

## The impact of COVID 19 lockdown on employee productivity

The worldwide pandemic of COVID19 and the associated lockdowns have changed the way we live and work. What was largely optional earlier, Work from home (WFH) has now become the new norm with more than 4.3 million people in Australia (~32% of the working population) WFH [1]. While many of us found the change welcoming, some people are struggling to keep up the work life balance and have found their productivity impacted by the WFH set up.

To understand the impact of WFH on our productivity and prepare us for the transition back to offices, Building 4 Impact conducted a short survey and asked their close group of friends how their productivity was impacted. Now that Victoria is getting back to working from offices again, we took a quick look on what people think about the impacts of WFH on their productivity.

Majority of the respondents reported a negative impact on their productivity, and many reported it to increase initially and then decrease. This large variation in the experience was attributed to several factors that influence our work-life balance including social relations, job-related activities and the home environment - which are discussed in detail in this initial results report.

## Research Aim and objective:

To understand the impact of work from home (WFH) on employees' perceived productivity with an objective to prepare us for the transition back to offices.

## Methodology:

The research used a structured survey – shared through social media from September 2020 to April 2021. The survey questions were developed to study the impact on Quality of Working Life (QWL) and the impact of the environmental quality on QWL.

QWL is defined as “*the overall quality of life that is influenced by work related to how an employee would evaluate their work environment*” by Olson et al. (2020) The following QWL indicators were taken from a comprehensive study conducted by Shamir and Salomon (1985):

- Task Characteristics (impact on psychological conditions such as meaningfulness of the work)
- Social Relations (impact on amount and quality of social relations other than work)
- Job-Related Activities (impact on role clarity)
- Work-life balance (impact on personal life)
- Working style (control on work conditions and flexibility)

The impact of the WFH environment was measured in terms of perceived air quality, thermal comfort, lighting comfort and acoustic comfort. The results are summarised below.

## Results:

The survey solicited sixty-three (63) responses from several countries 48% of which were collected from Australia majorly from Victoria (90%). The majority of respondents were in the age group of 25-34 (65%) and identified as female (67%).

A mix response from Professionals, consultants and academics mainly working on mid-level positions was obtained.

The background responses showed that more than half (63%) of the respondents were working for over six (6) months from home for about (5) days a week. Interestingly, 19% of the respondents had no previous experience of WFH.

When working out of office, majority of the respondents (40%) spent 31-60 minutes in commuting to the office. The background of the respondents is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: General background of the respondents

Gender Identity	Percentage Responses	Age Group	Percentage Responses	Work Industry	Percentage Responses	Position Level	Percentage Responses
Female	66.7%	18-24	4.50%	Academia	22.2%	Junior level	31.7%
Male	33.3%	25-34	65.10%	Consultant	17.5%	Mid-level	56.7%
Non-binary	0%	35-44	23.80%	Professional/Technical Services	31.7%	Senior level	11.7%
		45-54	6.30%	Government/Public Job	6.3%		
				Others	22.3%		

The hypothesis whether a particular QWL indicator will increase, reduce or be impaired was made on the basis of discussion in the paper by Shamir and Salomon (1985) from where the indicators were extracted. The impact of WFH on QWL indicators are shown in Figure 1.

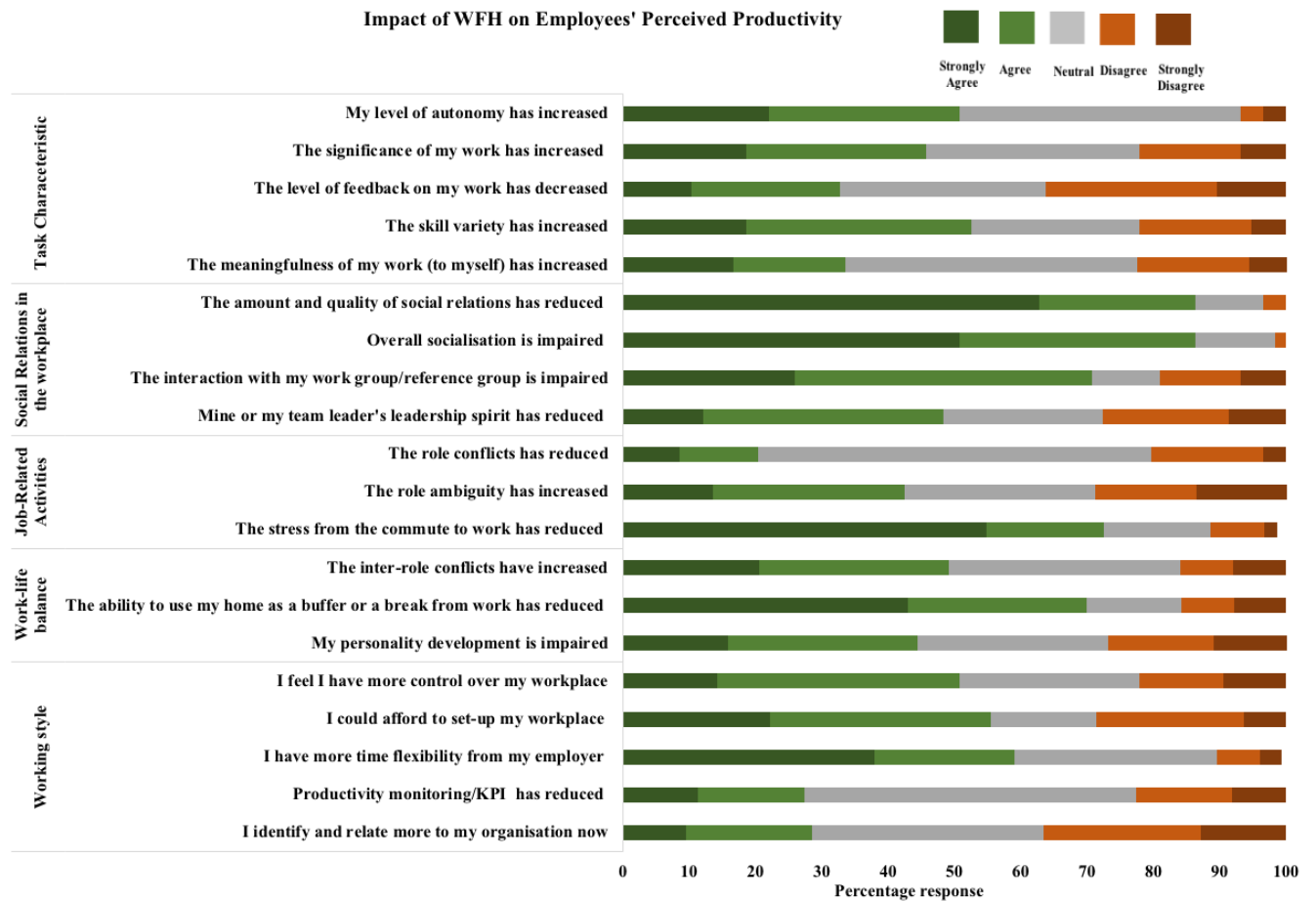


Figure 1: The impact of WFH on Quality of working life (QWL) indicators

As expected, the level of autonomy of on work and the skill variety (doing multiple tasks) increased during WFH while the level of feedback remained the same as 31% responded no change on the feedback levels. The opinion on the impacts of WFH on task characteristics was divided with 35.5% respondents experiencing positive impacts while 35.6% experienced negative response and 29% observed to have no change on their perceived productivity.

There was an agreement on the negative impacts of WFH on social relations. Approximately 60% of the respondents agreed that the reduced or virtual social relations during WFH negatively impacted their QWL.

*“Hated it [WFH]. I get depressed spending that much time in the house”*

~ Survey Respondent

*“I would say the biggest impact(s) to productivity have come from [1] the isolation experience of lack of interaction with colleagues/team face2face which has impacted motivation more than anticipated. [2] present context - COVID health / economic / job security uncertainty has drained motivation. [3] further home distractions / lack of buffer / melting of work/life boundaries has drained motivation / productivity.”*

~ Survey Respondent

Contrary to the hypothesis, the role conflicts such as conflicting demands or different expectations from different superiors, were not reduced but remained largely unchanged. Whereas, the role ambiguity (e.g. a lack of clarity in role and responsibility) increased as 42% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the hypothesis.

*“My workplace is dysfunctional. The increased separation from the workplace has helped me manage the dysfunctional culture.”*

~ Survey Respondent

The stress from commuting was clearly reduced with the lockdown restrictions still in place during the survey. However, the balancing of multiple roles and expectations such as parenting and working (inter-role conflicts) were increased as reported by approximately half of the respondents. The ability to use home as a buffer or a break from work was reduced as per the hypothesis.

*“It is difficult to have clear boundaries between work and home. Consequently, I am working many more hours than when I previously worked from home, or when I was in the office.”*

~Survey respondent

Many respondents (44%) even agreed that their personality development was impaired during WFH.

*“I think the boredom (no change in places or movement) together with the lack of actual communication and socialization impact my productivity and mental health negatively.”*

~Survey respondent

There was an agreement (60%) on the increased time flexibility from the employers and largely no change in the productivity monitoring or performance measurements. Yet, the overall changes in working style during WFH was reported to have negative impacts by 41% of the respondents and positive impacts by 31% of the respondents as shown in Figure 2.

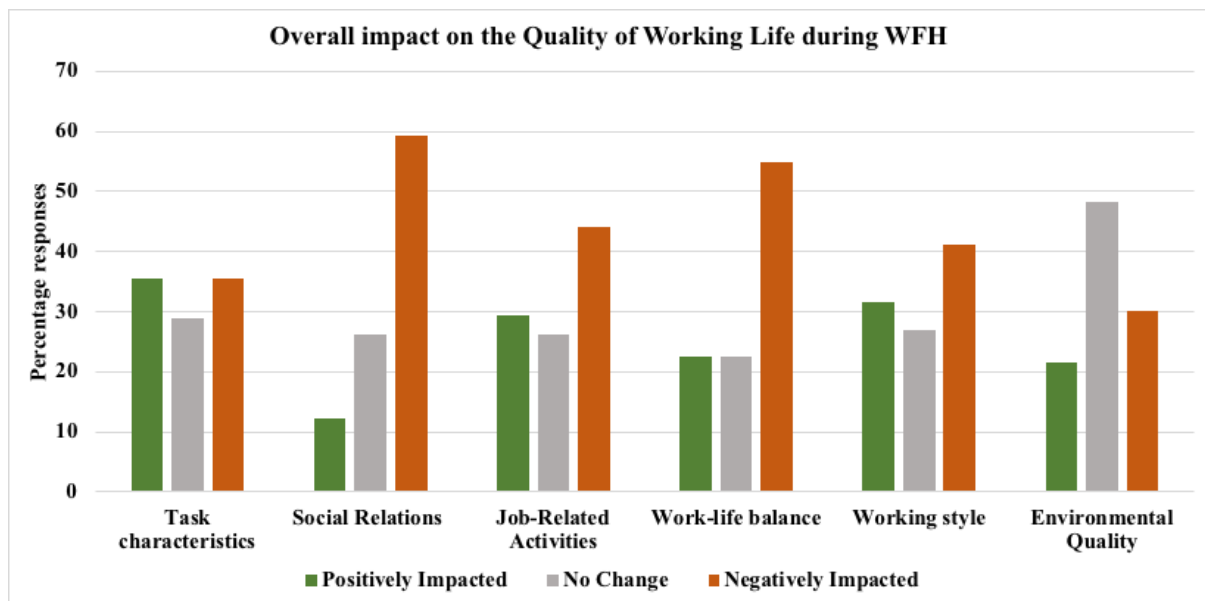


Figure 2: The overall impact of WFH on Quality of working life (QWL)

The setting up of WFH workplace was challenging for many with approximately 14% of the respondents while 21% of the respondents could easily afford the set up. Further, the environmental quality of our workplace has an impact on our QWL (Vischer and Wifi, 2017), and 30% of the respondents reported a negative impact on their productivity during WFH. While 48% reported no change and 21% said that the work environment had positive impact on their productivity. The major issues with home environment were noise and distractions with approximately 48% of the respondents reporting their home to be noisy and 58% reporting it to be visually distracting. The home workplace was also reported to be not ergonomic by 51% of the respondents as shown in Figure 3 below.

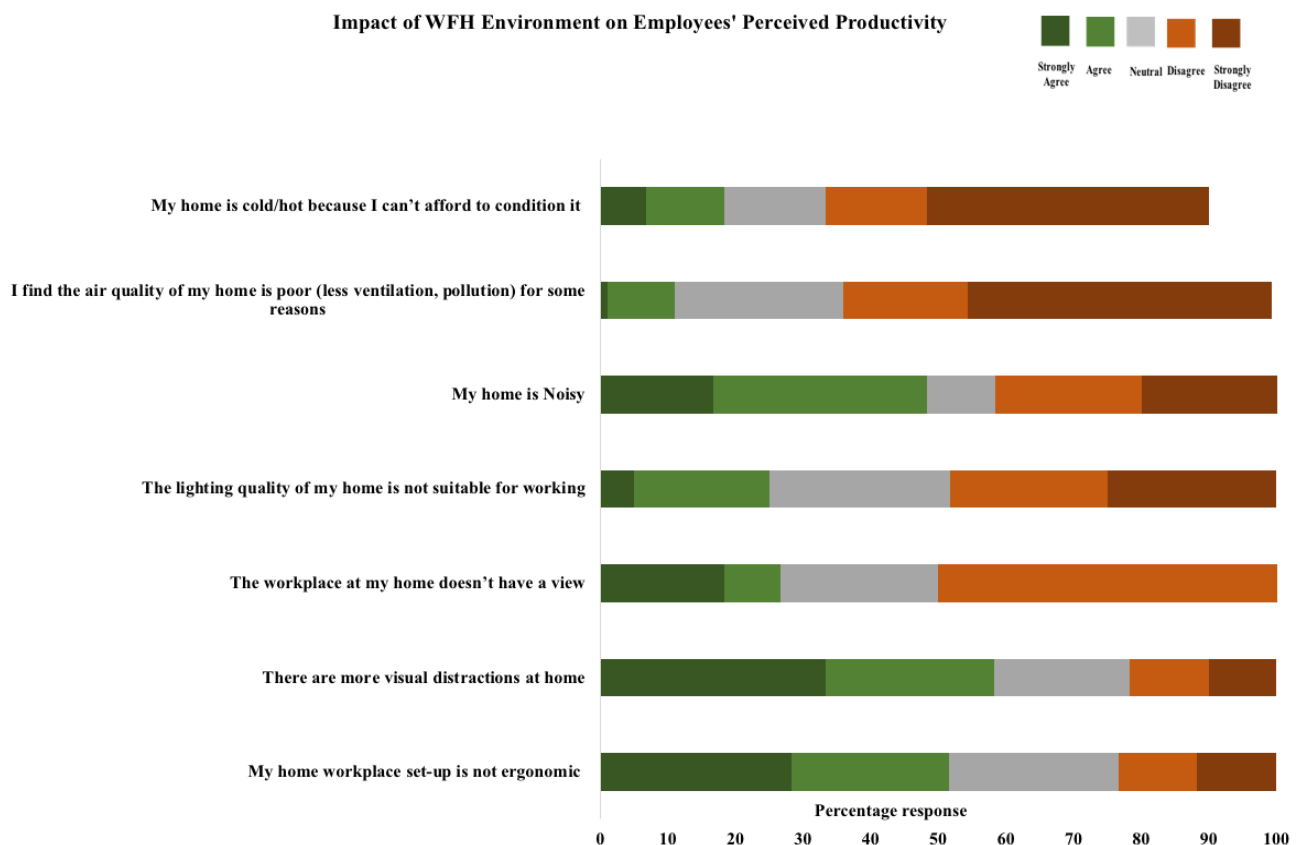


Figure 3: The impact of work environment on Quality of working life (QWL) indicators

While some QWL indicators were negatively impacted during WFH, many remained unchanged and some were even positive. 30% of the respondents reported a negative impact on their productivity and approximately 22% reported it to increase initially and then decreased. For 17% of the respondents the perceived productivity increased during WFH and for 20% it remained unchanged as shown in Figure 4.

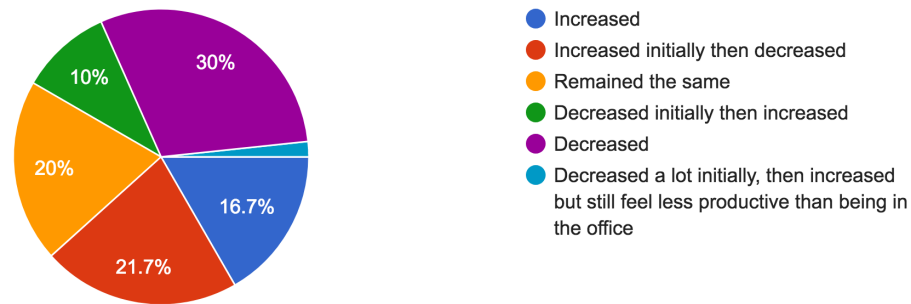


Figure 4: The perceived impact of WFH on productivity

*“My productivity while WFH has changed a lot over the last 6+ months. Initially it was very difficult because of the lack of a physical work-life separation. Now I think I have a good rhythm going, but there are ups and downs in my productivity still.”*

~Survey respondent

## Discussion

WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020. Most countries issued lockdown and social distancing measures. Due to the restrictions placed on non-essential travel and shut down of non-essential school and businesses, the public was required to stay at home and WFH if possible. This study was aimed to assess the impacts of WFH on perceived productivity levels in individuals. The underlying objective was to provide the employee feedback to help the transition back into office.

The WFH experience was different to each individual and so was the impact on their productivity. Several QWL indicators were affected during the WFH while many remained unchanged.

The Victorian government has allowed full occupancy to the offices (Victorian Government, 2021) since March 2021 yet Property Council of Australia (2021) reported a reluctance in employees to come back to offices.



Many claim that this does not mark the end of offices (Harrington, 2020) and only induce a change in office locations, e.g. working from offices closer to home (Poleg, 2021). The future of work in fact is going to be flexible with employees choosing a mix of WFH and office environment (Monash Business School, 2021). Regardless, the WFH opportunity made many re-think their work-life balance and how workplace environment effect their productivity

*“From pre Covid WFH experience I think some WFH can be productivity enhancing + life enhancing (in balancing other personal commitments). The practical solution is to balance both office/connection and WFH e.g. office 2-3 days and home 2-3 days / week. Having flexibility helps (in my view) productivity increase.”*

~ Survey respondent

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## **Limitations**

This report is based on the survey conducted by Building for Impact from September 2020 to April 2021. Building for Impact has taken all the reasonable precautions to ensure that the information reported is accurate. However, no warranty can be provided that the information and materials reported are completely free of errors. Building for Impact accepts no responsibility for any misjudgement or damages or claims if arise with the use or reliance on the information in this report or its interpretations

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