



Working from Home: Employer Perspectives

22 September 2021



Working from Home: Employer Perspectives

Draft Report

Prepared by

Professor Carey Curtis

Keywords

COVID-19 Pandemic; Employer; Working from Home Practices.

Version control

FINAL

Project No

iMOVE Project 1-036; Milestone 2.2

Project steering committee

Claire Thompson, Department of Transport

Renlong Han, Department of Transport

Damien Martin, Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage

John Chortis, Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage

Wes Soet, Main Roads WA

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by PATREC and the iMOVE CRC and supported by the Cooperative Research Centres program, an Australian Government initiative.

About PATREC

The Planning and Transport Research Centre (PATREC) is a collaboration between the Government of Western Australia and local universities, constituted to conduct collaborative, applied research and teaching in support of policy in the connected spaces of transport and land use planning. The collaborating parties are: The University of Western Australia, Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, Department of Transport, Main Roads Western Australia, Western Australian Planning Commission and the Western Australian Local Government Association.

Publisher

Planning and Transport Research Centre

The University of Western Australia (M087)

35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA 6009

+61 8 6488 3385

patrec@uwa.edu.au

<https://patrec.org/>

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from a series of in-depth interviews conducted with a selection of Perth-based businesses. The interviews were designed to gather an understanding of employer perspectives on working from home (WFH). The discussions centred on WFH practices and experiences before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic and on future plans. This also included discussions about the business travel and transport policies for commute journeys and on any internal or external changes to business floorspace.

Businesses were selected using three sources: the WA Land Use and Employment survey (conducted between 2017 and 2017) which provides a census of all businesses in WA; members of the Committee for Perth (by invitation); and by applying a snowballing technique. The aim was to ensure representation of businesses by industry type (focussing on those that had the potential to WFH), size (number of employees) and geography (focussing in the Greater Perth area). Twenty businesses participated.

Key insights are as follows:

- Prior to the pandemic WFH practices were mainly insignificant.
 - WA's first lockdown saw a major shift to WFH practices, and a need by businesses to equip and support staff to do so.
 - There has been a significant acceleration of WFH practice with almost all businesses now practicing a hybrid WFH model, with two days at home and three days in the office being the most common work pattern.
 - Where businesses requiring their staff to be back in the workplace, they now embraced a more flexible working practice where it was permissible for staff to WFH on occasions.
 - Work from home was more suited to certain types of tasks, rather than being distinguished by occupation or industry type. Tasks that required close collaboration between colleagues were seen as needing to be carried out in the workplace. More critical, was the need for regular work-based social connection in order to build the workplace culture of the organisation.
 - Performance has not suffered as a result of WFH and has built confidence that WFH is effective. There were, instead, concerns with over-productivity in relation to staff working longer hours, which are being addressed as part of the business 'wellness' approaches.
 - Staff were particularly keen on the hybrid WFH model since they could avoid a long commute into work on some days, giving them more energy and improving productivity.
 - Work from home practices have led to changes in workplaces with a shift to activity-based internal floor space layouts, seen as an acceleration of a trajectory - part of the move to flexible working practices.
 - The majority of businesses had no sustainable travel policy as regards the journey to work.
 - The future of WFH practices appears to be a continuation of the new hybrid model, with operational policies being developed to support this approach.
-

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
1. Introduction	1
1.1. Sub-project aim	1
1.2. Report purpose	1
2. Design and data collection	2
2.1. Design	2
2.2. Sampling	3
3. Results	7
3.1. Preparedness for the pandemic	7
3.1.1. IT Capability	7
3.1.2. Equipment	7
3.1.3. Procedures	7
3.1.4. National/international connected businesses	8
3.1.5. Flexible working pathway	8
3.2. Working from home practice prior to the pandemic	8
3.3. Working from home experience during the pandemic	9
3.3.1. Work from home patterns	9
3.4. Changes to policies and practices made since the first lockdown in WA	10
3.4.1. Work from home practices	10
3.4.2. Time patterns	10
3.4.3. Task-related	12
3.4.4. Social connectedness and collaboration	12
3.4.5. Timing savings, energy and other opportunities	12
3.4.6. Career life-stage	13
3.4.7. Work performance	13
3.4.8. Internal and external space changes	14
4. Transport and travel policies	15
5. Future plans for WFH	16
6. Conclusion	17
7. Appendices	19
7.1. Appendix 1: Participant information Sheet	20
7.2. Appendix 2: Respondent Profile	21

1. Introduction

1.1. Sub-project aim

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen significant changes in activity and mobility patterns including a significant change in the extent to which individuals' work from home (WFH). These changes in WFH practice were precipitated by government public health restrictions which required residents to stay at home during 'lockdowns'. This included workers (unless they were classed 'essential workers' who were required to work at a given workplace), and school children (resulting in some workers also having to stay home). Since the pandemic began in 2020, Western Australia (WA) has experienced four lockdowns.

Focussing on Perth, WA, this sub-project (A1) aims to understand employer perspectives on working from home.

This report is part of a wider project which aims to ascertain the extent to which working from home (WFH) has been undertaken since the advent of COVID-19 and is likely to continue in Perth and its implications for individuals, the transport system, and the economy at large. The project combines primary and secondary data sources to understand the potential of WFH to change travel demand, thus influencing policy responses and infrastructure investment decisions.

Wider project objectives are to:

- Understand employer perspectives on WFH (A1)
- Understand employee perspectives on WFH and how they are changing (A2)
- Estimate transport demand changes (B1)
- Determine scenario-based network impacts (B2)
- Value the economic, environmental and social benefits of WFH (C1)
- Provide broad guidelines on the appropriate policy response (C2).

1.2. Report purpose

This report is provided in support of Milestone 2.2. The findings from a series of in-depth interviews conducted with a selection of Perth-based businesses are reported, as well as details in relation to research design and data collection.

2. Design and data collection

2.1. Design

In this component of the research project, a series of in-depth interviews with managers responsible for work from home practices of Perth-based businesses, was undertaken. The aim was to understand the extent to which WFH has been, and is now, practiced by these businesses over three time periods: before the pandemic; during the pandemic (during and between lockdown periods); and thoughts on future practice.

Where WFH was practiced, the discussion was centred around the model of WFH the business had adopted; which groups of employees and work tasks could WFH; the approaches to supporting and managing productivity, productivity outcomes; whether any changes to internal floorspace, or location had eventuated as a result of WFH practices; the businesses' policy toward travel to workplace; attitudes towards continued WFH practices. After clarifying the nature of the business and location of offices, the interview framework adopted the following sequence:

0. Introduction

- a) How prepared was your organisation for a pandemic?
- b) What proportion of employees were permitted to WFH prior to lockdown?

1. WFH experience

- a) What was the businesses experience of WFH practices during the last year?
- b) What changes to policies and practices have you made since the first lock down (Internal and external considerations)?
- c) As a result of the experience of WFH practices during the last year, are you generally more accepting of your employees WFH?

2. Transport and travel policies

- a) Prior to COVID-19, what were the travel policies of the organisation
- b) Has your organisation become more aware of the transport benefits that result from WFH?
- c) What changes to transport/travel policies and practices have you made since the first lock down?

3. Future plans?

The rationale for in-depth interviews, rather than self-completed questionnaires related to the need for grounded research, with the benefit of an interview approach allowing for flexibility in discussion of key issues arising for business.

Ethics approval was granted by The University of Western Australia (UWA) on Friday 14th May 2021 and introductory emails then sent to the businesses selected, requesting participation. A participant information sheet was supplied (Appendix 1), together with a participant consent form. To encourage participation, the business was advised that their responses would be confidential, in that neither the business nor the individual interviewee would be named, and every effort would be made to ensure a business could not be identified in any written material. Interviews were

conducted via video conference with either a written note of the discussion or an audio recording (where permitted) being made, from which a transcript was produced. The transcript was used only for the purposes of an aide memoire to the interviewer and cannot be reproduced for any other purpose.

2.2. Sampling

The intent was to interview around twenty business's, selected to represent a range of public and private sector industries, geographies, and size of business (by number of employees). The focus was on those businesses more likely to be amenable to WFH for some or all of their staff. The research focus was on the extent to which WFH can become a normal practice (post-covid), and the extent to which this can reduce travel demand.

It was considered that the following parameters may result in variations in responses to the above issues and to travel demand management (Table 1).

Table 1: Parameters that may impact WFH

Factor	Measure	Rationale
Size of Business	Number of employees	Employers with large number of employees (so large trip generators) may have largest impact on travel reduction if they permit WFH. Although given WA has a large proportion of small employers, a WFH policy intervention may impact overall travel reduction.
Geography	Inner/middle/outer suburb High/low public transport accessibility High/low car accessibility	Many employers are located in the Perth CBD/inner city. Travel patterns are such that those employees living in outer suburbs have longest journeys by distance and many areas have the least public transport accessibility. Targeting inner city-based employers who draw on a wide geographic catchment may give greater insights into the TDM potential of WFH.
Industry type	WA Land Use Codes	To consider if WFH practices vary by industry type.
Occupation class	Managerial, professional, skilled technicians Clerical Etc.	Some occupation classes may be more suited to WFH than others.
Employer type	Private sector Public sector	There may be differences in policy mandates for WFH or flexible work practices.
Degree of face-to-face contact needed		Businesses that have client/customer facing operations may not be suited to WFH.

The original intent was to select a sample of businesses using the most recent WA Land Use and Employment Survey (2015-2017)¹ with the aim of seeking to cover the above parameters. The survey was intended to provide a census of all businesses in WA, acquired by surveying land uses. The data base included 29,426 businesses. It is dominated by small businesses (by number of employees) (Table 2).

Table 2: WA Land Use and Employment Survey - Size of business (Number of employees):

Size category	N.	%
5-19 employees	22,838	77.6
20-49 employees	4,363	14.8
50-99 employees	1,314	4.5
110-199 employees	610	2.1
200 or more employees	301	1.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>29,426</i>	<i>100</i>

In an iterative process, a selection of suitable 'Planning and Land Use' (WASLUC - Western Australian Standard Land Use Classification Code) categories for inclusion in the survey was compiled. These were based on the assumed nature of business operations and the likelihood that these are amenable for WFH arrangements for all or part of the workforce. Businesses were differentiated by size category: for businesses with up to 50 employees, it was assumed that a sizeable effect of WFH arrangements would only occur in the service sector (WASLUC code beginning with 6) and only for businesses whose core activities did not depend on face-to-face contact with customers or the general public. For businesses with 50 employees or more, it was assumed that a relevant portion of the workforce would be performing tasks that allow for WFH arrangements (for example, accounting or HR) in most business types, except for businesses whose core activities revolve predominantly around face-to-face contact with customers or the general public (for example, schools or restaurants).

To correct for the presence of very small businesses in the sample base (it appears that the category of 5-19 employees also includes businesses with fewer than five staff and sole traders, which were not considered relevant for the purpose of this investigation), a minimum floor area for inclusion in the survey sample was set at 101 sq metres.

The remaining data base of 4,883 individual businesses were sampled with a business size bias of 10% in the category 200 employees and over, 55% in the category 50-199 employees and 35% in the category 5-49 employees. Within these three categories, businesses were selected from the database using the Excel random number generation function.

¹ Notwithstanding that business turnover in the six years since the survey was conducted may make it inaccurate. The survey was undertaken by the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage on behalf of the Western Australian Planning Commission.

Businesses were identified by SA2, sufficient for geographical categorisation (central Perth, regional centres of Greater Perth etc), and also to associate a public transport accessibility category. The rationale for sampling by public transport accessibility was to use it as a proxy for the car mode share of the journey to work, thus differentiating business locations with good public transport journey to work options from those where these are lacking.

In the event a total 108 businesses were selected from the WASLUC database and were invited to participate in the research. Of these, the majority either declined (72), or did not respond (34), resulting in only two participants recruited using this method.

Further assistance was given by the Committee for Perth who invited members to participate. 11 businesses responded positively through this means.

An extra seven businesses were included using a snowballing technique, the focus was on ensuring a fuller range of industry types were represented in the sample.

The final response relates to 20 businesses, these offer a reasonable profile by industry type (Table 3), size of business (Table 4), and geography (Table 5).

Table 3: Participating businesses by industry type

Industry type	Number
<i>Public sector</i>	
National	1
State	3
Local	3
<i>Private sector</i>	
Legal	3
Property	3
Planning and Design	2
Research and consulting	2
Finance	1
Aged Care	1
Mining	1

Table 4: Participating businesses by size compared to WASLUC profile (Number of employees)

Size category	Participants		WASLUC Survey	
	N	%	N	%
5-19 employees	0	-	22,838	78
20-49 employees	2	10	4,363	15
50-99 employees	5	25	1,314	4
100-199 employees	5	25	610	2
200 or more employees	8	40	301	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>29,426</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 5: Participating businesses by primary location

Location	N
Inner	4
Middle	4
Outer	2
CBD	10

3. Results

3.1. Preparedness for the pandemic

For most respondents there was a view that they were ill-prepared for a pandemic. While some businesses had policies and procedures in place for hazard/crisis incident management and business continuity, these did not envisage the impact of a pandemic, nor specifically address issues of WFH. Some described the start of the first WA lockdown (March 29th 2020 to April 28th 2020) as a “mad panic”, others while reasonably prepared, still had to address a number of issues including IT, equipment and procedures. Most were relying on guidance from government on what was permitted or required. Some described concerns with lack of detail and information on what could and could not be done – including definitions of essential work, and in relation to fly-in-fly-out staff and cross-border movement. Many described the adjustment to full WFH taking between two and three weeks.

3.1.1. IT Capability

In terms of IT, not every business had the capability for staff to access their systems remotely, and neither did they have secure IT access (through VPN for example), this took some weeks to get this facility set up. A few businesses had difficulties with overload on the system, with temporary fixes involving limits to the types of activity permitted on the system.

At home, there were common reports that not all staff had internet access, and in some cases internet access was weak. Some businesses assisted by allowing their staff to connect their business phone to a hotspot. For some businesses that used software that required high capability bandwidth issues it was not possible to access these from home.

3.1.2. Equipment

In terms of equipment, a common story related an urgency to order laptops and dual monitors so that all staff could WFH. Many respondents noted that while their managers and senior staff had laptops and IT support to WFH prior to the pandemic, the remainder of the staff relied on desktop computers and were not equipped to WFH. Facilitating this not only saw purchase programs developed to replace desktops with laptops, but also sometimes involved ICT staff setting up staff in their homes. Equipment often included office chairs in order to meet ergonomic needs (a workplace occupational health and safety (OHS) requirement). Other businesses allowed their staff to take the office computer home.

Even for those businesses that were already seasoned WFHers, the public health direction for all staff to WFH saw them needing to supply their staff with more suitable workstations and screens given the potential OHS risks of prolonged WFH (ie. from one or two days to full-time), and switch to more robust video conferencing software.

3.1.3. Procedures

In terms of procedures, this involved addressing questions like ‘what does it mean to WFH’. Procedures needed to be formulated with clarity - thinking through questions as to whether staff should take annual leave/sick leave if actually sick rather than working. Some reported that approval processes were expedited, for example approvals to WFH or take office equipment home that had previously taken two weeks were now done in half a day.

Many of those who reported the initial panic reflected that they transitioned very quickly to WFH, that they were impressed with their organisation and staff ability to quickly respond and adapt. They noted that it required a measure of goodwill by employees, who in some cases were thankful

that they were able to retain their job when considered against the backdrop of a national picture of people losing employment.

3.1.4. National/international connected businesses

Businesses that were either part of a national or international organisation or conducted their business in a national/international environment fared better as regards the infrastructure and operational requirements necessary to WFH since they already conducted business digitally. Three businesses, each part of a national/international operation, indicated that they did a trial run a week or two before the first lock-down in order to test their remote work systems, and this had enabled a smooth transition.

3.1.5. Flexible working pathway

Some businesses were already on a pathway towards more flexible working that had set them up for a very smooth transition into lockdown. Some described this approach to work as being critical to their desire to be a 'top-tier' workplace. In these cases, the notion of flexible working was related to diversity needs and considered to be reflective of the culture of the organisation based around fairness and equity and dictated by the type of people they wanted to attract. One business stated that they had identified that workplace flexibility was a key limitation, particularly for working parents and so the ability to have a level of flexibility was already part of the consciousness of the business. Another acknowledged that a lot of their staff worked part-time and they wanted to improve the flexibility for them to be able to access work systems remotely and at times to suit them. This involved moving from VPN to cloud-based systems, a change which, together with the acquisition of laptops for staff and IT infrastructure set up, enabled remote working and digital meetings.

3.2. Working from home practice prior to the pandemic

For many respondents WFH practices prior to the pandemic were insignificant. They usually involved very few staff, mostly commonly described as "a handful" or "less than 10%". WFH was permitted through 'flexible work policies', but it was rarely supported. For those businesses where WFH was supported it was mostly permitted on an ad hoc basis by agreement between the employee and their immediate line manager. These arrangements tended to be used when employees needed to stay home for tradespeople, or for occasional childcare for example. Flexible working provided for employees to pick up children from school, and for some, they were permitted to WFH during school holidays (although in other organisations annual leave was to be used for that purpose). The oft cited reason for such a low take-up was that managers preferred to keep a close eye on their staff.

In some businesses the culture of the organisation impacted the WFH practice, either in facilitating/expecting WFH to some extent, or by limiting the opportunity to WFH. In relation to the former, where the organisation expects employees to finish work at home in the evenings or weekends, WFH during the day is a more common practice. In relation to the latter, the culture of the organisation may be that staff must be available 24/7 and so need to be present at work like the front-line workers.

Culture plays out in other ways. Where the management relies on a culture of 'presenteeism', rather than on a performance-based approach with defined deliverables, WFH is frowned upon. One business noted that their flexible working opportunities (such as nine-day fortnights, flexi time etc) provided ample opportunity for staff to manage childcare and tradespeople so there was no need to permit WFH, suggesting that those who WFH do not perform well. Another business conveyed the key difference being related to style of management, where a contemporary

management style involves adopting a coaching style with sub-ordinates and measuring by results, rather than a traditional management style based on needing to see staff sitting in the office.

A small number of businesses (three) did practice WFH prior to the pandemic, describing this as an essential part of their flexible working mandate. These businesses were also those that had embraced technology, providing staff with laptops or think pads that enabled their work to be more portable, both at home and within the office space. This was more common among private sector businesses, some noting that the shift towards flexible working for their staff had been taking place for the last five years or so. They noted a desire to be leaders in flexibility, recognising their employees had family and other commitments which also needed to be met by being flexible about the start/finish times and presence in the office.

3.3. Working from home experience during the pandemic

Work from home practices varied over the last 18 months depending on whether Perth or WA was in a period of lockdown. There have been 4 lockdown periods² since March 2020. In some of the post lockdown periods other restrictions such as wearing masks in open and closed areas and on public transport had an impact on whether or not staff worked in the office or from home. In addition, the public health directions varied for different lockdown periods. This included varying directions as to whether or not essential staff could continue in the workplace.

One of the earliest health directions was for physical distance to be adopted within the workplace, requiring some businesses to reduce the number of staff who could attend the office at any one time. This had a bigger impact on businesses who had open plan office arrangements.

The requirement to wear a mask also had a significant impact on the number of businesses that required staff to attend the office. Most businesses gave their staff the choice to work from home rather than attend the office and have to wear a mask all day. This also extended to those periods where mask wearing was required on public transport. Some businesses restricted access to the workplace only to those tasks that could only be done on the premises (such as engineering workshops, laboratories etc), so that those staff had a reduced risk from other staff.

3.3.1. Work from home patterns

The first long lockdown in 2020 saw all businesses either directing or encouraging their staff to work from home. Most businesses made decisions about which staff or occupation types could work from home in order to reduce the health risks.

Some occupations within a business could not work from home, for example those that required on-site working such as landscape gardeners and maintenance staff in local government, and laboratory or workshop-based research and engineering activities. In most cases key management or operational staff continued to work at the workplace (although even in these cases staff were encouraged to adopt a hybrid model with two or three days at home). Those staff who had client-facing tasks were also more likely to work in the office. The tasks associated with some occupations could not be done from home, for example development/building and health and safety inspections, but these were scheduled on one day and WFH on the other days.

² Lockdown periods in Western Australia: 1) 29 March to 28 April 2020 – WA wide; 2) 31 January to 5 February 2021 – Perth, Peel and South West regions; 3) 23 April to 28 April 2021 – Perth and Peel regions; 4) 29 June to 2 July 2021 – Perth and Peel regions.

Two businesses reported quite different experiences of their teaching delivery which had previously been a face-to-face approach. The first lockdown saw both businesses switch from 100% face-to-face delivery, to 100% virtual classroom delivery. One organisation stated that this was achieved in three weeks as a result of an extraordinary effort by staff (particularly IT) and clients. One business noted that virtual teaching had a dramatic negative impact on their business since the nature of what they delivered didn't lend itself as well to the virtual classroom. They also noted, with surprise, that there was a wide variation in the level of technology their clients had access to at home, with, for example, some trying to participate by a mobile phone, sitting on a bed, others without camera or microphone on their computer. They concluded that there was no demand for virtual delivery, with clients preferring a more social experience. The other business did not report the same negative impacts and continue to offer digital delivery as an option.

3.4. Changes to policies and practices made since the first lockdown in WA

The pandemic resulted in some contraction of the workforce for many of the businesses interviewed, mainly due to the impact on the business's budget. Some businesses took action early in the pandemic to save money/protect budgets by requiring their staff to work fewer days/hours, or to use annual leave. Some gave redundancies to up to a third of their staff. These approaches inevitably influenced the willingness of staff to make WFH practices work well, particularly as regards performance. Not all businesses contracted, and over the period since the first lockdown some have expanded, however this itself has been an issue in assimilating new staff in a WFH environment (see discussion later).

3.4.1. Work from home practices

Since the first lockdown the significant change has been an acceptance of some kind of WFH practice. Several businesses indicated that only around 20% of their staff had returned to the office, whereas several others suggested around 75% have returned for some days.

Many noted that WFH was simply an acceleration of a trend already in train, a trend building on models of flexible and activity-based working. For some, WFH was a significant change. One large business noted that it took over a year to equip staff with laptops (partly due to supply shortages) that provided them with the flexibility to WFH – however for this business they considered this was quite a rapid change (given the aging workforce) which they viewed positively as it would likely have taken very much longer to achieve without the pandemic circumstances.

3.4.2. Time patterns

A range of approaches have been adopted and rely on WFH including,

- a fully flexible work from home model, where the employee (sometimes in consultation with their line manager) is trusted to choose where to work, how often and on which days.
- a more structured hybrid work from home model, most often where the employee works from home two or three days per week (sometimes just one day a week).
- flexibility on a week-by-week basis where the employee decides which days to work from home.
- days that the employee works from home are dictated by the line manager.
- business determined days the employee worked from home taking into account the service they required and in relation to managing the team, for example staggering the days the team worked from home in order to reduce the number of staff in the office and maintain physical distancing.

Table 6 below outlines the different approaches that have been adopted in the periods outside lockdowns.

Not every business that was interviewed embraced a continuation of WFH, although all noted that flexible working arrangements were now an expectation. Five of those interviewed required their staff to return to the office once lockdown was over, at first in small waves reflecting the public health requirement for physical distancing. One key reason put forward for this requirement was described as an interdependency of roles within their work task process (described by others as the need for collaboration between staff), where the logistics of completing that process were seen as faster/easier done face-to-face rather than having to book a zoom meeting. However, this was not a view shared by all businesses. Some, particularly those businesses who were part of a national/international group argued that these collaborative tasks were being achieved in a digital environment. Some businesses noted that they missed the incidental or cross-conversations that occurred in the office setting in relation to a client having multiple touch-points with different staff.

Table 6: Models of Work from Home adopted by respondents in the periods outside lockdowns

WFH Model	Public sector	Private sector
<i>Fully flexible (employee decides)</i>		
One day per week	0	2
Two days per week	3	4
Three days per week	2	0
Four days per week	0	1
<i>Determined by management</i>		
One day per week	1	0
Two days per week	0	2
Three days per week	0	1
Not permitted	1	3

As regards the pattern of WFH, the majority of businesses permitted full flexibility, allowing the employee to decide which days to WFH. This approach was more common for public sector employees. A hybrid model, with two full days WFH per week was the most common pattern.

Mondays and Fridays were the most popular days to WFH. Some businesses fixed a day of the week when they expected all staff to be in. Wednesday was popular for team meetings, and in another case – Monday, as a means to review the week's work, with Friday seen as a 'decompress day with a social get together at the end of the working week. Tuesday and Thursday as office days was another pattern used by several businesses. One respondent noted that they specified which days to be in the office giving them a critical mass of staff in the office on any day, whereas their eastern states offices did not need to do this since they employed more staff. These in-office

days were based on the need to build a strong sense of engagement, important to the culture of the organisation.

Most businesses indicated that WFH was for the whole day rather than part of the day at home and the other in the office, this related to the commute time issue too (below).

One business noted that they had daily time schedules to allow for flexibility at the start and end of the working day – for example no internal meetings prior to 9:30 or after 3:30, and limits to the length of meeting – Teams calls reduced from one hour to 25 minutes, partly to enable people to concentrate better and partly to get a break, particularly from a day full of digital meetings.

3.4.3. Task-related

WFH is often ‘task related’, with many acknowledging that those tasks that require quiet uninterrupted time are more suited to working from home. These tasks might include report writing, accounts and budgeting and reviewing reports. When employees were required to attend the office on a set day, this was often related to the businesses desire to encourage collaboration between teams or members of staff, or to attend staff meetings, and to build client relationships. Many businesses noted, however, that there was now an acceptance that such meetings can take place through video conferencing. Indeed, some businesses noted that they spoke more often to their colleagues through zoom/teams than they had in the past when they were in the same physical space. Most considered that a choice of both a physical and digital presence for meeting had worked well with this mixed meeting mode being effective. One positive noted was the efficiency achieved since a meeting could be scheduled readily and it could be more efficient as it can require less travel time between meetings. Video conferencing packages also enabled staff to ‘chat’ throughout the day, important for fulfilling social connectedness.

3.4.4. Social connectedness and collaboration

Many businesses noted that with increased WFH they had made a point of ensuring their staff had opportunities to connect socially, an important aspect of team building and collaboration. Some businesses reported that staff enjoyed the ‘camaraderie’ of being in the office, with opportunities for more casual encounters with, for example senior staff, that prompt useful incidental conversations that are difficult to achieve via digital team’s meetings. During lockdowns, Friday night drinks occurred as online get-togethers, set up as trivia and quiz nights, art shows and so on, with family members and pets encouraged to join in as part of the interaction. Other businesses noted that they valued times during the week where everyone was encouraged to be in the office to share thoughts and ideas and build collaboration. Other initiatives had included ‘lunch and learn’, providing a light lunch and bringing staff together. For one business that had embraced WFH for the majority of staff and majority of time, they offered a dinner with ice-breaker games as a way of staff meeting each other face-to-face.

3.4.5. Timing savings, energy and other opportunities

Many businesses reported that a key benefit for their staff working from home was to avoid the long commute into work. Staff argued that they got more time for their work, more energy, and an uninterrupted focus. Two businesses, however, argued that staff saving the commute time was personal to them, not of benefit to the business – suggesting that staff should move closer to work, or recognise that commute time offered other benefits (such as time to unwind on the way home from work). It was not only the commute saving - several businesses noted that their staff had benefitted from improved family life, for example being able to take children to school or pick them up and having more time for physical exercise. Male employees in particular had appreciated the opportunities to be more involved with their children, by dropping them off to school or attending school events.

3.4.6. Career life-stage

Not all staff enjoyed the opportunity to WFH. This seemed to relate to career life stage, or the extent to which the team were well established. Younger employees that had just started were more inclined to want to stay in the office in order to build up that rapport with their colleagues and benefit from mentoring. Those that had been working longer, had already built that level of relationship with their colleagues so tended to WFH more. People who started during this period found it was quite difficult to become entrenched in the team. It was more challenging for them to start building those relationships, knowing who to ask, feeling like they could ask a question, rather than feeling reluctant to call someone to ask a question. It was easier if you were sitting next to someone.

One business, where a significant proportion of the employees were long-term having worked together for 40 plus years, noted that their staff were not keen to WFH since they had developed a strong social community in the workplace. They thought WFH was not glamorous, and they missed seeing their friends and complained that WFH blurred the lines between home and work.

Another perspective that was given was that certain occupations were more or less suited to work from home. For example, salespeople, were seen as those who liked to be around people and we're keen to get back in the office once the restrictions had passed, they valued human interaction, whereas those dealing with accounts and budgets or financial transactions, the nature of this work made it easier to do from home where they didn't have any distractions.

Front-facing, or client-facing roles were the reason most often put forward not to WFH. However, there were mixed views on this, with some noting that while traditionally it had been seen that these interactions should be done face-to-face, the experience of digital meetings during lockdowns (and bearing in mind that some businesses were part of a national group where lockdowns had been more prolonged than in WA) had seen that this platform did work, and that some clients were happy to continue this way. Businesses that had a national/international outlook were already working with clients in a digital-based environment and reported few problems with this approach. Some businesses that had front-counters for dealing with clients noted that they had transitioned much of this face-to-face contact to online web-based portals, noting too that customer expectations had changed and were demanding this approach.

Home circumstances also impacted on the ability to WFH. Those in small apartments without a work area, or with a young child at home impacted their productivity. They also didn't mind being in an office where there were now fewer people as a result of other staff WFH, and because there were fewer people, they were more likely to form strong bonds, more inclined to have a conversation with those than before when there were more people. The people who lived in shared houses faced the possibility of competition for workspace or internet bandwidth.

3.4.7. Work performance

One of the key issues that was explored during these interviews was work performance and its relationship to WFH practices. Most businesses reported that WFH had had no observable negative impact on performance. They noted that this idea was a misconception, instead the work from home experience had on the whole been very positive. They observed that the deliverables, projects etc were still done on time and work went on as normal. Some suggested their staff were more productive since they had more energy – especially since they had avoided the commute to work. Some businesses were able to point to detailed records that set out how many hours were being worked because the nature of the consulting business meant that each minute had to be accounted for in billing. A dashboard system was one way a business enabled all staff to stay in touch with the projects and staff activities, with one business noting that there are now useful systems available to enable this. Some noted that their staff are working longer hours as a result of working from home, which had prompted human resource sections to address the issue of work-life balance, with concerns of burn-out.

Many businesses placed a significant focus on people's well-being, particularly during the lockdown periods. A lot of effort was put into keeping in contact with team members, and it became apparent that, for some, WFH was making life a lot easier, while for others it was quite the opposite. Regular wellness phone calls to staff at home were made by some businesses, in one case it was noted that these, at first, were treated with suspicion, but then accepted as being a caring gesture.

3.4.8. Internal and external space changes

The acceleration of WFH practices during the last eighteen has resulted in changes to internal floorspace for a large number of businesses (12 businesses compared to 8) – see Table 7. The switch to laptops and wi-fi from desktop computers with fixed internet connections together with a proportion of staff WFH on any one day has provided opportunities to introduce changes to floorplans, in some cases accommodating more staff in less space. A shift to activity-based internal space has been significant (12 out of 20 businesses) (Table 7). Activity-based working arrangements refer to office set-ups where the employee has no individual desk allocation, rather using different spaces within the workplace depending on whether the activity is collaborative or solitary (also distinguished as focus-based; process based; or collaborative/integrative).

Another change for some, learned from the experience of WFH during lockdown, has been the reorganisation of teams/divisions around collaborative or interdependent activities.

Table 7: Changes to internal space

		Post first lock-down		
		<i>Individual offices</i>	<i>Open plan</i>	<i>Activity based</i>
Pre-Pandemic	<i>Individual offices</i>	4	0	5
	<i>Open plan</i>	0	4	7
	<i>Activity based</i>	0	0	0

The reduction in number of staff, either through contraction or through hybrid WFH practices (several businesses reported that only 10% of the staff now came into the office on days that they were not required to) has seen almost half the businesses question their space needs and/or location needs (Table 8). While most indicated that there would be no immediate change, others noted that when the lease expired, they would be seeking a change. Others had already made changes, reducing from two floors to one, from two buildings to one, and negotiating cheaper leases for example. This contraction was not only associated with workforce contraction and WFH practices, but also with a shift to hot-desking or to activity-based working as a result of fewer employees on-site (one business had a system of booking a desk if you intended to be in that day).

Not every business saw the shift to activity-based working leading to a lower demand for floorspace. Some argued that whilst they might not need as much space for desks, they need more breakout spaces and quiet rooms for team meetings (both physical and digital), and staff want bigger workstations so they're not sitting so close to others. They stressed the need for different types of breakout spaces and different spaces in the office so that people feel engaged, can switch from sitting at their desk to work from a higher table or go sit on a couch – replicating what they do at home. This has triggered the need to make it appealing for people to actually want to come back in the office.

Two businesses had been considering relocating some staff to suburban locations closer to their clients. There was an interest in utilising shared or co-worker spaces in cases where people could not work from home but did need to be closer to clients and in cases of long travel distance to the CBD. While those in CBD locations stated they would remain there, they noted an interest in utilising suburban hubs closer to people's homes and in particular decentralised from the CBD – particularly in high-amenity locations (Scarborough, Cottesloe, Mandurah, Fremantle cited as examples), especially as commute times got longer.

Table 8: External changes

No change	11
Reduction in number of floors/buildings used	8
Relocation (from CBD)	1
Use of co-worker hubs	1

NB. Count may be higher than 20 as some respondents were considering multiple changes

4. Transport and travel policies

On the whole sustainable transport practices were not addressed (Table 9). The majority of businesses did not have a transport or travel policy as regards commuting to work. A few businesses noted that with greater numbers of staff WFH their car parking was used less. Some stated that this gave a chance to offer what were once spaces for senior management only to more junior staff on a roster basis. Another noted that reserved bays were expensive as regards fringe-benefits tax, so if there were more staff using other modes this was a financial saving. Where work-provided cars were used for commuting, two businesses had noted a saving in fuel costs with more WFH.

Some businesses had policies as regards work related travel during the working day. Many businesses that were located in the Perth central business district commented that they had chosen this location because of its proximity to good public transport providing accessibility to many places across the metropolitan region. Businesses located outside the CBD but close to good public transport services noted that they encouraged their staff to use it for work-related travel, particularly where this involved trips into the Perth CBD where parking was more constrained.

One business noted that their staff, who had been public transport users prior to the pandemic, had now switched and started driving because they were concerned about catching public transport.

Table 9: Transport practices

Practice	Public	Private
Free car parking		
- all staff	3	1
- Senior management only	1	2
- pool parking	1	2
Taxi/Uber credit for late office working	0	1
Public transport subsidy	0	1
Bicycle end-of -trip facilities	6	6
None	1	5

NB. Count is higher than 20 as some respondents had multiple practices.

5. Future plans for WFH

Many businesses commented that the experience of work from home had demonstrated that it was possible for their staff to quickly mobilise so that all could WFH in the event of the lockdown. Many noted the merits of a hybrid WFH model. Some businesses we're reviewing their policies with regards to flexible working in order to enable work from home on a more regular basis. The WFH experience had triggered others to complete a formal WFH policy – these included the patterns of WFH that would be permitted (minimum/maximum days per week) and OHS responsibilities.

One business noted that advances in digital technology had made things like video conferencing much more seamless and facilitated WFH. However, this did not remove that real need in business around mentoring and making sure that the younger people grow in their abilities and confidence and knowledge. For this there needed to be some element of office-based attendance. This, they noted, would result in various degrees of WFH hybridity, where an office becomes the base where you go in and connect, and have meetings. This will also lead to these offices becoming 'agile-workplaces'. This model was, however, stressed as being dependent on a really strong culture of support within the business.

Policy development is not without its problems. Some noted that the operational nature of their business meant that people must be available at certain times, not always predictable. Others noted difficulties where only a small proportion of the workforce could WFH due to the nature of the business. In these cases, they raised concerns about fairness in approach between managing those at home and those who could be more closely supervised and could be working different hours of the day. These challenges meant many businesses were not yet ready to develop formal policies, seeing not WFH as a safer option given these issues of fairness. Instead, these businesses continue WFH practices in an informal manner. Where businesses had developed new WFH policies they tended to offer flexibility in implementation and left the task of managing who should WFH and the pattern of WFH to team leaders/managers.

Several businesses alerted to the need to resolve certain matters if WFH was to become common practice. They asserted that these matters had been set aside in the first lockdown due to pressure to act quickly. One issue was raised with regards to the HR policy procedure for sickness. It was noted that there is an expectation now that people do not come to work if they have a cold for example and questioned whether this should be counted as a sick day or instead permit that member of staff to be working from home on that day.

Another issue relates to work health and safety, where in theory each person's home should have an ergonomic audit and work health and safety assessment because it is being used as their workplace. While some organisations interviewed did not indicate that they had required their staff to fill in a compliance checklist, others did require this, and some asked for a photograph of the workspace.

The fact that the home is being used as an office with the employer potentially saving money as a result of needing less floor space, raised issues as to who should pay. One business indicated that this could lead to the potential to offer financial incentives to their staff to continue to WFH given the cost savings to the business in reducing their building footprint.

One business thought it necessary to clarify the difference between 'remote working' and 'flexible working', the former being about working away from the office regardless of location, the latter being concerned with flexibility around childcare for example. In the case of childcare, there were concerns raised that they may be working late in the evening to avoid WFH being done simultaneously with childcare and then, as a result expecting to be paid out-of-hours rates.

In the longer term, assuming WFH was adopted long term, some businesses noted other issues that would need to be addressed. One issue related to employee's mental health and considering how to keep people connected and motivated in the long run. Another issue concerned maintaining strong connections with the wider workforce, noting that while they had systems in place to ensure teams worked well together, there was a need to consider how this could be taken beyond the immediate team and particularly with staff changeover and renewal.

6. Conclusion

This research has reported a set of in-depth interviews with businesses based in Greater Perth on WFH practices before and during the pandemic and future plans. Twenty businesses participated, with representation from the public and private sector and from a range of industries. Half are based in the Perth central business district, the other half based across the greater metropolitan area including outer, middle and inner suburbs. Almost all businesses were large (by size of employees), employing more than 50 employees, compared to the mix for WA as a whole.

Few businesses were prepared for the requirement to work from home resulting from WA's first lockdown. They had to mobilise very rapidly, addressing issues of IT, equipment and work procedures. Those that were better able to rapidly transition to most employees WFH tended to be part of a national or international group and used to conducting business in the digital environment.

Those businesses that had or were on a transition to flexible working practises were more able to achieve a smooth transition to work from home.

Prior to the pandemic, for most businesses WFH practices were insignificant, used mainly for one-off days to cater for a sick child or to let tradespeople in. For those businesses that did WFH prior to the pandemic, the culture of the organisation was the defining factor, described as the difference between a culture of 'presenteeism' compared to a culture of 'performance-based'/ flexible working

practices. The latter culture is more common among private sector business and seen as the flexible or agile workplace that these businesses had been transitioning to for the past five years.

The first lockdown saw a major shift to WFH practices, and a need by businesses to equip and support staff to do so. This experience has resulted in a significant acceleration of WFH practice since that first lockdown. Now almost all businesses practice a hybrid WFH model, with two days at home and three days in the office being the most common work pattern. Four businesses, while requiring their staff to be back in the workplace, acknowledged that they too had embraced a more flexible working practice where it was permissible for staff to WFH on occasions.

Work from home was more suited to certain types of tasks, rather than being distinguished by occupation or industry type. Tasks that required close collaboration between colleagues were seen as needing to be carried out in the workplace. More critical, was the need for regular work-based social connection in order to build the workplace culture of the organisation.

Career life stage was a key issue in WFH. Younger, or newer, staff prefer to be in the workplace, in part due to home circumstances, but on the whole due to the need to learn the business and to be mentored.

Performance has not suffered as a result of WFH, this has built business confidence that WFH is effective. There were instead concerns with over-productivity in relation to staff working longer hours, these being addressed as part of the business 'wellness' approaches. Most businesses noted that staff were particularly keen on the hybrid WFH model since they could avoid a long commute into work on some days, giving them more energy and improving productivity.

Work from home practices have led to significant changes in workplaces with a significant shift to activity-based internal floor space layouts precipitated by there being fewer people in the workplace on any given day, and as a result of more digital meetings and the role of the workplace being seen as one for collaborative activity. This change was also seen as an acceleration of a trajectory many businesses were already on as part of the move to flexible working practices. Half of the businesses were making no change in the number of floors and or buildings they required, while the other half were downsizing, with two businesses relocating.

The majority of businesses had no sustainable travel policy as regards the journey to work. Many businesses provided free car parking, particularly for senior staff, although some were now using these bays more now for pooled work cars rather than privileging individuals. Most supplied end-of-trip facilities to encourage cycling to work. Several noted that they were located in the Perth central business district because of its public transport accessibility and that to relocate elsewhere would be an impediment given poor public transport accessibility outside the central business district.

The future of WFH practices appears to be a continuation of the new hybrid model. Some businesses are now developing operational policies to support this approach.

7. Appendices

7.1. Appendix 1: Participant information Sheet

Project title: Working from Home - Changes in Transport Demand
(Employer Interviews)

The Planning and Transport Research Centre (PATREC) at the University of Western Australia (UWA) is conducting a research study on 'Working from Home – Changes in transport demand'. This is funded by the iMOVE Cooperative Research Centre which includes the Department of Transport (WA), Main Roads Western Australia and UWA. Full details of the Project and iMOVE can be found at <https://imoveaustralia.com/project/working-from-home-changes-in-transport-demand-in-perth/>.

This research will investigate the extent to which working from home occurred during COVID-19 restrictions and is continuing to occur from the perspectives of employees, managers and employers. These changing patterns of work impact on travel patterns and our aim is to explore a range of scenarios looking ahead to inform transport agencies of potential longer-term demand changes and implications for infrastructure and service provision. We are seeking your participation in this research project through sharing your views and experiences of working from home. By participating in this research, participants are contributing to the planning of improved land use and transport systems in Perth. There are no foreseeable risks associated with the research.

As part of this project we would like to interview a representative from your organisation - a manager responsible for work from home practices - in order to gain an understanding of your organisation's perspectives and experiences on working from home. We are interested in exploring these perspectives for four time periods (During lockdown (March 2020); Prior to Lockdown; Current practice; Future plans) and covering your approaches to supporting and managing productivity, types of work that could be done from home, travel policies and future external drivers. We would like to understand what support needs you may have in continuing to enable work from home and explore wider policy issues.

The interview will take no longer than an hour and will be conducted online at a time convenient to the interviewee. With the interviewee's permission the interview will be recorded and transcribed and returned for the interviewee's approval. Individual organisations and participants will not be named in any reporting of the results, instead we will refer to the industry type of the organisation, its size and geographical location. All identifiable information provided will be treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator in any form that may identify the interviewee or organisation, unless specific consent has been given. The data will be kept in a non-identifiable format, in a password protected computer or a secure server at UWA for a minimum of seven years.

Participation is entirely voluntary. Participants can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give an explanation. Any data collected to that point will be deleted.

The researchers will publish a technical report using results from the analysis of the interviews and this report will be available on the PATREC website at <https://patrec.org/technical-reports/>. The researchers will create an academic publication(s) - without individual attribution - from the interviews. A link to any academic publications produced will be provided on the PATREC website at <https://patrec.org/academic-papers/>.

Approval to conduct this research has been provided by the UWA, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person considering participation in this research project, or agreeing to participate, may raise any questions or issues with the researchers at any time.

In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of researchers may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research project by contacting the Human Ethics office at UWA on (08) 6488 4703 or by emailing to humanethics@uwa.edu.au.

All research participants are entitled to retain a copy of any Participant Information Form and/or Participant Consent Form relating to this research project.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study please feel free to contact the investigators: Prof Carey Curtis (carey.curtis@uwa.edu.au) or Prof Sharon Biermann (sharon.biermann@uwa.edu.au).

7.2. Appendix 2: Respondent Profile

	<i>Industry type</i>	<i>Size of business (number of employees in WA)</i>	<i>Location</i>
<i>Public sector</i>			
1	State government	2000	Middle and outer
2	State government	500	Outer
3	Tertiary Education		Inner
4	Local government	500	Inner
5	Local government	1200	Middle
6	Local government	650	Outer
7	Research	60	inner
<i>Private sector</i>			
8	Research and consulting	550	CBD
9	Property	85	CBD
10	Property	50	CBD and outer
11	Planning and Design	60	CBD
12	Property and Planning	40	CBD
13	Consulting	40	inner
14	Property	130	CBD and other
15	Aged care	150	Middle
16	Financial Services	100	CBD and other
17	Legal	115	CBD
18	Legal	80	CBD
19	Legal	150	CBD
20	Mining	350	Middle, CBD