

Working remotely can work for carers:

What employers have learned from COVID-19 and how they can champion change

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The widespread acceptance of and adjustment to remote working during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has provided a unique opportunity for workplaces to embrace and integrate new ways of working that can better meet the needs of employees with family responsibilities.

For family and friend carers of a person with disability, mental illness or health condition, or a frail older relative, working from home can be essential to combining work and care. Research with carers suggests that working close to home can be necessary to carrying out their caring responsibilities. It allows them to drop off and pick up the person they care for from alternative care such as a school or respite service, drop in to administer or supervise medication, or respond quickly in an emergency.

For many carers, therefore, being able to work remotely enables them to maintain their working hours and essentially, to stay in the workforce. This brings obvious benefits¹ to their employers who in return, receive commitment and loyalty from their staff with caring responsibilities and reduced costs on recruitment and training of new staff.

Until recently, the options available to carers who want to work remotely have varied considerably depending on where they work. Some sectors or role-types are highly flexible whereas others have been much slower to embrace flexible work. Employers have minimum standards they must adhere to that include reasonably considering requests for flexible work (including requests to work from home) from employees with caring responsibilities. However, many working carers are not eligible for these entitlements. Increasingly, employers are reaching beyond their minimum obligations to proactively offer flexible forms of work to all employees.

“What has come out of the world’s largest work from home experiment is a workforce with changed expectations...”²

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COVID-19 presents an opportunity for employers that have not previously prioritised flexibility to translate their learnings from enforced remote working into longer term flexibility to benefit current and future staff who are carers. COVID-19 has led to the necessity of allowing remote working arrangements at scale and pace, with many employers rapidly accommodating this change. Emerging estimates suggest that in the midst of the pandemic, between two thirds³ and three quarters⁴ of Australian employees were working from home some or all of the time.

The many Australian employees working from home for the first time have faced a steep learning curve as they negotiate digital engagement with managers, colleagues and clients. They have had to learn new ways of maintaining focus and performance in the home environment and adapt quickly to working collaboratively and meeting deadlines without the incidental contact and extra resources of the office environment. For some, workloads have intensified and working days have become longer. Others have welcomed the new flexibility and convenience that can come with working from home. Either way, employees are becoming accustomed to the possibilities of remote working.

Many managers, too, are working from home for the first time and are learning to manage their workforce remotely. In a study of 27 employers currently being undertaken by researchers at the Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research at the University of Sydney, almost all employers reported developing new insights during COVID-19 into the possibilities of working from home. While many managers had staff already working from home to some degree, those that did not reported relative ease with the transition, and an increase in trust in the process and products of working from home. Most also reported an increased organisational commitment to supporting their employees to achieve a balance between work, family and wellbeing.

In a 2018 survey⁵ of over 1,800 carers in NSW, around one third of working carers reported some form of working from home – roughly the same proportion as the wider Australian population⁶. For carers already working from home, COVID-19 has created new pressures⁷, as their care responsibilities have intensified.

For other carers, COVID-19 has been an unexpected opportunity to test whether they can sustainably attend to caring responsibilities and work at home. While many carers have found remote working helpful in balancing these competing demands, others have struggled⁸ to find the space, quiet and privacy to work effectively under circumstances in which sources of alternative care, such as schools and respite, closed down.

Despite the challenges of remote working during COVID-19, early indications suggest that while productivity challenges exist⁹, many employees are reporting increased productivity¹⁰ during this period. Managers have also become more aware of their employees' lives outside of work, and have been able to see, in some cases for the first time, that with the right support, productivity and efficiency can be maintained or increased¹¹ with employees working from home.

Greater awareness among managers of the challenges of balancing paid work with caring responsibilities has highlighted the need for greater flexibility and support following the pandemic and provided the opportunity to break down cultural barriers to remote working that were entrenched in some workplaces.

Before COVID-19, progressive employers were beginning to understand that flex is best¹², and recognise the benefits for increased productivity and employee retention¹³, this experiential knowledge has resulted in a more widespread collective understanding as to what is possible. Recent research¹⁴ suggests that the new knowledge and experience from this enforced period

As employers consider what the “new normal” will look like for their workplace following this period of crisis management, integrating remote and other flexible working practices and policies will be imperative for competitive advantage, to optimise workforce participation for carers and others, and to meet employee expectations.

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of remote work could result in a more sustainable mix of flexible working arrangements moving forward, especially in desk-based sectors and roles.

Indeed, employees and employers report that their newfound acceptance and expectation of remote work is likely to extend into the future. In a recent study, only 5% of workers were looking to return to the office completely¹⁵. In the University of Sydney study of employers mentioned earlier, most employers reported that at least some of their staff would continue to work at home at least some of the time into the foreseeable future.

Remote working is one among many ways of working flexibly¹⁶, and only represents flexibility when it is a choice for the worker. It works best when employers trust the employees they have hired and employees are supported with technology and practices that foster productivity and inclusion. Managers and supervisors need to actively set reasonable workloads with accountability and communicate these to staff, encourage staff to carve out non-work time (when they don't 'log on'), and lead by example. This will protect their employees' health and wellbeing while working at home.

Enforced working from home for many employees during COVID-19 has shown that remote working can work, and many carers report that it works for them. The substantial interruptions to the world of work during the pandemic has presented an unprecedented opportunity to advance workforce participation for carers. In those sectors where embedding remote work is possible into the future, action can be taken now to get it right.

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Fair Work has best practice guides on the use of individual flexibility arrangements and WGEA has information on developing a flexible working arrangements policy.

Visit the Carers + Employers website for tips on developing a Carer Friendly Workplace. Employers who apply for accreditation have access to toolkits, consultation and resources to support the development of carer friendly workplaces.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has developed a toolkit for employers to support people with care responsibilities in the workplace.