support working from home to take place in weeks or a couple of months rather than traditional policy rollouts that would normally take years. The success of working from home is a widespread feature of reporting about one of the few positive impacts of the pandemic⁶⁹. It is also widely heralded as being of greater benefit to women than men, in enabling women to more readily manage work/life conflicts and the disproportionate division of domestic labour⁷⁰.

Nearly all respondents noted that despite early fears, productivity had largely risen due to working from home. While there were reservations regarding drawbacks of working from home, which are discussed below, particularly five days a week, these were overcome by the advantages. Likewise, while there were some views that a proportion of people would like to continue working from home exclusively, the consensus was that some form of hybrid working, between the home and office, was the preference and a likely long-term outcome of the pandemic. This consensus is backed up by research reported by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency⁷¹ which supports the view that hybrid working is a model desired by the majority of workers

In terms of increased productivity, most respondents pointed to several factors that enabled employees to be more productive. Besides the obvious reduction in distractions caused by a busy office environment in terms of ‘*kitchen or watercooler conversations*’, going out to get lunch and general noise, what was often referred to as ‘*the most obvious benefit*’ was the elimination of the requirement to commute to a central workplace. This change freed up in most cases, an additional one to two hours every day for each employee. The majority of employees allocated at least a proportion of this saved time to their paid work role.

As one executive in the health and medical services industry noted,

‘...And the experience of my colleagues in those cities, particularly Melbourne, is that it’s not only more family friendly, but it’s also allowed them to reduce the amount of time that they spend commuting. So many of them were commuting easily an hour a day, and sometimes more than two hours a day across Melbourne city. And so, there’s been a decline in the amount of time they’re spending having to do that kind of stuff.’

Equally as important in explaining the increase in productivity were factors that enabled people to be in control of how they prioritised when they worked and when life needs could be attended to during the day. Due to a variety of factors including the need to drop off and pick up children from childcare and school, attend doctor/dentist appointments or other interruptions to the work day, working from home allowed employees to attend to these needs during what was formerly ‘time present in the office’. They were able to make up this time either outside their previous normal working hours or during the time recaptured from not needing to commute. In essence employees were restructuring the time spent across the day balancing their work/life needs to maximise the efficient use of their time, working when they were most likely to be more productive.

⁶⁹ Henriques, M. (2020). Why COVID is different for men and women. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200409-why-covid-19-is-different-for-men-and-women>

⁷⁰ Gross, A. (2021) Equitable flexibility: Reshaping our workforce. <https://www.bain.com/insights/equitable-flexibility-in-australia-reshaping-our-workforce/>

⁷¹ WGEA. (2020b). Gendered impact of COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>

Outside of long term lockdowns and homeschooling, many focus group members also reported, either from personal experience or the experiences of their employees, a reduction in their stress. They did not have to race in the morning and afternoon to and from work to attend to drop-offs and pickups and the impact upon stress reduction was profound. Many reported that their mental well-being had been positively impacted through this aspect of working from home, as well as getting to spend more quality time with their children and spouses, in many instances enhancing their relationships with both. More broadly, most respondents appreciated the extra time flexibility brought to time spent with spouses and children.

Likewise, many reported that the guilt and stigma attached to leaving work early or having a recognised flexibility agreement in place had also disappeared with the new norm being that all employees were having to work flexibly. Moreover, many reported that those managers and senior leaders who had either actively opposed flexible working or were agnostic in the past, were now at least understanding of the benefits of flexibility. In many cases most managers were themselves reluctant to return to traditional ways of working. This understanding by managers also contributed to employees feeling less stressed about having to justify their ongoing need to work flexibly to accommodate balancing life needs.

Related to a reduction in overall stress, some respondents made reference to working from home allowing them to be more environmentally conscious employees by not contributing to increased carbon emissions. Many respondents also noted the significant cost savings in transport and parking for employees. Reduction in unnecessary interstate and international travel, and the stress of being away from family and friends, was also a factor raised by a number of respondents.

Overall, organisations across all industry sectors were questioning old views regarding the need to be present to be productive, the need to understand inputs and outputs to achieve organisational goals and examining what is actually essential work that needs to be carried out in particular locations.

After more than two years of pandemic conditions, the policies and practices developed or enhanced in terms of flexibility in working from home were more likely to remain entrenched and applied across Australia moving into the future. Even the more traditionally male dominated and less flexible industries such as mining, manufacturing and construction were reported as adopting greater flexibility, and opening roles to those whose work/life balance needs were previously not accommodated by these industries. As one executive in the construction industry reported:

“Our company has adopted part time rosters for their engineering staff. So, rotations so that they’re staggered Monday, Wednesday, Friday and they can work from home on alternate days. So that’s a huge, huge, huge step forward and for women in construction for engineering construction or really anyone who’s looking for an alternative to the six-to-six grind, five to six days a week, I think it’s definitely a positive one and there’s still a lot to go, we’ve still got a lot more ground to cover in that space, but I think it’s shown possibilities there so.”

Finally, across all of the focus groups, firms which were already significantly progressed along the flexibility pathway, both in terms of policy and infrastructure, were significantly advantaged when the pandemic struck. As one senior executive respondent in the Safety and Compliance sector summarised:

“...there was already enormous flexibility in our company and being able to work from home before, so there was no shock about the nature of that change, there was no scramble for technology to be able to make that change happen, it was something that we already had in the culture at our company and was entrenched in our policies and practices.”

Several respondents also noted that Melbourne and Sydney had suffered the longest lockdowns and these were also the cities where the majority of company headquarters are located. As such, after more than two years of pandemic conditions, the policies and practices developed or enhanced in terms of flexibility in working from home were more likely to remain entrenched and applied across Australia moving into the future.

Flexibility and the use of output measures to drive supervision

A key feature of the response to moving to a work from home environment was the light being shone on the issue of 'presenteeism'. Managers could no longer use the proxy of hours present in the office as a measure of the productivity of employees. The direct result was that formerly 'visible' employees needed a new kind of oversight. Many focus group respondents reported this requiring managers to have a deeper understanding of what employee roles were, what inputs and outputs were expected, how the roles interacted with other roles in the organisation and to focus upon these. As one mining executive noted,

"...it actually has made me more conscious, more mindful of what needs to be done and what's surplus. So being more concise in scope of works, so what is the purpose, what do I expect to see from the outcome, no I don't need a 50-page report when an email would suffice. It makes you become a little bit more aware of the direction that you're working towards."

Alongside the need to ensure that the technology was available to enable working from home, a deeper understanding of the division and integration of labour was reported as being required by businesses in the early days of the pandemic. As the pandemic wore on, many managers reported that they required assistance in learning to manage a remote or hybrid workforce. One consistent factor reported by focus group participants was the shift towards output-based measures of performance. As one banking executive noted:

"...we changed the traditional working hours and what the working week looked like by saying we just need a certain output by a certain date or time and left the rest to the individual employee."

One outcome of shifting towards outcome-based performance management, noted by many respondents, was that it has created a deeper understanding of the value chain within businesses, what is actually necessary in order for employees to perform their roles and in doing so this awareness has created greater organisational efficiency.



Unforeseen benefits in remote working

One feature of this deeper understanding of the nature of work carried out in organisations, how roles integrate into the value chain and what work does not need to be undertaken in a particular location, have become opportunities for individual employees and organisations to leverage remote working in ways that they had not previously considered.

Many respondents in the banking, insurance, finance, education and technology sectors reported that, during the first two years of the pandemic, several of their employees had relocated away from the major cities and had continued working uninterrupted. What was interesting is that it was reported that in many instances the employee had not informed the firm of their move. It was only when firms began to examine hybrid modes of working towards the end of 2021, and early 2022, that they discovered that key employees were now only able to work remotely.

Remote working had opened the possibility of a 'sea' or 'tree change' for employees that had previously not had an option. It had further caused organisations to question the need for employees to be present in the first place, especially if organisations were not immediately impacted by their move. However, many respondents did raise questions regarding ongoing connection to the firm's culture, as well as various aspects of human resource management during the employee lifecycle such as training, development, and progression for fully remote workers.

This concern was heightened for many respondents because they had seen opportunities for continuing education and attendance at courses, as well as the efforts normally applied to quality improvement, 'take a back seat' in responding to the urgency of the COVID response. One example given by a Health Sector executive was the disruption to the education of junior doctors who would normally move between hospitals in different states to further refine their training.

From an organisational perspective, other focus group members, including some from sectors outside those listed above, realised that they could recruit some employees in areas where they would not have previously considered. It became apparent that some roles did not require the employee to be present in a certain location, and that employees could live anywhere, at least within the bounds of appropriate time zone considerations. As one transport sector executive noted,

"One of the big things I think for [us] was, I had a role I needed filled and it's an Asia Pacific role, and I know when this role was advertised, the default was this role is going to be in Newcastle and the response was like 'Why does it have to be any of those locations? We've actually employed someone in Canberra, and we don't even have an office in Canberra and [we] would never have contemplated that, as many businesses wouldn't have before."

Many respondents noted that such thinking had widened the pool of potential employees considerably, making it more likely that organisations would secure the person they were looking for.

A further benefit that was reported as being identified in the early days of the pandemic was in response to the dramatically increased needs of customers in the banking, insurance and finance sectors. This benefit was the ability of large organisations with many employees in similar roles, but in different locations, to be able to pool this workforce and apply them to tackle workload pressures as they arose in different locations. Many examples were offered by respondents in different industry sectors where firms responded to the increased pressures created by the longer lockdowns in Sydney, and particularly in Melbourne, by drawing upon staff located in offices in Adelaide, Brisbane or Perth to support the additional load of staff in these lockdown cities as the pandemic unfolded. It further brought home the idea that people did not have to be located in one particular place to support the activities of the firm throughout Australia. 'Virtual hubs' could service differing demands across the country far more effectively than exclusively state or location-based hubs that existed pre-pandemic.

Expectations of flexibility

A key feature of all of the focus groups was the reported expectation by employees of continuing flexibility into the future. This change in attitudes represents one of the largest shifts in generations in the organisation of work and the way people and organisations are expected to work together.

Respondents from every focus group reflected that flexibility has become a part of the implicit employment contract. Many noted that, while it may be necessary to move the pendulum back towards hybrid modes of working as we come out of the pandemic, firms that insist on returning to pre-pandemic working modes will be significantly disadvantaged in terms of recruitment and retention. Many respondents reported having already experienced significant pushback from employees around messaging of a return to the workplace in 2022.

Many noted this push back is not just coming from people who have worked flexibly pre-pandemic, but from a large cross-section of employees and managers. This was reported as not being any great surprise to most of the study respondents. They noted that the pandemic has shown that flexibility has not only driven increased productivity but contributed significantly to improving the work/life balance for employees. Put simply, employees do not want to give up their improved lifestyle, especially after having proven their increased productivity.

While, as noted above, the nature of work has seen some sectors move to fully embrace flexibility, the shift has also impacted upon traditionally male dominated industries. As one executive in the mining sector noted:

“Any organizations that are looking to revert back to the old ways of office work I think are going to struggle to compete on talent acquisition. I think, employees that have worked in a full flex environment will move if they don't have flexibility any longer. It's moved from a nice to have, to being a requirement as an employer.”

Respondents reported that this expectation is not just a speculation. Many respondents across multiple sectors, both traditionally and non-traditionally male dominated, reported that employees are leaving in greater numbers for jobs that not only have better pay, but better pay alongside the ability to work from home exclusively or in a guaranteed hybrid mode. Likewise, most respondents reported that their respective organisations do not have expectations that people will return to work five days a week and are formalising plans for hybrid working across their organisations in 2022/23.



Downside of flexibility and the hybrid compromise

As noted previously, most respondents identified that there were some disadvantages to complete flexibility or working from home five days a week. Most suggested that a hybrid model of working was more likely to be the outcome as we emerge from the pandemic in 2022/23. This was in order to maintain the advantages gained through working from home and overcome the identified disadvantages. As one CEO in the education sector summed up:

“So, I think that’s a really big learning for us and looking at how we keep the goodness, you know, the good things about working from home, but also keeping an eye on inclusion. We have to really work hard to ensure that everybody is included, and a big question is, you know, and this is our executive team I’m talking about here, we have two people outside Melbourne now and what does that mean moving forward when we have executive team meetings? Are we all going to be in the office together in a room, or are we all going to be on Zoom? So, we’re still sort of working out those practicalities.”

Despite the overwhelming view that flexible working is here to stay, several issues of concern were consistently reported by focus group respondents. These issues were particularly prevalent during the peaks of the lockdowns, but at all times where the respondent’s workforce had been working entirely from home.

Most respondents related that levels of collaboration had been impacted. While electronic collaboration tools were widely reported as having enhanced opportunities for inclusion and collaboration by many respondents, many were concerned by the lack of face-to-face collaboration opportunities and the ability to connect ‘on a deeper level’. Many felt that while electronic collaboration tools were sophisticated, they had not yet replaced the need for social connection and getting to know one another in the creative process. Likewise, there was value in simply sharing a meal together or working together around a table on a sheet of butcher’s paper. It was broadly reported by a majority of respondents that in roles that collaborated with others in the organisation, some form of face-to-face contact was required.

Similarly, respondents reported that it was more difficult for organisational leaders to foster and maintain a sense of team spirit or promote a sense of shared identity or culture with fully remote team members. Likewise, mechanisms such as ‘Zoom’, ‘Teams’ and ‘Skype’ were no substitute for face-to-face relationship building with new employees or customers and clients. It was noted that particular groups of employees whose relationship needs were met through customer/client interactions, such as those in sales teams, were more likely to be adversely affected through remote working.

In addition, many respondents reported that the impact of working exclusively from home was experienced more negatively for some types of employees. These employees derived the majority of their social contact and connection within the workplace. The negative impact of isolation upon single people living on their own during lockdowns was an example offered by several respondents across the focus groups. Likewise, respondents identified that some people in their organisations more than others had professional/affiliation needs that are important to them and were not being met while working from home. In all, there was an organisational concern not to privilege some employees over others in examining flexibility and hybrid working. As one executive in the technology sector commented:

“I do have that concern that businesses and people will want to have that reconnection. People are going to have relocated, there is always going to be flexible working, I think, but I do believe, as humans, we do need that connection, and what is that going to look like for organizations going forward, and I’m still not sure.”

Another group who was identified as wanting to return to work as soon as possible were those whose home environments were not conducive to work, for a multitude of reasons: unstable marriages, young children, shared houses, unsupportive architecture, among others. In addition, another group were identified as those that do better under closer supervision and those employees who have either just commenced or entered the workforce and require more frequent guidance.

Another common theme related by focus group respondents to the downside of remote working was the impact upon leaders' ability to lead effectively. There was an impact in not being able to effectively understand and check in regularly with their followers' needs. The informal chats, or even the ability to gauge emotions remotely, was reported as significantly impacting effective leadership as they did not have complete confidence in how their team members were tracking. Leaders could not be sure about their team members emotional and mental well-being, whether they were motivated or frustrated, and whether they felt included or even considered on a day to day basis.

While the great majority of respondents across nearly all industry sectors reported a move towards hybrid working environments, at least for office employees, there were some exceptions identified, notably in the Construction sector. Invariably these exceptions were reported in firms that were strongly traditional, with little pre-COVID flexibility, male dominated, with a deeply ingrained presenteeism culture. These firms were reported as pushing employees to come back to the office five days a week and not contemplating hybrid working for any employees. In these instances, the respondents noted that they believed that the senior leadership groups of these firms were fearful of losing their traditional ways of working and were quick to push back against change. That said, some respondents noted that while this was the case, some employers in traditionally male sectors were now willing to discuss flexible roles to enable women to enter trades, engineering and construction roles, whereas this was extremely rare prior to the pandemic.

Finally, despite the consensus around the idea of a hybrid model for the future of work, there was a recognition by many respondents that one size does not fit all. As described above, there are multiple variables impacting upon the experience of flexibility, both positive and negative and these are each experienced differently. There is a risk in adopting blanket, one size fits all, hybrid models such as, one day in the office, four days at home or four days in and one day at home, that the true benefit of flexibility, and the ultimate learnings provided by the pandemic, will be foregone. As reported by many of the respondents, individual and collective organisational purpose should guide hybrid policy. Likewise, individuals should be trusted, as they have been throughout the pandemic and within the bounds of effective collaboration and leadership, to be the judge of how they will be most productive. Ultimately, and to the degree possible, individuals should be given a choice as to what form hybrid working should take for them.

Unintended consequences of flexibility and working from home

Many respondents noted that the move to working from home during the pandemic, and the likely move to hybrid forms of working in the post-pandemic world, has several implications.

As a result of the large-scale adoption of hybrid working, there will be fewer people present on any given day in the workplace, meaning that there will be less office space required. Given the significant cost of office space, particularly in CBD areas, there will likely be a significant saving in office lease expenses and rationalisation of office spaces as leases expire over the next few years. On the flip side, purpose driven hybrid attendance at the office may require changes to existing office architecture towards a preference for collaborative workspaces and 'hot-desking'.

A further unintended consequence caused by people having more discretionary time and increased expertise in remote communications was reported by respondents who also have a presence in community-based organisations. Several respondents reported an increase in the participation of people in these organisations and their ability to attend meetings which are now conducted remotely. While the meeting times may not have changed, people have more time to get domestic matters completed and do not have to spend time driving to these meetings.

Finally, the universal requirement at many times during the pandemic for people to work from home, has brought the experience of flexibility to men, who prior to COVID were far less likely to work flexibly. This has several unintended consequences. Firstly, most senior decision makers in organisations are men and previously, were men with little experience of flexibility nor an understanding of why it may be required. COVID has irrevocably changed this. Secondly, most respondents reported that first-hand experience of the advantages of flexibility has positively shifted attitudes of men towards its benefits and their desire to take up flexible working. Finally, many respondents noted that the attitudes and understanding of men towards their spouses, and the division of domestic labour has also shifted. Behind this change is first-hand experience with children at home and the need to work, particularly while accommodating home-schooling. Many men now want to be more involved at home. In summary, as a senior executive in the Finance sector noted:

"From my point of view, working from home has its advantages and disadvantages. But for me, it's still just the most radical thing in terms of the way we work I've ever come across. I'm not sure about the differences between men and women, but I think society as a whole has been tipped on its head."



Other Impacts of COVID-19 upon Individuals, Organisations and Industry Sectors

In speaking with people in focus groups representing all 19 industry sectors it was very clear that some sectors had been far more dramatically impacted financially than others. While it is beyond the scope of this report to enumerate or rank those worst impacted, it was very clear that the Arts, Aviation, Retail (Non-Essential), Tourism, Education and Training, Sports and Recreation and the Food and Beverage sectors had in many cases been 'decimated'.

Reports by McKinsey⁷², Grattan Institute⁷³ and the Workplace Gender Equality Agency⁷⁴ on the differential impact of COVID-19 upon industry sectors align to the reports of the respondents in this study. For example, from February to May, 2020, Arts and Recreation and Hospitality workers lost more than 40% of their working hours, with 35% losing their jobs altogether.

Essential Industries at the other end of the scale, such as Mining, Construction, large scale Transport and Manufacturing were far more fortunate, financially, and in many cases respondents from these sectors noted that it was pretty much '*business as usual*'. Nonetheless, some essential industries were more susceptible than others. A frequent example that was given by respondents in the Construction sector was its vulnerability to losing workers to the Mining sector due to '*even the threat of lockdowns on construction sites in the cities*'. Many workers in the construction sector perceived the mining sector to be '*more stable and reliable*', causing labour shortages on many construction sites. Growing supply chain issues are also an issue. As the economy continues to recover from the pandemic, labour shortages are becoming more acute across both essential and non-essential industries.

However, while the forgoing largely reflects the feedback by the respondents in this study in terms of an essential versus non-essential industry divide in the experience of the pandemic, this paints an overly simplistic picture.

There were many subsectors and individual firms in each of the industries that have been more or less impacted, dependent upon where they operate and the exposure they have had to the flow on effects of the government response to COVID 19. Also, some sub-sectors outside of the essential sectors boomed, such as the residential property sector. While there was little appreciable financial impact upon the Healthcare sector, the workload upon clinicians in hospitals, paramedics and ambulance drivers, as well as general practitioners in the community, has seen them taken to the breaking point, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne. As many respondents in this sector noted, '*it will be interesting to see how many frontline clinicians choose to leave the industry once the pandemic is over.*'

Also, there were the unforeseen consequences of State based lockdowns upon the movement of essential service providers such as safety inspectors or even the ability of people to have their property sale/purchase documents witnessed by Justices of the Peace who might normally be located in their local shopping centre. Each of these things had flow on effects and added to the complexity of variables differentially impacting people and organisations.

Additionally, some weaknesses in the Australian economy and its dependence on foreign workers, from fruit pickers to clinicians, nannies to engineers have been placed in the spotlight.

As one respondent from the Finance sector summed up:

"...we're a huge tourist state, so we've had lots of travel providers and tourism people that have had to cancel their insurance policies and they've had to go and find other work, and it's some of the stories you hear about that industry that really, really brings home how some people have been way more affected than others. But when it comes to the retail sector and that's really what we experience on our corporate side of our business, actually COVID really hasn't had much of an impact for us."

⁷² Madgavkar, A., White, O., Krishnan, M., Mahajan, D. & Azcue, X. (2020). COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects. McKinsey Global Institute. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects>

⁷³ Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

⁷⁴ WGEA. (2020). COVID-19 and the Australian Workforce. Sydney: Workplace Gender Equality Agency. https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/COVID19_Australian_workforce_2020_0.pdf

Jobkeeper and the casualised workforce

Non-essential sectors of the economy have an employment structure, whereby Jobkeeper was available to some and not to others. Early analysis by the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre estimated that up to 950,000 casual workers were not eligible for the Jobkeeper payment. They also identified that the majority of these casuals were employed in sectors most impacted by the pandemic such as the Arts, Retail and Food and Accommodation sectors, where more casual workers are women⁷⁵.

To use the Arts sector as an example, it was particularly vulnerable in regard to the ineligibility of the greater part of its artists and their support workforce for Jobkeeper. Linked to this vulnerability is the itinerant nature of the work, and the largely self-employed workforce, coupled with their inability to pivot due to the nature of many areas of the Arts being completely reliant on face-to-face public performance. Some of those Arts organisations were more able to survive: those with secure, recurring government funding, or the ability to compete successfully for a limited number of grants, or were resident in States less impacted by lockdowns, and not reliant on interstate touring. As a consequence of the lack of support, it was reported that many have left the Arts and, as focus group respondents from the Arts sector noted *'will not be coming back'*. Likewise, it was reported that this vulnerability meant that aspiring artists or those studying to enter the Arts sector were also turning away from the sector, so the impact upon the Arts sector is likely to be felt for many years to come. As one respondent from the Arts sector noted:

"It's almost impossible to get staging crew around Australia at the moment. Most people have either moved out of theatre and performing arts or they're in Dubai at the Dubai Expo or overseas following the work, but most have gone 'I can't do this anymore' which is heartbreaking, and we've lost the whole base. We've also lost really three years of study, people who studied to come up to do that and they finished in either end of 2019 or 2020 and went I can't do this. This is not a life I want, which is crazy."

Furthermore, the degree to which organisations relied upon overseas customers, such as the Tertiary Education sector, also meant that drops in revenue that could not be made up through 'pivoting' to online offerings, were again born by those in vulnerable forms of employment such as casual and contract workers. Due to the largely casualised workforce in the Tertiary Education sector, in the early days of the pandemic, these workers were often the first to lose their jobs and were likewise often ineligible for Jobkeeper.

The consequences of shifting to remote and virtual working, as well as lockdowns in the major cities, saw other sub-sectors of some industries such as the ridesharing and taxi sub-sector of the Transport industry which are also highly casualised or self-employed, effectively shut down. A respondent from the Transport sector noted that in Melbourne alone the number of jobs per week in one organisation had dropped from 70,000 per week to 5,000. In a direct flow on effect upon another highly casualised workforce, fuel retail outlets were commensurately impacted.

While some sectors were being significantly financially impacted and individuals were ineligible for Jobkeeper, the relatively small increase in the unemployment rate across the pandemic (an overall increase of 1.45% at its highest⁷⁶) and a record low emerging from the pandemic in 2022 indicates that, particularly those individuals with transferrable skills, were quickly absorbed by sectors which were relatively un-impacted or those sectors such as Finance which were experiencing greater demand.

One further unintended consequence of JobKeeper, reported by some respondents in sectors experiencing significant increase in demand for labour, was that it tied people to businesses that were either wholly or partly in 'hibernation' and as a consequence acted to prevent the free flow of labour between sectors.

⁷⁵ Cassells, R & Duncan, A (2020), JobKeepers and JobSeekers: How many workers will lose and how many will gain? viewed 21 April 2020, available: https://bcec.edu.au/assets/2020/03/BCEC-COVID19-Brief-3-Job-Seekers-and-Keepers_FINAL-1.pdf

⁷⁶ <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/AUS/australia/unemployment-rate>

Australia's vulnerability to overseas supply chain issues

Issues with Australia's increasing dependence on overseas manufactured goods, due to a decline in domestic manufacturing, has been highlighted by significant supply chain issues caused through overseas shutdowns, particularly in China. This has been exacerbated by the unforeseen impact of the return of container ships to their home ports during the height of the early global response to COVID-19 and the dramatic rise in on-line shopping.

These developments have caused massive delays to the routine shipping of goods across the globe and huge forward waiting periods for items essential to the Construction and Manufacturing sectors in particular, as well as spare parts for the Mining Industry. While the closing of international borders impacted upon the supply of labour in many industries, even seemingly unrelated social distancing rules also have placed internal pressures upon the supply of labour on underground mining and construction sites, with limits placed upon the number of personnel allowed in lifts, for example.

To further exemplify the impact of disruptions to the normal operations of container ships and the delays in loading/unloading in ports, the container freight rate rose from \$US1,446 in March, 2020 to \$US10,361 in September, 2021, alongside increased delays of between two-weeks to three-months in getting that container from A to B. At the time of writing this report the container rate is still sitting at \$US7,768⁷⁷, some five times higher than pre-pandemic levels, placing additional pressure on organisational budgets and contributing to inflation rates. Likewise, demand for products, as the world comes out of the pandemic, has seen the price of some essential manufactured goods dramatically increase, such as steel which doubled in price in 2021⁷⁸.

These factors call into question the continued viability of some organisations into the future, as many respondents in both the Manufacturing and Construction industries reported. While many organisations have responded by attempting to diversify their purchasing away from dependence upon one country, this has often meant upskilling of labour forces in new manufacturing locations, as well as issues with quality control, all causing further delays. These delays cascade down through work scheduling and retaining sub-contractors for set periods, again causing disruptions and further costs on-site.

As one executive in the Manufacturing sector summed up:

"Personally, from a logistics perspective, being able to deliver our product to customers around Australia hasn't been an issue at all. So the border lockdowns, the government or whoever is responsible for the state border systems or whatever are pretty good at keeping our product moving. My issues have been getting people around the country and the world. Also, where ports are concerned that's obviously totally different. So, getting product, even from Australia and New Zealand is very, very problematic, let alone from China or America to anywhere in Australia or New Zealand. It was taking about three weeks, now it takes about three months or even longer. For some things we have lead times out to six-months"



⁷⁷ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1250636/global-container-freight-index>

⁷⁸ <https://fortune.com/2021/07/08/steel-prices-2021-going-up-bubble/>

Strain upon support services

Many respondents, though mostly those in the hardest hit sectors, reported the strain upon support services in the areas of mental health, domestic violence and food, clothing and shelter. For example, the Arts sector has a support service known as 'Support Act' for musicians. It was noted by several respondents that as the pandemic wore on, and particularly in the second year, its services were being drawn upon extensively, placing huge burdens upon the organisation to be able to help the growing number of those in need. Likewise, respondents in the Healthcare and Assistance respondent group noted the massive upswing in women seeking domestic violence support as well as food, clothing and accommodation.

As noted in earlier parts of this report, incidents of domestic violence have increased across all of Australia during the pandemic, while States which experienced the longest lockdowns have witnessed the greatest increases. For example, for the two-year period to June 2021, Victoria police note an increase of 17.8% in 'family incidents' whereas New South Wales reports of domestic violence have increased by 9.8% for the same period⁷⁹. In many cases they noted that support agencies had reached capacity and were not able to provide the support and assistance that these women required.

A similar picture was provided by respondents working in and with the aged care system and older Australians. As children moved back into home for various reasons during the pandemic, the strain upon older Australians increased, as had the number of elder abuse cases. However, many agencies working in this space have seen little if any increased support from Government for their work. They were also under intense pressure, and in many cases, were also unable to provide assistance or ensure referrals to other services for a significant proportion of those seeking assistance.

On the other hand, many respondents noted the increased payments by Government through the social support system during the early half of the pandemic, as well as the brief period of free universal childcare, had seen some women saying, *"it was the first time they've not had to juggle between paying for food for their kids and something that was urgently needed."*

A number of respondents expressed concern and disappointment that many large corporations that had benefitted financially from Jobkeeper payments in the first six months of the scheme, prior to needing to prove economic downturn to receive the benefit. There was a manifest sense of anger reported by several respondents regarding the allocation of funding to support unaffected businesses and industry sectors, rather than support services during the pandemic. It was also considered ironic and *'unconscionable'* that those sectors least impacted were the largest beneficiaries of Government stimulus policies, while those in the worst affected sectors such as the Arts, Tourism, Food and Retail received little, if anything, from the Federal Government and, relative to the quantum of Federal stimulus, little from the States.

Another issue shared across nearly all industry respondent groups was the inability to access mental health support services for employees unless the organisation had a pre-existing contract or had acted early in the pandemic. This was also the case for parents seeking help for their children, particularly children in Melbourne and Sydney, which had been most affected by the lockdowns. Between the respondents there were over fifty separate mentions of the inability to access services when needed for these two groups. This experience was reflected by those working in the Education and Training sector, who are not mental health professionals, but rather provide coaching support. One Executive respondent in this sector noted the following:

"...our coaches are saying, particularly for women in both the health sector and the education sector, they are overwhelmed, it is just incredible and, in fact, some of our coaches have accessed assistance for themselves, because it's almost like a vicarious stress or trauma that they're experiencing by hearing these stories over and over again. So, our associates are accessing our mental health and wellbeing resources because of what they're hearing."

Many respondents mentioned that the impacts of the pandemic upon mental health, as well as the inability to access services when required for many children and adults, may result in longer term impacts on mental health outcomes. These respondents noted that the Government will need to examine current funding models, and support for mental health services and community support services in general, at least into the medium term and particularly in schools.

⁷⁹ Risse, L. & Jackson, A. (2021). Changing trajectory: Investing in women for a fairer future. Sydney: Equity Economics. <https://www.equityeconomics.com.au/report-archive/investing-in-women>

Work/Life After the Pandemic – What have we learned?

While this report has been written as Australia tries to navigate a 'new normal', the pandemic is not over. Businesses are still grappling with the implications of the past two and half years. The following section represents not only what the participants viewed as changing and what might stay the same, but also the questions that are being raised across industries about the future of work.

Overall, there was a sense of optimism about some of the progress being made in workplaces during the pandemic and the future of work, though most agreed that women had disproportionately borne the brunt of additional burdens. Moreover, this burden will play out into the future. This broad optimism, however, was tempered for many respondents around the human propensity to forget the lessons of the past when the good times return. Reflecting the dominant view, one Executive in the Construction sector noted:

"I think the learnings of the past two years will probably show an effect over the next five to ten years and I think it's definitely made people question work and how we work and again that productivity over time and work life balance, and I think once people had a taste of that freedom, I think it's definitely hard to go back to the traditional ways of working and, you know, so many things are also hard driven changes and embedded now and that can't be unlearned".

However, some, represented by the following quote from a senior clinician, were less optimistic"

"I hope we've learned lots, but I fear that we haven't and that some things will just revert back to the way they were because there's so much fatigue about what we've had to put up with in the last couple of years and that the result will be a kind of reversion to the mean or to normal because there'll be so much relief that we can do what we've done before."



Implications for the future of workplace gender equality

Australia's workforce is highly gender segregated, both by industry⁸⁰ and by working mode⁸¹. Nearly twice as many women than men work in part-time and in casual roles and far more women worked flexibly than did men prior to the pandemic. Flexibility is an enabler for women, who bear a significantly disproportional burden of domestic labour⁸² to re-join or remain in the workforce. However, it is also a significant contributor to the relative lack of progression of women into senior leadership roles⁸³.

The levelling of the playing field through forced remote working of men and women during the pandemic has several implications for workplace gender equality moving into the future. The success of more flexible work has been through either working from home remotely five days a week during the periods of the lockdowns or via a transition back to the workplace in some hybrid form⁸⁴. There is no doubt, either through the respondents of this study or the survey work undertaken in various studies throughout the pandemic, that employees want greater flexibility. They want their organisations to do more to encourage flexible working into the future⁸⁵. Likewise, organisations recognise its advantages and see a move towards hybrid working as likely in the future⁸⁶. However, there does appear to be a preference of employees seeking more days at home than organisations are contemplating.

As long as women continue to bear the greater burden of domestic care and responsibility, flexibility over when, where and how women can undertake paid work will advantage their productivity and ability to remain engaged in the workforce. The pandemic has also seen men undertake a greater number of hours of domestic labour and care with predictions that this effect may last beyond the pandemic^{87 88}. There are also predictions that the normalising of flexibility over the past two years has reduced or eliminated the gendering and stigma around flexible working, which was responsible for men being reluctant to utilise it⁸⁹.

However, many more men than at pre-pandemic flexibility take-up levels would need to continue working flexibly for this outcome to be assured. Work undertaken by the Grattan Institute has identified that women are more likely than men to want to continue working flexibly after the pandemic (84% compared to 68%)⁹⁰. If men do return to the workplace in significantly greater numbers and hybrid working becomes more of a norm for women, there is a real risk that men will gain greater face time with managers, thereby enhancing their chances of promotion and undermining workplace gender equality further.

⁸⁰ WGEA. (2022). Australia's gender equality scorecard. Sydney: Workplace Gender Equality Agency. https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020-21_WGEA_SCORECARD.pdf

⁸¹ WGEA. (2022). Australia's gender equality scorecard. Sydney: Workplace Gender Equality Agency. https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020-21_WGEA_SCORECARD.pdf

⁸² ABC (2021) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-31/division-of-domestic-labour-continues-to-land-heavily-on-women/100418942>

⁸³ Eagly, A. & Carli, L. (2007). *Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

⁸⁴ Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). *Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women*. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

⁸⁵ Gross, A. (2021) *Equitable flexibility: Reshaping our workforce*. <https://www.bain.com/insights/equitable-flexibility-in-australia-reshaping-our-workforce/>

⁸⁶ Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). *Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women*. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

⁸⁷ Henriques, M. (2020). *Why COVID is different for men and women*. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200409-why-covid-19-is-different-for-men-and-wome>

⁸⁸ WGEA. (2020b). *Gendered impact of COVID-19*. Retrieved from: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-1>

⁸⁹ Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). *Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women*. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

⁹⁰ Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). *Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women*. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

In a recent address by the former Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, at the ANU's Global Institute for Women's Leadership, it was noted that such a disproportional return to face to face working by men might render women '*invisible*'⁹¹. Much will depend upon how organisations institute hybrid working policies coupled with workplace gender equality strategies in this regard. The focus of these policies should be on progression within the organisation of those who undertake hybrid working. The greater the proportion of the workforce that undertakes hybrid working, the more likely it will be that hybrid working will see an increase in the number of women being promoted, as opposed to pre-pandemic flexibility policies⁹².

As interviewees from the Construction sector reported, the opening of some roles, such as site-engineers to hybrid working forms, will create opportunities for greater numbers of women to enter these roles and industries. Again, the more these roles are offered by organisations and are taken up by both men and women, the more likely that such practices will become normalised and advantage women's recruitment and progression.

On the other hand, there has been a 'perfect storm' against those factors which support moves towards workplace gender equality during the pandemic. Firstly, organisations have been in survival mode and, as many of the interviewees reported, '*gender initiatives have taken a backseat*'. Secondly, due to the increased care and domestic workloads created by working from home and home-schooling, women in greater numbers than men have opted out of promotion, learning and development opportunities. Finally, in Australia, in absolute terms more women left the workforce from February, 2020 to May 2020, despite there being more men in the labour force overall.

Much of this decline is attributed to women being predominant in industries more negatively impacted by COVID-19, and women being in more precarious part-time and casual roles that were more likely made redundant in the opening months of the pandemic. Many early studies across western countries indicate that mothers disproportionately sacrificed paid work to accommodate the additional care burden imposed by a lack of access to childcare and to the home-schooling requirements during lockdown⁹³. While the numbers of women employed in the economy have now bounced back⁹⁴, the disruptions to careers were felt more greatly by women. In all, the cause of workplace gender equality has been set back by the pandemic.

Employers of Choice for Workplace Gender Equality⁹⁵, as well as many of Australia's ASX100 firms, have embraced both the business case and equity case for increased representation of women in their management and executive pipelines. Most understand that these ideas are interconnected and that it is inclusion that drives better firm outcomes. Coupled with a recent change in the Federal government and its focus upon gender equality initiatives, despite the setbacks experienced during the pandemic there is a sense of optimism that renewed energy will be applied by organisations to recover lost ground. As a result, the rate of progress around women gaining greater access to management and leadership roles, tracked by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency⁹⁶ pre-pandemic, should continue to grow.

⁹¹ <https://www.crikey.com.au/2022/06/01/working-from-home-risks-invisibility/>

⁹² Fitzsimmons, T., Yates, M. & Callan, V. (2020). Employer of choice for gender equality: Leading practices in strategy, policy and implementation. Brisbane: AIBE Centre for Gender Equality in the Workplace. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/EOCGE-leading-practices-report>

⁹³ Wood, D., Griffiths, K. & Crowley, T. (2021). Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian Women. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute.

⁹⁴ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>

⁹⁵ Fitzsimmons, T., Yates, M. & Callan, V. (2020). Employer of choice for gender equality: Leading practices in strategy, policy and implementation. Brisbane: AIBE Centre for Gender Equality in the Workplace. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/EOCGE-leading-practices-report>

⁹⁶ WGEA. (2021). Australia's gender equality scorecard. Sydney: Workplace Gender Equality Agency. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/australias-gender-equality-scorecard>

Business agility, adaptability and change readiness

One of the most frequent comments by respondents was the rapidity with which organisations moved to remote working at the outset of the pandemic. Many commented on what was achieved in a matter of weeks or a couple of months and which, under normal conditions, would have taken years. Perhaps this is elegant proof of John Kotter's⁹⁷ work on the importance of a sense of urgency for meaningful change to occur swiftly and successfully.

As the pandemic continued to unfold, the need to move quickly was tested time and time again, making change readiness a key factor in life over the past two and half years. Many respondents noted that these lived and practical learning experiences of enacting change formed a new skill base for managers and employees alike, and which would be drawn upon moving into the future.

Coupled with this responsiveness, most respondents commented on how quickly organisations focused upon the preservation of core business. Also, they directed resources to the support of those areas of the business essential to driving cash-flow. Against the backdrop of uncertainty and ambiguity, strategies and plans had to be redrafted, enacted and redrafted again, perhaps many times over, dependent upon the variables facing the organisation. Planning horizons had shortened dramatically and, while many respondents expected that longer term planning would return eventually, this was not in the immediately foreseeable future.

Most respondents noted that businesses have become more agile, paying much closer attention to the needs of customers and clients. They were much better at planning. Likewise, state and national border closures forced businesses to look at continuity plans and the necessity for particular roles, functions or work processes. In many cases, this required innovation and looking deeper into possibilities closer to home, resulting in many organisations sourcing both essential front-line human and other resources locally. The pandemic proved that businesses could be far more reflexive than they believed possible and that these skills could not be unlearned.

As one Executive in the Mining sector summarised:

"I have been amazed with how adaptive we've become to overcome change and uncertainty. You can have plans that can get changed in a matter of hours and because of that uncertainty I think organizations have increased their ability to implement change and lead change and that can't be unlearned, so planning will be different in the coming years and also where we can drive our sustainability agenda at a quicker pace because people are now open to really operating in a sort of virtual world and, therefore, when we look at being change ready, we sort of understand that you can make change quickly, and you can survive and so there are certainly opportunities to do things quicker than we thought we could before, because we've proven how adaptive we are now."



⁹⁷ Kotter, J. (2012). Leading change. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Flexibility and hybrid work is the way of the future

No respondent held the view that Australia would return to the nine to five, five day a week, in the office mode of working. Even respondents from industry sectors where flexibility had been barely tolerated or not offered as a matter of practice, conceded that *'the genie was out of the bottle'*. There were many reasons offered as to why the future of work was likely to be a hybrid model that combines remote and face to face working, balancing the advantages identified by remote working while addressing some of its shortcomings.

Perhaps the greatest surprise to some of the respondents, and an overriding feature of moving to flexible remote working during the pandemic, was the increased productivity of people working in this mode. As discussed throughout the report, the most obvious factor contributing to this increased productivity was the significant amount of time (and money) saved by not needing to commute to the office and the allocation of some of this time towards undertaking additional work.

Also contributing to increased productivity was the ability of people to decide the best use of their time, by scheduling work for when they would be individually most productive during any given day/week. In addition, productivity was enhanced due to an array of stress reducing features of working from home. This was especially the case where organisations adopted output measures of performance, whereby employees were given the information they needed to maximise their time relative to objectives for a given time period. Managers could monitor employee performance through this mechanism. Organisations, therefore, are reluctant to forego this additional productivity, though they will need to realise that, at least to some extent, this additional productivity will decline based on the number of days employees will be expected to attend the office.

Another feature of the move to remote working caused by the pandemic was the need for nearly all organisations to codify policies around remote working. They addressed flexibility in more sophisticated ways as issues emerged. Through the pandemic experience, managers now have extended, deep firsthand experience in managing a flexible or remote workforce, a factor absent pre-pandemic. A lack of such experience is reported in research as a key barrier to the uptake of flexible working⁹⁸. As one respondent from the Transport and Infrastructure sectors noted:

“So there has been a 100% paradigm shift or step change because of COVID and that was the only way I could ever see that happening was something like COVID forcing the shift. So, I don't see any of the industries that I'm involved with or any of my colleagues, nobody is talking 9-5 again. So, it's been in the company policies for a while but whereas previously it might have been tolerated, now it's just accepted.”

On an emotional level, many employees who had not worked fully flexibly in the past gained a greater appreciation of work/life balance. They realised the ability to partake more in the care of their children, rediscover greater meaning in their relationships with their spouse, family and friends, as well as participating more in sports and community groups. Many respondents also noted how the rationalisation of the need for overseas or interstate meetings created additional time for work and family.

⁹⁸ Fitzsimmons, T. W., & Callan, V. J. (2016). Applying a capital perspective to explain continued gender disparity in the C-Suite. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(3), 354-370.

Focus group respondents noted widespread pushback from employees in not wanting to give up this newly found time, freedom and balance by having to return to the office. Even in the early months after coming out of lockdowns in Sydney and Melbourne in late 2021, there were many reports of employees leaving organisations to secure fully remote, flexible or hybrid work. Many report the significant number of employees who had made lifestyle moves away from the major cities predicated upon continued remote working modes. With unemployment rates at their lowest levels in fifty years⁹⁹ it is an employee market. Most respondents noted that employers who resisted the shift to hybrid working would be significantly disadvantaged in recruiting future talent.

Finally, many organisations were reported by respondents as manifestly committing to the future of hybrid working by reducing their office floor space, particularly in the CBD. Their hybrid workforce would require different office architecture, such as hot-desks and collaborative spaces which would see the need for less physical space overall.

These pressures and factors indicate that the future of work is likely to be a hybrid model of face to face and remote working, dependent upon employee and organisational needs for maintaining continued collaboration and socialisation.



⁹⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) Employment and unemployment. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment> accessed 2nd June, 2022

Addressing the pitfalls of remote working

The switch to remote working is one of the great success stories of the pandemic recounted by nearly every respondent in this study. It dispelled the myth of the '*impossibility*' of having completely flexible workforces, while dispelling many of the myths surrounding its supposed inefficiency as a model of working. Respondents were almost unanimous in noting that it had increased performance across the organisation. Nonetheless, remote working was not without its pitfalls. Respondents noted that as businesses move out of the pandemic, and more towards hybrid forms of working, these pitfalls will need to be addressed.

Fully remote or hybrid forms of working are not suited to all individuals. As respondents from the Education sector were quick to point out, there are aspects of learning that require hands on or kinaesthetic appreciation of the task that cannot be conveyed virtually. Individuals often have a preference for one of visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learning and some will find virtual/remote working more suited to them than others¹⁰⁰. The same may be said of informal workplace learning. As outlined earlier in the report, on-boarding was an example offered by a few respondents that required the new employee to be on-site to learn about the organisational culture which is largely learned by observing the actions of those in the organisation¹⁰¹.

Another issue raised was the need for working from home policies to be enacted to deal with issues of ergonomics and workplace, health and safety. Related issues were: the need for documenting what people are working on; reporting mechanisms and their timing; scheduling regular check-ins; response times for emails and the times at which these could be sent; appropriate times for online meetings; and actions to enable a shared understanding of responsibilities between individuals and organisations and to ensure work/life boundaries were not being unnecessarily breached.

However, as noted earlier in the report, once policies are cemented into organisations, it does lend inertia to policies being acted upon into the future rather than reverting to the past attitudes and behaviours.

In a similar vein, team-building and team-spirit were areas that respondents pointed to as suffering from a lack of face-to-face engagement. In addition, performance reviews and mentoring were discussed by respondents as being significantly enhanced when a manager has an established interpersonal relationship with an employee. They noted that particularly when sensitive or important matters are at stake, accurately assessing people's feelings and reactions is significantly reduced using electronic media. This highlights the important role played by the interpretation of subtle signals and body language in effective communication¹⁰².

While the sophistication of electronic collaboration tools was noted by many, nearly all respondents agreed that collaborative, creative, improvement and problem-solving processes are facilitated by being able to share things 'in the moment' as they arise in a co-located face to face team environment. Similarly, communications, especially email, but even virtual meetings were discussed by respondents as requiring additional care, since these communications were far more likely to be misinterpreted compared to face to face communications.

In looking towards the future, very few respondents reflected a full return to the office. Few expected that we would work remotely five days a week either, driving the view that a hybrid mode of working is more likely. Another shared view is that no-one is completely sure of what this will look like or the balance that will be required to keep the advantages gained from this new employee flexibility, while overcoming the disadvantages. As one senior Executive in the Education and Training sector noted:

¹⁰⁰ Willingham, D. (2005). Ask the Cognitive Scientist: Do Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic Learners Need Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic Instruction? American Educator. <https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2005/willingham> Accessed 2nd June, 2020.

¹⁰¹ Wihak, C. (2006). Learning to Learn Culture. Comparative and International Education. 36(1). <https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/cie-eci/article/view/9071> Accessed 2nd June, 2022.

¹⁰² Mandal, F.B. (2014). Nonverbal Communication in Humans. Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment. 24(4): 417-421. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10911359.2013.831288?casa_token=PEq-NhYa4CwAAAA%3AP217kBI6QrJ2MtYvWFhxeK0yRwLgFE0TC4XDWIW9RkONEofQODfJH2jfMTIn_7Qj3OJseoMaaKuTXI Accessed 2nd June, 2022.

“We have been able to do it and to make it work, but I think we’re still quite a long way from having a really good solution in terms of how does it really work? I think, you know, sort of there’s an essence of making the best of a situation, but then, as we go forward, how do we find the right balance, how do we find where the optimal level is? Because I think it’s almost like at this point now, it’s not just flexibility, and yes, it is going to be more the way that we work, but what does that look like, how has that fundamentally changed the way we work, but also how do we really optimize that and make the best out of it and get to the best decisions. Which I think it’s a challenge that we’re going to have to work through as an organization, but it’s, a challenge that most organizations are also dealing with. So, what does it look like to get the best outcomes for our staff, for our business and our customers, what is the right balance?”

Whatever the outcome, organisations will need to identify a definitive purpose/s for the number of days employees must return to the central workplace that overrides the productivity gains of working from home. An arbitrary allocation of days in and out of the office, without regard to the individual circumstances of employees, is likely to produce mixed results at best. At worst it may see many employees leaving for more considered employers.



Approaches to Mental health, sickness and well-being

A significant change noted by nearly all respondents was in attitudes towards mental health, and the shift from it being a *'taboo'* subject around being a point of discussion at work. Many respondents noted that the shared experiences and stresses of the pandemic have created a greater sense of empathy around stress, isolation and their impacts upon employee mental health. This change in attitudes has enabled managers and employees to feel more comfortable sharing their feelings in the workplace. As recounted elsewhere in the report, even in highly masculine, male dominated industries there is an appreciable shift in open discussions to include an examination of employee well-being, stress levels and mental health. A related development is more attention by organisations to well-being training including the resourcing of internal support mechanisms and external support services.

Perhaps because of the possibility of a COVID close contact shutting down an entire operation in the essential services sectors, organisations quickly addressed incentives and workplace cultures that supported attendance in the workplace while sick. In fact, many organisations extended sickness entitlements to those whose entitlements may have run out or were not entitled to them, so that there was no incentive to come into work while ill.

Unlike business agility and hybrid working, some respondents expressed doubts about how long some of these changes would survive post-pandemic. As one Executive respondent in the Education sector noted in summing up this position:

"I might be a bit cynical, but I don't know if the conversations around mental health will continue to be as much at the forefront as they are currently. I think everyone's going to get to a point where we're going to say, 'Oh well, you know, we're all okay now, so let's move on to the next thing.'"



Electronic connectivity and resource pooling

Many respondents recounted the increase in the use of virtual electronic collaboration and the role that electronic collaborative communication platforms have on improving the ability of people to connect nationally and internationally. The ability to set up a virtual meeting on short notice between colleagues spread around the country or the globe was driving innovation and speeding up business processes.

Electronic collaboration media had enabled greater inclusion, especially when travel and space are not issues. Likewise, when appropriately chaired, these platforms provided a greater equality of voice, since literally no one is at the *'back of the room'* or *'at the end of the table'*. Finally, the necessity to be more 'tech savvy' through the pandemic, will have profound implications for the rollout of future technological innovations in the workplace, as well as interactions with other businesses and customers.

While face to face industry conferences and meetings with clients are expected to return, respondents believed that widespread comfort among employees with e-communication will drive greater collaboration and communication between organisations and individuals. It was also widely reported by respondents that this development will continue to drive a reduction in unnecessary travel moving into the future.

At an organisational level the universal take up of electronic collaboration tools, as well as the full digitisation of materials and remote connectivity to hubs have opened new opportunities for organisations to recruit to certain roles from almost anywhere. This is increasing the likelihood of finding the right candidate. Many organisations have discovered how peaks and troughs in the workloads for geographically separated offices could be smoothed by pooling personnel from different offices around tasks. Again, by doing so, organisations realised for such tasks, at least, there was no need for a person to be affiliated with a particular office. They could be physically located anywhere in the country, time zones permitting, again opening up recruiting possibilities outside of the major cities.

It was also reported by many respondents that resource pooling and remote working/recruitment were likely to produce demographic impacts upon property prices and the location of services into the future. While beyond the scope of this report, it is worth noting that the 'Great Resignation' and the 'Great Migration' reported upon by many of the focus group respondents are being seen in current ABS employment movement data¹⁰³ and in the dramatic increase in property prices in regions outside the metropolitan areas of the major cities¹⁰⁴. Should the trend in shifting towards complete remote working continue beyond the pandemic, this development will have significant implications for infrastructure development and investment into the future.

¹⁰³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) Employment and unemployment. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment> accessed 2nd June, 2022

¹⁰⁴ CoreLogic (2022). Regional Australia property dominates as profit-making resales surge. News and Research. <https://www.corelogic.com.au/news-research/news/2022/regional-australia-property-dominates-as-profit-making-resales-surge> Accessed 2nd June, 2022.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The pandemic has been a seismic event impacting the lives of people around the globe. It has seen tremendous loss of life and financial hardship. The pandemic has caused increased stress, anxiety and depression, particularly for women, as well as commensurate positive changes in attitudes towards the importance of health, well-being and community. Finally, it has created the greatest shift in the way in which work is carried out since the introduction of the computer.

The following recommendations are made that address these core issues, and the many related issues, that emerged from this analysis of the survey and focus group evidence:

1. Early Education and Childcare:

One of the greatest inhibitors to women's workforce progression, and one of the greatest stressors during the pandemic, was home-schooling and childcare. This was also an issue pre-pandemic. The out-of-pocket cost to Australian families for childcare is nearly double that of the average cost for OECD countries. Likewise, early childhood education has gained greater importance with the lost opportunities for learning for children aged 0-5 years during the pandemic. It is widely understood that early childhood education enhances children's learning and development, as well as their social and emotional development.

It is recommended that there be greater investment in childcare including significant Child Care Subsidy reforms in line with global best practice policies. A preferable solution is the adoption of a fully state funded flexible, longer hours, early education and universal child care model for ages 0-5.

It is recommended that out of hour's school care at all schools for ages 5-16 be considered and recognised as part of the response to investing in improved childcare and that greater investment by State governments be made in support of these services.

2. Children's Mental Health:

There were widespread reports of the impact of lockdown isolation on the social and emotional welfare of all children. The impacts of this isolation, and the general trauma of the pandemic, are likely to be felt for many years.

It is recommended that the Federal Government provide States in the longer term with funding for the appointment of a trained psychologist/therapist to all primary and secondary schools; and initially in the shorter term the allocation of a visiting psychologist across a number schools to monitor and support the mental health of children

3. Children's Learning Outcomes:

Many interviewees who were parents noted that despite the best of intentions, many were unable to provide their children with the quality of home-schooling support they needed. Parents were not trained or equipped to be teachers. This raises serious questions around how much children's learning was impacted during the pandemic.

It is recommended that a national review of children's learning outcomes during the pandemic be undertaken. Additional funding support to be allocated to the States to facilitate the immediate funding of tutoring programs to assist children whose learning was interrupted by the pandemic.

4. Flexible and Hybrid Working:

Organisations need to continue to promote equal access to remote and hybrid working, while also ensuring that there are no penalties in pay, training or advancement for those using them. Adoption of output measures of performance and other regularly collected gender equality metrics will need to be maintained to assure evidence of equal opportunity for progression. How inclusion of remote and hybrid workers is maintained, and hybrid working physically accommodated, needs to be a key priority for businesses emerging from the pandemic. In addition, organisations will need to be clear in their strategy around 'the individual purpose in attending the office' for determining the right balance in hybrid working policies.

It is recommended that, responsive to a given organisational context, organisations adopt an output measures and purpose focus in approaches to the integration of long-term hybrid working arrangements for their employees.

5. Continuance of Mental Health Support:

The impact of the mental strain, anxiety and stress characteristic of 2020/2021, and the fatigue, exhaustion and burnout widely reported in late 2021 and early 2022, will continue to be felt for many years to come.

It is recommended that organisations continue to resource the mental health and well-being support of their staff as Australia emerges from the pandemic.

It is recommended that State and Federal Governments increase and secure the funding provided to in-demand mental health support organisations.

6. A Gender Lens on Recovery Investments:

The measures introduced by Governments in response to the pandemic have had a disproportional impact upon women.

It is recommended that a gender lens be applied to all future COVID-19 recovery strategies to ensure that there are no unintended gendered consequences of investments made to progress the economy post COVID.

7. Rebuilding Australia's Social Fabric outside of Work:

The Arts, Sports and Recreation and Tourism industry sectors experienced the highest rates of business closure and the departures of experienced employees to other sectors of the economy.

It is recommended that additional financial support, through grants, loans and tax incentives, be extended to those industry sectors worst hit by the pandemic such as the Arts, Tourism, Sports and Recreation, and to the educational and training pipelines leading into these industries.

8. Equalise Parental Leave Entitlements:

The division of domestic labour and gender role stereotypes around childcare were linked to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic upon women's mental health, and their ability to take up progression, learning and development opportunities.

It is recommended that, to encourage a greater equalisation of the division of domestic labour, there is a legislated equalisation of paid parental and carers leave entitlements to each parent, and an extension of superannuation entitlements to these payments.

9. Social Support Investment:

The pandemic revealed that the social support agencies working in the areas of domestic violence and emergency food, clothing and accommodation were overwhelmed.

It is recommended that Federal and State governments significantly increase funding of key, in-demand, social infrastructure, community support agencies and charities in the areas of counselling, food, accommodation and housing and domestic violence services.

It is recommended that funding models for social infrastructure organisations provide greater assurance around their continuity of future funding by providing more multi-year grants and greater certainty around future funding decisions, to enable agencies to better plan their activities and retain critical staff in the longer term.

10. Address Gender Role Stereotypes:

Stereotypes are acquired in early life by boys and girls, and are largely responsible for our gender segregated economy, both by industry and occupation. These stereotypes are responsible for entrenched attitudes towards women's roles in society and the division of domestic labour. These attitudes also form an underlying cause of the disproportional suffering of domestic violence by women. Any undertaking to address this complex issue of gender role stereotypes requires a whole of society strategy, led by the Federal and State Governments with the support of industry and community groups.

It is recommended that the Federal Government initiate a National Strategy for Gender Equality that addresses the fundamental and causal issue of gender inequality in Australia, the intergenerational adoption of 'traditional' gender roles, fueled by widely believed gender role stereotypes.

11. Overhaul of Wage setting Mechanisms:

Female dominated industries are also those that are less well paid. Wage setting mechanisms, largely an artefact of an era that did not consider issues around gender equality, are in need of reformation.

It is recommended that the system for setting wages be reviewed and include increased provisions around gender equality, especially in relation to the pay of care workers in the economy.

It is recommended that the Federal Government take further steps to recognise the value to the economy of unpaid caring work. Recognising and valuing the time devoted to unpaid care, and its contribution to the wellbeing of society, is essential in overcoming the unequal distribution of unpaid care work.

12. Review of Regional Infrastructure and Investment:

Due to changes in demographics and working patterns caused by the pandemic, it is possible that plans based upon pre-pandemic population and migration patterns will need to be reconsidered.

It is recommended that Federal and State policy makers reconsider the impact that shifting demographics, caused by the pandemic, have had on social cohesion and infrastructure demands within regional communities.

13. Exposure to Overseas Supply Chains:

The global supply chain problems brought about by the pandemic reveal weaknesses in Australia's reliance on overseas manufactured goods for the functioning of the Manufacturing, Construction and Mining industries, in particular. The need to import vaccines early in the pandemic was a major indication that Australia needs to rethink its manufacturing investment policies.

It is recommended that the Federal Government review policies surrounding the financial support of the manufacturing sector to ensure that Australia ceases reliance on overseas imports that have become key strategic inputs into numerous industries in the Australian economy.





Appendix 1 – Sample, Methodology, Analysis and Limitations

Rationale

The purpose of this research project was to understand the differential impacts of the response to COVID 19 upon women. Early indications during the first nationwide lockdown were that women were bearing a disproportionate burden of additional domestic labour and caring responsibility, particularly in relation to home-schooling. Increases in the disproportionate sharing of domestic labour in working couples contributes to additional stress for women and less time to focus upon career pursuits, thereby contributing to continued workplace gender inequality. To examine this, we undertook a first study that was a survey of 2,000 men and women across the 19 ANZSIC Divisions or Industry groups (See Appendix 2 for the survey questions asked of these respondents).

Upon completion of the survey, we undertook a second study to examine in more depth the results from the survey. We undertook 20 focus groups comprising of individuals from each of the 19 ANZSIC Divisions or Industry groups used in the survey, two years after the commencement of the pandemic. In undertaking the second study, we gathered data on a range of questions related to the survey outcomes, as well as a deeper examination of the broad impacts of the pandemic to workplace flexibility, perceived stress and well-being, the financial impacts and the organisational responses to the pandemic (see Appendix 3 for questions asked in the focus groups)

Findings from two studies aim to provide key stakeholders, such as representative bodies from across the 19 ANZSIC Divisions and State and Federal Governments, with a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of the responses to the COVID 19 pandemic. These changes include the ways in which work will be undertaken into the future. Both studies also highlight some of the unforeseen outcomes of the approach to the pandemic that disadvantaged women and certain industry sectors, as well as what areas require additional support in the years following our emergence from the pandemic.

At a more theoretical level, findings from these two studies contribute to the existing literature and theory building surrounding the most effective responses to improving workplace gender equality, including the contributions of human resource policy and practice, as well as the role of government interventions.

Method, Sample and Context – Study 1

Method

Participants were recruited through a targeted sampling strategy. Initial invitations to participate were distributed through the 24 professional peak bodies for women throughout Australia. Invitations to participate also requested that participants share the survey within their professional and social networks amongst both men and women to expand the reach of the survey.

Respondents received no monetary incentive to participate. Survey completion took approximately 20–30 minutes. Questions relating to the nature of work hours, the provision of care within the household, the number of children within the home, the experience of stress, pressure and fatigue, as well as various demographic variables were presented to participants.

Participants

In total 1931 men (n=240) and women (n=1691) completed the survey. The sample was predominantly English-speaking with over 86% of men and 90% of women native English speakers. The majority of participants were partnered between March 1, 2020 and June 30 2020, with 85% of men and 75% of women indicating they had a spouse through the timeframe of focus. About half of the sample surveyed had children residing within the family home at the time of survey completion; 48% of men and 53% of women participants indicated they had children within the family home.

Measures

Participants were asked to respond to a variety of measures regarding living arrangements (e.g., marital status, number of children, children residing within the home). The survey also asked participants to estimate theirs and their spouses' hours of unpaid caregiving / domestic labour within the home pre-COVID-19 pandemic, and between March 1, 2020 and June 30 2020. Participants were asked to share their income prior to the pandemic and their estimated loss of income between March 1, 2020 to June 30 2020. Estimated hours of work per week were requested, alongside anticipated promotion prospects pre- and post- onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions surrounding participant experiences and perceptions of flexible work, managerial support, hours, and ideal arrangements were asked. Participants were asked to respond questions regarding feelings of stress and pressure, and finally questions surrounding their perceived financial security.

Results

Data analyses were conducted in SPSS24.

Sample Characteristics

Industry representation was mapped within Table 4 which specifies the percentage of the overall sample of male and female respondents from each industry.

Limitations

Practical

The sampling strategy means that the respondents are not randomly selected, and the final purpose sample is not representative of the broader Australian population. Despite this, all sectors of Australian industry are represented within the final sample to varying degrees.

There is an under-representation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups, First Nations peoples, or those that may experience additional layers of disadvantage or complexity in their navigation of the Australian workplace (e.g., disability, LGBTQI+). Future research seeking to contribute to broader understanding of these diverging experiences should seek to employ more targeted sampling strategies (e.g., random, stratified sample).

The Study 1 survey provides a cross-sectional view of Australian men and women's workplace experiences. To further enhance the insights gleaned within this survey, Study 2 was designed as a qualitative study with the intent of exploring some of the themes identified in Study 1 in more detail. Again, the Study 2 sample is small and not representative, but it does provide the exploratory opportunities provided by a more in-depth qualitative examination of the experiences of the Australian workforce.

Table 4. Percentage of men and women from each industry included within the sample

Industry	Men	Women
Financial & Insurance Services	10.2	22.4
Rental, Hiring & Real Estate Services	0.9	0.6
Construction	9.8	7.0
Professional, Scientific & Technical Services	36.2	21.4
Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	1.3	1.1
Information Media & Telecommunications	3.4	1.9
Arts & Recreation Services	1.3	2.2
Transport, Postal & Warehousing	0.9	0.7
Other Services	3.8	6.1
Electricity, Gas, Water & Waste Services	1.3	1.1
Healthcare & Social Assistance	5.1	10.4
Retail Trade	1.7	1.7
Administrative & Support Services	1.3	4.1
Mining	9.1	1.5
Manufacturing	0.9	1.0
Accommodation & Food Services	0.4	0.5
Education & Training	6.8	9.7
Wholesale Trade	1.3	0.9
Public Administration Safety	4.3	5.9
Total	100	100

Method, Sample and Context - Study 2

Key stakeholder groups were identified through a search of industry representative group databases, as well as consulting with peak industry representative bodies for women in the workplace. The choice to use focus groups, rather than individual interviews, was driven by the advantage of inviting more open discussion among different individuals within the same industry grouping about their shared experiences. This enables a wider view of the impacts upon that industry, but also allowed these knowledgeable respondents the opportunity to explore with each other individual, organisational and industry wide impacts of the pandemic.

The primary criteria for interviewees in each focus group for the research was either (1) being a member or recent former member/employee/office bearer of a representative body in one of these stakeholder groups; or (2) being in a role with significant oversight over a range of people within these industry groups.

In all, 20 focus groups were conducted with 81 participants, with an average focus group size of 4 people. Focus groups were undertaken between 26th October, 2021 and 22nd February, 2022, a period immediately after the last large-scale lockdowns had ceased, and Australia was opening up. However, interviews straddled the period of the spread of the COVID 19 Omicron Variant.

Focus group interviews ranged in length from 0:48:55 hours to 1:15:17 hours, with an average focus group interview lasting 1:01:51 hours. Many interviewees belonged to multiple stakeholder groups and these are reflected in the following Table 5.

Table 5 provides a numerical representation of the stakeholder groups sampled through the 20 focus groups.

Industry Sector (ANZSIC Division)	Respondents
Health Care & Social Assistance	7
Education & Training	20
Retail Trade	5
Other Services	16
Accommodation & Food Services	2
Financial & Insurance Services	19
Arts & Recreation Services	6
Administrative & Support Services	6
Professional, Scientific & Technical Services	13
Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	3
Information, Media and Telecommunications	10
Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	3
Wholesale Trade	3
Manufacturing	4
Construction	8
Transport, Postal & Warehousing	5
Electricity, Gas, Water & Waste Services	2
Public Administration and Safety	8
Mining	5
Overall representations	145

Procedure

Recruitment for the focus groups commenced in September, 2021 and concluded in February, 2022. The researchers made separate approaches to a list of key stakeholders identified by the research team through preliminary stakeholder analysis in consultation with the Australian Gender Equality Council and key industry representative bodies.

Key individuals were invited to participate in a focus group for their industry sector via an email. In many cases key industry representative bodies identified respondents who they believed had significant oversight of the issues COVID 19 had presented to their industry sector and organised the date and time of the focus group on behalf of the research team.

Recruitment involved forwarding the potential focus group participants a copy of the Project Information Sheet, Consent Form and Focus Group Interview Protocol. All participants who consented to participate in the study were interviewed.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, interviews were conducted by the lead researcher using Zoom. Transcripts of Zoom interviews were derived using Zoom transcription VTT technology and reviewed and edited by the research team for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the focus group transcripts was strongly informed by the methods employed by Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann (2006)¹⁰⁵ in their work on professional identity construction, which is described in detail in Athens (2010)¹⁰⁶ and which occurs in three stages. Focus group interviews and individual interviews do not differ in ways which preclude the use of individual interview analysis techniques¹⁰⁷. Analysis was undertaken in three iterative stages.

Stage 1 involved a manifest analysis¹⁰⁸ of the focus group transcripts to generate first order codes. Each focus group transcript was read several times prior to coding to identify commonly used phrases and patterns of description. These data were used to create codes and to name key ideas or themes. Each text was manually coded by the research team members. Next, codes were cross checked by recoding undertaken by another team member, and comparisons made to ensure consistency in coding and interpretation early in the analysis process to ensure an accurate allocation of codes to the focus group texts. Statements by interviewees were grouped around common conceptual meanings using first order codes and names.

Stage 2, saw the integration of the first order codes and the creation of theoretical categories through a latent (or relational) analysis of the data.¹⁰⁹ Coded statements were consolidated into a concept group or theoretical category through a reflexive interpretation of the data.¹¹⁰ The interpretation was based upon the researcher's prolonged engagement with the subject and a deep understanding of the corporate field¹¹¹ and work previously carried out in researching workplace gender equality, employee progression, stress, anxiety and mental illness.¹¹²

In Stage 3, the texts were considered by code to group, ungroup, refine or discard categories based upon identifiable distinctions between them.¹¹³ This stage identified relationships between theoretical categories, while each category was considered in relation to possible associations with differential views between the respondent focus groups. This stage also compared the respondent group's similarities and differences and tested whether any exceptions or unexplained connections in the derived categories remained in the data set.

¹⁰⁵ Pratt, M.G., Rockmann, K.W. & Kaufmann, J.B. 2006. Constructing professional identity: The role of work and identity learning cycles in the customization of identity among medical residents. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(2): 235-262.

¹⁰⁶ Athens, L. 2010. Naturalistic inquiry in theory and practice. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39(1): 87-125.

¹⁰⁷ Morgan, D.L. 2013. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research: Planning and research design for focus groups*. London: SAGE Publications.

¹⁰⁸ Greenwood, R. & Suddaby, R. 2006. Institutional entrepreneurship in mature fields: The big five accounting firms. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(1): 27-48.

¹⁰⁹ Greenwood, R. & Suddaby, R. 2006. Institutional entrepreneurship in mature fields: The big five accounting firms. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(1): 27-48.

¹¹⁰ Alvesson, M. (2003). Beyond neopositivists, romantics, and localists: A reflexive approach to interviews in organizational research. *Academy of Management Review*, 28(1): 13-33.

¹¹¹ Athens, L. 2010. Naturalistic inquiry in theory and practice. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39(1): 87-125.

¹¹² Fitzsimmons, T.W., Yates, M.S. & Callan, V.J. 2020. *Employer of choice for gender equality: Leading practices in strategy, policy and implementation*. Brisbane: AIBE Centre for Gender Equality in the Workplace.

¹¹³ Braun, V. & Clarke, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(1): 77-101.

While the presentation of the findings may infer that the above process was completely linear, such an inference would be incorrect. For example, as strong patterns emerged early during data collection, further questions were asked of later respondents, after the conclusion of the formal focus group questioning and discussion, relating to these patterns and some of the early emergent themes. This process was followed in order to refine and validate our early understanding of the data.¹¹⁴ Further, the research team maintained contact with some of the respondents after the interview process was completed and they were able to present the preliminary findings to them in order to seek feedback on these interpretations.¹¹⁵

Finally, wherever possible, salient facts, figures and dates were independently verified against secondary data sources such as media, institutional and academic reports and, where appropriate, these sources have been footnoted throughout the report.

Limitations

The qualitative analysis within this report is based upon 20 focus groups undertaken with stakeholder groups representing the 19 ANZSIC Divisions or industry sectors. While steps were taken to ensure that the respondents comprised a significant proportion of identified key stakeholders (See Table 1), and that theoretical saturation had been reached, the sample is nonetheless relatively small. The possibility exists that other views may have been missed in compiling the report.

The qualitative research methodology used in compiling the report has an inherent limitation in not being able to quantify the relative contribution of each of the key stakeholder groups identified in this report. Using the data analysis methodology outlined above, coupled with accessing other research reports that have emerged during the undertaking of focus group interviews and up to the period of writing this report, the researchers believe that broad industry experiences reflected in the report are robust. However, any quantitative ranking of the relative impact between the industry sectors reported is beyond the scope of this report.

Interviews and their outcomes exist in a field of tensions between different logics such as the communication of facts and experiences, political action, script following and impression management requiring reflexive awareness. Each question posed to the respondents was subjected to rigorous prior examination. Respondent's views were sought at the end of the interview about the questions that were asked and their ideas on those that should have been asked, but were not.¹¹⁶

A significant limitation of Study 2 is the intensity of the individual experience of the pandemic upon each person interviewed. While we were seeking the views of respondents upon their industry sector and their colleagues, friends and relatives, they were also personally impacted, perhaps biasing particular responses. To help overcome this potential bias, questions were provided to the respondents before the interviews, and were limited to critical incidents and events identified in the surveys. Likewise, the focus group methodology in this case facilitated a discussion between multiple interviewees of what might be individual versus industry wide experiences of the COVID 19 pandemic.

Ethical Clearance

The University of Queensland Business, Economics and Law, Low and Negligible Risk Ethics Sub-Committee, reviewed this study in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, incorporating all updates as of May 2015) (National Statement) on the 3rd September, 2021.

The University of Queensland Business, Economics and Law, Low and Negligible Risk Ethics Sub-Committee is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Statement.

The University of Queensland Business, Economics & Law, Low and Negligible Risk Ethics Sub-Committee approved this project on the 10th September, 2021, noting that the application met the requirements of the National Statement.

Approval Number: 2021/HE002076

¹¹⁴ Corley, K.G. & Gioia, D.A. 2004. Identity ambiguity and change in the wake of corporate spin off. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 49(2): 173-208.

¹¹⁵ Sandberg, J. (2000). Understanding human competence at work: An interpretive approach. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(1): 9-25.

¹¹⁶ Flick, U. 2006. *An introduction to qualitative research* (3rd Ed.). London: Sage.

Appendix 2 – Survey Protocol

Appendix 2 – Survey Protocol

COVID-19 and the work outcomes of Australian men and women

Start of Block: Participant Information

Instructions Introduction

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project - a collaboration between the University of Queensland, the National Association of Women in Construction, and the Australian Gender Equality Council. The following information is provided by the research team about the study, Impacts of COVID-19 on Men and Women's Work, so you can decide if you would like to participate. Please take the time to read this information carefully. If you have any queries or questions about this work, you can contact Dr Terry Fitzsimmons or Dr Miriam Yates via e-mail, set out below. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you do not have to. If you begin participating, you can stop at any time.

What is this research about?

This research project aims to understand how work - paid employment and unpaid work - and home life has changed and continues to change due to the outbreak of COVID-19/Coronavirus in Australia. In particular, we are interested in understanding how men and women are managing their broad range of responsibilities, navigating new ways of working and continuing to provide care within their families. The aim is to understand the issues and challenges faced during this period to inform research, policy and industry insights.

What will I be asked to do?

Should you agree to participate, you are asked to complete the online survey questionnaire which follows. The survey is anonymous and does not ask you for personal identifying information. The results will be used for academic purposes, industry submissions to government and reporting back to industry. The outcomes of this research may also be used to provide an evidence base to inform policy about work and caring responsibilities.

Data Storage

The data will be stored in a secure environment at the University of Queensland and access to the data will be restricted to the members of the listed research team. Only de-identified, aggregated results will be reported.

What are the possible benefits?

You will be able to provide information about the opportunities and challenges associated with the changing nature of work and lives due to COVID-19/Coronavirus. These insights will be vitally important to discussions surrounding gender equality, the provision of unpaid care in Australia and the distribution of domestic labour in Australian homes.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation is completely voluntary. You can withdraw from the survey at any point just

Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service 1800 512 348.

Will I hear about the results of this project?

If you are interested, you can contact the researchers with the contact details listed below. A copy of the report will also be uploaded to <https://www.agec.org.au/resources>.

Where can I get further information?

If you would like more information about the project, please contact us: Dr Terry Fitzsimmons (t.fitzsimmons@business.uq.edu.au) or Dr Miriam Yates (m.yates@uq.edu.au).

Who can I contact if I have any concerns about the project?

This study adheres to the Guidelines of the ethical review process of The University of Queensland and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Queensland (#2020001305). If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this research project, which you do not wish to discuss with the researcher, you should contact the Ethics Coordinator, University of Queensland, QLD 4067. Tel: +61 7 3365 3924 or Email: humanethics@research.uq.edu.au.

Consent Do you agree to participate in this study?

- ☐ Yes (1)
☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Do you agree to participate in this study? = No

End of Block: Participant Information

Start of Block: Demographics

Gender Please indicate how you identify yourself

- ☐ Man (1)
☐ Woman (2)
☐ Other (3)
☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Year What is your age?

ESL Is English the first language you learned to speak?

- ☐ Yes (1)
☐ No (2)

Work Which of the following best captures your hours of work before the outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia?

- ☐ Full-Time (9)
☐ Part-Time (10)
☐ Casual (11)

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Industry From the list below, pick the industry that best describes the one in which you work:

- ☐ Financial and Insurance Services (869)
☐ Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services (870)
☐ Construction (871)
☐ Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (872)
☐ Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (873)
☐ Information Media and Telecommunications (874)
☐ Arts and Recreation Services (875)
☐ Transport, Postal and Warehousing (876)
☐ Other Services (877)
☐ Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services (878)
☐ Health Care and Social Assistance (879)
☐ Retail Trade (880)
☐ Administrative and Support Services (881)
☐ Mining (882)
☐ Manufacturing (883)
☐ Accommodation and Food Services (884)
☐ Education and Training (885)
☐ Wholesale Trade (886)
☐ Public Administration and Safety (887)

Spouse Do you have a spouse (partner) who resided with you from approximately March 1 to June 30?

- ☐ Yes (23)
☐ No (24)

Children@Home Do you have children residing in your home?

- ☐ Yes (23)
☐ No (24)

Skip To: End of Block If Do you have children residing in your home? = No

of children How many children do you have currently residing with you? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Number of Children

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10

Children's Age What are your children's ages?

	0-4 (1)	5-8 (2)	9-12 (3)	13-18 (4)	18+ (5)
Child 1 (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child 2 (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child 3 (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child 4 (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child 5 (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child 6 (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Care On average, how many hours per day would you provide **unpaid care to children** within your home, **prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia**? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Hours of Care

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0

Post Care From March 1 until June 30, how many hours per day on average would you provide **unpaid care to children** within your home? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Hours of Care

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0

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Pre-Hours On average, how many **hours per week** did you undertake in paid employment **prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia**? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Hours per Week

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

0

Post Hours On average, how many **hours per week** do you currently undertake in paid employment? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Hours per Week

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

0

Pre Promotability In December 2019, how likely is it that you **would have expected a promotion** during next two years?

- ☐ Extremely likely (1)
- ☐ Moderately likely (2)
- ☐ Slightly likely (3)
- ☐ Neither likely nor unlikely (4)
- ☐ Slightly unlikely (5)
- ☐ Moderately unlikely (6)
- ☐ Extremely unlikely (7)

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Display This Question:

If Do you have a spouse (partner) who resided with you from approximately March 1 to June 30? = Yes

Spouse Care From March 1 until June 30, how many hours per day on average **does your spouse (partner)** provide unpaid care to children within your home? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Hours of Care

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: Income, hours and promotion prospects

Pre-Income What was your income (before tax) **immediately prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia**? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Thousands of Dollars

0 25 50 75 100 125 150 175 200 225 250

0

Post Income From March 1 until June 30, how much income would you estimate you have lost, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Thousands of Dollars

0 25 50 75 100 125 150 175 200 225 250

0

126

Post Promotability How likely is it now that in the next two years you would expect a promotion?

- ☐ Extremely likely (1)
- ☐ Moderately likely (2)
- ☐ Slightly likely (3)
- ☐ Neither likely nor unlikely (4)
- ☐ Slightly unlikely (5)
- ☐ Moderately unlikely (6)
- ☐ Extremely unlikely (7)

End of Block: Income, hours and promotion prospects

Start of Block: Care

Domestic Labour On average, how many hours per day would you spend on **unpaid domestic labour** (excluding care of children) within your household, **prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia**? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Hours per Day

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0

Post Domestic Labour From March 1 until June 30, how many hours per day on average would you spend on **unpaid domestic labour** (excluding care of children) within your household? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Hours per Day

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0

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Display This Question:
If Do you have a spouse (partner) who resided with you from approximately March 1 to June 30? = Yes

Spouse Labour From March 1 until June 30, how many hours per day on average does **your spouse (partner)** spend on unpaid domestic labour (excluding care of children) within your household? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

Hours per Day

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0

End of Block: Care

Start of Block: Flexible Work

Flexible Working Outline The follow series of questions relate to flexible working arrangements. For the purposes of this study, consider flexible working to comprise of working from home, working non-standard hours, and working less than full-time.

Organisational Support To what extent would you agree that **your organisation supports flexible working?**

- ☐ Strongly agree (4)
- ☐ Agree (5)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (6)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (7)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (8)
- ☐ Disagree (9)
- ☐ Strongly disagree (10)

Flexible Support Since COVID-19 in Australia, to what extent do you see **flexible work as being practical** for you?

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (3)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (5)
- ☐ Disagree (6)
- ☐ Strongly disagree (7)

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Flexible Working For many people, the way in which work is completed (where, when, and how) has changed. To what extent would you (dis)agree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
I believe that flexible work is important (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel flexible working is something that I support (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would like to engage in flexible working more in the future (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Support To what extent would you agree that **your direct supervisor** (line manager) **support flexible working?**

- ☐ Strongly agree (11)
- ☐ Agree (12)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (13)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (14)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (15)
- ☐ Disagree (16)
- ☐ Strongly disagree (17)

Flexible Behaviour How likely is it that **you will work flexibly over the next twelve months?**

- ☐ Extremely likely (1)
- ☐ Moderately likely (2)
- ☐ Slightly likely (3)
- ☐ Neither likely nor unlikely (4)
- ☐ Slightly unlikely (5)
- ☐ Moderately unlikely (6)
- ☐ Extremely unlikely (7)

Page Break

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Past Flexibility What percentage of your working time was spent working **flexibly** prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

% of Working Time

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

0

Ideal Flexibility Ideally, what percentage of your working time would be spent working **flexibly** over the next twelve months? Slide the toggle along the scale below to indicate your response.

% of Working Time

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

0

Changed Perspectives Based on your new understanding and experience of flexible working, to what extent would you agree that you are **reconsidering the time that you dedicate to your work?**

- ☐ Strongly agree (4)
- ☐ Agree (5)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (6)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (7)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (8)
- ☐ Disagree (9)
- ☐ Strongly disagree (10)

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Stress Thinking about how you've felt regarding juggling the responsibilities you've address above. In the past two months, to what extent would you (dis)agree

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I felt I was rather touchy (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I found it difficult to relax (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I found myself getting agitated (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I found it hard to wind down (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I tended to over-react to situations (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Time at Home Based on your new understanding and experience of flexible working, to what extent would you agree that you are **wanting to spend more time at home and less time at work?**

- ☐ Strongly agree (4)
- ☐ Agree (5)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (6)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (7)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (8)
- ☐ Disagree (9)
- ☐ Strongly disagree (10)

End of Block: Flexible Work

Start of Block: Stress

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Financial Security To what extent would you (dis)agree that you are **feeling financially secure?**

- ☐ Strongly agree (4)
- ☐ Agree (5)
- ☐ Somewhat agree (6)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (7)
- ☐ Somewhat disagree (8)
- ☐ Disagree (9)
- ☐ Strongly disagree (10)

End of Block: Stress

Start of Block: Debrief

Debrief Thank you for contributing to this research.

This project aims to understand the work impacts of COVID-19 on the working lives of Australian men and women. If any of the questions raise issues for you, or you feel distressed, please contact [Beyond Blue Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service 1800 512 348](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/1800-512-348).

If you are interested in knowing more about the work we do, and the research we undertake please contact Dr Terrance Fitzsimmons on t.fitzsimmons@business.uq.edu.au or Dr Miriam Yates on m.yates@uq.edu.au

End of Survey
END OF SURVEY

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Appendix 3 – Interview Questions

1. How has COVID-19 changed the working lives of men and women within your industry sector? Have these impacts been experienced differently by men and women?
2. How was “flexible working” generally utilized by men and women within your industry prior to the COVID pandemic (e.g., start times, days).
3. Has flexibility changed since the onset of the COVID pandemic? In what ways has flexibility changed? Do you think these changes will remain after the end of the pandemic?
4. To what extent do you feel members of your industry are feeling financially insecure? Have you seen greater numbers of women/men wanting to leave the industry? What might be driving this insecurity?
5. What location-specific impacts of COVID-19 have you noticed across your industry (i.e., state-based, city/country-based, national/international-based)? What are these impacts, and do you think these impacts will extend beyond the end of the pandemic?
6. How has the progression and retention of men and women in your industry been impacted by COVID-19?
7. How might the unequal distribution of domestic labour (excluding childcare) impact on men and women within your industry?
8. How might the unequal distribution of childcare responsibilities impact on men and women within your industry?
9. What evidence have you noted that might suggest men and women are being unequally affected by childcare responsibilities within your industries?
10. Have you seen any relationship between COVID-19 and domestic abuse within your industry?
11. How has the stress and psychological wellbeing of men and women within your industry been impacted upon by COVID-19?
12. What outcomes have you noticed?
13. Is this impacting men and woman differently?
14. In what ways, if any, do you believe that the COVID 19 pandemic has impacted upon workplace gender equality? For example, have you seen any policy changes around child care, flexibility, parental leave, domestic violence; changes in patterns of promotion or work allocation; changes in management expectations or recalibration of KPI's; changes in hybrid/remote working and traditional working hours? Do you think that these changes will persist beyond the pandemic?

About the Authors



Dr Terrance Fitzsimmons is an Associate Professor in Leadership with the University of Queensland Business School. He is also a Chartered Accountant with over 30 years of practice. He is the Managing Director of the Australian Gender Equality Council (AGEC), a body whose members comprise of peak national bodies representing 400,000 women across industry sectors in Australia.

His PhD in Leadership examined successful attributes of CEOs and differing pathways to CEO roles for men and women. In June 2015, Dr Fitzsimmons and Professor Callan released 'Filling the Pool' a major report into gender inequality in Western Australia and what government, organisations and individuals can do to address the issue. In December 2018, Dr Fitzsimmons and Dr Yates released 'Hands Up for Gender Equality' a major report into the gendering of confidence, leadership and STEM career intentions in adolescents. In 2019 with Dr Yates and Professor Callan released 'Employer of Choice for Gender Equality: Leading Practices in Strategy, Policy and Implementation' with the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. This was a major report outlining the successful strategies adopted by 120 of Australia's leading organisations for the progression of women in the workplace. In 2021 with Dr Yates and Professor Callan he released the 'Towards Board Gender Parity: Lessons from the past, directions for the future' report with the Australian Institute of Company Directors. The report details how Australia's corporate sector helped ASX200 boards to lead the world in moving towards board gender parity.

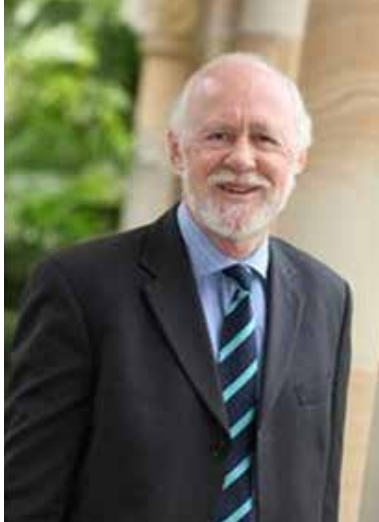
Dr Fitzsimmons has worked with many of Australia's largest firms on their diversity programs and speaks regularly in Australia and overseas in the area of gender equality and inclusion. He has served as national and state presidents of not-for-profit bodies as well as being a director on boards of Listed Public Companies in Australia and overseas.



Dr Miriam Yates is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the University of Queensland Business School and Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Science Research. She is also a Registered Psychologist and consults with organisations on matters of strategic planning, diversity and inclusion, leadership development and psychological health and wellbeing at work.

Her PhD examined the gendered nature of power and the implications this has for women and men's career advancement. Since, Miriam's research portfolio has grown to include topics such as processes of career transitioning in male-dominated industries, the 'silver-lining' that crisis contexts may offer minority leaders, intersectional leadership in Australia and projects evaluating the efficacy of gender equality policy and procedures in Australian organisations.

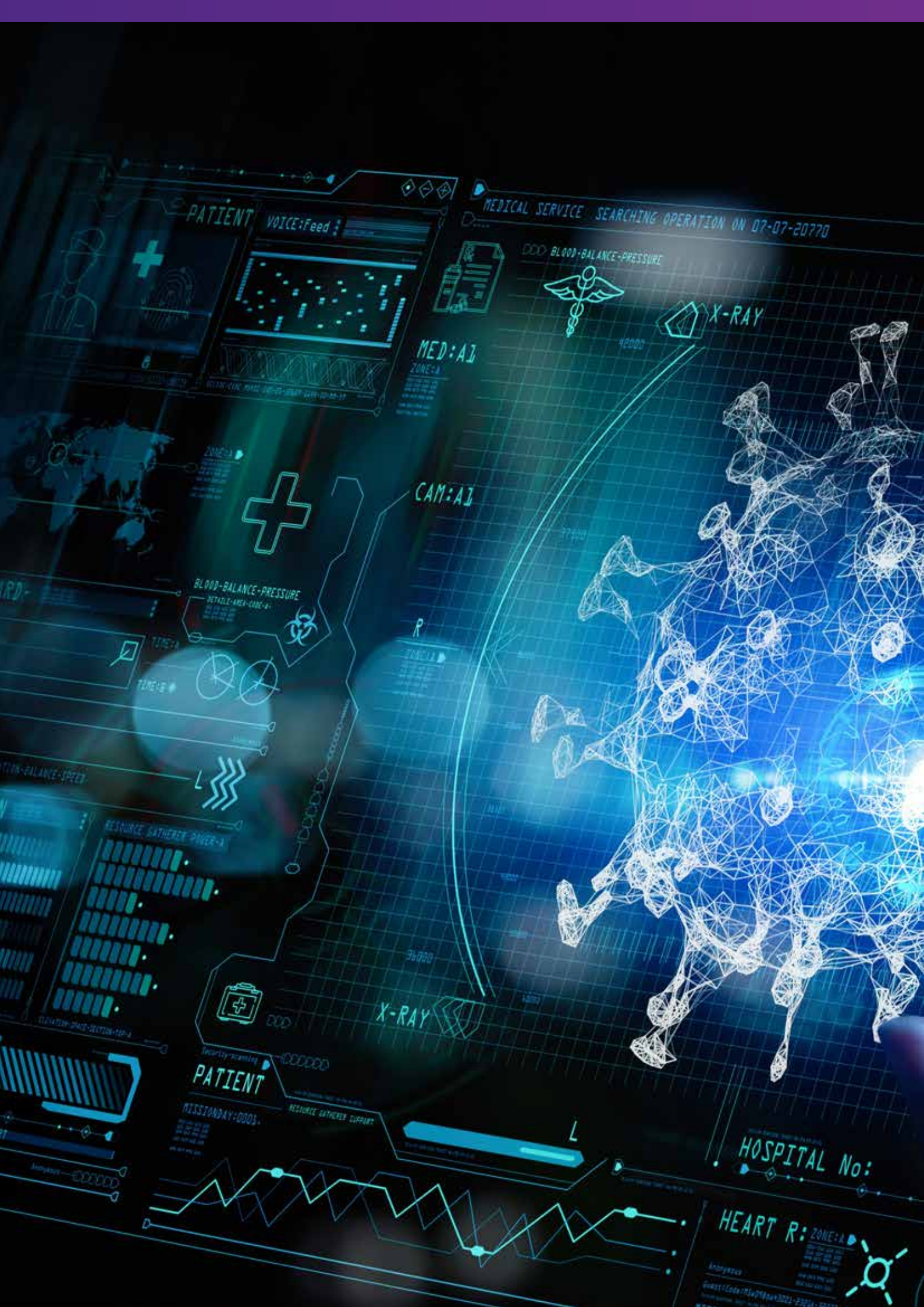
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Professor Victor Callan AM FAICD is Professor of Change Management and Leadership at the University of Queensland (UQ) Business School. He has an international research reputation in the fields of organisational change, training, and leadership. He has published in the world's leading management and psychology journals and based on this record of achievement was elected as a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. Victor is a recipient of two UQ Excellence in Leadership Awards for his roles in developing research and industry partnerships. In 2015, with Dr Fitzsimmons, he co-authored 'Filling the Pool' that has emerged as a major report into gender inequality in Western Australia, and the actions required to address the issue. In 2016, he was a member of a high-profile research team that investigated skills development in Australia's most innovative organisations in a project funded by the Federal Chief Scientist.

In 2019 with Dr Fitzsimmons and Dr Yates released 'Employer of Choice for Gender Equality: Leading Practices in Strategy, Policy and Implementation' with the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. This was a major report outlining the successful strategies adopted by 120 of Australia's leading organisations for the progression of women in the workplace. In 2021 with Dr Fitzsimmons and Dr Yates he released the 'Towards Board Gender Parity: Lessons from the past, directions for the future' report with the Australian Institute of Company Directors. The report details how Australia's corporate sector helped ASX200 boards to lead the world in moving towards board gender parity.

Victor is a regular contributor to executive education and workshops for senior executives and managers in the public and private sectors in the areas of organisational, workforce and leadership development. He has served on government boards, and completed over 100 projects for Federal, State and local government departments including major reviews on skills, training, change and leadership and workforce development.



PATIENT

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RESOURCE GATHERER POWER-A

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