

Mentally Healthy Workplaces
and COVID-19: Emerging Issues



Creating mentally healthy hybrid teams in the recovery from COVID-19

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Australian Government
National Mental Health Commission

**THE MENTALLY
HEALTHY
WORK
PLACE ALLIANCE**

Overview: mentally healthy hybrid teams



Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many organisations were already exploring or implementing flexible and remote work as people sought opportunities to better balance work and personal commitments.



As a result of COVID-19, many people increasingly expect a form of hybrid work to combine the advantages of working from home gained during lockdowns with the benefits of the usual workplaces. However, key challenges remain around how to manage hybrid work effectively.



Organisations can take key steps to help them develop a model of hybrid work that suits their needs and helps avoid some common challenges, such as communication, interaction, work health and safety and equity.

Introduction

The necessity to close or scale down usual workplaces during COVID-19 meant that many organisations and people experienced the benefits of working from home, such as greater flexibility, less time commuting and increased autonomy. However, rapid transitions to remote work also created challenges, such as communication issues and fewer opportunities for collaboration.

As workplaces re-open, many organisations are looking to hybrid work as a means of getting the best of both worlds – combining the benefits of usual workplaces and remote work arrangements. At the same time, organisations are seeking approaches that address some of the challenges with hybrid work – such as managing dispersed teams, ensuring equity and inclusion, and facilitating effective communication.

This guide helps organisations and businesses understand the interpersonal and mental health related issues around hybrid work and provides practical steps to developing a model that suits a particular workplace and its people.

“We hear regularly that businesses would like their employees to return to the workplace once restrictions ease...this is usually being driven by a sense of ‘everything returning to normal’ once everyone is back at the usual place of work. For some, the uncertainty and lack of expertise in how to address work from home or hybrid work issues means it is easier to revert to pre-COVID practices. Now more than ever we need to provide the information and resources so that businesses can recognise any benefits hybrid work may provide to their own operating circumstances.”

Jennifer Low, Director WHS & Health Policy, ACCI



“While hybrid work brings many benefits to employees and workplaces, there are challenges for managers to bring out the best in their team in this new operating environment. Helping managers to best understand how to guide this transition is vital.”

Dr Mary Wyatt, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Physician, and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM)

“Those who were closely monitored by managers when working from home reported higher distress, likely because they felt ‘tethered’ to their desks and distrusted to do their job effectively from home.”

Dr Caroline Knight, Research Fellow, Centre for Transformative Work Design at Curtin University

About mentally healthy hybrid work

Hybrid work is a model where people can both work from home or remotely and from the usual workplace.

Many workplaces are grappling with the reality that COVID-19 has fundamentally changed our ways of working. While many people will appreciate the benefits of returning to the usual workplace, such as regular social interaction, many also want to retain the advantages gained during working from home, such as flexibility.

A recent *Post-Lockdown Guide* by WayAhead Workplaces, a network of individuals and organisations interested in employee health and wellbeing, has highlighted that hybrid work is on the agenda for many organisations ([access it here](#)).

Stephanie Thompson, WayAhead Workplaces Lead, says hybrid work can have a significant impact on organisational culture.

“Aside from more Zoom drinks or token activities, leaders and organisations are grappling with how they create a culture of cohesion, innovation and support,” Ms Thompson says.

“Issues like how to effectively onboard new starters in a hybrid environment are also pertinent, and these feed into culture building and maintenance,” she says.



“Working from home can support Australians with complex mental health challenges to support their health while maintaining productivity.”

Rachel Green, CEO of SANE Australia



“Research shows that uncertainty about post-pandemic hybrid work is linked to burnout in employees. For workers, not knowing where or how you will be expected to work in the days, weeks or months from now has an impact on all other aspects of life, and it is leading to burnout. Business leaders can provide confidence and clarity about the future by removing this ambiguity and making their plan for hybrid working in the future very clear.”

Dr Zena Burgess, CEO of the Australian Psychological Society

Unprecedented demand

Since COVID-19, people have increasing expectations for the possibility of flexible work, according to researchers at the University of Melbourne. Their research with Australian people found that seven in 10 want to keep some flexibility in how they work.¹

Similarly, Dr Caroline Knight, Research Fellow at the Centre for Transformative Work Design at Curtin University, says that hybrid work appears set to stay at unprecedented levels compared to before COVID-19.

The Centre previously released detailed flexible work resources to support both managers and workers ([access them here](#)).

“In our hybrid work research, most people reported wanting to spend around two days a week working from home, whether they were already doing that or not. Most saw the benefits of some days in the office, particularly for collaboration, but also saw the benefits of working from home – such as managing home-work life, more autonomy, no commute, quiet time to focus on specific tasks,” says Dr Knight.

This preference aligns with research² that suggests hybrid work is most optimal when around half the time is spent in the office and half at home, according to Dr Knight.

Greater management support

Another impact of COVID-19 is that organisations are more likely to support hybrid work, says Dr Knight. “Managers are also more likely to support hybrid work now that they have evidence that workers can be trusted to do their work efficiently from home,” she says.

While some organisations that previously did not engage in flexible working are now allowing it as a matter of course, others are keen to see a return to the office.

“Besides the ease of communication and collaboration in the office, one reason why some organisations may have mandated everyone back to the office is due to pressure to increase footfall and spending in city centres to keep businesses open. It is yet to be determined whether these mandates have the desired effect, or whether these organisations eventually become more flexible and spending in the economy is spread out to the suburbs” says Dr Knight.

Other impacts of COVID-19 include a growth in technology, such as video conferencing platforms, and more organisations investing in infrastructure to support remote and hybrid work, according to Dr Knight.

Inequitable access

In addition, COVID-19 has highlighted that some industries and occupations are simply not suitable for hybrid work.

"No matter how well we adapted during COVID-19, some work, such as healthcare and retail, must be carried out face-to-face, and so hybrid work is still only an option for people in some industries and occupations."

There may be instances where friction or feelings of resentment arise within teams when some people can work from home while others cannot, due to the nature of their roles, for instance.

Adding to existing challenges

COVID-19 has also highlighted key existing challenges around hybrid work, which include reduced social support, diminished team collaboration and close monitoring by managers, according to Dr Knight.

Recent research Dr Knight conducted with industry partners in Western Australia shows that hybrid workers feel lonelier when working from home than in the office.

"What was surprising was that it is the amount of support from colleagues that these hybrid workers got while in the office that helped protect them from loneliness even when working from home," she says.

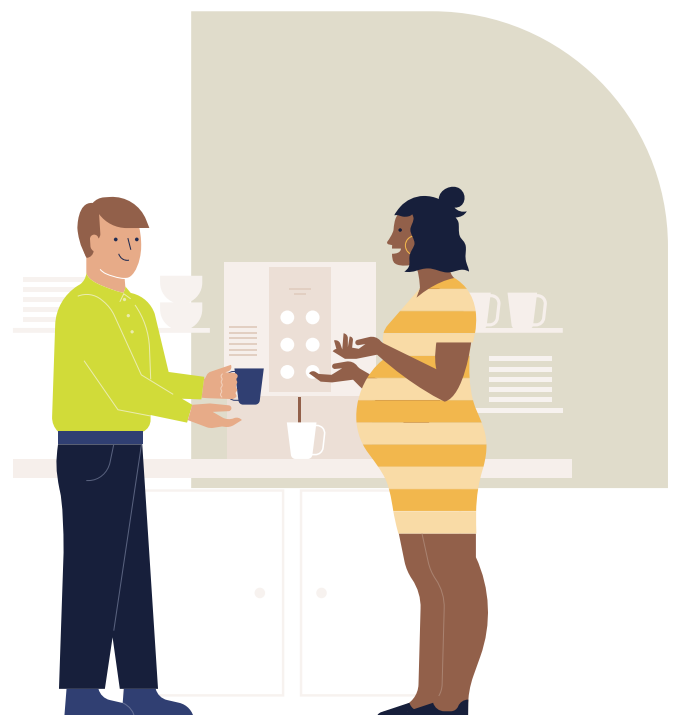
Collaboration issues

Difficulties in team collaboration can arise when team members are split across locations. While virtual platforms can facilitate communication, they also change the nature and frequency of discussions and make spontaneous engagement more difficult, Dr Knight says.

Close monitoring by managers has been another challenge, she adds. "A work from home study I led with colleagues between April 2020 and April 2021³ revealed that those who were closely monitored by managers when working from home reported higher distress, likely because they felt 'tethered' to their desks and distrusted to do their job effectively from home,"⁴ Dr Knight says.

Missing opportunities

Other challenges around hybrid work include reduced professional networks for those working from home,⁵ and some groups of people who are more likely to choose hybrid work, such as parents with young children, missing out on opportunities and promotions due to being "less visible" to managers, according to Dr Knight.^{6,7}



How organisations can respond

1. Meeting legal requirements

It is important that employers understand their legal requirements when it comes to requests from workers for flexible working arrangements (e.g., see this [guidance from the Fair Work Ombudsman](#)).

Organisations must also ensure they are aware of and are meeting their work health and safety obligations in relation to both physical and psychosocial risks when workers are working from home (e.g., see this [information from Safe Work Australia](#)).

Organisations will want to consider any potential worker compensation risks from working from home arrangements. Comcare's Office Safety tool has provided information on the consequences of not managing working from home risks ([access it here](#)).

2. Consulting and communicating

Beyond legal obligations, organisations need to strike a balance between the challenges and opportunities that hybrid work present to their workplaces and people. This will involve exploring people's preferences around ways of working and how an approach can be taken to ensure they align with the organisation's needs.

Dr Knight says tailored hybrid work models will need to be developed, depending on the nature of the organisation and individual roles and needs. "There is no one size fits all and we are likely to see many different models of hybrid work evolving," she says.

3. Exploring flexible working arrangements

"People may have circumstances and needs that require more time working from home. Giving people the flexibility to mould their own hybrid work model will be important for their job satisfaction, work motivation and general wellbeing. Organisations which can support different models of hybrid work are likely to be more successful," Dr Knight says.

This may include an organisation consulting with people and reviewing internally the different activities and work people in different roles undertake and whether hybrid or remote work is possible. It may also include reviewing the necessary infrastructure (e.g. technology and equipment) to support hybrid work.

Organisations may also want to consult the companion guide in this series, *Helping people return to workplaces after extended periods working at home during COVID-19* ([access it here](#)).



4. Engaging teams and managers in decisions

Involving people at all levels of the organisation in decision-making around hybrid work practices is likely to improve satisfaction with the result, with research showing involvement in decision-making is important for wellbeing and performance.⁹

5. Encouraging communication and networks

Managers can promote effective hybrid work by encouraging people to communicate via virtual platforms informally, and collaborate when in the office, according to Dr Knight.

“Offering a peer buddy system to increase support for individuals who might be more at risk of becoming isolated may also be beneficial - for example, for those who work from home more often, or report feeling isolated,” Dr Knight says.

In addition to engaging people to see what they want from hybrid work, Ms Thompson says organisations can benefit from a clear hybrid or flexible work policy.

“That policy should clearly state the expectations around hybrid work, and why these are the expectations. It is important to ensure consultation in the creation of this policy so it reflects the attitudes and needs of workers and leaders,” says Ms Thompson.

Organisations can also seek to empower people who are managing teams to implement the policy in a way that gets the best out of the team and the organisation.

“If there are to be mandated days in the office, give evidence as to why this is a requirement. Be intentional about those days. Are they for collaboration, innovation, team building or deep work? Organisations need to plan. Coming into the office because ‘the boss said so’ is not a meaningful use of a person’s work from the office day,” Ms Thompson adds.

6. Addressing friction

If friction or feelings of resentment arise within teams when some people can work from home while others cannot, potential approaches to manage this issue include:

- openly addressing with the team and exploring options for managing the issue e.g. possibility of job sharing (i.e. parts of the role that can be done at home).
- identifying parts of the job that could be done from home and reorganising work so these can be done in a block on one day.
- openly acknowledging that some people cannot work from home and the manager recognises this can create a sense of injustice.

Ideas to help re-energise a workforce

Co-create the future

- Leader listening tours
- Conduct surveys or engagements using online tools
- Share the organisation’s strategic direction
- Describe or revisit organisation’s values

Set boundaries

- Empower people to self-manage and complete work.
- Clarify expectations of people
- Role model a balance between work and home
- Promote awareness of different ways to balance work/home
- Celebrate creative problem solving

Promote wellbeing check-ins

- Regular check-ins from manager or a buddy
- Use data (e.g. pulse checks) to monitor wellbeing and workload

Source: WayAhead Workplaces Post Lockdown Workplace Guide ([access here](#)).

Where organisations can get support



[WayAhead Workplaces, Post lockdown workplace guide](#)

[Thrive at Work, Curtin University, Flexible work resources](#)

[Centre for Transformative Work Design, Thrive at Work at Home](#)

[South Australian Leadership Academy, Leading Through COVID-19: Manager toolkit](#)

[Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, White paper on Telecommuting](#)

[Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Remote Work: A guide for organisations and professionals](#)

[Safe Work Australia, Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination Code of Practice](#)

[Safe Work Australia, Working from home](#)

[The Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Find a consultant](#)

[SANE Australia, Mental illness & the workplace](#)

[Australian Unions, COVID-aware workplaces](#)

Federal and state resources

Comcare

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – Working from home guide](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – Working from home checklist](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – Striking the balance with flexible working](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – Living alone and working from home](#)

[Comecare, Office Safety tool – work or home office, <https://www.comcare.gov.au/office-safety-tool>](#)

New South Wales

[Safe Work NSW, Remote and isolated work \(includes those who work from home\)](#)

[Safe Work NSW, Design and layout of work environment](#)

[NSW Government, Get healthy at work \(includes work from home resources\)](#)

[Being healthy while working from home](#)
[10 tips to work well from home](#)

Queensland

[Work Safe Queensland, Health and safety for telecommuters](#)

[Work Safe Queensland, Telecommuting checklist](#)

[Work Safe Queensland, Safe telecommute to work](#)

[Work Safe Queensland, Office ergonomics](#)

[Work Safe Queensland, Setting up work stations](#)

Victoria

[Work Safe Victoria, Working from home](#)

[Work Safe Victoria, More information about working alone](#)

Australian Capital Territory

[ACT Government, Home based work](#)

Northern Territory

[NT Work Safe, Strata title bodies corporate and the work health and safety laws - F.A.Q.](#)

[NT Work Safe, Remote or isolated work](#)

Western Australia

[Department of Mines, Industry regulation and safety, Office safety – overview](#)

[Department of Mines, Industry regulation and safety, Frequently asked questions](#)

[Department of Mines, Industry regulation and safety, How to set up your work station](#)

[Department of Mines, Industry regulation and safety, Toolkit and information resources](#)

References

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- 5 Yang, L., Holtz, D., Jaffe, S., Suri, S., Sinha, S., Weston, J., ... & Teevan, J. (2021). The effects of remote work on collaboration among information workers. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01196-4>
- 6 Baruch, Y. (2000). Teleworking: benefits and pitfalls as perceived by professionals and Managers. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 15(1), 34-49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-005X.00063>
- 7 Bloom, N., Liang, J., Roberts, J., & Ying, Z. J. (2015). Does working from home work? Evidence from a Chinese experiment. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 130(1), 165-218. doi:10.1093/qje/qju032
- 8 Humphrey, S. E., Nahrgang, J. D., & Morgeson, F. P. (2007). Integrating motivational, social, and contextual work design features: A meta-analytic summary and theoretical extension of the work design literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(5), 1332-1356. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.5.1332>

About this guide

This guide is part of the *Mentally Healthy Workplaces during COVID-19: Emerging Issues* series, created by the National Mental Health Commission and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

The series explores key issues workplaces are facing due to the challenges created by COVID-19. Each guide provides a summary of the issue, expert guidance on actions organisations can take and links to further resources.

This guide has been developed in association with:

- **Dr Caroline Knight**, Research Fellow at the Centre for Transformative Work Design at Curtin University.
- **Stephanie Thompson**, WayAhead Workplaces Lead, WayAhead – Mental Health Association NSW.

Read more

- The guides in this series include:
 - Helping people return to workplaces after extended periods working at home during COVID-19.
 - Strategies to support wellbeing of decision makers through periods of sustained pressure.
 - Identifying and managing fatigue and burnout during COVID-19.
 - The hidden impact of COVID-19 on sleep.
 - Creating mentally healthy hybrid teams in the recovery from COVID-19.
 - Responding to COVID-19 concerns in the workplace.
 - Supporting people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to download the series.



National Workplace Initiative

- The National Mental Health Commission and Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance are developing the National Workplace Initiative to create a national approach to mentally healthy workplaces.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to learn more about the National Workplace Initiative.

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