Zooming into better work-life balance?

Gender and equity insights from New Zealanders' experiences with working from home

NZIER report to ASB

2 March 2022

About NZIER

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NZIER was established in 1958.

Authorship

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The assistance of Sarah Spring is gratefully acknowledged.

Key points

COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the trend towards working from home

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, trends in digitalisation and globalisation were changing the ways people worked, including the skills they needed, how they worked, and even where they worked. The public health measures adopted to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the trend of working from home in New Zealand and abroad.

As restrictions are relaxed, employees and employers are grappling with the return to a new 'normal', for which working from home now plays a more prominent role in many workplaces. This reflects the benefits of working from home for both employees and employers, including reduced costs and increased flexibility.

But increased remote working may not automatically be good for equity

But this flexibility is a double-edged sword – it can also blur the boundaries between work and home life. With women still taking on responsibility for the bulk of domestic chores, the risk is that the current trend will disadvantage women both at work and in the home. Employers need to identify practices and policies that ensure equity for all workers, i.e. Creating opportunities for everyone to fully participate in the workplace productively and successfully, to progress their career equally and for the rewards and benefits of doing so to be equivalent.

Our survey reveals New Zealanders' experiences and preferences for remote working

We conducted a survey of working New Zealanders to better understand what their experiences of working from home had been during and outside of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Our key findings indicate:

- Both men and women had an overall positive experience of working from home during lockdowns, agreeing that achieving a better work/life balance, avoiding long commutes and overall cost-effectiveness are major benefits of working from home. This is in line with research showing that reduced commuting can significantly benefit workers, particularly those who work in major urban centres.

- Women are most likely to report that they did most or all of the childcare and home-schooling during COVID-19 lockdowns, confirming many published studies, including a New Zealand study (Masselot and Hayes 2020).

- Women were significantly less likely than men to report having the ideal equipment and a space designed for working effectively and comfortably from home, which impacted on their experience of working from home during COVID-19 restrictions and their view of this as a motivator for not working from home.

- When choosing where to work, men are more likely than women to be motivated by the need to be seen in the workplace or the need to be seen as adaptable. In contrast, women were more likely than men to say professional and social connections motivated them to be physically present and work-life balance motivated working

from home, demonstrating that the concept of ideal worker culture may be stronger in men than in women.

- Respondents agreed that the major challenge of working from home was the ability to connect with colleagues. This result is confirmed by numerous studies, with younger workers, in particular, more susceptible to experiencing negative career impacts due to working from home because of this issue.

- Women in management roles were significantly less likely than their male counterparts to express a preference for their staff to be physically present in the workplace, demonstrating what published studies indicate: That women in management roles have a higher level of confidence managing remote workers.

- Women were more likely to report finding it harder to justify taking sick leave when working from home, increasing their risk of burnout.

- Nearly half of respondents said that the ability to work from home was important, very important or essential.

Employers can act to ensure remote working improves both productivity and equity

To ensure that remote working arrangements provide the win-win scenario of improved well-being, lower employer costs, and no loss to productivity or workplace equity, we recommend that:

- Employers carefully identify their needs and requirements with respect to remote versus on-site working and offer as much flexibility as possible.

- Managers be offered training and support to increase their confidence in managing remote workers.

- Employers should take steps to break down the ideal worker culture by encouraging all employees to adopt at least hybrid working (some days at home, others in the workplace) where possible and praising those who do. Managers may need to model working from home explicitly to achieve better work-life balance to indicate to workers that this is an important goal for a healthy, productive workplace.

- Employers provide better support professional and social connections by:

  - ensuring meetings and important discussions never exclude remote workers

  - avoiding giving solo projects to remote workers

  - actively supporting new employees to form connections with their colleagues

  - organising online social events and encouraging teams to have informal online catchups and check-ins.

- Employers implement strategies to ensure work-life boundaries are respected.

- Employers seek to ensure remote workers can work as effectively and comfortably at home as they can in the workplace, including providing the appropriate equipment and ensuring staff have the same connectivity and IT support at home as at work.

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1 Background

1.1 A new future of work?

According to the OECD, the twin trends of digitalisation and globalisation have generated radical shifts in the way people live and work (OECD 2018).

A major focus of these trends has been on the implications for workers most affected by artificial intelligence and automation, while the opportunity to work remotely has been largely considered secondary and a lightly used perk for working parents (i.e. women in particular). Pre-pandemic, up to half of the workforce was expected to work at least some of the time remotely, by 2020 (Gough 2017).

In New Zealand, Stats NZ reported in 2019 that over half of the workforce already had flexible work hours while only a third had worked from home at some point (Stats NZ 2019). The 2018 Business Operations Survey asked employers similar questions and confirmed that until then, flexible start and finish times were the most common forms of flexible work arrangement offered by employers (Stats NZ 2019a).

1.2 Pre-pandemic patterns

Surveys of labour force data have revealed that working from home is influenced by gender, parental status, and occupation (Sullivan 2012). People who work from home are most likely to be well-educated, highly-paid, and employed in professional, executive or skilled occupations (Golden 2008; Wight and Raley 2008).

While women were only slightly more likely than men to have experienced working from home (Stats NZ 2019b), women were ten times as likely to say that working from home was motivated by a need to coordinate work with family and personal needs (Wight and Raley 2008). Unsurprisingly, the experience of working from home was far more common in parents of dependent children. The presence of dependent children increased the likelihood that an adult had worked from home by roughly 50 percent (Stats NZ 2018).

The Survey of Working Life 2018 (Stats NZ 2019) also revealed that working from home did not guarantee a better work-life balance: While most who had experienced working from home were satisfied with their work-life balance (69 percent), they were also nearly twice as likely to be dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied compared with those who had never worked from home. One reason may have been that, as many studies found, women who worked from home raised their family's expectations with regards to the number of household tasks they should take on, blurred the lines between work and personal life, and often ended up working longer hours (Tremblay 2002).

1.3 Lessons and insights from the COVID-19 pandemic

Enter the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, and remote working became not only an option, but a necessity as restrictions prevented many workers from accessing their usual workplace. The benefits of remote working fall into three broad areas:

- benefits to employers in reduced costs (due to the potential to function with a smaller footprint) alongside no discernible reduction in productivity
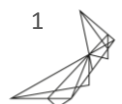
- benefits to workers in terms of work-life balance

- environmental benefits from reduced traffic congestion and commuter volumes.

A previous NZIER report identified the benefits of reduced commuting across four dimensions: Economic, transport, well-being and environmental (NZIER 2020) (see Figure below).

Figure 1 Impacts of reduced commuting

Economic effects
- Direct and indirect changes in consumption pattern
- Fiscal implications for infrastructure investment
- Economic effects of reducing congestion
- Potential productivity gains from time not spent commuting

Transport effects
- Speed
- Travel-time savings
- Reliability
- Safety
- Congestion
- Accessibility

Well-being effects
- Reduced commute-related stress
- Accessibility
- Public health effects of emissions

Environmental effects
- Upstream and downstream effects of changes in consumption
- Land-use changes
- Reduced emissions

Source: NZIER (2020)

Many workers are now seeing opportunities to leverage this experience to achieve an optimal balance of commuting into work and working remotely. This increases choices for both workers and employers – workers have a greater pool of jobs to choose from given the increased flexibility, while employers have a greater pool of workers to choose from when hiring. Remote working provides an opportunity for employers to support workers to achieve a better work-life balance and secure their loyalty while attracting high quality applicants for job openings.

It sounds like a win-win. But the published literature highlights some important considerations in the shift to more remote working, which requires careful planning to ensure outcomes are fair for all workers in the short and long term.

1.4 Risks and challenges

Many reports that emerged over 2020–2021 have focused on workers' shifting preference towards more remote working. Many studies suggest employers will struggle to get staff back into the workplace post-pandemic, the implication being that employers would prefer that their employees are physically present.

While some employers may continue to have concerns about the productivity of staff who work from home and consequently may call for a post-pandemic return to the workplace, the Future of Time study (Adobe 2021) found that more than half of workers were actually working more when working from home. But it also pointed out that these workers, feeling responsible for being constantly available in and out of workplace hours, were risking burnout. Other reports identify wide variation in employer readiness for remote working – from workplace culture to management practices – with potentially negative implications for those who choose more remote work.

Whether employers limit work-from-home opportunities or behave in ways that impose additional stress on remote workers, these choices are largely driven by a phenomenon known as ideal worker culture. This issue should be a major concern for employers who wish to avoid a worst-of-both worlds scenario.

1.5 Ideal worker culture

The literature describes ideal worker culture as an overt or implicit workplace culture in which employees are rewarded or valued for behaviours that are not actually associated with greater productivity, but which managers often see as evidence of commitment to work (Reid 2018; Lott and Abendroth 2020; Hills 2019). This includes:

- arriving at work early and leaving late
- taking few and short breaks
- minimising sick leave.

In an ideal worker culture, workers are totally dedicated and always on call. Any hint of meaningful interests outside of work or dedication to family is seen as a lack of commitment to the organisation and evidence that career progression is unimportant. People who subscribe to the idea of the ideal worker find it challenging to work with or manage those who do not (Hills 2019).

Ideal worker culture is incompatible with remote working because it rewards those who are most physically present and visible. Where ideal worker culture is a feature of the workplace, those who work from home may experience:

- being given less interesting and challenging work
- struggling to demonstrate their productivity to their manager
- not receiving credit or recognition for their achievements
- being left out of some meetings and decisions
- not being prioritised for training and development opportunities
- being passed over for promotions and pay increases

- being subjected to monitoring designed to assess whether remote workers are really spending their time working.

Under these conditions, workers can feel pressure to stay at their desks for lunch breaks, work longer hours, be constantly available for phone calls, and respond to emails immediately. Being left out of important workplace decisions and meetings and the lack of informal opportunities to connect professionally or socially with colleagues is isolating

The potential for negative implications is significant when the scale of the shift is considered. Researchers at the National Bureau of Economic Research surveyed 22,500 Americans over several waves to investigate whether, how, and why working from home would continue to be commonplace after the COVID-19 pandemic has passed. COVID-19 restrictions and behaviour change led to nearly half of all paid hours being remote work between May and December 2020 in the United States. According to the authors, survey responses indicate that approximately 22 percent of work hours will be done remotely after the pandemic ends, compared with just 5 percent before (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis 2021).

Work-life balance – or workers' level of satisfaction with the amount of time they spend working versus attending to personal and family activity – has been shown to be positively related to:

- job satisfaction

- life satisfaction

- quality of life.

(Gröpel and Kuhl 2009)

Overseas studies indicate that poor work-life balance can be a major contributor to workplace stress and is associated with social and economic costs (The Council of Economic Advisers 2014).

Employer flexibility regarding remote working has been identified as a potential means to improve work-life balance for the workforce, but for this objective to be realised – and realised equitably – the barriers to achieving better work-life balance through remote working must be addressed.

2   Women's work in a post-pandemic workplace

Even before the pandemic, workplaces with a stronger female presence led the shift towards remote working options. Specifically, those businesses leading the shift towards more flexibility for remote working often had a higher proportion of women in leadership roles, suggesting this may be another symptom of organisations that are generally more supportive of women progressing in the workplace. Under this hypothesis, the ability to work remotely is seen as advantageous for women as the flexibility to balance work and personal responsibilities would enable more women to maintain or return to full-time employment after having children. OECD analysis shows that countries with the highest percentage of women working from home also have the highest female employment rates (OECD 2018).

Figure 2 Relationship between working from home rates and employment rates for mothers
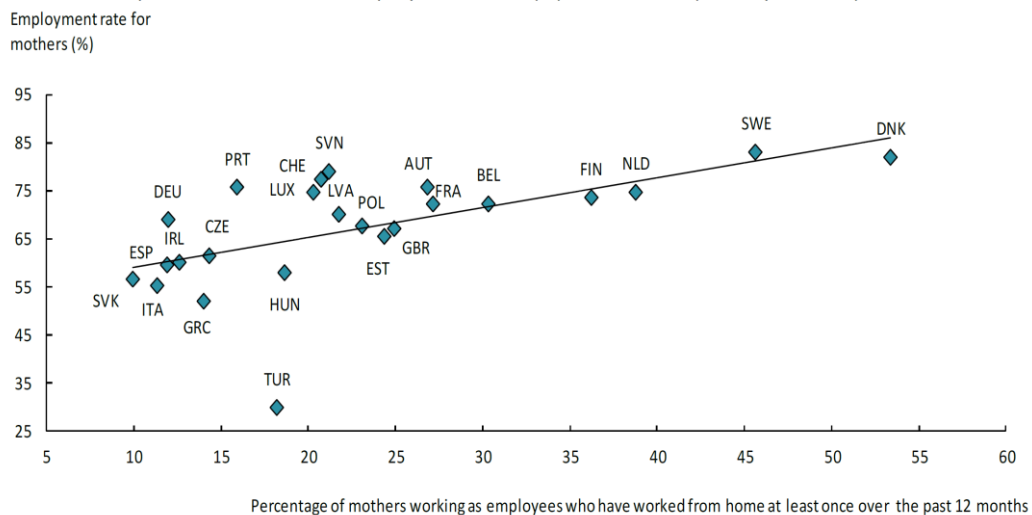
Source: OECD (2017)

Traditionally, and still today, in many types of households (nuclear families, extended families and most sole parent families), women take on the bulk of the housework and childcare responsibilities. This means the attraction of remote working, with the opportunity to better manage children's needs and the extra hours afforded by eliminating the commuting time, is likely to be greater for women.

Some studies (e.g. Dockery and Bawa's (2018)multivariate analysis of panel data from 2001 to 2013 on the impacts of working from home indicate that working home *can* improve household relationships and support more equitable sharing of household/ childcare tasks. But women's status in the household is not the only concern.

As normality begins to return after the peaks of the COVID-19 pandemic, to the extent that an ideal worker culture remains, women are most likely to choose to continue spending a higher proportion of their working time working from home, while men are more likely to return to the workplace. This has led to concerns that workplaces will shift to being more

male-dominated, with potential implications for a widening gender pay gap and women's progression in the workplace to be affected negatively (Alon et al. 2020a).

2.1 Work-life balance versus work-life separation

Two key issues emerge from the literature as critical concerns for many workers, particularly women: work-life balance and work-life separation.

Work-life balance is generally seen as enhanced by remote working, largely because commuting time is reduced, freeing up more time to attend to family and personal needs. Additionally, work breaks such as lunchtime can allow for some household chores (e.g. loading the washing machine, unloading the dishwasher, etc.) to be attended to in such a way as to improve the efficiency with which the household is run.

However, work-life separation, which describes the ability of workers to ensure work responsibilities do not impinge on family time or vice versa, is seen as threatened by remote working. Some reports even indicate that some employers actively exploit this phenomenon by calling on employees outside of their normal working hours when they are working from home. For workers whose working day is not 'bookended' by a commute and who have ready access to laptops or any other equipment or files needed to work from home, pushing back against employer demands is challenging (Feldmann 2022).

The dangers of poor work-life separation include negative mental and physical health impacts, strained working relationships with colleagues and managers, and low levels of employee engagement. A report identified that the COVID-19 pandemic had caused a decline in the general wellbeing of 85 percent of workers, with 26 percent identifying increased work demands – including loss of work-life separation – as the reason for this. A representative quote included in the report indicated that working from home was a clear threat to work-life separation due to employer behaviour: "*There's more pressure to produce, and no one respects time boundaries. Emails start at 5:30 AM and don't end until 10 PM, because they know you have nowhere else to go.*" (M. Campbell and Gavett 2021)

While workers with better work-life balance are expected to be happier, more productive, and more loyal to their employers, poor work-life separation – often caused by employer behaviour – threatens to undermine this potential benefit of working from home.

2.2 Not just a woman's problem?

The choice to work from home to better balance work and family commitments is associated with working mothers – the group most strongly associated with the concept of work-family conflict. Work-family conflict occurs when workers feel that their role in the family is being compromised due to the demands of their professional role. It is the main predictor of emotional exhaustion in working mothers (Recuero and Segovia 2021). But working mothers are not the only group likely to be experiencing high rates of this type of conflict. Fathers are increasingly taking on an active role in parenting. Many people with carer responsibilities or even pets that require attention during the working day are likely to see benefits in working from home.

Trends indicate that some remote working is increasingly a preferred choice for men. For example, the 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce found that between 1977 and 2008, U.S. men's' experience of work-family conflict in dual-earner couples increased from 35 percent to 60 percent (Reid 2018). This represents a shift from the traditional gender difference in which women experience work-family conflict and men experience family-work conflict, in which workers feel that their professional role is being compromised due to the demands of their family role (Weer and Greenhaus 2014).

Many reports indicate younger workers are also enthusiastic about remote working and have a high expectation that they will be offered these opportunities. Millennials are said to prefer a working arrangement that blurs the lines between work and personal life and offers flexibility to work whenever and wherever they choose. Gallup polls have identified Millennials as the majority of remote workers (52 percent of remote workers are Millennials, versus 29 percent for Gen Xers and 17 percent for baby boomers). Nearly half of Millennials choose to work remotely (Robison 2020).

But other reports indicate that younger workers are no more likely than older workers to embrace remote working and may be put off by fears their careers will suffer as a result. A UK survey of over 18,000 people found that post-pandemic 79 percent of all professionals are likely to be interested in remote working opportunities, but the data indicated senior professionals are slightly more enthusiastic at 82 percent than young professionals at 78% (Lindstrom 2021).

But younger workers are also highly likely to express concerns that when they do choose to work from home, they may miss out on important professional networking and connections that will have a longer term impact on their careers. And the literature suggests that they are right to be concerned: The advantages of being physically present may be greatest for younger workers as they are most in need of opportunities to establish professional networks that can impact career advancement in the long term (Schlitz 2021). But in this day and age, with more tools than ever before to connect online, is it possible that younger workers could have it both ways?

Finally, workers from minority groups reportedly experience working from home as detrimental to their ability to participate equally in meetings and discussions: The ability to 'read the room' when in a minority not physically present makes minority workers more reluctant to speak up for fear of having misread the room and saying the wrong things (Kurtz, McGee, and Guo 2020).

2.3   Equity in the workplace

There are many definitions of equity in the workplace. Broadly speaking, equity in the workplace is generally understood to be about creating opportunities for all workers to:

- fully participate in the workplace productively and successfully
- progress their career equally
- receive equivalent rewards and benefits for equivalent work.

Equity in the workplace may mean supporting different workers in different ways, by taking into account their individual circumstances, challenges and aspirations, or providing sufficient flexibility. This will enable workers to make the necessary adjustments themselves and feel confident that they will not be penalised for doing so.

3 What do working New Zealanders say?

With the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating the trends towards more flexibility for remote working, it's important to ask:

- Will working from home become the new norm for many New Zealanders?
- Who is most likely to choose to work from home as their primary working arrangement?
- What are the major challenges associated with working from home?
- What are the primary motivations for working from home or not?
- What can employers do to support employees to work from home and achieve a good work-life balance?
- How can employers ensure differences in remote working do not translate into inequitable workplace outcomes in job satisfaction, career progress, and earnings?

Having a better understanding of how workers view these issues will provide ways to measure whether remote working was providing optimal outcomes when it comes to equity for all workers.

To gain insights into these issues, we surveyed working New Zealanders about their experiences of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions we asked covered the challenges they faced and their motivations to either return to the workplace or continue working from home. We analysed the data by gender, parental status, age group, professional group, and region.

3.1 The survey sample

The survey sample of 1129 was selected to be representative of the New Zealand working population.[1] We outline below some useful descriptive characteristics of the survey sample.

63 percent of respondents lived with a partner and/or children. This provided a useful backdrop in assessing whether working from home (WFH) experiences and outcomes affected people in households differently, depending on any other roles they may have outside of work.

Table 1 Respondents' living situation
% of survey sample and % of each gender

Living situation	Total	Men	Women
Live alone	14%	11%	17%
Live with friends / flatting	9%	11%	8%
Live with parents	6%	6%	6%
Live with a partner	33%	31%	35%

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[1] The survey was conducted online by Camorra over the period 9th to 14th February 2022, with the sample selected from the survey provider's panel. In selecting the sample, a sample size of 1,000 New Zealanders who are working was targeted, with the composition of the survey sample matched to as closely represent the demographics of the New Zealand working population as possible.

Living situation	Total	Men	Women
Live with a partner and child/ren	26%	31%	20%
Live with a partner and child/ren live with you some of the time (e.g. shared custody)	1%	2%	1%
Single parent with shared parental responsibilities	1%	1%	0%
Single parent with full parental responsibilities	3%	1%	4%
Live with an adult/s person you help to care for	1%	0%	1%
Live with a partner and adult/s person you help to care for	1%	1%	0%
Live with a partner, child/ren and adult/s person you help to care for	1%	2%	1%
Live with extended family	2%	2%	3%
Other	2%	2%	3%

Source: NZIER

Four percent of men and four percent of women reported living with a partner of the same gender.

Table 2 Opposite and same gender partners
% of survey sample and % of each gender

Gender of live-in partner	Total	Male	Female
Male	45%	4%	94%
Female	53%	95%	4%
Other	0%	0%	0%
Prefer not to say	1%	1%	1%

Source: NZIER

76 percent of respondents (with 80 percent for men and 73 percent for women) were in full-time work.

Figure 3 Work status of survey respondents

% of survey sample and % of each gender

- Work in part-time paid employment (i.e. less than 30 hours per week)
- Work in full-time paid employment (i.e. 30 hours or more per week)
- Self-employed - own farm
- Self-employed - own business
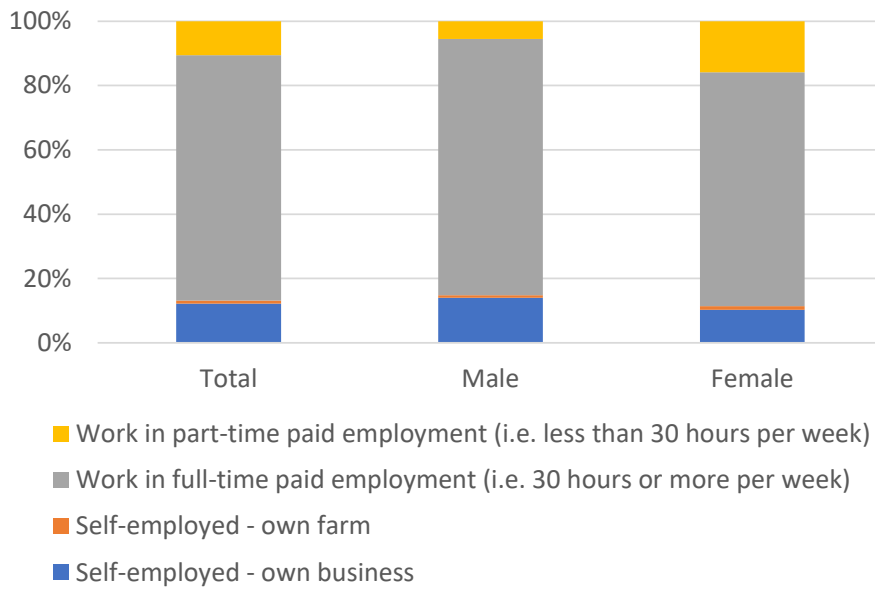
Source: NZIER

58 percent of respondents with a partner said their partner was in full-time work. This was higher for women than for men, with 67 percent of women and 50 percent of men saying their partner was in full-time work.

Figure 4 Work status of partner

% of survey sample and % of each gender
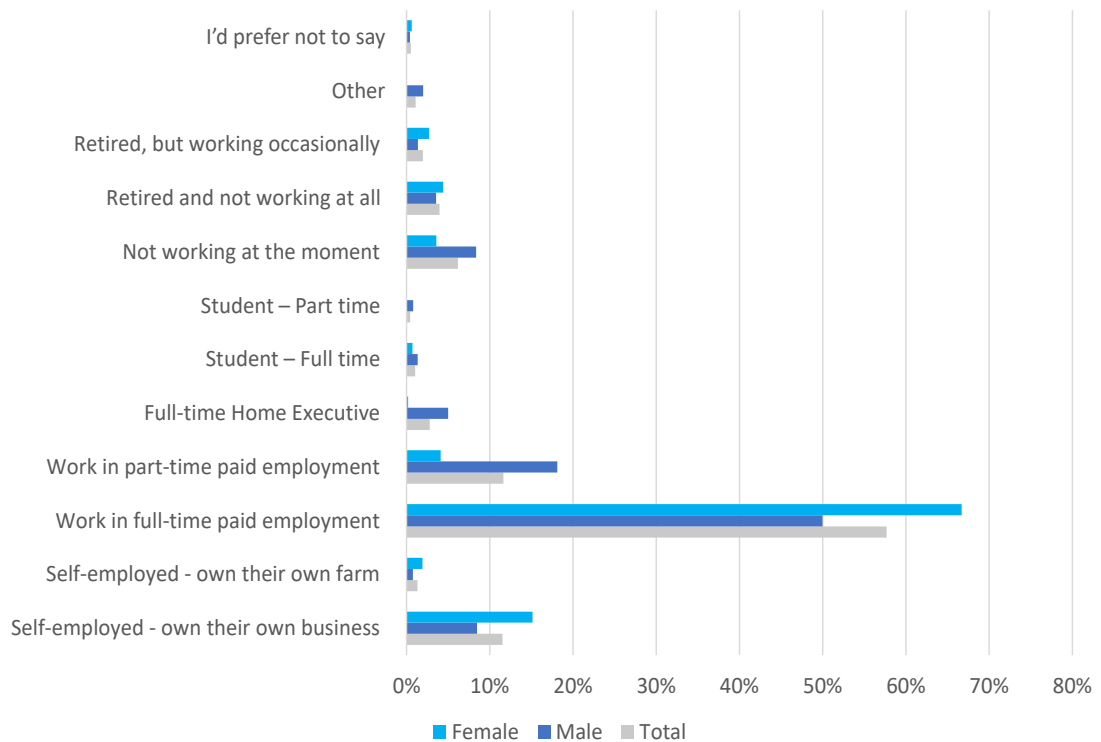
Source: NZIER

3.2   Experiences are varied but largely positive

It is important to recognise that many workers have yet to experience working from home. Even during the strictest COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, essential workers continued to work in their usual workplace, and many other workers were sent home with no ability to carry out their work at home (either due to a lack of required equipment or due to the nature of their work).

Survey respondents aged 55 and older were most likely to say it was not possible to work from home. This was an interesting finding because overseas studies indicate older workers are no less able to work from home than younger workers in terms of skills. The ability of older workers to do their jobs from home during the COVID-19 pandemic has been linked to differences in earnings, education and gender rather than to age (Chen and Munnell 2020), indicating that occupation and industry are the primary drivers of the response to our survey.

Overall, respondents reported that their experience of working from home during COVID-19 restrictions was positive.

Our literature review suggested that younger people experienced higher levels of distress, anxiety and loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, but our survey indicated they were only slightly less likely than other age groups to report that their experience of working from home was overall positive and only slightly more likely to report that their experience was negative.

Figure 5 Overall experience of working from home during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, by age group

% of each age group
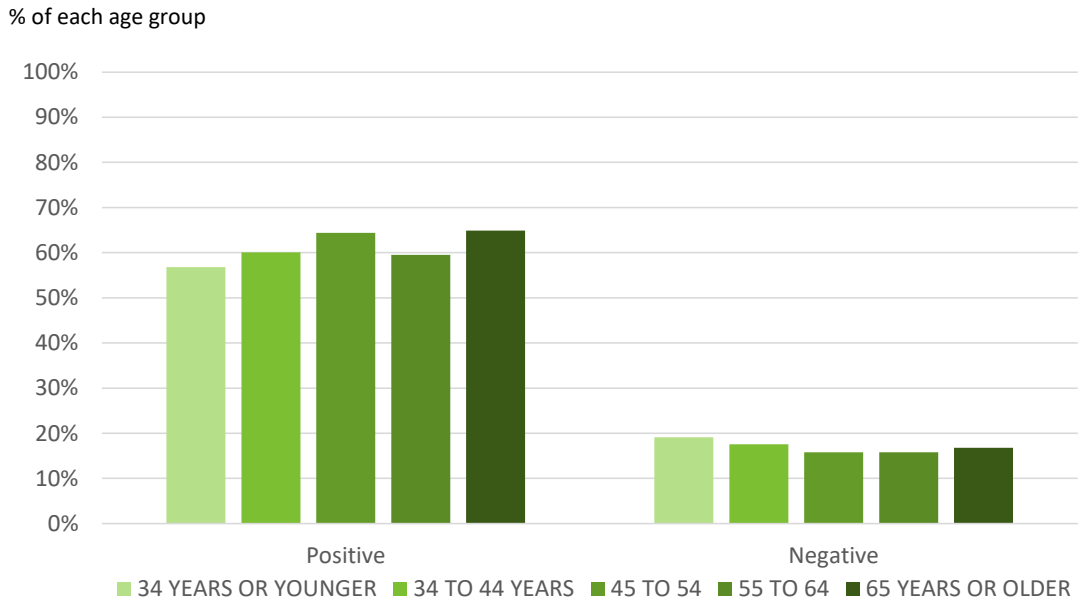
Source: NZIER

A closer look at responses shows that while young people were only slightly less likely to report an overall positive experience, they were significantly less likely to report that their experience was very positive. The oldest workers (aged 65+) were most likely to report a very positive experience.

Figure 6 Experience of working from home during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, by age group

% of each age group

Source: NZIER

13
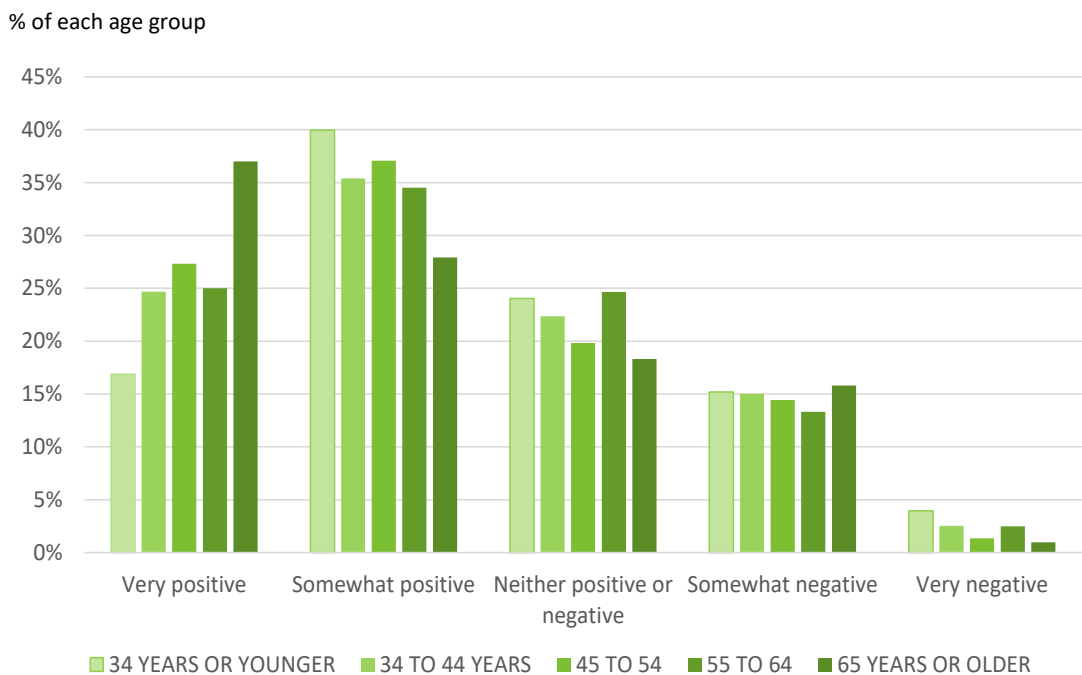
Our survey also indicates that respondents' living arrangements had only minor impacts on their experiences of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions: Those living without a partner or children were slightly more likely to report either a very positive or very negative experience, and those living with a partner or children were slightly more likely to report that their experience was neither positive nor negative.

Figure 7 Experience of working from home during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, by respondent living situation

% of each living situation group

Source: NZIER

Delving deeper into the experiences of people living with children, the survey responses indicate that those living with older children were significantly more likely to report a positive experience of working from home, while negative experiences peaked in workers whose children were aged 5 to 10 years.

Figure 8 Overall experience of working from home during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, by age group of respondent's child(ren)

% of each child age group
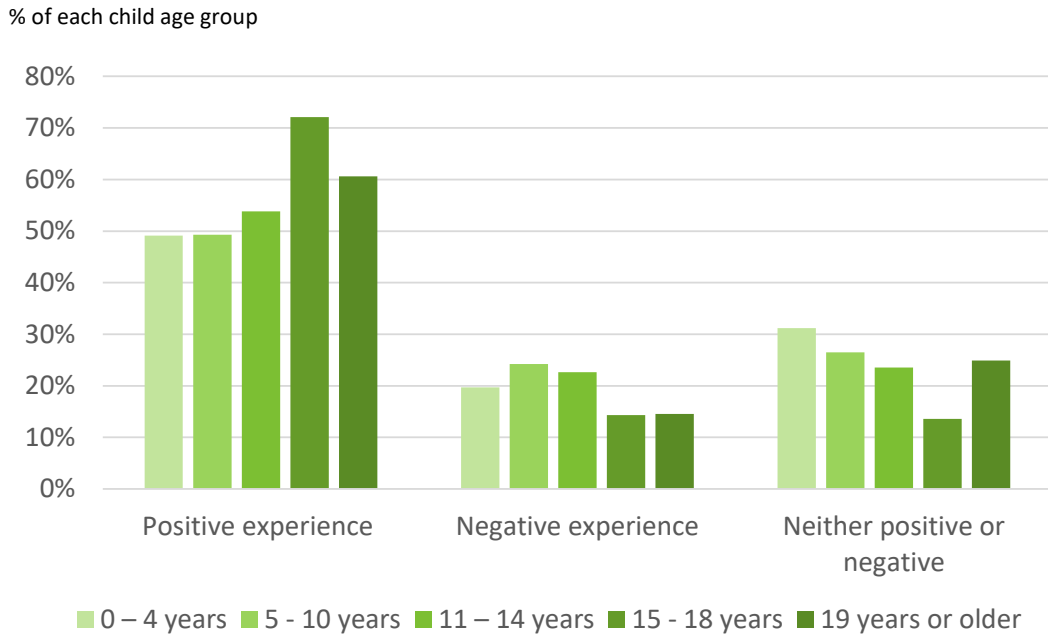
Source: NZIER

Our survey also asked about respondents' region of residence. We suspected that there may be significant differences between the experiences of Aucklanders versus those of other New Zealanders due to the duration of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in Auckland. Our literature review indicated that people are generally happy and grateful for opportunities to work from home, but this is most likely to be true when working from home is offered as a choice, not so much when required (Anderson and Kelliher 2020). Stress levels have increase as populations spend more weeks confined to their homes (Rodríguez et al. 2021).

The survey responses confirmed that people in Auckland were least likely to report a very positive experience, reflecting the effects of the prolonged lockdown for Aucklanders over late 2021. Interestingly, though, people in the upper north island (north of Auckland) were most likely to report a very positive experience. Aucklanders were also most likely to report that their experience was somewhat negative, but those living further north were most likely to report a very negative experience.

Figure 9 Experience of working from home during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, by region

% of each region

Legend: Upper North Island, Auckland, Lower North Island, South Island
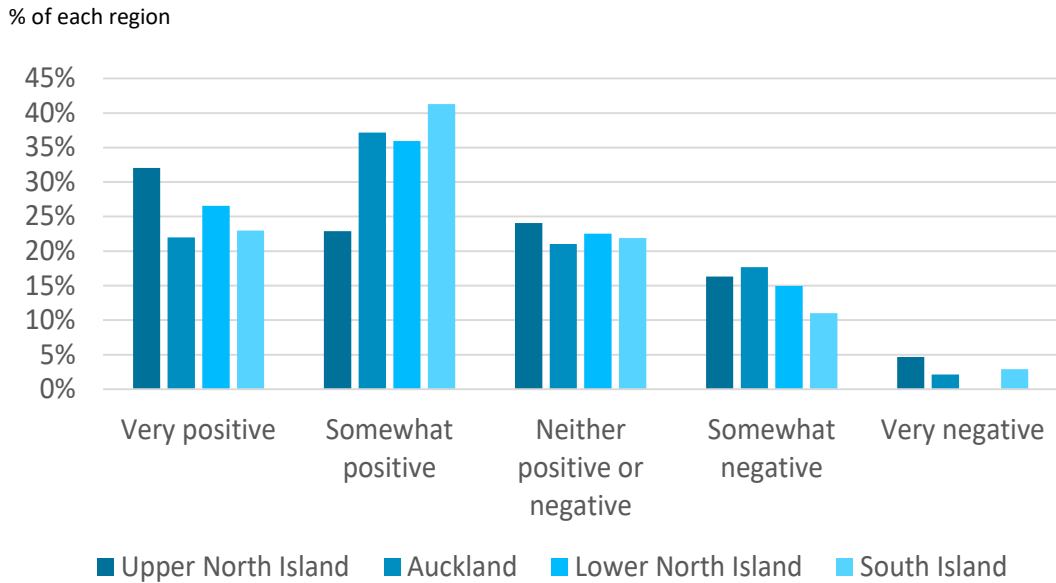
Source: NZIER

Adding up the positive and negative responses reveals that Aucklanders' experience of working from home was rated as only slightly less positive than the experiences of people living in the lower North Island or the South Island, but slightly more positive than the experiences of people living in the upper North Island.

Figure 10 Overall experience of working from home during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, by region

% of each region

Legend: Upper North Island, Auckland, Lower North Island, South Island
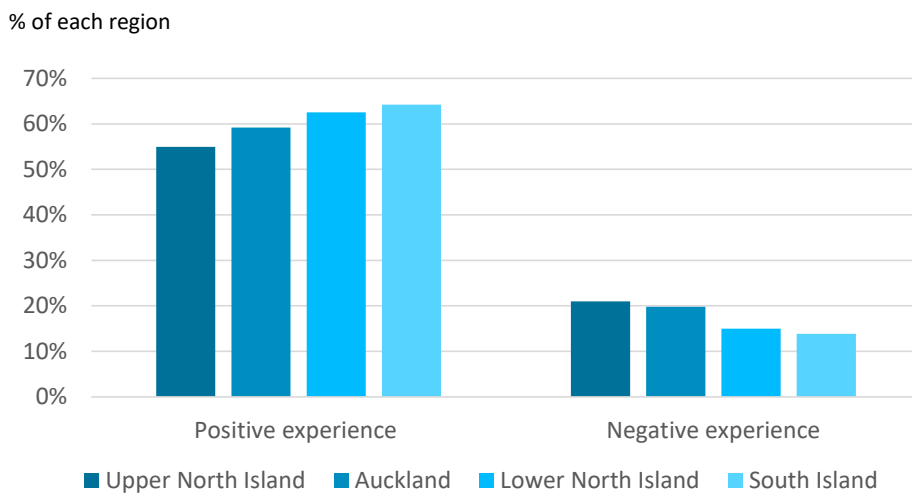
Source: NZIER

Our survey also sought to identify whether people in low-income groups had different experiences of working from home than those in high-income groups. Responses indicate that workers in low-income groups were the most likely to report a positive experience of

working from home during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, while those with the highest household income were the most likely to report a negative experience.

Figure 11 Overall experience of working from home during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, by income group

% of each income group
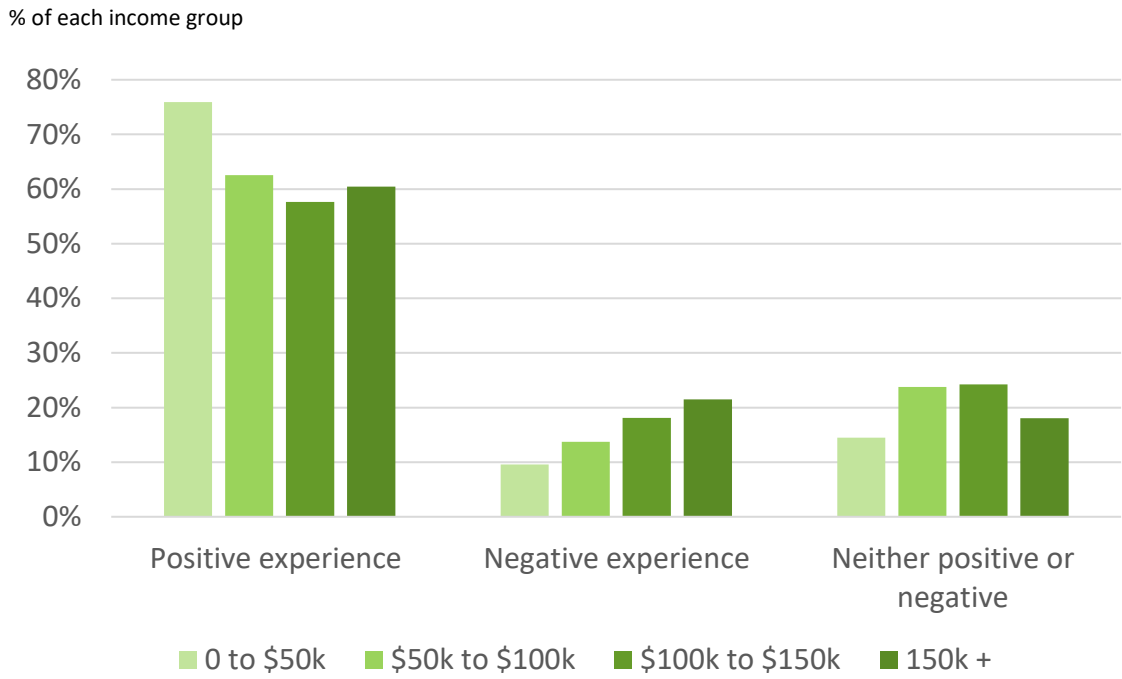
Source: NZIER

3.3 Almost half of New Zealand workers have a choice about working from home outside of pandemic restrictions

Outside of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, some amount of working from home is normal for around half of our survey respondents. Respondents also indicated that their remote working arrangements allow them to choose when and how much, either without limits or within limits set by their employer. Very few respondents had an arrangement in which working from home occurred according to their employer's specifications, with no flexibility for workers' needs.

However, over 40 percent of respondents indicated that working from home is either not possible or that they are not allowed to work from home.

Figure 12 Working from home arrangements outside of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions

% of respondents
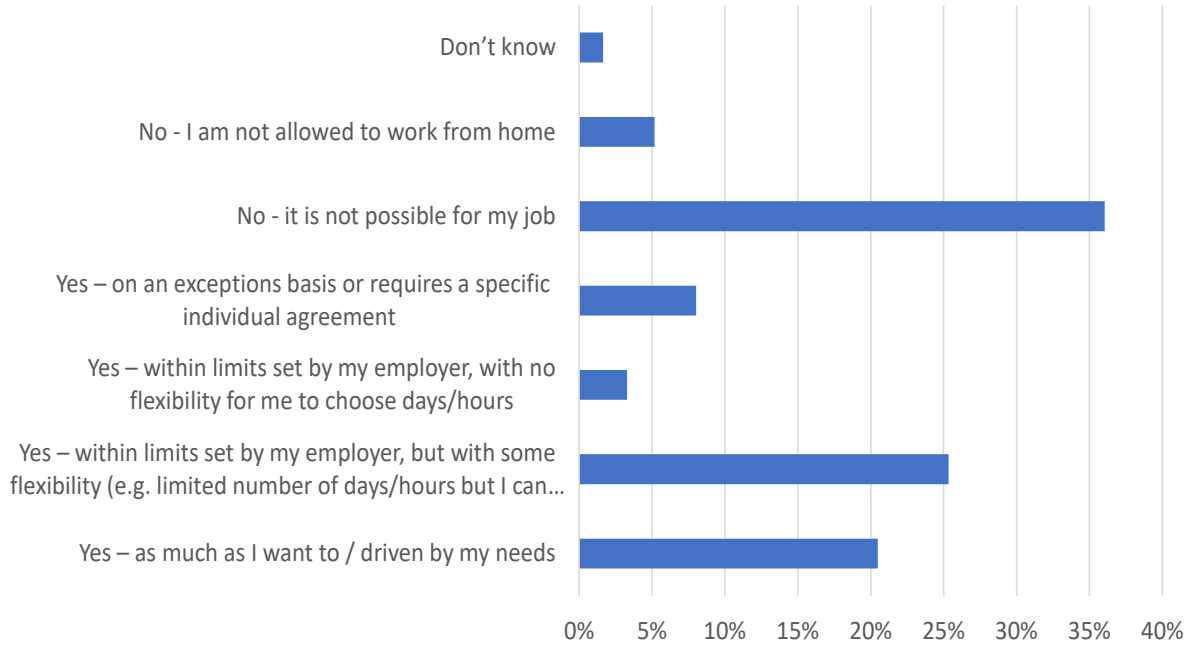
Source: NZIER

Work-from-home opportunities differ across age groups. Older workers (aged 55-64 and 65+) were most likely to say it was not possible for their job to be done from home, but at the same time, those aged 65 and older were most likely to say they could work from home as much as they wanted, and that the arrangement was driven by their own needs.

An arrangement in which some working from home was permitted but where employers set the days that this could happen were relatively rare.

Figure 13 Working from home arrangements outside of pandemic restrictions, by age group

% of each age group
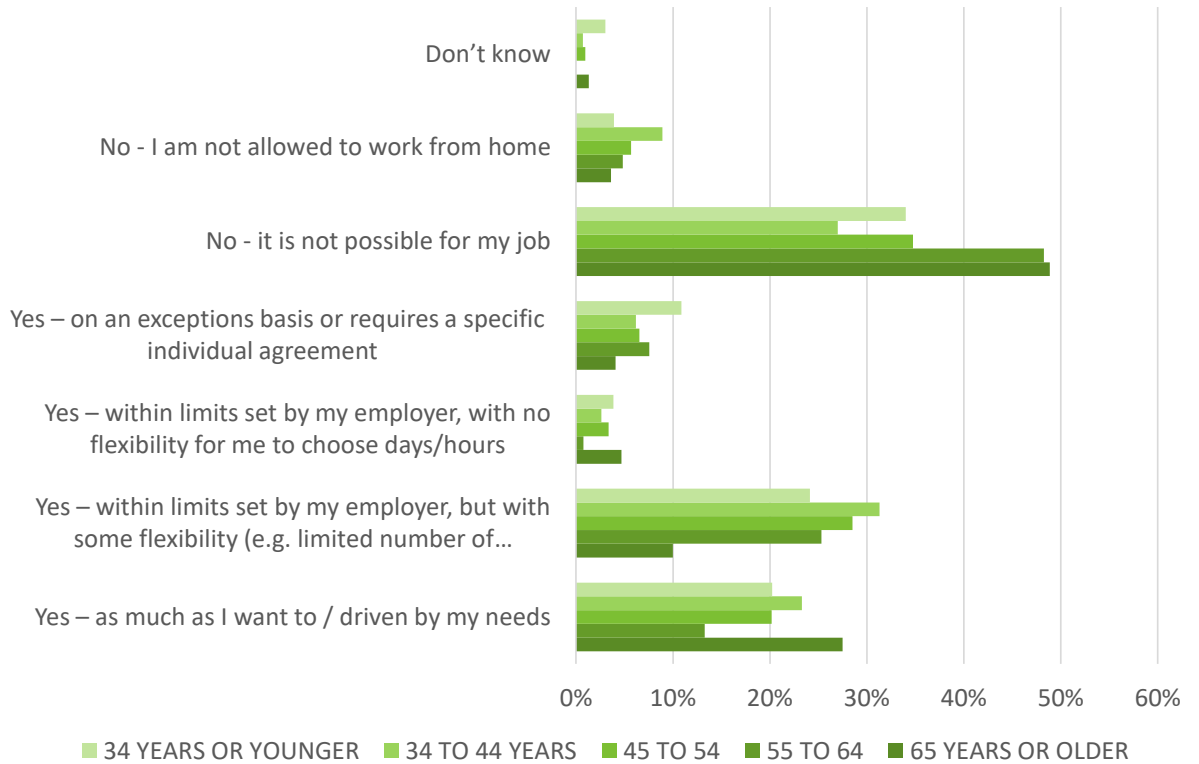
Source: NZIER

3.4 Reasons for working from home identify the key perceived benefits

Respondents identified why they prefer to work from home. They overwhelmingly indicated that the primary reasons for remote working were avoiding a commute, overall cost-effectiveness, and achieving a better work-life balance.

These reasons are consistent with the literature, which shows that people who work from home are happier, less stressed, and more focused (Schlitz 2021). Other research has found that having more time for family and reducing the stress of commuting are strong motivations for working from home (Pelta 2021). The ability to WFH also enables employees to relocate to lower-cost areas that tend to be less geographically accessible (Pelta 2021).

Figure 14 Reasons for preferring to work from home

% of respondents
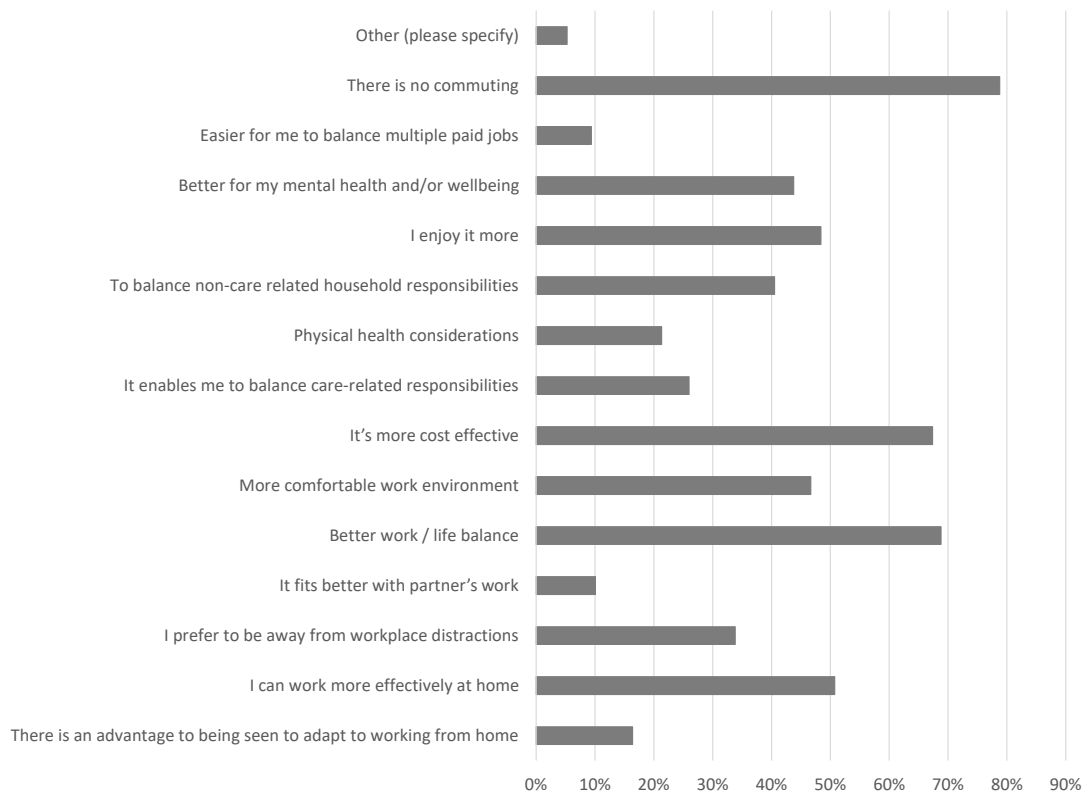
Source: NZIER

Similarly, the survey results indicate that people generally have congruent feelings about the perceived benefits of working from home: Mainly the ability to achieve a better work-life balance, avoiding long commutes and the overall cost-effectiveness of the arrangement.

3.5   The challenges of working from home

While there are widespread motivations to WFH, employees also highlight some challenges. Overall, less than half of respondents said they had all the equipment they needed to work comfortably and effectively at home or had a space designed for home working.

Figure 15 Respondents' set up for working from home

% of respondents
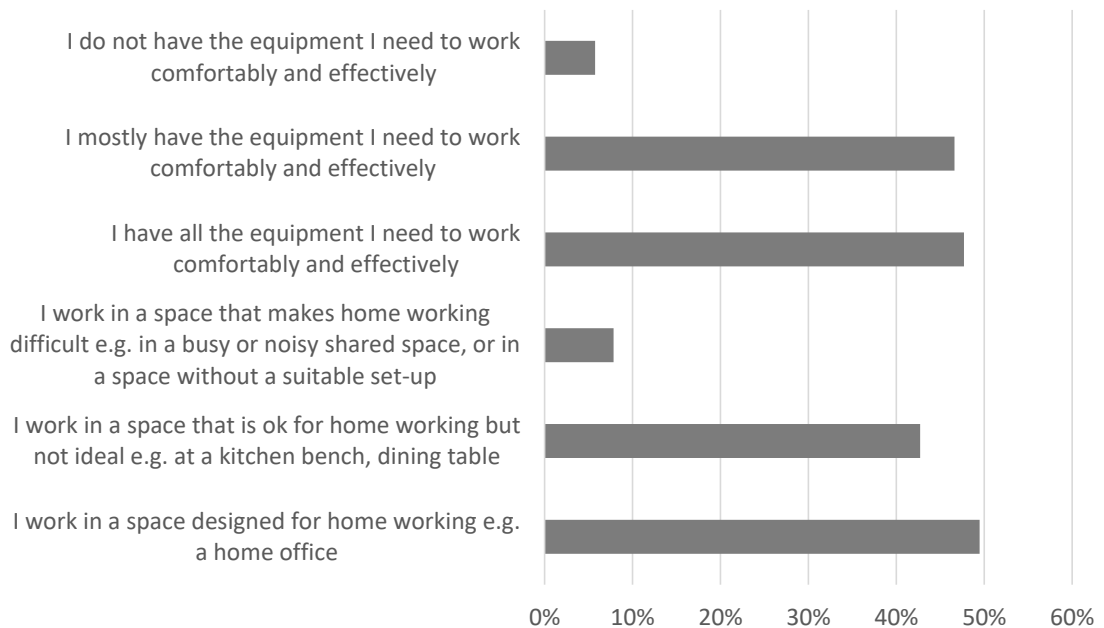
Source: NZIER

Working in an appropriate space with a healthy physical set-up and equipment that supports productivity is acknowledged in workplaces as important, but employers are generally unaware of the conditions under which remote workers are working. Risks of repetitive strain injuries and other physical – most likely musculoskeletal – ailments raise the possibility that remote working could be counter-productive if workers need time off to access treatment or work less productively due to pain and discomfort. Even mild musculoskeletal discomfort can mean workers take more and longer breaks and experience reduced wellbeing.

Many remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions may have been working from home with little advance planning to ensure they had appropriate equipment and furniture. Workers will undoubtedly have tolerated this aspect of the restrictions as acceptable and even inevitable. But longer-term arrangements may require greater support to ensure the set-up is appropriate to minimise risks to health, wellbeing and productivity.

Analysis of responses by age group indicates that older workers are more likely to have the appropriate set-up for working from home, including space and equipment, and are least likely to say they work in a space that makes working from home difficult or that they do not have the equipment they need to work comfortably and effectively.

Figure 16 Respondents' spaces for working from home, by age group

% of each age group

I work in a space that makes home working difficult e.g. in a busy or noisy shared space, or in a space without a suitable set-up

I work in a space that is ok for home working but not ideal e.g. at a kitchen bench, dining table

I work in a space designed for home working e.g. a home office

■ 34 YEARS OR YOUNGER ■ 34 TO 44 YEARS ■ 45 TO 54 ■ 55 TO 64 ■ 65 YEARS OR OLDER
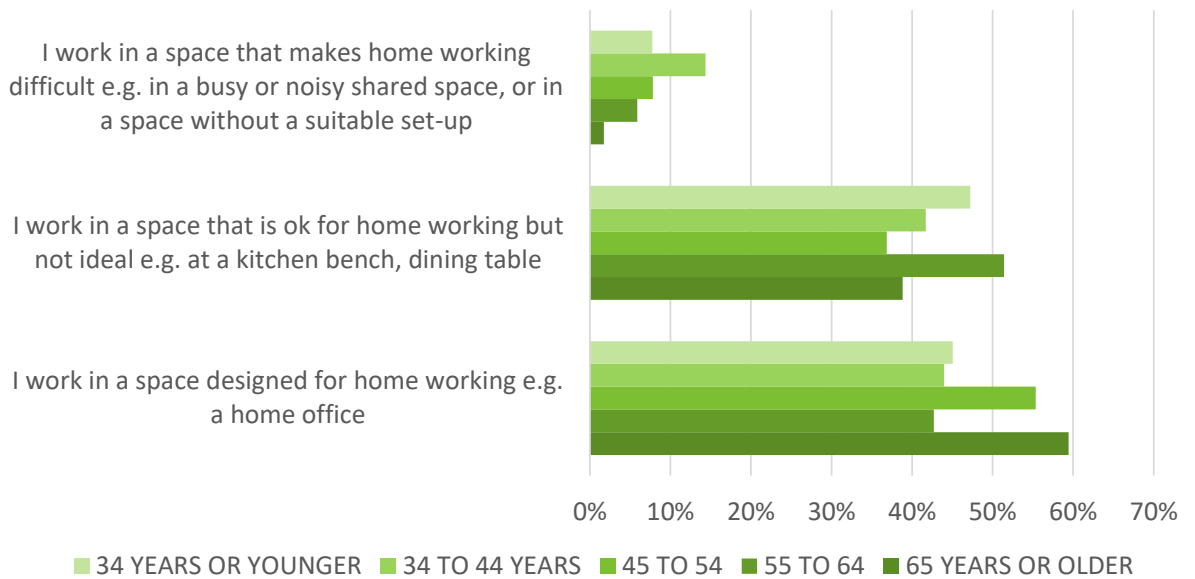
Source: NZIER

Figure 17 Respondents' equipment for working from home, by age group

% of each age group

I do not have the equipment I need to work comfortably and effectively

I mostly have the equipment I need to work comfortably and effectively

I have all the equipment I need to work comfortably and effectively

■ 34 YEARS OR YOUNGER ■ 34 TO 44 YEARS ■ 45 TO 54 ■ 55 TO 64 ■ 65 YEARS OR OLDER
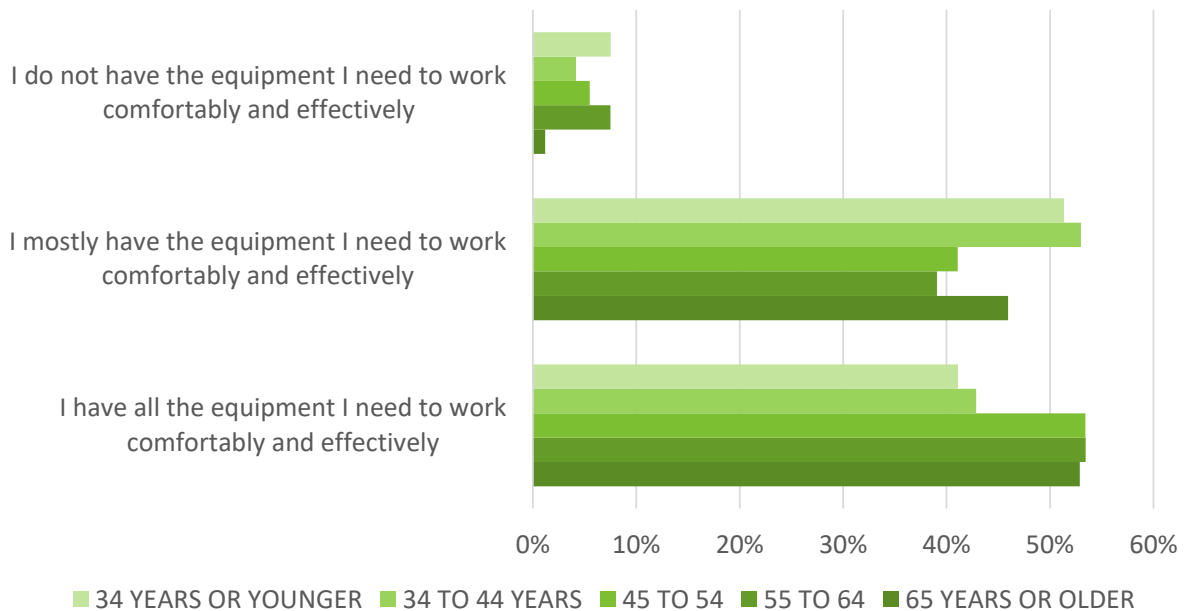
Source: NZIER

These findings are consistent with the literature, which indicates that the quality of the workspace shapes the WFH experience, resulting in perceptions of whether remote work is a positive experience – this differs amongst different socioeconomic and demographic groups (Johanson 2021). Other published research identifies that over 60 percent of remote

workers spend money on equipment and furniture and pay for it out-of-pocket to significant amounts (Society for Human Resource Management 2021). Other studies show that remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic who worked from home more than previously reported significant increases in lower back pain, shoulder pain and eye strain (Robinson 2021).

Reflecting on their experiences of working from home, respondents largely agreed that the most significant challenges associated with working from home centred on staying in touch with colleagues and staying focused on work.

Young workers were significantly more likely to identify staying focused on work as a major challenge of working from home. Like women, they were also more likely to feel that it was harder to justify taking sick leave when working from home.
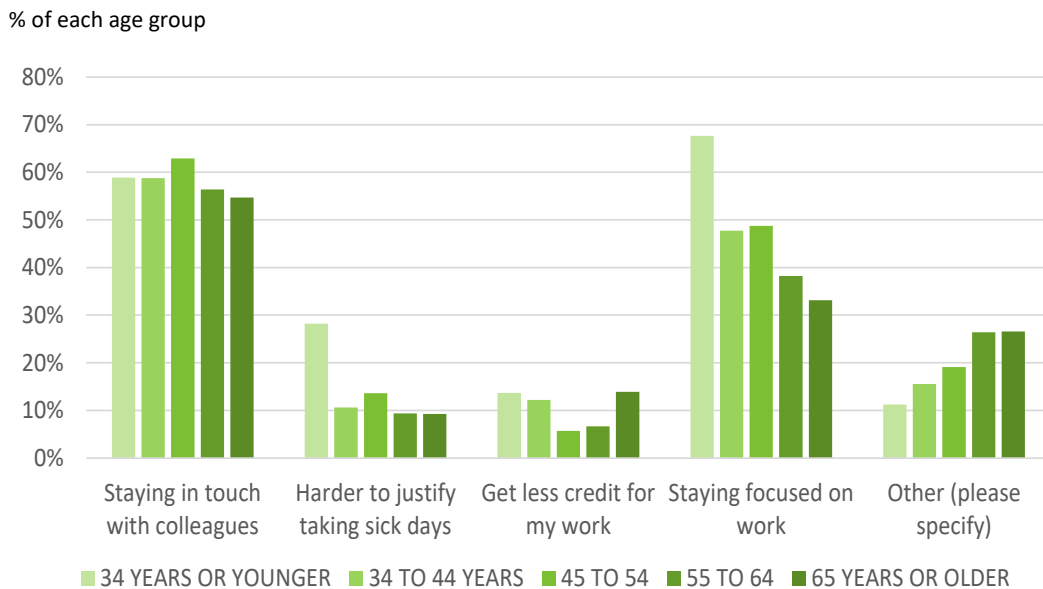
Figure 18 Challenges of working from home by age group

% of each age group

Source: NZIER

The literature suggests remote working may be killing the concept of a sick day, with many workers feeling that mild illness is not enough to justify taking sick leave when they are already at home. This raises the risk of burnout as workers attempt to keep working when they actually need a break (Smith and Dill 2022; Zitron 2021). Our survey responses indicate this risk is higher for younger workers.

The challenges of working from home identified by respondents were largely consistent with the reasons given by respondents for choosing *not* to work from home. The most common reasons identified for choosing to work in their usual workplace were seeing and working with colleagues, working more effectively with colleagues, and achieving a better work-life separation.

The literature confirms that connecting with colleagues is a major challenge for remote working. Employees working from home are particularly less likely to connect with new team members, indicating a greater need for managers to actively support and encourage connections across the team when there is new staff (Parker, Knight, and Keller 2020; Williamson et al. 2021).

Figure 19 Reasons given for preferring *not* to work from home

% of respondents

Source: NZIER

3.6   Future intentions of workers and challenges for employers

When asked how important the ability to work from home was, 45 percent of respondents indicated that it was either important, very important or essential.

Figure 20 Importance of ability to work from home

% of respondents
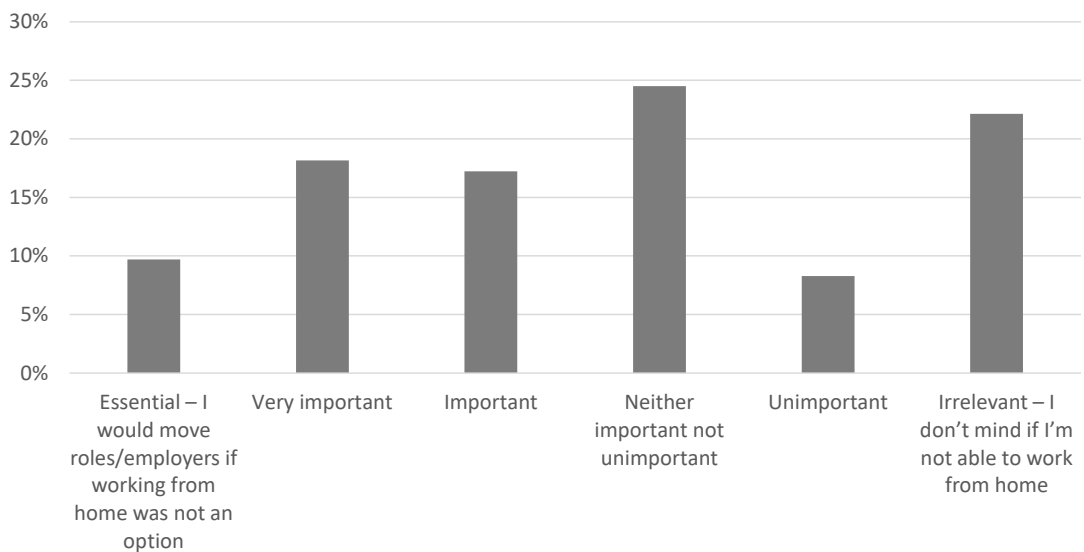
Source: NZIER

Most employees want a hybrid working arrangement

When asked what working arrangement they would choose if given a choice, only a minority of respondents indicated they would choose to work from home almost every day. Most respondents preferred a hybrid working arrangement, with either two or three days per week working from home.

Figure 21 Respondents' preferred working arrangements
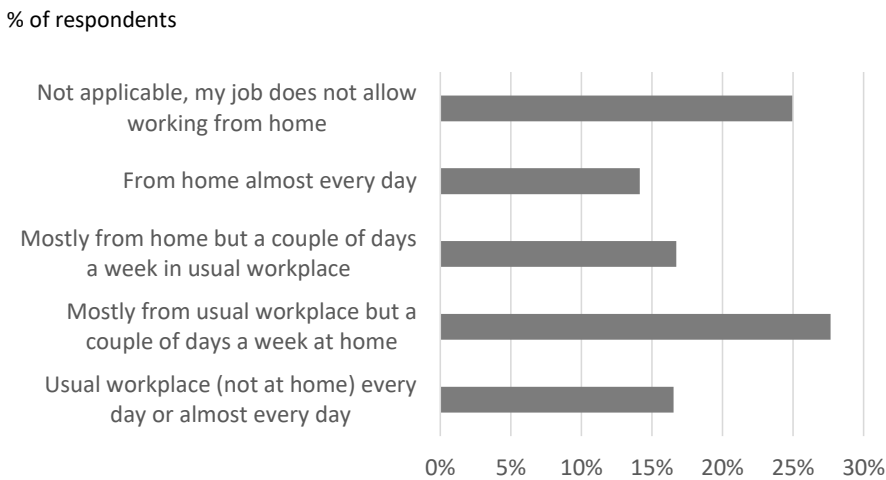
% of respondents

Source: NZIER

Across age groups, there are no obvious differences in respondents' preferences for working arrangements, but workers in the 45 to 54 and 55 to 64 y age groups appear to show a slightly stronger preference for hybrid working that favours more time in their usual workplace.

Figure 22 Preferences for working arrangements by age group

% of each age group
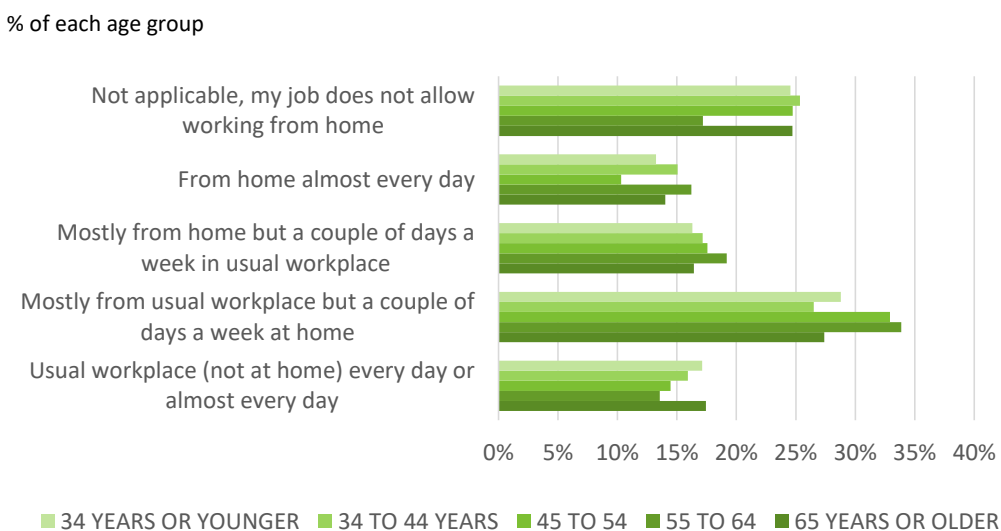
Source: NZIER

Ideal worker culture is stronger in some demographics than others

Responses to some key questions reveal that ideal worker culture is not a strong feature of New Zealand workplaces.

Most respondents felt that working from home should not impact any of the suggested issues related to work performance and career progression. Respondents overall were strongly in agreement that working from home should not impact career advancement, managers' assessments of performance, and remuneration.

Figure 23 Survey respondents' views of what impacts *should* result from working from home
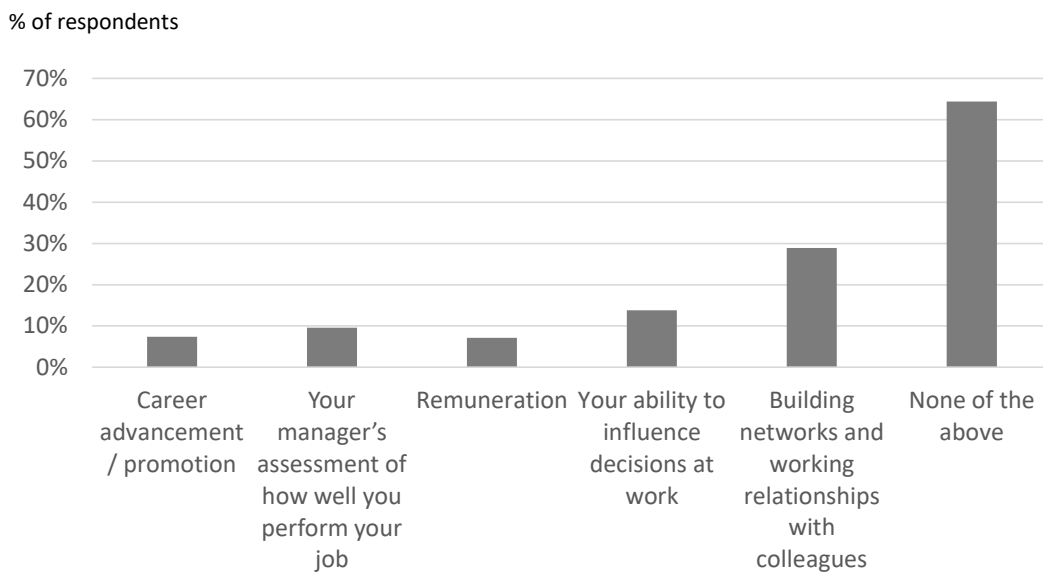
% of respondents

Source: NZIER

While younger and older respondents generally agreed that none of the identified impacts should occur for people who choose to work from home, workers in the 55 to 64 age group were more likely to agree that working from home *should* impact on a worker's ability to build networks and working relationships, on their ability to influence decisions at work, on their remuneration, and on their career advancement or promotions. These responses indicate that the workforce's demographic composition impacts how colleagues who choose to work from home are perceived in the workplace, which will likely have implications for career progression for those whose remote working choices are seen in a negative light by others.

Figure 24 Views of what impacts *should* result from working from home, by age group

% of each age group
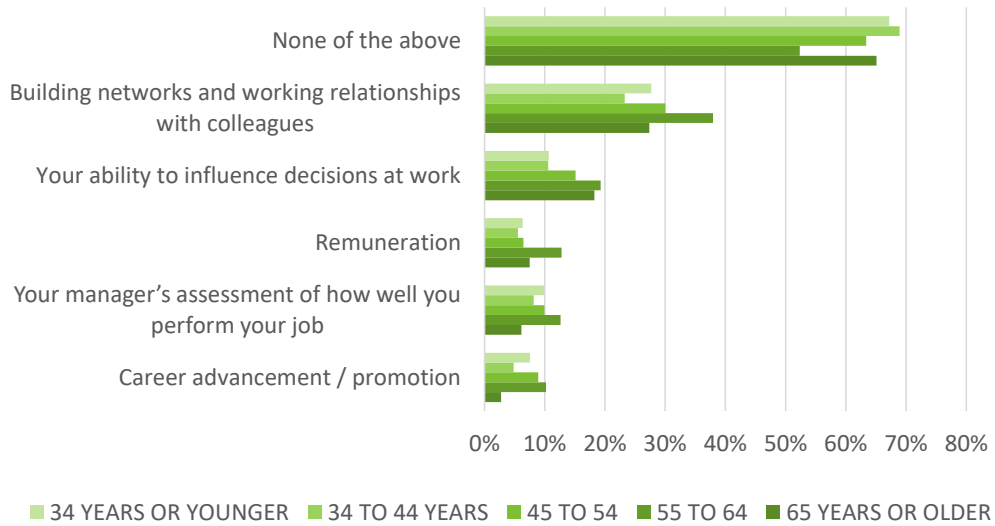
Source: NZIER

Management responsibilities

Approximately 31 percent of respondents indicated they had some management responsibilities.

Figure 25 Survey respondents' management responsibilities

% of respondents
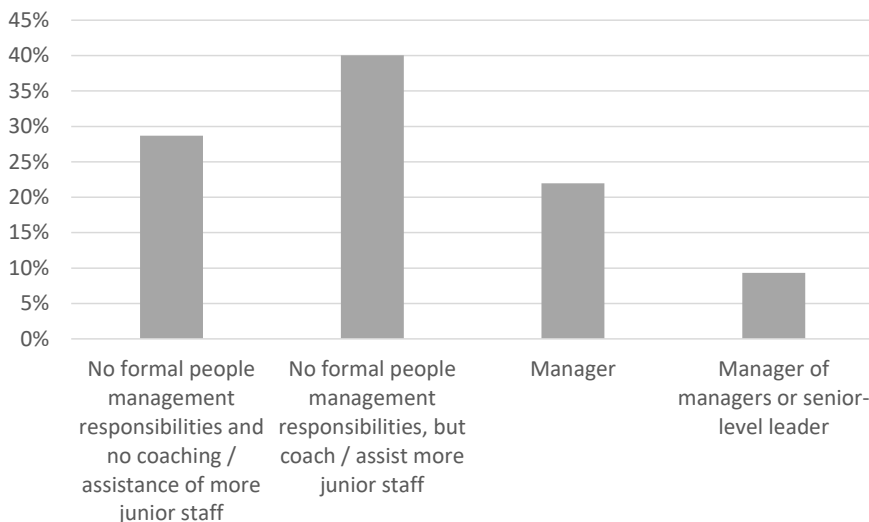
Source: NZIER

A question directed towards those who identified themselves as having management responsibilities at work indicated that few managers in any age group identified a

preference for their staff to either working from home or being physically present in the workplace. Published studies suggest some managers forget about remote workers when assigning tasks and believe they spend more time supervising remote workers than on-site workers (Society for Human Resource Management 2021).

However, younger managers were less likely than older managers to express a preference for their staff to be physically present in the workplace, and those aged 55 and older were least likely to express indifference to the arrangements that workers had for where they do their work.

Figure 26 Managers' preferences regarding remote working, by manager age group

% of each age group
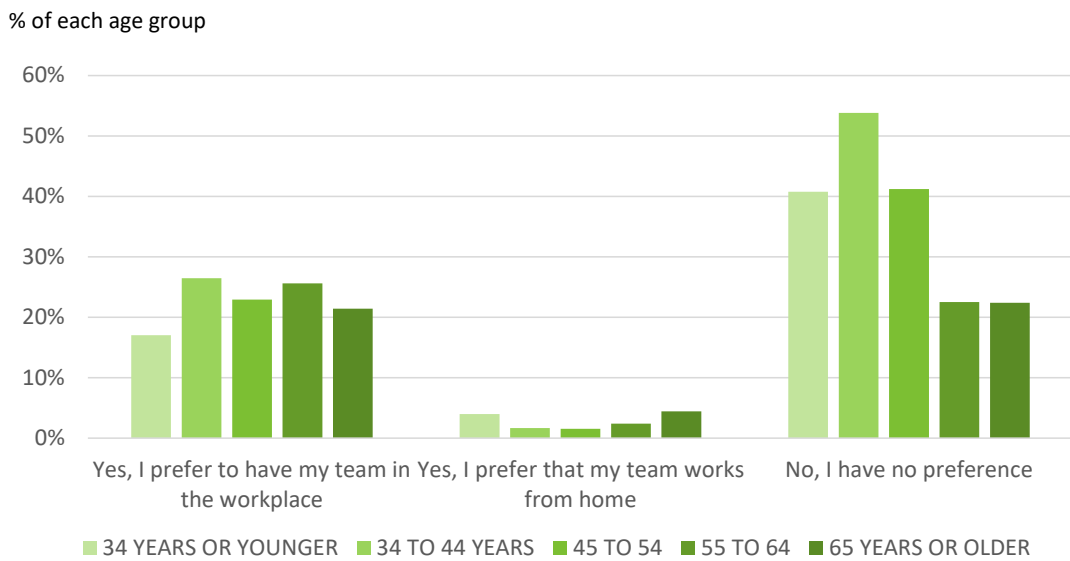
Source: NZIER

Many workers feel that networks and relationships are negatively impacted by working from home

59 percent of workers identified that the most significant challenge associated with working from home was their ability to stay in touch with colleagues.

Figure 27 Most challenging aspects of working from home

% of respondents
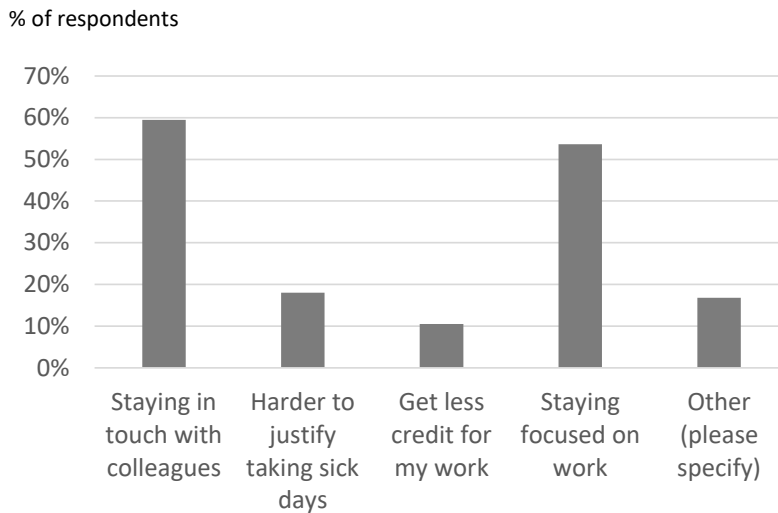
Source: NZIER

This finding is consistent with published literature which suggests working from home limits our ability to connect with different teams, reduces cohesion and may hinder the potential to create new ideas (Bloom 2021).

Some amount of loyalty to employers can be expected as a result of support for remote working, but other factors have more influence

For most respondents, whether they were planning to stay with the same employer or not, the ability to work from home was not likely to be a major driver of the decision. 15 percent of those who planned to remain with their current employer said the ability to work from home was a major driver of the decision to stay, but only six percent of those who planned to change employer said that the ability to work from home was a major driver of that decision.

However, 35 percent of respondents said the ability to work from home was either important or very important, and an additional 10 percent said it was essential.

Figure 28 The importance of being able to work from home
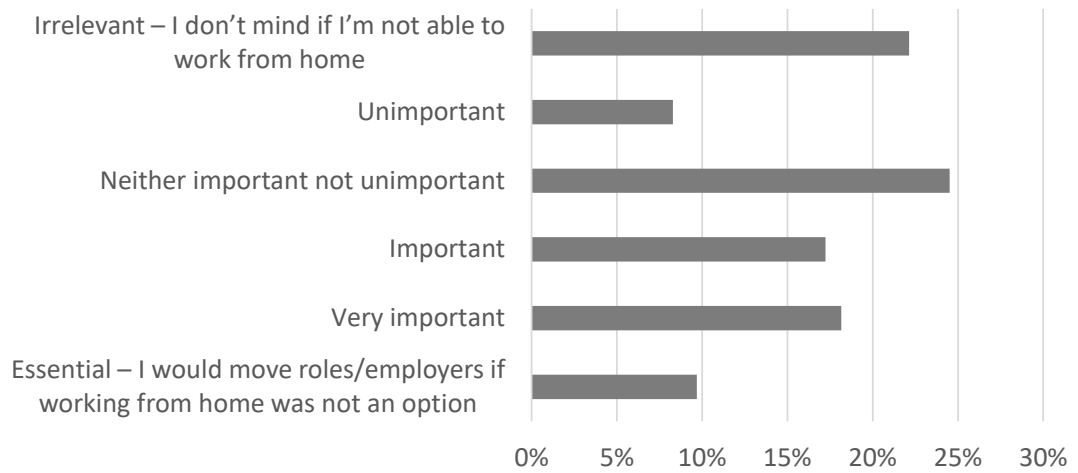
Source: NZIER

Together, these results suggest that although the ability to work from home is not often the major driver of decisions to leave employers, this consideration does have the ability to influence decisions some of the time or may be a secondary but still important consideration (alongside other factors like remuneration, for example).

4 How are women different?

4.1 Women's experiences of working from were generally positive…

Most workers saw the WFH experience over lockdown as a positive experience. Across the genders, women were more likely than men to indicate their experience was highly positive or somewhat positive, but also slightly more likely to indicate their experience was somewhat negative. Men were slightly more likely to indicate their experience was very negative and significantly more likely to indicate it was neither positive nor negative.

Figure 29 How the WFH experience over lockdown was viewed

% of respondents and % of each gender
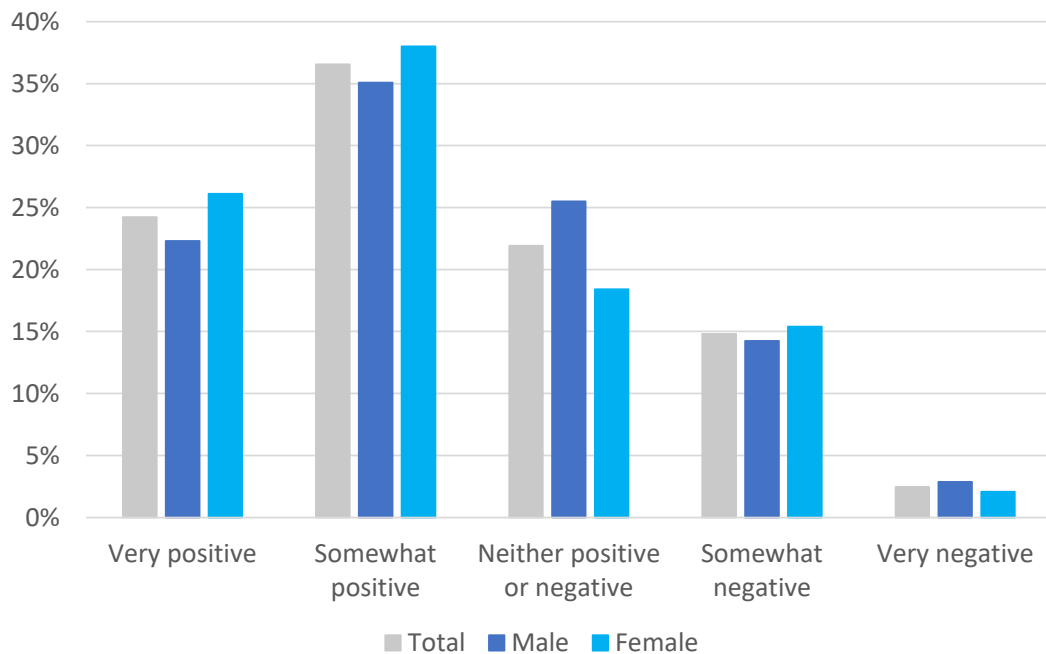
Source: NZIER

This finding confirms published studies that indicate women were significantly more likely during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions to undertake all or a majority of domestic chores and caring responsibilities in their households, hence reinforcing gender roles (Mallett, Marks, and Skountridaki 2020). National Bureau of Economic Research working papers even expresses concerns that the heavy impact on women of school and daycare closures may result in women's careers suffering long term impacts (Alon et al. 2020; Alon et al. 2021).

But the findings of our survey also contrast with what some literature suggests. For example, Backman (2021) suggests women are less likely to report a positive experience of working from home during the pandemic due to unequal responsibilities at home.

4.2 …but work-life balance and work-life separation was challenging for mothers in particular

Our literature review overwhelmingly indicated that overseas and in New Zealand, pandemic restrictions that required workers to work from home and closed childcare centres and shifted education to home-based learning had disproportionate impacts on women. Some studies identified that, compared with fathers, mothers devoted, on average, twice the amount of time to home production and childcare (Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020). A major New Zealand study identified that among working parents, mothers were more likely to experience an increase in family demands during COVID-19 lockdowns. Mothers with young and primary school-aged children reported that this interfered with their work responsibilities (Prickett et al. 2020).

Our survey respondents indicated that women were more likely to have been responsible for all or most of the home-schooling and childcare responsibilities during the lockdown.

Figure 30 How home-schooling responsibilities were shared between respondents and their partners during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions

% of each gender
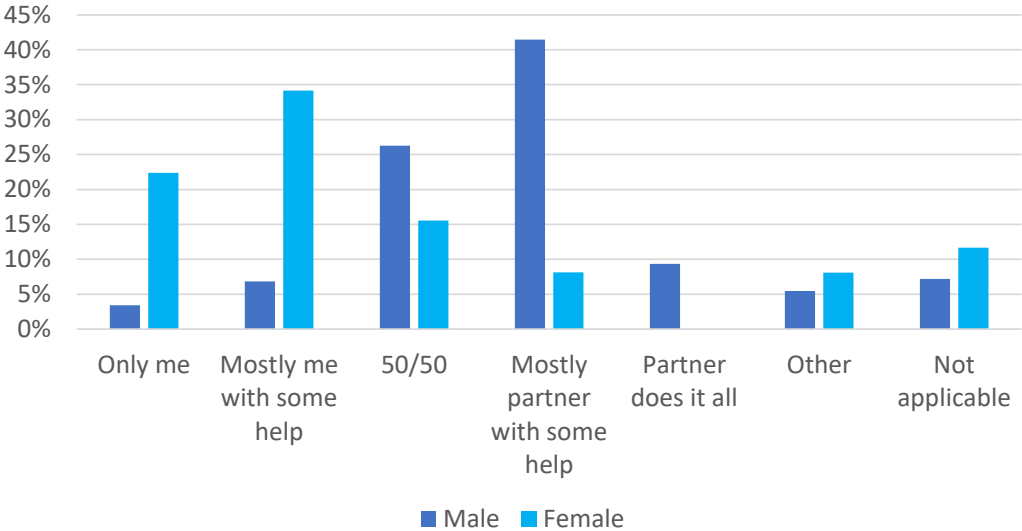
Source: NZIER

Figure 31 How childcare responsibilities were shared between respondents and their partners during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions

% of each gender
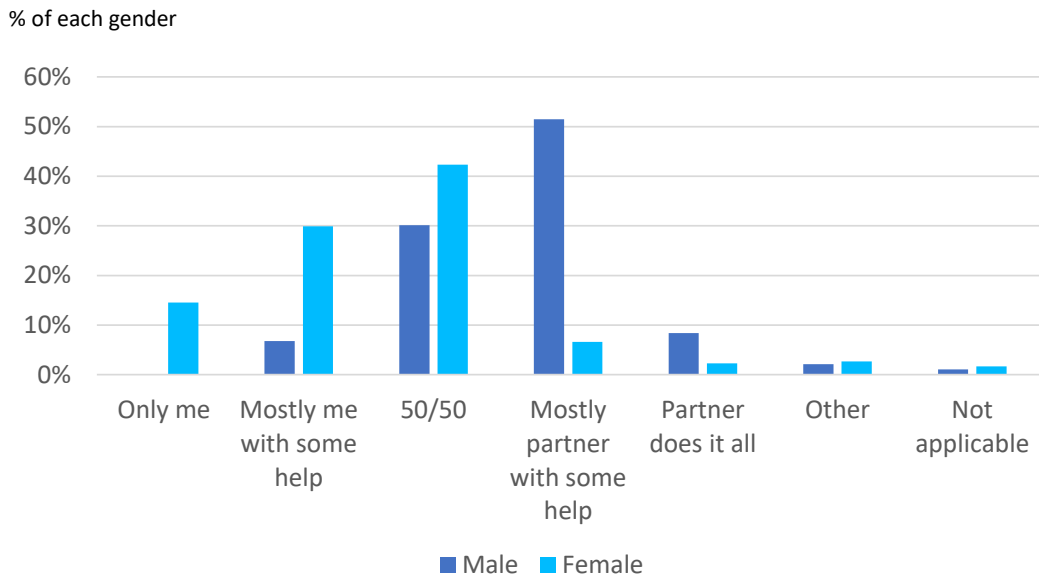
Source: NZIER

4.3 Women are more likely to identify mental health and wellbeing as a key benefit of working from home

Nearly half of respondents said that working from home was better for their mental health or general wellbeing, with women more likely to report this as a benefit.

Figure 32 Improved mental health or general wellbeing as a benefit of WFH

% of each gender
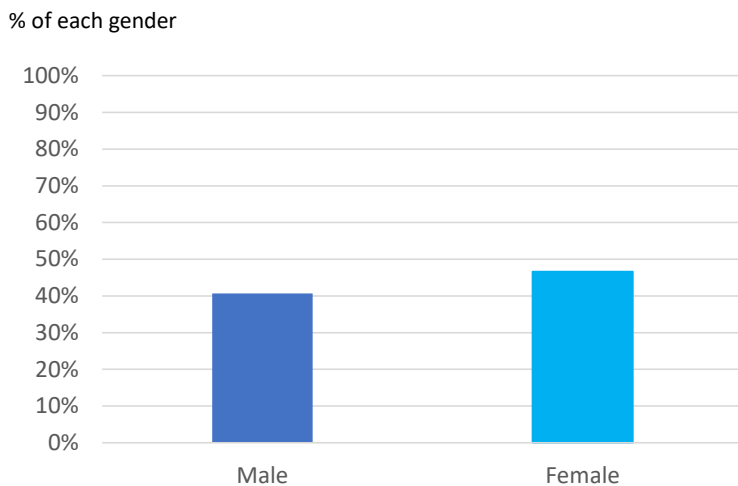
Source: NZIER

Published studies indicate that the mental health benefits of remote working are associated with factors that cause workers to choose this arrangement rather than being inherent to the arrangement itself (Ogbonnaya 2020).

4.4 Encouragingly, women are no more likely to report that they have been disadvantaged in their careers by choosing to work from home

Despite many published reports indicating that working from home can result in career impediments with the potential to widen the gender pay gap if women embrace remote working to a greater extent than men, our survey found no difference between genders in perceived disadvantages associated with the choice to work from home.

Over 90 percent of New Zealanders feel they have never been disadvantaged due to choosing to work from home, with no difference between genders.

Figure 33 Perception of whether their WFH choice disadvantaged them

% of respondents and % of each gender
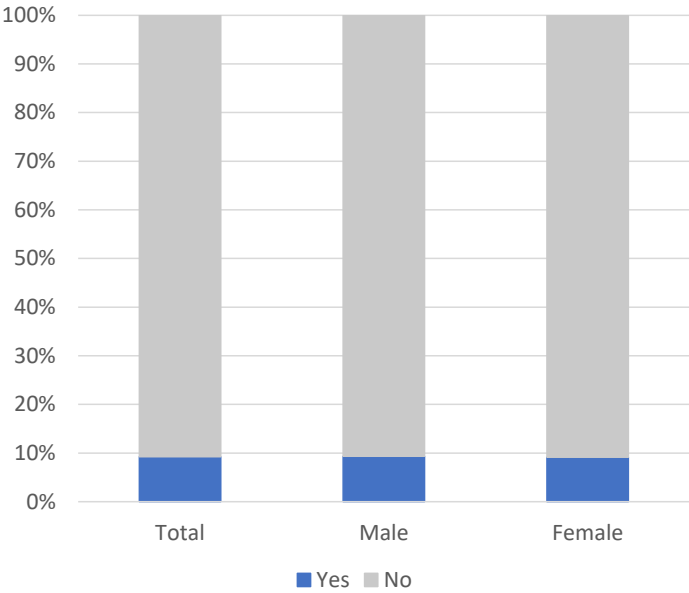
Source: NZIER

4.5 But women are less likely to be allowed to work remotely or to have an arrangement driven by their own needs

A greater proportion of men than women were allowed to work from home as much as they want or need to. Women who were allowed to work from home were more likely to have some constraints, or it was by specific agreement with their employer.

Figure 34 Whether employer allows WFH

% of each gender
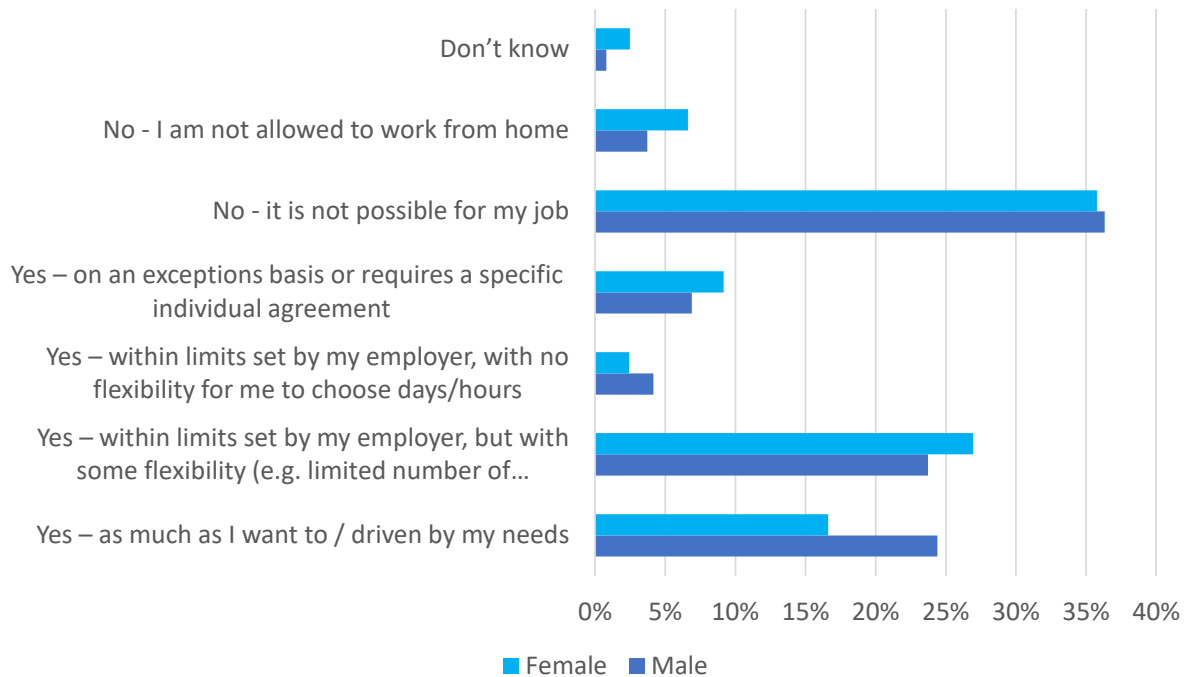
Source: NZIER

4.6 When women work from home, they are less likely to have the right set-up, and they are disadvantaged when their partners also work from home

Overall, less than half of respondents said they had all the equipment they needed to work comfortably and effectively at home. Women were more likely than men to report that they did not have all the equipment they needed to work comfortably and effectively at home.

Figure 35 Equipment to WFH effectively

% of each gender
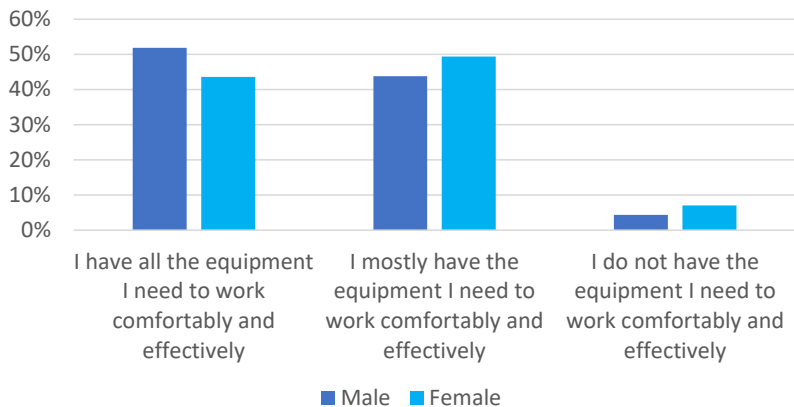
Source: NZIER

When comparing their set-up at home for remote working, women were more likely than men to report that their partner had the best set-up, and men were more likely than women to report that their own set-up was the best.

Figure 36 WFH set-up relative to partner

% of each gender
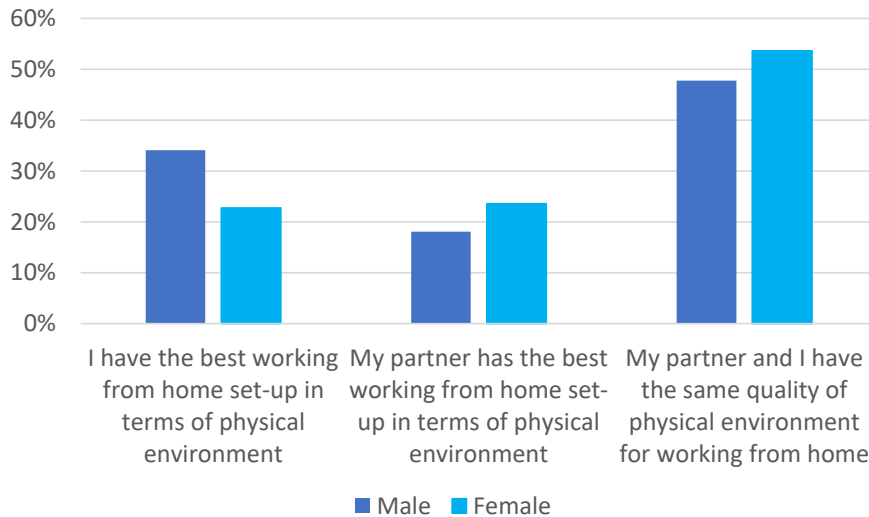
Source: NZIER

These responses provide some context for the difference in men's and women's explanations for choosing to work from home: Men were more likely than women to identify home as being a more comfortable work environment than their usual workplace.

Figure 37 Perceive WFH environment as more comfortable than usual workplace

% of each gender
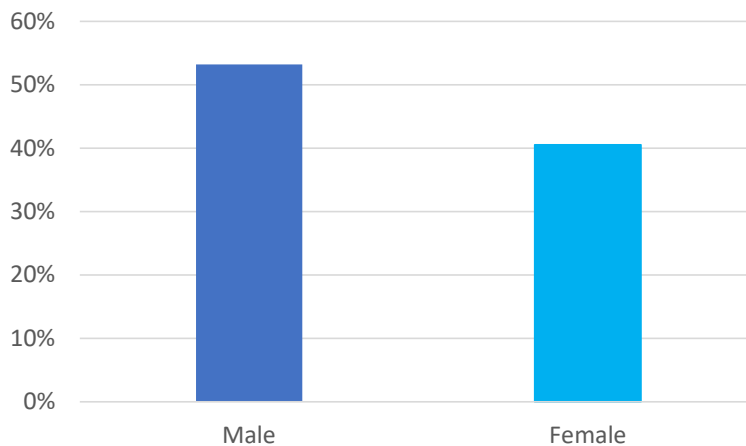
Source: NZIER

And women were more likely than men to identify the more comfortable work environment in their usual workplace as a reason for *not* working from home.

Figure 38 Usual workplace being more comfortable as a reason not to WFH

% of each gender
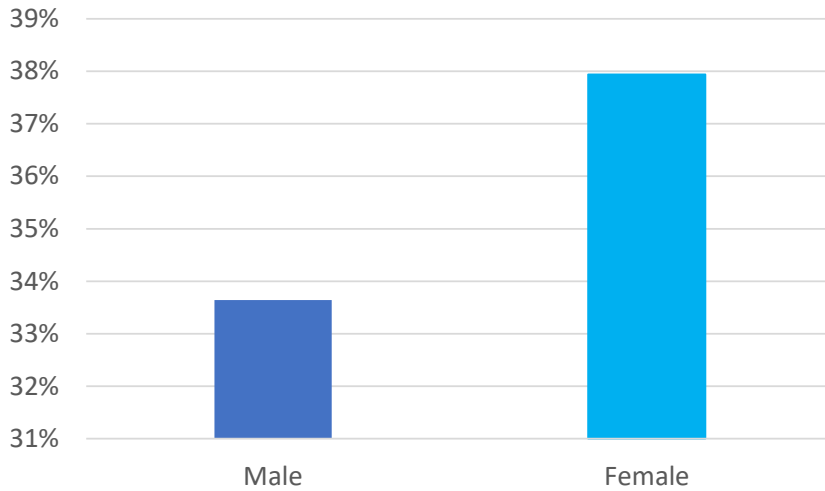
Source: NZIER

These responses are consistent with the literature, which also finds women are less likely to have the best space for working from home. Where there is a study or office, the male partner is most likely to get it while women work at the kitchen table, in the bedroom, etc. (Mallett, Marks, and Skountridaki 2020).

4.7   Women are more likely to find it difficult to justify taking sick leave when working from home

Respondents largely agreed that the most significant challenges associated with working from home were staying in touch with colleagues and staying focused on work, but women were less likely than men to report these challenges and more likely than men to say that it was harder to justify taking sick days when working from home.

Figure 39 Challenges of WFH

% of each gender
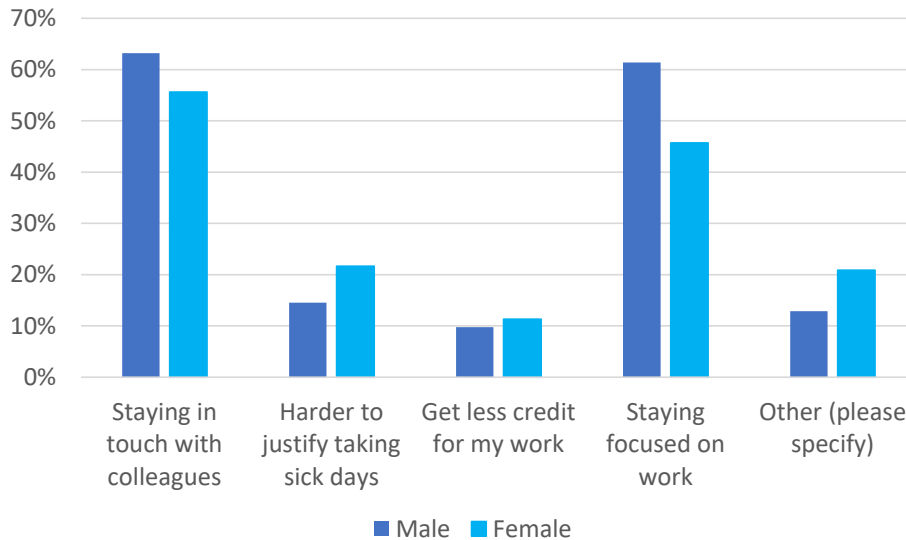
Source: NZIER

Women's responses, which are in line with younger workers' responses described earlier, are consistent with the literature, which suggests remote working may be killing the concept of a sick day. Many women may feel that mild illness or a dependent being ill and at home instead of at daycare or school is not enough to justify taking sick leave or leave for the care of dependents when they are already at home. Literature suggests this may result in women being at higher risk of burnout (Smith and Dill 2022; Zitron 2021).

4.8 Work-life separation and connecting with colleagues are primary drivers for women who choose to work at their workplace

There were interesting differences between men and women in the reasons provided for being physically present at work. Women were more likely to identify reasons such as the need to see and work with their colleagues, better work-life separation, and a belief that their manager and/or colleagues expect them to be present.

Figure 40 Women's and men's reasons for *not* working from home

% of each gender
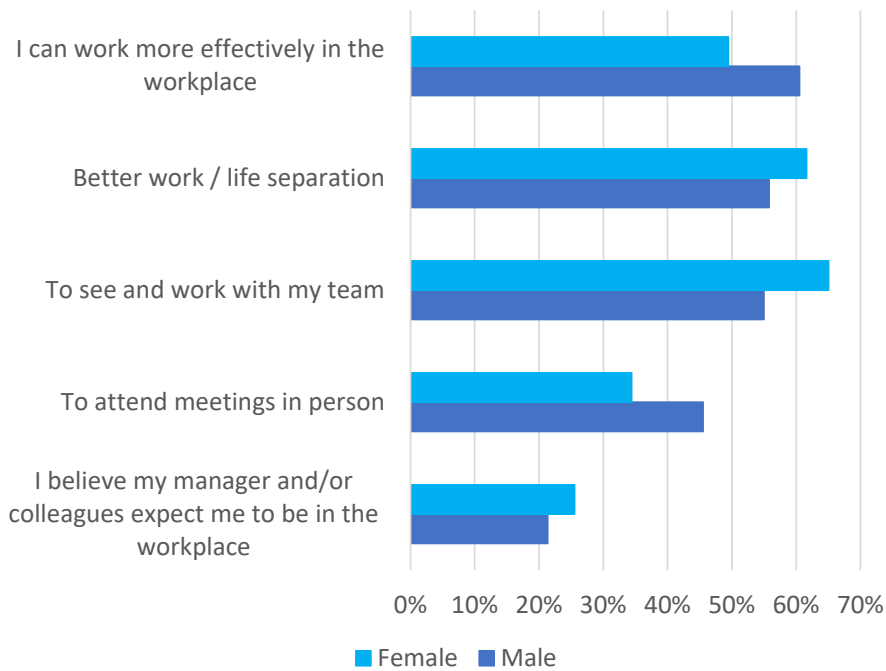
Source: NZIER

4.9 Women are only slightly more likely to favour working from home in their preferred hybrid working arrangement

As shown earlier in this report, most respondents prefer a hybrid working arrangement with either two or three days per week at home. Men showed a slightly stronger preference for a hybrid arrangement that favoured more time in their usual workplace, whereas women showed a slightly stronger preference for a hybrid arrangement that favoured more time at home. Overall, differences between genders are small, which contrasts with some reports that suggest workplaces post-pandemic will shift to a male-dominated presence as women overwhelmingly choose to work remotely.

Figure 41 Preference for working at usual workplace or WFH

% of each gender
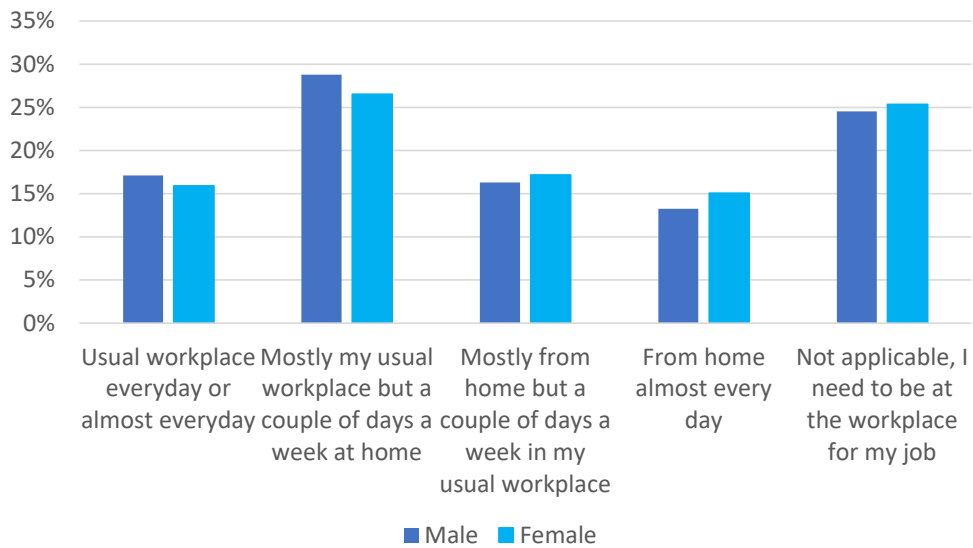
Source: NZIER

4.10 Women are less likely to subscribe to ideal worker culture

Gender differences in responses to key questions reveal where ideal worker culture is a feature of New Zealand workplaces; it is stronger amongst both male workers and male managers.

The literature suggests women and men value aspects of work differently. Women are more likely to value relationships, teams and collaboration (Peterson 2004). Responses to the survey confirm this: When choosing where to work, men are more likely than women to be motivated by the need to be seen in the workplace or the need to be seen as adaptable; whereas women were more likely than men to say professional and social connections motivated them to be physically present and work-life balance motivated them to work from home.

Figure 42 Reasons for *not* working from home

% of each gender
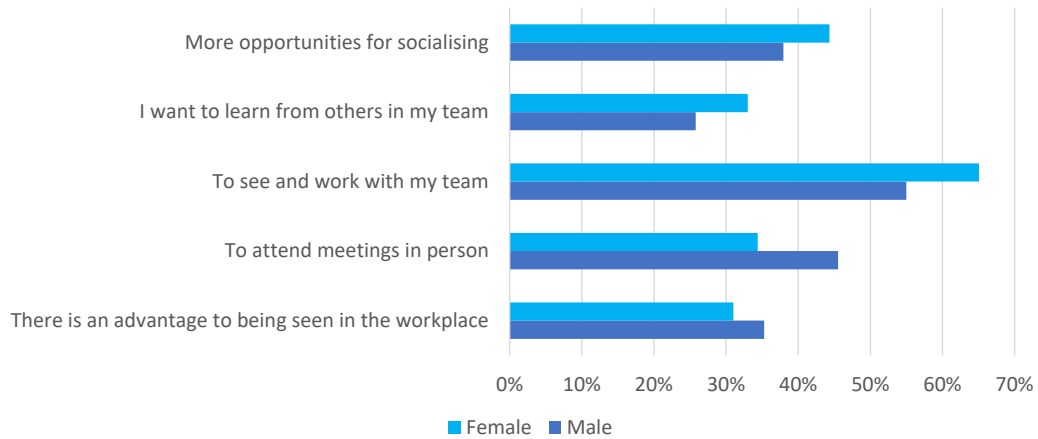
Source: NZIER

The literature confirms women's concerns: Working from home limits our ability to connect with different teams, reduces cohesion and may hinder the potential to create new ideas. Employers may need to devise new ways of keeping staff connected, especially when there is new staff in the team, and fostering growth of new ideas and creativity (Peterson 2004).

Employees working from home are particularly less likely to connect with new team members, indicating a greater need for managers to actively support and encourage connections across the team when there is new staff.

While most respondents felt that working from home should not have an impact on any of the suggested issues, men were slightly more likely than women to say that working from home *should* have an impact on workers' ability to influence decisions at work, on remuneration and on career advancement/promotions. Having a greater awareness of differences in beliefs can help mitigate any potential consequences on perceived worker performance and outcomes that may arise due to workers choosing to work from home.

Figure 43 Women's and men's beliefs about what aspects of work life *should* be impacted by decisions to work from home

% of each gender
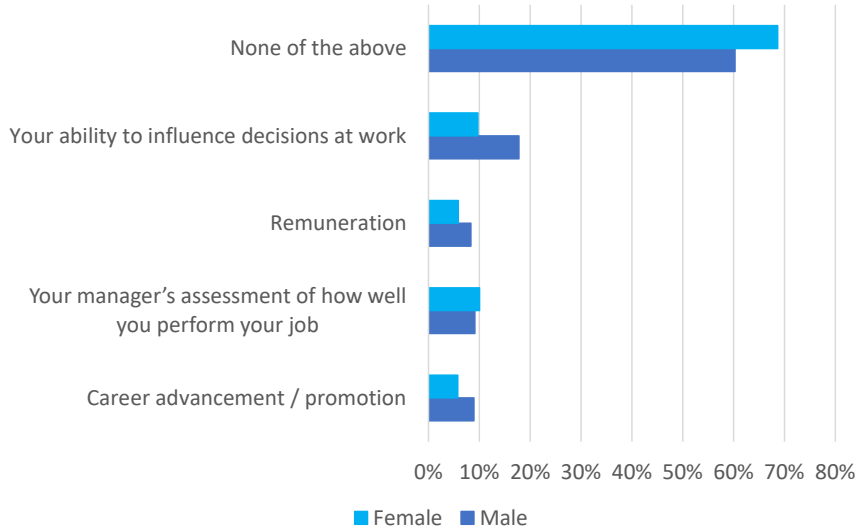
Source: NZIER

Respondents were less likely to identify themselves as having management responsibilities if they were women. In total, only 27 percent of women said they had management responsibilities, compared with 36 percent of men.

Figure 44 Women's and men's management responsibilities

% of each gender
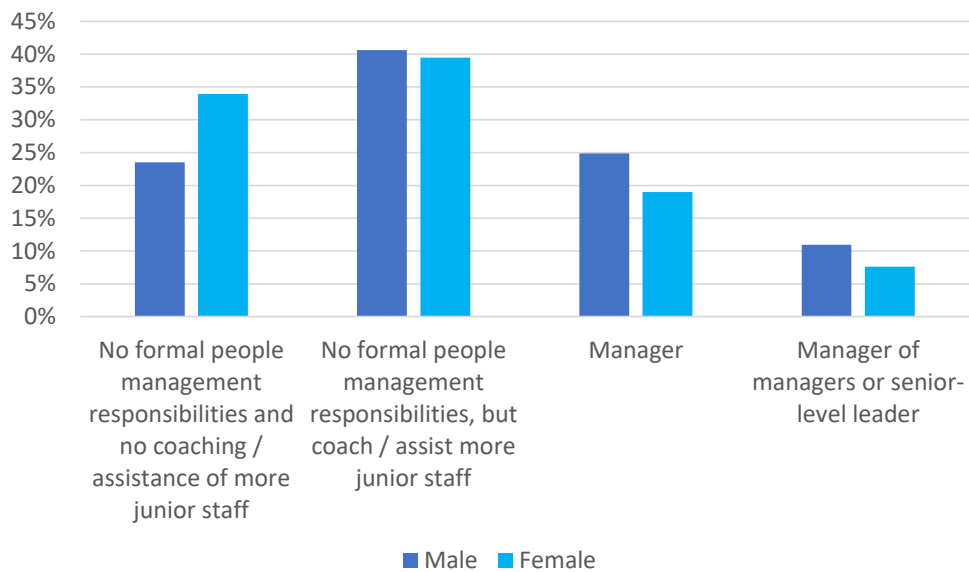
Source: NZIER

A question directed towards those who identified themselves as having management or leadership responsibilities at work indicated that men in this category have a stronger preference than women in this category for their team to be physically present in the workplace.

Figure 45 Managers' preferences about staff working from home, by manager's gender

% of each gender
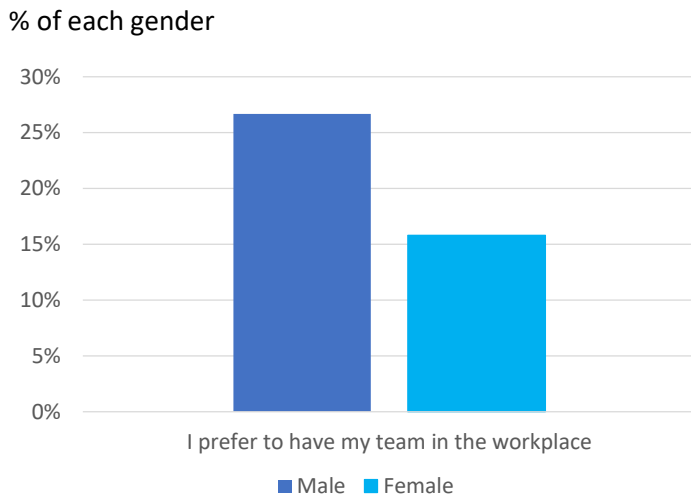
Source: NZIER

These findings are consistent with the literature. A study published in the Harvard Business Review found that about 40% of managers had low self-confidence in their ability to manage workers remotely, but that female managers were less likely to have negative attitudes to remote working, and to mistrust their remote working employees (Parker, Knight, and Keller 2020).

The literature suggests that people who work for employers with an ideal worker culture based on presenteeism are more likely to forego work from home opportunities, leading to reduced employer support for work-life balance (Lott and Abendroth 2020).

4.11 Women may feel more strongly about working from home and are slightly more likely to be loyal to employers who support working from home

Asked whether the ability to work from home was important, women were slightly more likely than men to identify working from home as essential or very important

Figure 46 Women's and men's feelings about the importance of being able to work from home

% of each gender
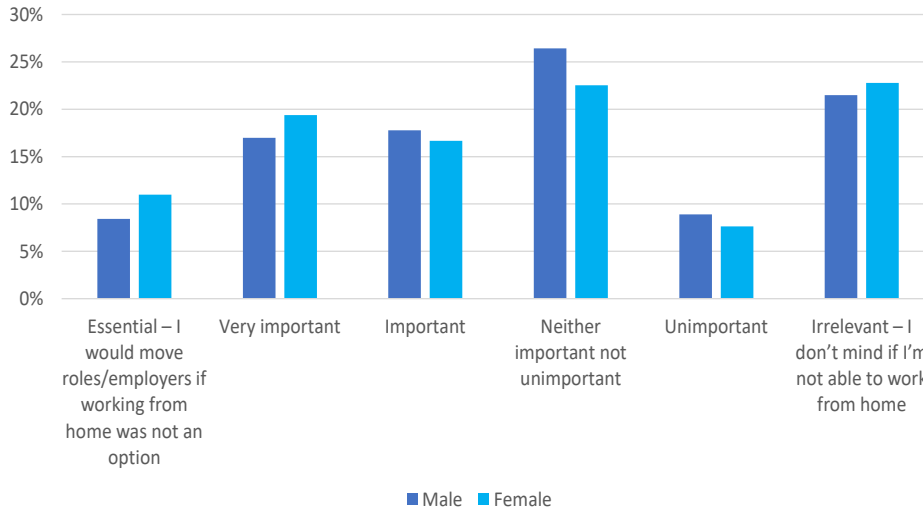
Source: NZIER

For most respondents, whether they were planning to stay with the same employer or not, the ability to work from home was not likely to be a major driver of this decision. But 17 percent of women and 12 percent of men expressed that the ability to work from home was a major driver of the decision to stay, indicating that employee loyalty may be a positive outcome for employers who support remote working.

Figure 47 Remote working flexibility and employer loyalty, by gender

% of each gender

Source: NZIER

5 What can employers do?

These survey and research findings suggest that both employers and workers can benefit from the flexibility of working from home, but there are important considerations to ensure potential downsides are mitigated.

5.1 Employers should identify what their needs and requirements are concerning remote working and offer as much flexibility as possible

Many workers feel that the benefits of remote working are significant and affect critical dimensions of their lives, including work-life balance and mental health and wellbeing. The benefits of avoiding a long commute and the costs of getting to the workplace are likely to be significant for workers in major centres, particularly as fuel prices increase.

Some employers are offering workers the option of working remotely all the time. This has the benefit of allowing workers to decide where to live without concern for the implications for commuting. Again, this may be a significant benefit for workers in major centres, and by extension for their employers who may be able to draw on a larger pool of workers who want to avoid high-cost city living and commuting expenses.

5.2 Managers should be offered training and support to increase their confidence in managing remote workers

Although the majority of New Zealanders feel they have never been penalised for choosing to work from home, nearly one in ten feel they have. Our literature review and the survey indicate that some managers have a preference for workers being in the workplace and that this is often due to a lack of confidence in managing remote workers. The survey indicated this is a stronger preference amongst male managers than female managers and the literature confirms that male managers are more likely to lack confidence in managing remote workers.

Employers could provide training for managers to break down myths about remote worker productivity and identify how worker productivity can be assessed in a remote working situation. Ideally, this would not include monitoring as this is likely to be counter-productive for workers seeking a better work-life balance and reduced stress.

5.3 Employers should take steps to break down and redefine ideal worker culture

At a household level, ideal worker culture contributes to the challenges of working from home for women by encouraging male partners not to choose remote working. This contributes to women taking on a greater proportion of the household chores and childcare than they would if both partners worked remotely or if both partners worked outside the home.

Ideal worker culture encourages presenteeism and is likely to mean that workplaces are dominated by male workers keen to be seen as committed and productive, while both male and female workers who choose to work from home experience negative impacts on their career progression and job satisfaction.

Breaking down ideal worker culture may require explicitly encouraging employees to work from home or adopting hybrid working patterns (some days at home, others in the workplace) and praising those who do. Managers may need to model working from home explicitly to achieve better work-life balance to indicate to workers that this is an important goal for a healthy, productive workplace.

5.4 Employers should better support professional and social connections for remote workers

Overwhelmingly, the literature review and the survey indicate that missing out on professional and social connections, including working with colleagues, learning from colleagues, forming professional relationships, building professional networks, and socialising with colleagues, are the primary concerns for people who choose to work from home.

Many younger workers, particularly, are concerned that missing out on these connections will harm their career progression. Some workers commute to work just to ensure they do not miss out on these connections. In particular, new team members are likely to find this aspect of remote work challenging as research suggests that when working remotely, workers are least likely to connect with new colleagues.

Employers who want to see more remote working or support staff who work remotely should:

- Ensure staff meetings, important discussions and decisions that involve staff never exclude remote workers.

- Ensure all workers have opportunities to work collaboratively by avoiding giving solo projects to remote workers and ensuring that regular discussions and meetings occur in a project team to keep remote workers connected to their colleagues and support productive teamwork.

- Take steps to connect new employees to their colleagues, recognising that simple introductions are unlikely to be enough in a remote working situation.

- Consider taking a more active role in supporting professional connections and network building for employees by hosting online events or offering online training and development with opportunities for group discussions and break-out sessions for smaller groups that support connections with own-team colleagues as well as colleagues from across the organisation.

- Organise online social events and encourage teams to have informal online catchups and check-ins to support remote workers to connect socially with both managers and colleagues.

5.5   Employers should monitor their behaviour and implement strategies to ensure work-life boundaries are respected

Work-life balance depends on the worker's and employer's ability and willingness to set boundaries so that work doesn't intrude on personal lives (Campbell 2006). Six strategies suggested include:

- Learning how to see obstacles as opportunities instead of challenges

- Eliminating unhelpful guilt

- Building supportive networks

- Monitoring and responding to changing needs

- Making time for oneself and self-care

- Enjoying each moment in life.

To better support remote workers, employers can:

- Explicitly recognise the importance of work-life balance, happy personal lives and setting boundaries between work and home life.

- Monitor and adjust their own behaviour to ensure they are not encroaching unnecessarily on workers' personal lives.

- Implement specific wellbeing policies that address the practice of contacting workers outside of normal work hours or setting work tasks and deadlines that will inevitably encroach on personal time.

- Require or encourage managers to model boundary setting behaviours.

- Support workers to identify and adopt strategies to manage boundaries and stress by offering subscriptions to online or app-based mindfulness, time management and stress management tools, bringing in experts to offer sessions for staff, enabling staff to form and maintain supportive networks, providing memberships in gym and fitness programmes, and providing/expanding access to employee assistance programmes (EAP).

5.6   Employers should seek to ensure remote workers can work as effectively and comfortably at home as they can in the workplace

Working from home effectively and comfortably requires an appropriate set-up. This can include:

- An appropriate space in which to work

- Appropriate furniture (e.g. desk and chair)

- Equipment that is essential to the work (e.g. laptop)

- Equipment that minimises injuries associated with work-related strain (e.g. separate monitor, keyboard and mouse when using a laptop)

- Items that enhance the worker's ability to focus on work and connect with colleagues (e.g. noise-cancelling headphones, microphone, camera)

- Job-appropriate connectivity: An efficient internet connection and at-home access to resources and files

- IT support for the day-to-day issues that may arise in remote working situations.

While employers may not be able to provide staff with space to work from home (except indirectly where working from home 100 percent of the time enables staff to relocate to areas where they can afford larger homes), employers can nevertheless support workers to create an appropriately equipped space at home. This could include providing furniture and equipment, offering vouchers for purchasing these, and contributing to broadband plans in the home. Employers can also ensure IT support is readily available regardless of where the worker is working from.

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