



**Flexible work and psychological safety -
Best practice to advance psychologically
safe solutions from alternate locations:
A report on findings from interviews
with NSW flexible employees and
managers**





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Phase 2 Report

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Executive summary

Flexible work, like all work, brings with it exposure to psychosocial risks. That is, risks arising from social factors or human interaction. These can include excessive workloads, lack of role clarity, job insecurity and lack of support from managers or colleagues. Flexible work relates to flexibility with respect to locations of work, hours of work or patterns of work. This report drew on the experience of 52 NSW flexible workers and managers to understand the exposure of flexible workers to psychosocial risks. It investigated how these risks may have affected workers from different demographic cohorts differently, as well as the workplace health and safety experience of flexible workers.

Key findings

- Social isolation is a key psychosocial risk factor for flexible workers. Interviewees recounted missing the social aspects of work, and for some, feeling isolated. At the extreme end, there were reports of staff having breakdowns related to feelings of isolation while working remotely. Organisations, managers and flexible workers took measures such as “check-ins”, and social events held online to try to minimise the risk of feeling isolated.
- Flexible work has the potential to improve employees’ work-life balance, but negative impacts on work-life balance were also discussed. The general picture was of flexible workers and managers enjoying the time saved from commuting. This could be used on housework, errands, exercise, hobbies, or spending more time with family. However, having children at home “full-time” could be difficult during the lockdown period. Some employees felt pressure to, and did, work unpaid overtime, or to be contactable outside of work hours. This included a number of managers whose workload increased significantly, particularly due to relationship aspects of their work (i.e. there was more need to “check-in” with employees during COVID-19, and doing so remotely took more time). For employees the inability to quickly address work problems in-person in the office added to workload. There was also some “blurring” in the sense of lacking a clear demarcation between work and family life.
- Remote and flexible work was experienced differently by different demographic cohorts. Some women had additional demands placed on them when working from home due to societal gender norms. Flexible working helped some workers with a disability (although this was a very small number of interviewees). Flexibility in work location or work hours can facilitate the involvement of people with caring responsibilities into the workforce,

although some managers and workplace cultures were not very understanding of this. In one case a worker was bullied for being a part-timer. While only a very small number of interviewees spoke about having a mental health condition, their responses demonstrated that personal preferences for work location can affect worker's mental health. In terms of older workers, some viewed working from home as a bridge towards retirement.

- Flexible workers placed a high value on feeling trusted by their line manager, and their employer generally. Many interviewees felt trusted to do their work and made a strong case for the importance of this trust. Others expressed disquiet that management didn't trust them. Trust can be considered an important job resource effective and psychologically safe flexible workers. Conversely, lack of trust is a stressor or job demand.
- An improper ergonomic set up is a barrier to safe flexible work. This caused physical pain for some flexible workers. Some organisations offered financial support for staff to set up ergonomically appropriate work stations and home, but many did not. There were less thorough (and in some cases absent) ergonomic assessments for workers working flexibly at home than in the office environment. Some interviewees also discussed issues related to sedentariness or alcohol consumption.
- Some flexible workers stated that their organisation did not have work health and safety (WHS) processes in place for remote workers. While very few WHS incidents were mentioned by interviewees, the few that were highlighted a lack of protocols to cover incidents while working away from the office in some organisations. Some flexible workers felt that training around mental health issues while working from home was lacking, while others raised training as an area for improvement. The general picture was that WHS processes have not kept up with changes in the nature of work. Interviewees showed awareness of the need for more attention to be given to WHS processes, involving flexible workers in this, and changed WHS requirements in a remote work context. Perceptions of WHS culture in organisations were mixed, with some participants citing a failure to adequately communicate WHS information effectively, while other organisations gave employees advice on ergonomics.
- Flexible workers and managers felt that the responsibility for WHS issues at home was unclear.

Future research

- Further research should target participants diverse demographic and employment groups for a first-hand account of how the nature and extent of psychosocial risks faced amongst flexible workers affect them. In particular, this should target workers with a disability, younger workers, and those with carer responsibilities, as these groups were identified as being at increased risk in Phase 1.
- Flexible workers experience both an added burden of demands and additional resources, such as improved work-life balance and manager and co-worker support. Further research should focus on one key aspect of support that was frequently mentioned in both positive and negative contexts: line management capabilities for relation-oriented leadership (Bartsch et al., 2020) in support for flexible workers.
- Future research in the present project will focus on how WHS management systems can effectively respond to the needs for WHS engagement for flexible workers. The findings from this Phase 2 research will assist us to better understand the shortcomings of the current WHS systems and standards as they relate to flexible working, particularly in relationship to working remotely.
- In this respect, the Phase 3 study will include consideration of the five domains of WHS identified as themes in the present study: WHS systems and processes, WHS culture, employee engagement in WHS, ergonomics and physical design, and responsibility for WHS. Phase 3 of the project will generate a best practice guide by drawing on the findings from Phases 1 and 2, and conducting a series of focus groups with a range of key stakeholders.

Recommendations

Interview data from Phase 2 points to the following recommendations, which will be further refined by Phase 3:

- Measures need to be put in place to ensure that the potential benefits of flexible work are realised, while “blurring” of the line between home and work, increased workload and work intensification are avoided. This could include organisation-wide policies, training for line managers and regulators enacting a right to disconnect for flexible workers.
- Organisations should give consideration as to how to avoid social isolation for remote workers, and in particular the level of support required and balance of in-person and remote working any individual worker does.

- More training on WHS for managers and employees. This should be adapted to challenges faced when working remotely, such as psychosocial risk, ensuring employee voice in WHS processes such as through WHS committees, and improving awareness of who is responsible for WHS. Ensure that protocols are in place to cover incidents that occur while working remotely.
- More training on managing remote workers appropriately.
- Support, including financial support, for an ergonomically-suitable workstation and work-related costs such as electricity.
- A hybrid model, where employees can choose to work remotely for up to two or three days per week, may help to retain some of the positive aspects of remote work (e.g. time saved from commuting), while minimising its negatives (e.g. social isolation).
- Flexible and remote work should be a genuine choice for employees. Personal circumstances for some employees may mean it is not safe to work from home. Some employees prefer working from the office. Organisations should ensure they provide the relevant support for both modes of working.

1. Background

Flexible and remote working arrangements are a reality for many white-collar workers today, brought about through developments in new technology. This evolving trend to working remotely has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many workers who had not previously worked from home switching rapidly to remote working during 2020. According to the NSW Innovation and Productivity Council (2020), by May 2020, an estimated 46 percent of NSW workers were working remotely due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Furthermore, findings from Phase 1 of this project reported that approximately 80 percent of those who worked from home amongst a sample of over 1300 NSW workers did so because of COVID-19, rather than having a pre-existing arrangement.

This research study, *Flexible work and psychological safety: best practice to advance psychologically safe work from alternate locations*, was commissioned prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The period of lockdown meant that a larger number of workers and organisations across NSW (and Australia) experienced remote work. Some of these organisations had experience of, and a positive culture towards, flexible and remote work prior to COVID-19 restrictions, others less so. For all of them the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their experience of remote work in 2020. Interviews were conducted during a period of varying COVID-19 restrictions in New South Wales; interviewees also reflected on their experiences of earlier lockdowns.

The research study comprises three phases. The first phase involved a broad survey of flexible workers and collected data concerning their exposure to psychosocial risks. The second phase, reported here, involves interviews concerning psychosocial risk exposures, how these impact across different demographic groups, and the workplace health and safety experience of flexible workers. The third phase will connect the two previous stages and, using a co-design activity, will work collaboratively with key stakeholders to develop a model of best practice for flexible working arrangements that promotes participation in workplace health and safety by flexible workers.

In this report, we discuss the findings from Phase 2. This Phase aimed to develop new knowledge about how organisations can manage flexible workers more effectively within a psychologically safe work environment. This qualitative research, by its nature, provides a richer and more in-depth explanation of the factors involved in psychologically safe work, thereby complementing and adding to the Phase 1 findings.

This report has brought together the voices of flexible workers and managers across multiple NSW organisations and industries to draw out some of the issues needing consideration so that flexible and remote work can be both safe and successful.

The key Phase 1 findings are summarised in Table 1.1. For more detail please refer to the Phase 1 report.

Table 1.1 Key Phase One findings

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flexible working does not create additional cognitive load or psychological demand on workers, compared to office-based employees.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Respondents who worked flexibly experienced a more positive working environment than non-flexible workers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flexible workers experienced more bullying and ill-treatment than non-flexible workers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Psychological health did not differ significantly between flexible and non-flexible workers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wellbeing, psychological distress, job stress or burnout were reported at similarly moderate levels by flexible and non-flexible workers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Levels of psychological distress suggested that the large majority of the sample were not experiencing severe mental health problems.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flexible workers perceived a higher level of psychosocial safety climate than non-flexible workers, with organisational climates that prioritised psychological health and safety.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Safety compliance and participation were rated significantly lower by flexible workers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flexible workers with an ongoing disability, carer responsibilities, and younger workers experience higher levels of job demands and lower levels of job resources.

Phase 2 research sought to provide a nuanced understanding of psychosocial risks faced, referred to as job demands, along with positive psychosocial factors, known as job resources, and current barriers and limitations that confront flexible workers of diverse backgrounds, when seeking to engage with WHS systems.

The results section of this report is divided into four sections: Psychosocial factors: job demands and resources; distribution of risk across demographic groups; engagement with Work Health and Safety; and a summary of key findings.

2. Literature scan

White collar workers now compose almost 25 percent of Australia's workforce (Johnson et al 2020). White collar jobs have increased in the last two decades in Australia, as have the number of workers working regularly from home (Johnson et al., 2020). The literature around remote work or "telework" dates back many decades (Harrington & Ruppel, 1999). However, a recent uptick in the prevalence of remote work makes the most recent literature especially important. This increase in remote working prevalence pre-dated the COVID-19 pandemic, but was greatly accelerated by lockdowns in response to the emerging situation, in turn drawing new attention to, and research on, remote work. The literature suggests that "flexible working can be used to improve employee mental health through mechanisms such as increased autonomy and flexibility" (Johnson et al., 2020, 409). Increased autonomy, however, can also "lead to an intensification of work when combined with heavy workloads and work cultures dominated by competition, self-management or mechanisms to enforce performance," termed the "autonomy paradox" of remote work (Eurofound, 2020a, 1). This work intensification can derive from remote workers putting in greater work effort as an exchange for their increased job flexibility (Palumbo, 2020; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). NSW remote workers reported an average productivity increase of 13 percent in a survey of 1500 remote workers last year and an average of an extra 13 minutes a day spent working (NSW Innovation and Productivity Council, 2020, 1, 16). Similarly, workers who worked from home at a travel agency in China performed 13 percent better than their colleagues in the office. This was broken down into 9 percent which "was from working more minutes per shift (fewer breaks and sick days) and 4% from more calls per minute" (Bloom et al., 2015).

Flexible working has the potential to increase social isolation, which can impact on stress, mental health and sleep (Johnson et al., 2020). Research has also highlighted the potential risk to employees' work-life balance. For example, a quantitative study of almost 3000 Swedish office workers found "[t]he strongest negative associations with WLB [work-life balance] were found for over-commitment, quantitative job demands, expectations of availability, and overtime work" (Björntoft et al., 2020). As a recent European Union report into remote work states, "Work-life balance is both a goal and a challenge of TICTM [Telework and ICT-based mobile work] ..." (Eurofound, 2020a, 1).

As Johnson et al. argue, when not properly managed, "flexible working can be a significant risk to employee mental health" (Johnson et al., 2020, 409). Clear boundary planning can reduce the risk of negative mental health impacts from remote work (Johnson et al. 2020). Johnson et al. (2020), in their review of the literature on flexible and remote work, recommend that managers

“express reasonable expectations around response times and availability during non-working hours.” Further, they find that “a central hallmark of good management of flexible workers involves allowing for autonomy while also maintaining close communication and providing support when and as needed.” They advocate peer-to-peer support measures such as “buddying” more experienced flexible workers with employees who are new to working flexibly. Additionally, informal social and professional events can be used to reduce isolation (Johnson et al., 2020). Interviewees spoke positively of such measures. When done well, flexible working can help workers meet family responsibilities and reduce work-family conflict, as well as assist employees with transitions into or out of work such as retirement or returning to work after having children (Johnson et al., 2020).

Very recent empirical research in Australia and the European Union has elicited similar issues. NSW researchers recently published a report based on an October 2020 survey of around 6000 Australian Public Service (APS) employees, including almost 1400 managers, who worked from home during the pandemic (Colley & Williamson, 2020). The experience of working from home was reported as “overwhelmingly positive” for both employees and managers. Employees enjoyed saving commute time and being able to spend more time with families, however, many employees were working longer hours. There were also issues around the “ability to undertake some of the less tangible, relational aspects of work” (Colley & Williamson, 2020, 2). Other challenges included with information technology, and with organisational culture, although the working from home experience during the pandemic had changed the views of many previously sceptical managers. These managers had previously lacked trust in their employees to perform adequately without the direct supervision afforded by an office environment. The APS employees favoured a hybrid work location model, that is, continuing to work from home for part of their work week (Colley & Williamson, 2020), while 78 percent of 24,123 remote workers surveyed in the European Union in July 2020 wanted to continue working from home in the absence of COVID-19 restrictions at least occasionally, with 32 percent preferring to work from home several days each week (Eurofound, 2020b, 34).

The risks of remote and flexible work are distributed differently across demographic groups. A number of academic studies have focussed on the risk posed to women, who experience working from home differently to men. The literature is somewhat mixed, so caution is needed in assuming that flexible and remote work arrangements will simply be beneficial for women with caring responsibilities. Ross et al. (2017) argue that women with school age children value flexible work arrangements, which can make it easier to balance caring responsibilities. They, however, warn that women are “more likely to juggle paid work and domestic chores than men” (Ross et al., 2017, 24 citing Troup & Rose, 2012, 484) and that outcomes of “teleworking”

arrangements in the Australian public sector varied by gender. The Australian experience during the pandemic bears this out. Craig and Churchill's (2021) survey of 2722 Australian men and women workers during lockdown in May 2020 found that the amount of time mothers spend on unpaid labour and caring for children each day was higher than men before the pandemic, and also increased by a slightly larger amount in absolute terms during the COVID-19 lockdown. Mothers' time increased by 2.8 hours to 8.58 hours per day, while fathers reported an increase of 2.2 hours per day, taking them to 6.28 hours. Similarly, a 2014 quantitative study of 16,145 Canadian employees with dependent care responsibilities found that "more flexible work arrangements such as flextime and telework were associated with higher levels of WFC [work-family conflict] than were fixed 9-to-5 and CWW [compressed work week] schedules" (Higgins et al., 2014). With respect to mature age workers, (defined in their study as those aged between 45 and 64 years, Miranti and Li (2020) have found "significant associations between a mismatch of working hours - that is, either working more or less than one's desired hours - and poorer mental health" and call for designing flexible work environments to address the issue. While there is little research on remote work and workers with disabilities, Linden (2014) concludes that "individuals with disabilities have complex reasons for teleworking, and that telework as a job accommodation may not provide equivalent access to employment. The apparent benefits of telework for those with disabilities have not resulted in its adoption, nor do those who have adopted it necessarily view it in a positive light."

Remote work poses challenges to Work Health and Safety (WHS) systems. This stems in part from WHS's traditional focus on physical health (Robelski & Sommer, 2020) rather than psychosocial risk. These challenges operate at a number of levels. Neilson (2019) explores the challenges remote work poses to line managers' responsibility for remote (distributed) workers' health and safety, including limited face-to-face interaction, and the distribution of workers across multiple locations. At an organisational level, this includes how flexible work arrangements are organised and how risk assessments are used. Robelski and Sommer's (2020) study of German organisations revealed that only around half of German companies carried out risk assessments, with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) particularly lacking. Concerningly, only 29 percent of organisations who did carry out risk assessments covered the home workplace. The authors highlight the crucial importance of conducting risk assessments and recommend that initial risk assessments be followed up with another assessment after a few months of working from home, when workers would have more awareness of the issues at stake. At the institutional level, regulations need to be enforced. A further concern was "the availability and impact of employee representatives. With an increasingly dispersed workforce, companies have to find ways and means to enable representation" (Robelski & Sommer, 2020).

A recent European Union study supports regulatory action to try to address some of the issues surrounding flexible work arrangements: “providing the right to disconnect – might be the only way to curb the trend towards a culture of work characterised by self-imposed work intensity, project-based work, performance-based pay and constant availability. Regulations could contribute to a cultural change” (Eurofound, 2020a). Some member states, such as France, already have such legislation. The study also calls for workplace level initiatives to ensure workload is not excessive and to address a corporate culture where immediate responses to emails and messages is expected. Unions and employees should participate in the design and implementation of these initiatives (Eurofound, 2020a). More research is needed, and organisations and regulators alike need to pay more attention to this space.

3. Method

Data for this report came from 52 semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2021. Of the participants, 33 were flexible workers (indicated as FW1, FW2, etc.), and 19 were frontline managers of flexible workers (indicated as MFW1, MFW2, etc.). As managers were also flexible workers themselves, they offered perspectives as to how the experience of flexible work had impacted them, as well as the employees that they line managed. These interviewees came from both the public and private sector, across multiple organisations and with diverse demographic characteristics. The interviewees worked in a number of fields shown in the tables below.

Table 3.1 Flexible workers interviewed by sector

Sector	Number of workers interviewed
Manufacturing and Technology	1
Health Care and Social Assistance	10
Health Care and Social Assistance - Aged Care	1
IT and Communications	4
Construction and Property Development	1
Education and Training	1
Government - Planning, Infrastructure & Environment	3
Government - Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste	3
Commonwealth Government Services	1
Professional, Scientific and Technical services	5
Professional, Scientific and Technical services - Environment	1
Finance & Insurance services	2
Total:	33

Table 3.2 Managers of flexible workers interviewed by sector

Sector	Number of managers interviewed
Manufacturing and Technology	1
Health Care and Social Assistance	4
Government - Planning, Infrastructure & Environment	9
Government - Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste	4
Professional, Scientific and Technical services - Legal	1
Total:	19

While we did not collect detailed demographic information from participants, or information from which they could be identified for ethical reasons, the sample was comprised of approximately equal levels of men and women, and included individuals from across the age spectrum. Participants were recruited using two complementary methods. The first method recruited participants through expressions of interest with the assistance of partner organisations. It was originally envisioned that this method would achieve the required sample size alone, however, this did not occur, largely due to the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak in NSW during the recruitment period on organisations. Therefore, the research team supplemented this method by directly approaching potential participants who were among the extended professional network of the researchers. Potential participants were sent an invitation email to invite them to participate in the research and/or suggest other possible flexible workers/manager to participate in the study. Through this method – known in the literature as snowball sampling – the target number of interviews was reached and indeed exceeded. Researchers did not approach anyone for whom there may be an unequal power distance, such as a direct employee, or manager.

Participants were provided with a copy of an information letter setting out the aims of the study, their rights and a consent form. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions they had, or to withdraw at any stage. This process was approved by and overseen by Edith Cowan University's Ethics Committee. Signed consent forms were received from participants before they were interviewed. Recordings of interviews were then transcribed in full with participants de-identified.

Interviews were conducted via the Microsoft Teams on-line platform, or via Zoom where the participant did not have access to Teams. Interviews typically lasted between 30-60 minutes, and were conducted by members of the Phase 2 research team. The interviews explored flexible workers' and managers' thoughts about flexible and remote working arrangements in their organisation, diversity and flexible working, links between risks, hazards and safety and flexible working, engaging with work health and safety processes while undertaking flexible working, and key facilitators and barriers that can affect successful and safe flexible and remote working arrangements. The full list of interview questions is provided in Appendix 1. Some of the questions asked included:

- Regarding the current flexible and remote working arrangements in your organisation, what is working well in your view? What can be improved?
- Are risks and hazards related to flexible and remote working arrangements more pronounced for some demographic cohorts within your organisation than others?

- What do you believe are key considerations in terms of factors that can affect successful and safe flexible and remote working arrangements at the following levels: Individual, Work-related and Organisational?

Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Researchers also took notes during the interviews as an aide memoire for points of interest raised by the participant. The data analysis approach followed a qualitative thematic content analysis process. The data was analysed using a framework created according to themes identified from the literature and through an initial review of the content of transcripts by the research team who had conducted the interviews. Specifically, relevant quotes from the interview transcripts were inputted into the following documents:

- Analysis Framework - Employees
- Analysis Framework - Managers Working Flexibly
- Analysis Framework - Managers Managing Flexible Work

The separate frameworks for managers were created as during interviews it became apparent that managers were discussing the experience of those workers they manage, as well as their own work; both perspectives were valuable. The frameworks further divided data into four separate levels, in-line with a work-systems perspective on the problem:

1. Individual level factors
2. Task and environment factors
3. Team level factors
4. Organisation level factors

In addition, separate documents were created to capture longer anecdotes/stories from both flexible workers and managers. All data was inputted manually by a researcher. From these documents key themes were elicited before being presented in report format.

4. Findings

4.1 Key themes

Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 below show the key emergent themes from the analysis of interview narratives, along with brief descriptors for each theme. The themes emerged in response to interviewees being asked to discuss factors that they believed could influence effective flexible working, with a mix of positive (resources) and negative (demands) factors mentioned as key psychosocial factors. Participants were also asked how these risks might affect different demographic groups with responses being categorised under five emergent themes in this area. Finally, interviewees were asked to consider the impact of flexible working on their engagement with workplace health and safety, resulting in four emergent sub-themes. These themes are each considered under separate sub-headings in the following sections of this report. Throughout the findings section of the report, 'break-out' quotes that represent or illustrate a particular issue of interest are highlighted (in boxes).

Table 4.1 Key themes – Psychosocial factors: job demands and resources

Demand	Description	Resource	Description
<i>Social isolation</i>	A perception of social or professional isolation when physically working away from co-workers, considered a job demand.	<i>Social support from colleagues and supervisor</i>	A perception of receiving psychological support from co-workers and line-manager as a resource to help cope with job demands
<i>Workload</i>	Quantitative demands, including workload, work pace, work intensity, work hours.	<i>Work-life balance</i>	The perception that time and focus is effectively balanced between work and family/non-work life. Note: an absence of work-life balance or poor boundary management between work and life, and the related concepts of work-family or family-work conflict are considered psychosocial demands.
<i>Workplace bullying</i>	A form of workplace ill-treatment where individuals perceive themselves to be exposed to negative actions from one or more persons persistently over a period of time, in a situation where the targets have difficulty defending themselves.	<i>Trust</i>	Trust of management to complete work and be productive. In the context of flexible working, this is a necessary condition where workers cannot be physically monitored.

Table 4.2 Key themes – Demographic differences in psychosocial risk exposure

Theme category	Theme label	Description
Demographic differences in psychosocial risk exposure (gender)	<i>Female flexible workers</i>	The relative risks faced by those workers who identify as female.
Demographic differences in psychosocial risk exposure (vulnerable workers)	<i>Workers with a caring responsibility</i>	Where workers have responsibility for caring for children, older adults, those with disability, etc. in their home or elsewhere.
Demographic differences in psychosocial risk exposure (vulnerable workers)	<i>Workers with a disability</i>	An ongoing disability that impacts ability to complete work tasks to some extent.
Demographic differences in psychosocial risk exposure (vulnerable workers)	<i>Workers who have experienced mental health problems</i>	A wide range of conditions which can affect a person's ability to engage in work.
Demographic differences in psychosocial risk exposure (age)	<i>Older workers</i>	No agreed definition, although 55 years and over is often used as the age at which a person is considered an older worker

Table 4.3 Key themes – Workplace Health and Safety Engagement

Theme category	Theme label	Description
Workplace health and safety (WHS) (systems)	<i>WHS management systems and processes</i>	Processes and procedures to effectively manage workplace health and safety
Workplace health and safety (culture/climate)	<i>WHS culture</i>	Shared values, beliefs and attitudes towards workplace health and safety; “how things are done around here.”
Workplace health and safety (responsibilities)	<i>Responsibility for WHS</i>	Who is responsible for managing health and safety (when working remotely) – the organisation or the individual?
Workplace health and safety (workstation and physical environment)	<i>Ergonomics and sedentary work</i>	Physical workspace, workstation design factors in the work environment

4.2 Psychosocial factors: job demands and resources

A large amount of narrative from the interviews was devoted to different areas of psychosocial risk – or workplace factors that can negatively influence employee wellbeing. These we refer to as job demands. The following sections set out some of the more prominently discussed area of

risk, along with those positive workplace factors, referred to here as resources, that benefit psychologically safe working. Where appropriate, we relate these findings to those from the quantitative Phase 1 survey.

4.2.1 Social isolation

Social isolation is a key psychosocial risk factor according to the scholarly literature on remote working and telework (e.g., Bentley et al., 2016), with feelings of social isolation having a detrimental effect on mental health, and potentially impacting stress, mental health and sleep (Johnson et al., 2020). Indeed, flexible working respondents from the Phase 1 study reported significantly great levels of professional isolation than non-flexible workers. In Phase 2 interviews, a number of participants discussed social isolation. At the extreme end of this, interviewees reported breakdowns while undertaking remote work. Measures to help address these issues were also discussed by interviewees.

Working from home can be monotonous. The surroundings do not change, and workers may be alone for hours at a time, or even the entire workday. For FW8, working remotely was “really isolating” and can seem like their “four walls are kind of closing in.” A manager shared that “...I live alone and I need to talk to people. I didn’t cope too well” [MFW16] while FW20 made the comment that “It almost feels a bit like a jail... same table, same computer, same walls.”

Responses from a number of participants indicated that remote workers miss the social side of working from the office. This can include incidental contact with people, saying hello to co-workers, or having lunch or coffee with friends from the office. Physically seeing people in the office can be a big contrast with working from home. One flexible worker related that their screen time had increased because they were talking to their friends online, and that having too much screen time impacted them psychologically. A manager of flexible workers related: “I know a lot of the other coordinators, they’re like ‘I had to get back to the office, I was feeling isolated,’ or ‘I was missing interaction with other people,’” [MFW9].

Flexible worker missing the social aspects of work

“I was ready to come back to work a couple of days a week, for the social interaction and the human connection not through a screen.”

Some interviewees related these issues to different personalities, noting that some people prefer to keep to themselves, and enjoy working from home for this reason, while others thrive on social interaction so struggle to work away from the office for long periods. One self-described introvert [MFW6] found this problematic, despite their preference, stating that for introverts

“the more we stay at home, the less we like going out or less like going to the workplace or doing things, viewing this withdrawal as “unhealthy.”

Mental health of the isolated employee

“being isolated like this, it’s very easy for your head to run away and make things up in your own head and not have things addressed.”

By contrast, one flexible worker for whom English is a second language [FW10] felt less isolated working from home. In an office environment, they found it hard to tell colleagues to slow down when speaking. In the online world, telling people to slow down, or that it was hard to understand them became normalised. This worker felt that managers and colleagues simply assumed everyone understood them in real-world meeting, but online they made an effort to ensure each person understood because of a recognition that they are not all in the same space.

Other respondents discussed how the lack of physical interaction, the absence of face-to-face human contact, and missing out on those incidental “water cooler conversations” results in a lack of the type of social discourse that integrates new employees into the team. One respondent noted that the technology helps to connect people to do the work and that it possibly is more efficient, but for flexible working to be successful the social aspects that involve physically being together are essential.

The feelings of isolation discussed by interviewees referred to the period when they were working exclusively from home. FW16 recounted that “after quite a few months of being at home ... I was ready to come back to work a couple of days a week, for the social interaction and the human connection not through a screen.” Hybrid working arrangements, where work is done away from the office for part of the week, potentially remove or risk the risk of social isolation. FW8 stated “It’s such a balance isn’t it...I like the time I have that is uninterrupted. But I also like that casual catch up.”

Participants also spoke about measures taken to reduce feelings of isolation, as discussed below.

4.2.2 Social support from colleagues and supervisors

Social support received from both supervisors and co-workers can be viewed as a job resource which assists employees to cope with job demands. This support can be used to try to counter some of the isolation that can occur while working remotely, in effect helping offset the lost resource of in-person contact in traditional office-based working. This may explain the higher perceived level of social support experienced by flexible workers in Phase 1 of the study. Work in the office allows team members to collaborate with one another differently to when working

remotely. This was a frequent theme raised by interviewees, who usually compared working remotely unfavourably when it came to collaboration. Organisations, managers and employees, however, tried to put in place measures to support each other socially, and collaborate professionally, outside the office environment. As working from home, at least on the scale required by COVID-19-required lockdowns, was a new experience for many, social support measures could be ad-hoc and experimental. The interview data suggests that more training around these issues for managers would be beneficial, something raised by interviewees.

Collaboration between employees can be seen as a form of social support; professional collaboration cannot be separated entirely from social interaction more generally. Many interviewees raised either incidental contact (bumping into someone) or deliberate short encounters (asking a nearby colleague for help, bouncing an idea off them) as important features of work. Organisations have tried to replicate this support through the use of software such as Microsoft Teams. However, as FW14 told us, “it’s not quite the same as being in the room with them.” Further, they felt that “sometimes it’s nice to have that one-on-one physical interaction.” A manager stated simply: “I don’t think you can create a physical culture via Microsoft Teams...” [MFW14] while a flexible worker expressed frustration that “there hasn’t been really a recognition of, we have lost something and something valuable, in terms of not being able to work co-located.” [FW11] A flexible worker who performs a lot of “admin and repetitive tasks” reflected that the experience of talking to colleagues in the office to some degree offset the boredom of monotonous task “because you’re speaking to everyone around you. You might not feel it as much, you’re all socialising, so it’s not so much of a problem” whereas at home “you really notice what’s something that you enjoy doing and what’s something that you don’t enjoy doing.” **MFW4 expressed concern that the lack of face-to-face communication and social support can have a psychological impact:**

I wonder when I see people’s temper fray a bit, it’s because everything is at the same level at the moment. So, everything is a Teams meeting or an email. Things aren’t, “I’m making a cup of tea and I have a chat.”... Something about this form of communication, which enables virtual working, but it also seems to flatten out that understanding of import. And I think that lends people extra stress and concern about things that normally they’d be able to brush off because it’s via the conversation. [MFW4]

Concern about social isolation motivated a number of measures within organisations and work teams to keep people in touch with and support each other. FW4 spoke of a “buddy programme,” where employees can be paired up with co-workers living close by to meet up with. They saw this as especially helpful for workers who lived alone. This pre-existing programme had increased uptake since the onset of COVID-19. Another flexible worker spoke positively of games nights and trivia nights: “there’d always be something funny that happens

and we'll be able to have a laugh. It was good to break down that barrier of, okay, these people are still my colleagues, we can still have a laugh, it doesn't need to be all work, work, work." [FW5] This interviewee indicated that this social support could have been improved, while acknowledging the limitations of the situation.

For a managers point-of-view, strategies are needed to try to offset the issues raised around collaboration, teamwork/bonding, and isolation surrounding WFH. One manager suggested:

...[Y]ou have to be more deliberate with your face to face time. So, you need to make sure that you prioritise whatever face to face time you have with that ... and you need to prepare for when you meet with somebody face to face so that it's not a waste of time. [MFW8]

One manager [MFW16] structured social engagement with peers into the work day, scheduling times to just "chat" about "random stuff." The fact that these phone calls were scheduled meant the managers could support each other socially, without worrying that they were interrupting each others' work. Another manager noted the importance of external social support: "If you've got a good support network outside of your work, even though you can't necessarily share exactly what's gone on in your workday, it makes a big difference." [MFW10]

MFW3 called for "more work around making sure that managers do feel competent and supported in managing staff when they work remotely." They noted the challenges involved in a rapid shift from being in the office five days a week to trying to regular catch up with staff virtually. Some managers, they felt, had dealt with this better than others.

While noting that things will never be replicated virtually in exactly the same way, it is clear that employees require social support to try to offset personal and professional isolation when working from home. More organisational policies and manager training around the specificities of these issues in a remote environment would likely benefit many organisations.

4.2.3 Workload

Workload, or quantitative demands, refers to the quantity of work (workload), and pressure to work at high speed to complete work tasks. Studies have found an association between remote working and longer working hours, including a recent large-scale study of Australian Public Service workers (Colley and Williamson 2020). While the Phase 1 findings indicated no significant differences in quantitative demands between flexible workers and non-flexible workers, the interviews revealed aspects of both working flexibly and managing flexible work which appeared to negatively influence workload and work intensity.

Among flexible workers, there were many comments suggesting an increase in workload while working remotely. Reasons for this increased workload included:

- Working during the time they would normally commute to work,
- Being given a higher workload by supervisors, and
- Tasks taking longer in a remote setting.

Managers also reported a higher workload as “checking in” with team members took more time in a remote environment. The consequences of a higher workload could be very detrimental to the wellbeing of the employee, with reports of colleagues of participants having breakdowns due to overwork. Interviewees perceived that productivity was higher while working from home.

A number of interviewees reported working longer hours while working remotely, sometimes substantially so. FW17 expressed their concerns regarding excessive workload as follows:

I see people sending emails at five in the morning. That’s great if you’re a morning person in the hours, but when you see the same person late at night and you know they’ve been working all day, that’s not healthy either. Even some monitoring, by IT on how many hours someone’s working a day, and it doesn’t have to be “Big Brother is watching you,” but if someone is logged on consistently for 12 hours, surely that can come up in some exception report, because that’s not great if it’s happening regularly. Probably need two people to do that job.

Some interviewees located the cause of increased workload in managers’ decisions. For example, FW21 perceived that management were deliberately increasing workload. Initially, they said, management had a perspective of “you’re working from home you have all this time, I’m going to make sure you work, so I’m just going to load all this work on top of you.” For FW6 financial considerations led to overwork: “I think they need to start focusing more on the people and less on the dollars that will keep people safer, because by focusing on the dollars, they cut corners and they give people more work and they make people just bust their guts to save \$20,000, and that’s not worth it.”

Other reasons given for an increased workload related to the nature of remote work requiring workers to contact colleagues electronically. Workload was impacted by a lack of social support and connectivity with team members. For example, not being able to have quick conversations with people can increase the amount of work needing doing, while the amount of emailing has increased while working in this mode:

[Y]ou can always call people and you can always call them through video [but] it's a level of distancing that adds to your workload rather than getting up while you're going to go and get yourself a glass of water and saying, "By the way, can I check in with x."

...I bet you emails have tripled... [S]uddenly you're sending emails to people whereas you would have just ... shouted it out across the room ... [or had a] corridor conversation. That quick kind of huddle together that you can get when you say, "Shit I need to talk to these two people about that. Do you have five minutes?" [It] suddenly becomes a much bigger experience and more challenging to set up even if you're quickly doing it on Teams. It takes on an importance sometimes more than things should. [FW18]

At the work/job/task level, FW5 reported that

you have so many different tasks and - people have come together more, there's been more connectedness, more relationships built. Different people are reaching out to you for different things. And you may have a lot on at one time so I think prioritising and knowing what to draw your attention to [is an issue].

FW24 referred to remote working as a "double-edged sword." The time saved by not commuting to work, they said, could help people focus on their work, as well as their own wellbeing, for example, by spending more time on hobbies. However, "there are times where the workload can be quite intense and so the scale of balance tips."

Some managers were concerned about their staff working excessively long hours:

[A]s long as people are able to get the work done they need to get done and they can do so safely, then we don't really mind how they do that. And when I say safely, that also includes mental well-being so we don't want people - one of the real changes we have had is people that have been working really long hours or have come under higher levels of mental stress than previously. [MFW2]

Managers felt that the different communication methods necessary in a remote environment increased their workload, as these two examples show:

I've put in my diary to have ten-minute conversations with every person, 68 [of them] - a phone call in the quarter... I'm constantly thinking, "is everybody happy? Who have I missed? How do I bridge that gap?" in the time that you don't have in your day. [MW15]

I found that my workload ... my sense of mental fatigue was much elevated through this experience much more than anything I've ever encountered. I'm someone who 20 years ago was flying all around the world managing business units of a global company and I found it much more tiring sitting here talking to a screen. [MFW19]

The consequences of an increased workload could be severe, as mentioned previously. This included mental health issues, and stress-related work absences. Some flexible workers identified being given an increased workload as a risk:

[O]ne of the biggest risks at the moment in a lot of the areas I've seen are people are extremely tired. They've got a bigger workload than what they're being paid for. They're working far more hours than they're being contracted to do, just to fit in what they need to do. And I think that just leads to mistakes being made or people just getting exhausted physically emotionally and financially, because they're not being paid for what they're doing. And also something else is going in their life for them to be able to fit those hours in. [FW7]

FW21 reported colleagues having breakdowns: “three people that confessed to me that they’d had a nervous breakdown ... [They] gravitated to me because of my experience.” For one of these workers it appeared to relate to an increased workload and an inability to refuse new tasks or projects when overloaded:

it was part of that shift to working remotely, but they just didn't feel confident in speaking up about their capacity. They just kept taking it on. I'd hear sort of key words like, "I'm going under for the third time and I've had a breakdown." And I even spoke to someone this morning in a team that I led last year, a young woman, and she said, "Oh, I'm so glad to talk to you today. You're my rescuer. I've had a bit of a breakdown over the last couple of days." [FW21]

Another flexible worker recounted similarly that: “a colleague of mine...pretty much needs to go on stress leave, because she’s working from home...She’s just feeling so isolated, but also that she just keeps getting work dumped on her and has no ability to say, “No.” [FW17]

The overloaded isolated employee

“She’s just feeling so isolated, but also that she just keeps getting work dumped on her and has no ability to say, ‘No’.”

One interviewee’s first experience with flexible work occurred during COVID-19 when everyone at his organisation started working from home. Initially, there was a lot of pressure on the whole team to be highly productive which continued for about six months. The interviewee noted that “we were all working really late hours and took up a lot of new projects to show that we were

busy and ended up working a ridiculous amount of hours.” While there was some pressure from their manager, the team added more pressure themselves because they were contractors and were worried about losing their jobs, so they were trying to prove that they were working.

The interviews also addressed the related issue of productivity. Many participants perceived that productivity was higher working from home, mainly due to a lack of interruptions and noise in an office. For one manager, “productivity risk is not one...we seem to be as productive, but ... if you’re a person who has a task to complete and you’re working remotely, I think that’s more efficient.” [MFW15] Another manager referred to their own productivity as “[s]o much better. It’s so much quieter. I feel like I’m getting through twice as much work ... when you’re at home, you’re tuning everything out and you can concentrate. You’re set up and you can get through it, get everything done. [MFW9]”

The productive flexible employee

“I love the fact that I’m not getting all those interruptions. And not getting all that noise around me. And I can actually focus on the work.”

Paradoxically, remote work improved meetings in one team: “it’s actually much easier to get people together for meetings when they’re working distance – or flexibly – than it is when they’re supposedly all in the same building. There’s been a big productivity gain to be able to quickly call a meeting and get something happening.” [MFW4] This aligns with the findings of Colley and Williamson’s (2020) study of APS employees, referred to earlier, where 90 percent of managers found their team to be equally or more productive while working from home.

However, as one interviewee (FW23) pointed out, with knowledge workers “...it’s a bit hard to track productivity ... it’s more like a gut feel[ing].” Productivity can vary from individual to individual: “Some people don’t work effectively from home, so I think it’s just a bit of a steep learning curve for management to realise who you’re allocating work to and what’s coming back, and what’s not...Everyone fills in time sheets, but time sheets don’t reflect true productivity.” Another, FW11, felt that there had been a loss of productivity. Nonetheless, many more interviewees referred to an increase in productivity, suggesting that remote work could provide a more focussed environment for employees. While this is positive for organisations, if this increased productivity comes as a result of work intensification and/or increased hours, this can negatively impact workers’ mental health and wellbeing.

4.2.4 Work-life balance

Work did not significantly impact family life for flexible workers (work-family conflict), according to findings from the Phase 1 study. Work-life balance was supported, however, with many flexible workers reporting in the interviews that they enjoyed being able to do non-work activities in times they were not previously able to. This included doing housework, running errands, and spending time with children. Some saved substantial amounts of commuting time. On the other hand, work “blurring” into personal life could be problematic: boundaries between work and home became less clear.

For FW15, working from home “literally adds hours to your day, or hours to your week. The convenience of being able to ... [work from alternate locations] works really well.” FW32 was similarly positive saying “**on my lunch break I'm able to go around my local area, where I get my dry cleaning done, for example, or go shopping, or get laundry done during the week.**” Another recounted:

[T]he flexibility ... is important too. Like, people enjoy flexibility. People have lives. And I even know myself working at home, I can chuck a load of washing on, I can drag the bin out at lunchtime instead of waiting until it's night time, and just little things that you can do while you're at home. [FW16]

A number of managers also enjoyed having more time for themselves. MFW2 saved themselves four hours of travel a day. This was beneficial to work-life balance: “there’s a significantly increased level of well-being in terms of being able to do things around the house or go and exercise or that sort of thing.” However, they found it difficult interacting less with people. Another manager with a two-hour commute, MFW17, said that while they had no caring responsibilities, working from home provided respite from their long work day and meant they could sleep in one day a week.

The happy flexible worker

“People enjoy flexibility. People have lives. And I even know myself working at home, I can chuck a load of washing on, I can drag the bin out at lunchtime instead of waiting until it’s night time, and just little things that you can do while you’re at home.”

Flexibility can make “life admin” easier:

If I need to take a day off tomorrow because I’m getting a parcel delivered or I’m getting a tradie come in, I can do that with – even though I have an agreement that says I’ll be at the office Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and ad hoc on the Fridays, it can change. The fact that we can have an agreement and then we can change it if we need to. And it means I have that flexibility if things change. And things always change...[MFW16]

FW4 has “an hour’s commute to the city one way.” Working from home makes them “happy” as it saved them time, and money from public transport expenses. Working from home during the COVID-19 period, they saved “\$150 per month on Opal [public transport] expenses. I feel like I’m saving quite a bit of time. The time that I’m normally using to commute is that time that I can do what I say is my life admin.” Another flexible worker said “it works very well for me to be able to sit down and do an hour’s work and then go for a little walk, or hang the washing out or something like that and come back and then do another hour, or I don’t do anything and then I do five hours on a Saturday.” [FW19].

Parental responsibilities could be a barrier to flexible work when children were at home all the time during a lockdown, but a positive of flexible work under “normal” circumstances:

a lot of people ...in my team that did have to look after kids when they hadn’t previously had to look after kids when they’re at school, they generally found that really hard. So it’s not so much the working from home that was the challenge. It was the kids being there and having to do childcare and home school as well.

So when a lot of those kids then went back to school, those people that are really enjoying the work from home because it means it’s much easier for them to do drop-offs and pickups ... So I would say that the availability of working from home or flexible working is, in almost every case, going to improve opportunities for well-being. But being forced into it, that environment can have some problems and downsides for people, often in unpredictable ways. [MFW1]

The transcript of the interview with FW7 highlights the point:

Interviewer: from an individual's perspective, what are the barriers that prevent them from working successfully and safely, if they're working flexibly and remotely?

<Child yelling in background>

FW7: Sorry. Probably those things, children.

Parent enjoys better balance of work-life

"flexibility has given me back something that I would never have been able to have - to be at home when your kids get home from school."

A manager related:

from my conversation with colleagues and people in the team who, for example, have child care responsibilities or school-age children or other caring responsibility for family members and so forth, working flexibly certainly made a huge difference to them, I think positively. They just were able to structure their lives in a way that they were able to balance their work commitments with their family commitments. [MFW12]

Being able to better balance work and family responsibilities was not simply a matter of remote work, but also the ability to work reduced hours, or to have flexibility around the hours worked: "Some employees who have children, just newborns, have requested part time work, whereas they were full time when they didn't have a child. They've requested flexible hours as well."

[FW3] Flexibility could be a double-edged sword for parents with respect to the COVID-19 period:

I was saying to people, "What's one of the best things and worst things about 2020?" It was a Christmas kind of thing. And they said, "Best thing was being able to spend more time with my children. The worst thing was spending more time with my children." [MFW13]

Despite the many positives surrounding work-life balance, there were also serious "blurring" or boundary issues. As FW24 states, "psychologically, not having a line in the sand between work and home life can be dangerous." Or, as FW17 relates:

last week I was on leave and I logged on every day and I ended up working every day. And, yes, part of that is a sickness and a personality that I have and I've worked out I need to leave my computer at home, but ... I find it very hard to switch on and off when I work from home. And I start work earlier and I finish work later. Which is great for the organisation in terms of my productivity, but it's not so good for me...

As MFW2 suggests, “while people don’t like commuting, one of the things that commuting does for work/life balance and well-being is that it really places a barrier between work and home. You actually get to change mental gear but, when you’re working from home, you don’t have that switch from work to home.” FW20 said similarly, “It depends on the person but personally...I need the physical component. I need to be able to go into work. I need that boundary, the separation between the workplace and home.” Along the same lines was a manager who felt:

there was also a blurring [between work and home] ... you’d be getting calls at seven o’clock in the morning to eight o’clock at night. You’d be checking in just before you went to bed, checking in, so that there was that sense that you were never not at work. [MFW13]

FW13 thought that “people are working more and I know I’m working more ... the day bleeds into the later hours of the night.” [FW13].

Flexible worker experiences greater work-life conflict

“people are working more and I know I’m working more ...the day bleeds into the later hours of the night.”

Some employees felt that they did not have a “right to disconnect” from work:

I definitely think that working overtime is a big barrier, because that’s – it’s literally – personally, in my contract it says, “You won’t be paid for any time that you work out of these hours”... if an employee is personally feeling pressure and then feeling overwhelmed with the kind of work that they have, they might ... feel the need, that they have to work these overtime hours to fulfil pressure that they’re receiving from the managers... [FW5]

Lack of payment for the hours worked was also raised:

I don’t think they’re that flexible...[T]hey’re flexible to a point, as in I can work from my own office or my own house... But if my job is required on a weekend or after hours, I can do it, but I don’t get remunerated for it. Like I don’t get paid outside of nine to five Monday to Friday, so there’s no overtime or after hours, if that’s when you need to work. [FW7]

What the interviews demonstrate is that flexible work has the *potential* to help employees’ work-life balance. Many employees spoke positively about flexible work arrangements in this regard. Flexible work, however, also carries with it the risk of “blurring” the line between work and home. Some of the literature finds that flexible work arrangements are worse for work-life balance than traditional modes of working (Bjærntoft et al., 2020; Higgins et al., 2014). Therefore,

measures need to be put in place to ensure that the potential benefits of flexible work are realised, and “blurring” and increased hours are avoided.

4.2.5 Trust

The scholarly literature is consistent in asserting that trust in their employees – from both line managers and an organisation’s senior leadership – is a crucial factor in making flexible and remote work arrangements function (Lee, 2021). Bartsch et al. (2020), in a study of service employees performance in a virtual environment in crisis situations, concluded that appropriate leadership requires a balance between “enabling leadership behavior (ELB) as a relation-oriented leadership behavior and managing leadership behavior (MLB) as a task-oriented leadership behavior.” In Phase 1 of this project, flexible workers reported significantly greater levels of trust between themselves and their managers than non-flexible workers, a positive factor in facilitating effective remote working. Some interviewees in the present study spoke to the negative impact of a lack of trust. Conversely, others felt trusted, and made a strong case for the importance of this trust. The pandemic made some difference to perceived levels of trust.

Lack of trust by either line managers or senior management in their employees was cited as a barrier to flexible work by many interviewees.

[W]e weren’t able to do the normal work that we were doing ... we didn’t see it as a lack of trust then but it could very much well have been ... they created all this work for us to make sure that we were doing something. And these projects were consuming. We’ve had two-hour meetings every day to fill it and taking minutes, and so many actions out of them.

And it was very, very draining. That was a horrible period in our organisation and everyone speaks about it now, “How do we do that, it was horrible”. It was so demotivating and actually horrific.
[FW5]

Trust was also contingent on being “earned” in one example offered:

Through COVID we were working at home a lot, like I mean I always have but the others were, and one of the girls wanted to continue and her manager told her that, “No, you have to earn that. You can’t just keep doing it.” Even though she was as productive if not more productive, it was like it was just pulled back from her for no reason.” [FW7]

Feeling trusted, rather than a micro-managing approach, can motivate employees:

...[I]n an office, you have that panopticon approach where anyone can be looking over your shoulder [...]. You really don’t have that at home, or flexible working arrangements. You can be doing whatever you want, looking at whatever content you have, and apart from some really

hard-core organisations with logging on and logging off and maybe screen monitoring, that kind of thing, it is not really a practical thing. The easy way to go about that is having that trust, and knowing that if I am an employee, I am going to be doing that work and I am going to be doing it because it is meaningful to me. Not because someone is watching me and making me do that.” [FW9]

FW14 posited a “lack of trust that management have for people doing the work” whereas “... everyone’s got a different way of working. So, as long as the work gets done, doesn’t matter where or how.” FW14 expressed concern that:

When the flexible working arrangements was announced at the All Staff meeting, they were saying that the flexible arrangements were there to help you work the way you want to work. But then they straight away narrowed that down and said, “It’s only one day a week and it’s by agreement.” And I already know that there are a lot of managers in the organisation who do not allow their staff to work remotely...I don’t see how you can in one breath say that we’re introducing flexibility but we’re actually limiting that flexibility by the very definition of the policy that you’ve put in.

Here, this lack of trust caused disquiet among a staff member and can be viewed as a stressor or job demand.

Flexible workers feeling trusted, by contrast, is a job resource. As one manager put it, “that culture of trust between management organisation and the individual is really, really critical because, if you don’t trust each other, and you don’t trust the motivation, then it’s going be really hard for all parties.” [MFW2] Similarly, a flexible worker argued that:

...if you’re going to go down the flexible path you have to be able to trust your employees. You shouldn’t have to sit in the room with them or sit in the next room with them and monitor them to know that they’re doing their work. If you can’t trust them, then you shouldn’t be in that management position, as far as I’m concerned. A manager should be able to trust their employees.
[FW14]

Other interviewees made similar comments, showing a level of awareness of the importance of trust by both flexible workers and managers.

The trusted flexible employee

“I’ve got a lot of trust from my manager and the amount of work I’m getting through elicits that trust.”

Encouragingly, a number of flexible workers did feel trust from their managers. For one, **“you're trusted to do your own thing. And there is definitely that trust there; there's no ‘We need to be watching you; you need to come in because we need to watch you.’”** [FW32] Another related their experience of trust as benefiting from an outcomes-based approach: “a lot of trust from my manager and the amount of work I’m getting through elicits that trust. And doing that whole audit remotely and getting a 100% compliant result for the organisation that elicits trust. So, I know that that’s working well for me.”

FW17 recalled that:

the last couple of line managers I've had, particularly my last one, really, just said, “You do what works for you. I trust you to get your job done.” ... [S]he understood that sometimes the school rings and you've got to go and pick your kids up. It doesn't mean I'm not going to get what I needed to, done for the day.

Another flexible worker spoke positively of “having that feeling of independence ... being able to work on your own and being independent from your manager looking over your shoulder. Not that I have had ... managers looking over my shoulder, which is nice. But again, it’s just that extra spacing...that you’re trusted to do your own thing. [FW32] The reference to “spacing” again backs up the categorisation of trust as a job resource. Rather than feeling cramped or stifled, FW32 felt they had had room to perform work tasks as they saw fit, without being burdened by excessive supervision.

While the comments above relate to the line manager level, FW21 felt trusted both at this level and at an organisational level from senior leadership. At a team level, the environment was one of: “I trust you to do that and deliver on what you - and I trust you to support me. You need to be able to trust me that I support you and you do that by delivering on time, respecting each other, and just making sure that we check in.” At a leadership level:

They had some very strong visionary leadership taking place which was really good. And there was a lot of trust in the leadership. And also, then the trust went back to each individual employee as well. If you trust me to do my work effectively at home, then I'll trust you to lead me through this dark forest of pandemic.

Government restrictions due to COVID-19 brought about remote work on a large scale. Remote working, and managing remote workers, was a new experience for many. In some cases, the experience of employees “getting work done” led to more trust from managers, changing

mindsets. For example, FW6's account suggests that in their organisation trust had increased during the pandemic:

... it was interesting how there was this endemic, systemic lack of trust between management and staff, that if you didn't keep that line of sight things would go wrong, compared to now where they're basically throwing these agreements at us saying "Learn to trust them, it's okay, we can do this." And I think partly it's because it's been proven now.

This accords with Colley and Williamson's (2020, 17) study of APS employees, referred to earlier, noting a "definite shift" towards managers putting more trust in employees.

FW25 reflected on trust before and during the pandemic:

[Before the pandemic] some people had commissioned to work from home one afternoon or one day a week, that sort of thing, through arrangements with their manager.

Previously, flexibility, obviously there were people on part-time. It was all centralised agreements about part-time, ad hoc flexibility for people with their manager that yeah, no worries, I don't mind if you've got an appointment or picking kids up from school on Wednesdays, that sort of thing.

It's also brought issues relating to trust to the fore, where people who weren't really trusted that much before, those people are not really trusted now, and it's exposing that. Whereas, people who were trusted before are working effectively remotely under managers that are trusting them.

One academic spoke positively of being trusted before and during pandemic:

I think something that really hasn't changed, which is probably a good thing is the level of trust. So, working in an academic environment you are very much self-motivated, and your supervisor isn't really checking in with you on a daily or a weekly basis. You're doing your thing. You know they're there if you need them and I think from a level of trust perspective, that hasn't - while on one hand I can say, "Well, they just kind of send us off and let us do it," that does show a really high level of trust in our ability to get it done and our ability to make things happen. [FW8]

In summary, trust from management is a job resource. Participants who felt that managers trusted them to get on with their work appreciated that trust and articulated why it was important. Conversely, those (small number) who did not feel trusted attested to the damaging effects of a lack of trust.

4.2.6 Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying has been described as “a significant social stressor in contemporary working life” (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012, 321), and can be defined as “a situation where one or several individuals perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative actions from one or more persons persistently over a period of time, in a situation where the targets have difficulty defending themselves against these actions” (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts 2007, 847). Workplace bullying can involve person-related or work-related negative behaviours (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009) and can be distinguished from other similar forms of ill-treatment (such as harassment) as the negative behaviours are repeated and systematic, and can often be subtle or covert. Because of this, bullying can be hard to detect, making intervention less likely, especially in the context of flexible working. Australia has a relatively high prevalence of workplace bullying compared to European countries (Potter et al., 2016, 3).

While the research literature on workplace bullying among flexible workers is fairly limited, the published empirical evidence does indicate a higher risk of being exposed to workplace bullying for those employees working in flexible work arrangements (Ariza-Montes et al., 2015; Feijo et al., 2019), including working remotely. This accords with Phase 1 survey findings from this project, which indicated that flexible workers experience greater exposure to bullying and other forms of ill-treatment than non-flexible workers. While the present study did not seek to measure the extent of workplace bullying, findings suggest that bullying takes a different form when working remotely. As one manager points out, if working 100 percent remotely, belittling someone face-to-face and humiliating them in front of others is not possible:

The bullying that I suffered in one of my previous roles was that my manager, she was not being inclusive in team environments and she would also sit in the office at a desk behind me and complain to other people in the team about me. So I guess when you work remotely you don't have the opportunity for a manager to sit there and belittle you and speak negatively of you to your team, because there's no opportunity for that.

You could still obviously not be inclusive with your team and give all the work to some people and not other people. That could still happen. [MFW7]

However, as another manager points out, this bullying can take other forms:

I've been quite lucky to not often work in environments where there's a lot of workplace bullying. [...] I've definitely seen some at that level, and I don't think flexible working would make much of a difference there. I think it probably changes the way that bullying would manifest itself and it would change the visibility of bullying. If you go back years, traditional bullying might involve somebody yelling at somebody across the office, and everybody can see it. Whereas now bullying

might be angry emails that people, that can still be bullying, it can still affect people, it's far less visible so it probably really changes how it's coming about. [MFW2]

This may make it harder to see bullying going on and to intervene:

[Y]ou can see when behaviours are toxic or potentially there's bullying going on in the office ... [W]hen someone's working from home ... people could be pretty awful to each other through Teams or via emails and you have no awareness that this stuff is going on because you wouldn't see the impact.

So potentially there's a risk there that we haven't thought about because I guess out of mind, out of sight in some regards and you don't know until you know potentially that somebody's being nasty to other people. When people are in the office, you do hear, "Look, so and so is not being very nice to so and so" and you're like "Okay, I need to go nip that one in the bud... [MFW14]

Given Australia's high rates of bullying (Potter et al. 2016, 3) and the harm it causes, more research needs to be done into how this bullying may manifest itself in an online environment, and what can be done to combat it.

4.2.7 Reducing psychosocial risks associated with flexible work through a hybrid strategy

The recent published literature on flexible working indicates that employees prefer a hybrid model of remote working. Australian Public Service employees, for example, favoured a hybrid work location model, that is, continuing to work from home for part of their work week (Colley & Williamson, 2020), while similar findings have been reported in Europe (Eurofound, 2020b). Indeed, many of the negatives inherent in remote work arrangements noted above relate mainly to where those arrangements are applied 100 percent of the time. A hybrid remote work model was raised by a number of interviewees: "I don't think five days a week working from home is a particularly good idea long-term, even though that's what we've had to do because of the virus, but I do think we need to look at trying to at least have two days a week minimum back in an office to really keep that collegiality alive." [FW6] Such a model potentially counters some of these negatives, while still allowing employees to experience some of the benefits of remote work. Isolation is an example. Someone working from home for two or three days per week, is unlikely to feel the same sense of isolation as someone working remotely for five days a week. This is not to deny the importance of engagement virtually for those few days, or for those whose work is entirely remote. Similarly, in a more work-related sense, issues around incidental contact, bouncing ideas off workmates and so on may be better managed if employees are working from the same location at least some of the time. Yet this does not mean they need to be there all of the time.

4.3 Distribution of psychosocial risk across demographic groups

The experience of work in general, and flexible and remote work in particular, can affect diverse demographic cohorts differently. Improving our understanding of psychosocial risk in this area improves our understanding of how to manage the work environment of diverse workers and their particular needs. Phase 1 findings showed that psychosocial risks varied across the demographic groups somewhat. For example, those with older age, carer responsibilities, or with a disability, had higher exposure to psychosocial risks associated job demands, and typically lower job resources, making these worker cohorts more vulnerable to psychological harm and other negative outcomes.

During Phase 2, we asked flexible workers and managers for their thoughts regarding diversity and flexible and remote work. Their responses added to our understanding of why flexible work affects different demographic groups differently, and also highlighted this as an important area for future research. Interviewees provided us with anecdotes around the experience for women workers, carers, workers with a disability, older workers, and workers who have experienced mental health issues. Little of substance was said regarding workers from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background and LGBTIQ workers. Given the nature of the interview process, interviewees were not asked personal questions about, for example, their sexuality or whether they identify as having a disability. Rather, this only came up if they raised it themselves. This often meant that participants spoke either about workmates from diverse backgrounds, or generally about how they perceived the risk for different demographic cohorts, which is of more limited value.

4.3.1 Female flexible workers

Academic research suggests that women experience working from home differently to men. While the literature is mixed, it is clear that flexible and remote work arrangements should not be considered purely as being beneficial for women with caring responsibilities (Ross et al., 2017). Indeed, women are more likely to have to juggle work and childcare while working flexibly (Ross et al., 2017), placing additional demands on women rather than freeing them to balance their work and non-work time. In line with this, one flexible worker highlighted the impact of societal gender norms on women they knew working from home during the pandemic:

[E]ven when you have a job which allows you to work from home, it's still not equal in the sense that for many women over this last year if they were to put up their hand to work from home, often childcare burdens are also saddled on them. There was pressure for women to be the ones to work from home, and mind the kids when the kids weren't going to school. So we've got a few sort of presumed norms in society that says that the burden of caring for others sits more on women than on men.

So I know of some women who really did everything not to work flexibly if they could help it because ... it was almost like putting your hand up to do a whole lot of other things ... [Y]ou're home now, you can do these other things as well, and they couldn't, and it did influence their ability to work properly ... I've got a daughter who actually went and rented herself her own office away from the home just so the pressure of having to be home for the kids and the au pair didn't influence her work. So flexibility is good to some extent but not always, for some. [FW6]

Another flexible worker recounted that “we had a colleague, she’s left now, but she struggled very much so because she had two teenage boys at home and just couldn’t focus. [...] maybe checking in to see if they need to reduce the hours.” [FW5]

A manager felt that the lockdowns had balanced the caring responsibilities more equally between men and women:

The lockdown really opened the opportunity for people to undertake caring opportunities while working full time. But what it's also meant is that there's probably more men, it's probably starting to balance the equity between caring responsibilities in childcare responsibilities. So you're probably getting more men getting involved in some of those childcare arrangements, which is opening opportunities for women but I think in general it's probably opening more opportunities for women. [MFW2]

While many of the discussions in this study were around remote work, one manager saw the ability to work part-time – that is, *flexible* work arrangements – as benefitting women: “... we see quite a number of women when they come back from parental leave, they actually don’t want to work full-time immediately. They might take a sort of a staged approach and come back in a part-time capacity and then move to fulltime further down the track.” [MFW3]

Finally, a flexible worker in the WHS space raised the issue of increased domestic violence during lockdown periods, and questioned what organisations had done about this:

We know that from domestic violence services here in New South Wales, that they're reporting up to 20 to 30% of women who are working from home have been subject to coercive control and domestic violence. But where have the businesses come in to assess a woman who could be under that threat? Or even if she reports it, what do they do? How do they assess for that risk? [FW31]

4.3.2 Workers with caring responsibilities

The ability to work from home can facilitate the involvement of people with caring responsibilities into the workforce. FW23 noted: “I have a son with schooling issues and family

members who are sick, and I think that the flexibility of me being able to work from home is just a huge relief.” Another example of flexible work helping workers with care responsibilities was given by MFW10:

I had a staff member whose partner had a stroke, very unexpected. They're both in their late 30s, so obviously very young to have that sort of thing happen. It allowed her to be able to – because she was able to work from home, she was able to be nearby while he recovered when he wasn't able to be left unsupervised. The alternate, I guess, would have been if we demanded that she needed to be in the office. She would have either had to burn through all of her annual leave even though she was still able to work, just needed to be nearby to him, but – or she would have worked, and he wouldn't have been able to stay at home.

One interviewee worked part-time for a government agency, and balanced working with caring for her child. She noted that she commenced working for the agency as a full-time employee but after realising that she could not maintain a full-time position and care for a child with disabilities, she requested part-time work hours. While she expressed gratitude for the flexibility, she was frustrated that she had to re-apply annually, and that she is bullied about being a part-timer. Hot desking was also difficult for her to find a desk with her later start time, and as her team plans meetings on days that she does not work, she misses out on important information. Another flexible worker (FW6) described having to “battle really hard with the executive” for a team member with a terminally-ill spouse to be allowed to work from home.

4.3.3 Workers with a disability

A flexible worker with a disability found it better to work from home, for reasons relating to the disability:

I'm hearing impaired and wear hearing aids. I find the office environment very noisy. That's my main reason for enjoying [working from home]. They obviously try and assist me in every way they can, but there's just some things that you just can't get away from, and that's noise within the office and that sort of thing ... working from home suits me a lot better not only from a personal level, but also a bit of a health level as well. [FW12]

A manager felt that working from home made it easier for a team member:

I used to have a gentleman in my team who was visually impaired, and he's a younger fellow and his eyesight will go to zero or near on where he'll need a dog or a support of some sort. So you know, working from home probably takes the challenge of trying to get around town and get to the workplace. [MFW15]

Two managers highlighted the complexity of the issue, calling for more awareness and action:

[I]t's very important to understand that the different people have different disabilities. For some disabilities, that probably makes it much easier. So for example, somebody that has mobility disabilities, it's probably much easier if they don't have to go and find their way, or people who are visually impaired, they have probably got a much better setup at home than what they would in the office and having to negotiate through the office.

It's not something I've actually really thought about to be honest, but I think it'd be really important to think about how it can benefit people with disabilities and how it might hamper. Because we don't have the disability ourselves, we might not realise how much harder some things become. [MFW2]

'I wonder if this COVID experience has exaggerated the difficulty of people with disability working through technology. I would have naively thought beforehand perhaps office access and things like that and transport and those sort of things may be harder for people with some disabilities. But actually maybe people have worked out how to get to work and how to be transported and how to get in the lifts and all that stuff. But I think maybe things at home, maybe technology if you are visually impaired or hearing impaired, maybe it's not as good an experience as actually being in an office.' [MFW19]

Finally, the issue of workers with underlying health issues was raised by one interviewee, specifically, of them not being allowed to work from home:

Flexible has not been something that's universally applied. And so, it might be a workplace right under enterprise rules, but unless it's enforceable by both parties and it's genuine, then it may as well just be left out; there's no point in actually saying it.

I had a vulnerable worker who had asthma and we put up a really strong case to the General Manager, and she was expressly forbidden to work from home, despite the fact that she sat in a COVID testing centre, where staff were coming to her because they were sick, with something they didn't know they had, and it could have been COVID as much as it could have not been COVID, and she was denied the ability to work from home. She could have done that very easily, but she was denied. [FW31]

4.3.4 Workers who have experienced mental health issues

Consideration also needs to be given to workers who have previously experienced mental health issues. Personal preferences can also impact workers who have previously experienced mental health issues. While working from home can bring about feelings of isolation, paradoxically one interviewee spoke of a preference for working from home:

I've gone through depression, I've experienced a lot of things, and I know that I'm a highly sensitive person. So I can sense other people's vibe. When we are sitting in a closed room for a meeting, it's

so unhealthy. I'm not concentrated, I'm not focused, and constantly I'm experiencing flushes of heat and I'm sweating, it's so uncomfortable.

But now, present time, we are doing this through online monitoring. I'm sitting in the comfort of my home, it's safe, it's secure, I can move as much as I want and sit as I like, and I'm so concentrated and focused on what it is I'm hearing. And I just – I am myself, I'm not being self-conscious of being watched by others, and how they're judging me about what I'm saying, or what I'm wearing, and how I smell even, you know? I don't know if other people think about these things or not but to be honest, you are researchers, you should know that this is something that I think about.

Another thing I've seen for myself, I get better sleep. I get better sleep, I look better because I get better sleep, and I'm more focused and concentrated, and in the end I realised that I like my job, I like myself, I'm enough for this job. [FW10]

4.3.5 Older workers

For older workers, working from home could be seen, positively, as a bridge towards retirement: “I think it (working from home) works really well now. It took me a while to get used to not seeing people, but I'm heading towards retirement, so I think that's, probably, a really good thing for me.” [FW22]. A manager concurred with this:

[S]ome older people may be wanting to move towards retirement and transition towards retirement. I think flexible working really helps people transition towards retirement in a way that they can start to gradually step down their work in a more easy way without being seen to be letting down the team. [MFW2]

Older flexible worker transiting to retirement

“I will find it easier to leave work than I would have if I was still in the normal environment; it's a good transition to retirement.”

Care should be taken to ensure that older workers receive adequate training and support in the use of technology:

[S]ome of the older people might struggle a bit more with the technology although we've seen, over the last year, that early on there were more barriers with older people but it didn't take much. I mean just because you're old or young doesn't mean you're smarter or stupider but, once they've been actually forced to overcome their aversion to technology in some cases, they've actually got on board quite well.

My boss is a great example. He's one of the least technologically competent people I've come across, but it took him about a month. But once he got over those initial barriers, he's finding it

absolutely fine to work flexibly and remotely. Whereas if it hadn't been for this push, he would probably still struggle with it. [MFW2]

As well as the distribution of risk across demographics, and the possible benefits to different types of workers, we should also consider those who are not able to work remotely:

You can't work flexibly if you've got nowhere to work or if your environment is chaotic or disturbed.

I don't think we talk about these things because we tend to assume everybody is a middle-class professional in a big house. My house is tiny. So, I'm really sympathetic to my staff who have got multiple flatmates. [MFW4]

4.4 Workplace Health and Safety engagement

The literature suggests flexible working can be a challenge for different aspects of employee health and safety (e.g., Eurofound, 2020a; Neilsen, 2019; Robelski & Sommer, 2020). A major concern of the current project was to understand how engagement with workplace health and safety (WHS) was impacted by flexible working. Findings from the Phase 1 study that relate to this issue were mixed. While flexible workers perceived a superior psychosocial safety climate and greater engagement with WHS, their WHS participation and compliance ratings were significantly lower than non-flexible workers. The following sections consider a range of relevant workplace health and safety (WHS) issues of particular importance to the effective management of risk to the safety, health and wellbeing of flexible workers, including systems and processes, safety culture, and responsibilities for WHS.

4.4.1 Workplace Health and Safety Management Systems and Processes

Interviewees were asked what was working well and what could be improved with respect to engaging with WHS systems and processes while undertaking flexible or remote work. Some flexible workers stated that their organisation did not have work health and safety processes in place for remote workers. For FW5, "The nature of the work is changing and we need processes to support that. But ... we don't have any processes in place that I've been exposed to at least." This worker cited an absence of both processes relating to physical wellbeing – "do you need any monitors or chairs?" – or mental wellbeing – "check-ins ... having a conversation seeing how the employees are." FW8 replied to the question by saying:

I'm not engaged with it at all.

They've made some big assumptions on what I have available to me at home. Do I have fast running ADSL, broadband ... I might not be able to afford that at home. And so I do all my work in

the office. And suddenly now I've got to work from home, I've got to pay for these additional services. I have to make sure that I've got home hardware, laptop, screens, cameras, microphones, all those kinds of things.

FW11 said: "It's just one of those things – it's off the radar. When we're working from home, it's just off the radar. It's almost not relevant." The same interviewee revealed that working from home had exacerbated his shoulder injury, and "in the office, it's easier ... to raise ... concerns around 'I've got too much work', or 'I can't manage that.'"

Another flexible worker highlighted the importance of training of managers and organisational structures:

You do need your policies and procedures, but don't set them up once everybody's moved home, like they did basically. So in organisations, it's about recognising that your workforce is diverse and having policies and procedures from the workplace health and safety viewpoint ... [It is] also ... providing managers ... information ... how to manage staff remotely. So it's about the education of managers and staff about well these are the kind of things that we will be looking at before you move home. And it's not so much about the technology but it's about the organisational structures. [FW2]

Interviewees had some awareness that WHS needs to be considered in relation to flexible workers: "...[W]e do not have a formal WHS committee as yet. Because all the jobs are white collar jobs, they are all working from the laptop, it's not like high WHS risk business. But we still think that to cover the risk areas, we still need WHS." [FW3]

One flexible worker was very engaged with WHS, being "... involved with the work health safety committees and conferences we have, and I'm a wellbeing ambassador in our division" [FW10]. They, however, felt that training around mental health issues while working from home were lacking in their organisation, stating that: "people take their laptop into their bed and work long hours, which is not healthy, or because I have my laptop during the weekend I just open it up and check my emails, which is not healthy. I think these are the more general things that need to be improved." By contrast there was a lot of training for WHS when they were "in an office environment." FW10 also raised the quality of online WHS training, saying it was "crammed" into 20-minute videos. This made it hard to digest the material, and there was not the opportunity to ask questions that there would be for comparable in-person training.

There was limited discussion by interviewees of WHS incidents. One exception was MFW6, who "... fell over a couple of months ago trying to do the vacuum cleaning and working at the same

time, and not really looking where the cord was and hurt myself quite badly. Luckily, I didn't knock myself out." Care must also be taken to ensure that reporting mechanisms are known and followed in a remote work environment:

There was an incident at work that wasn't reported because, initially, the person who was there would have just spoken to the manager and then they would have relayed it on to the appropriate person. But because they weren't physically in the office, they didn't communicate that through to the appropriate person...[It] could have been a bigger safety issue in the long run. [FW9]

Another interviewee was worried about her colleague who left their online Teams meeting abruptly. Unfortunately, due to an undiagnosed medical condition, the colleague passed away. This event shocked the team, and also highlighted the absence of written protocols to cover these types of incidents, and an underlying assumption that if someone leaves a team meeting abruptly it will be due to technology issues. The interviewee posited, that if they were in the office there would have been first aid available, someone could have called an ambulance, but if you are working at home by yourself, 'Who calls the ambulance?' While, she was aware that safety protocols would not have changed the outcome for her colleague, she thought that these were the types of questions that organisations should consider when developing safety protocols for working from home.

4.4.2 WHS culture

Perceptions of WHS culture in organisations were mixed. A worker in the WHS space stated:

We have got such poor enactment of the psychosocial components of work health safety around culture, which ties into, I guess, this whole concept of flexible work. So, where we've got organisations and government organisations that have a really shit culture around flexibility, they're the ones that seem to also have the claims. [FW31]

At an organisational level, sometimes advice to take a break and not work long hours was seen as "tokenistic":

If the organisation was genuinely concerned about its workforce, it would actually schedule in time and activities. It would require managers really to take an active interest in contacting their staff ... My direct manager is overwhelmed with work. And that's largely the fault of I think the people above him. ... they don't take their staff's wellbeing that seriously ... They acknowledge it, they pay lip-service to it, they say we all need to manage things, blah, blah, blah. But ... the deadlines don't move. The expectations don't move ... There really are not, in my view, meaningful conversations around work expectations, wellbeing, deadlines, and how they all interplay to each other. [FW11]

At one organisation, concerns about WHS and health and safety communications were reported to have "fallen off the wagon":

Originally when everyone was directed to work from home, there was a bit of feedback that came out of how you're meant to be setting your chair up and how your desk and monitors and all that should be set up. And it came out in the first week or whatever it was, and then it sort of just fell off the table. There was never those constant reminders of being like accepting of the stresses of some people of working from home and how much harder it was, or may have been for some. But there was never the "Don't forget about getting up so every often, and having a walk, having a stretch. Making sure your chair's still right."

A lot of those things fell off the wagon with staff with working at home so there wasn't that consistency of "Despite you're working at home, this is what our expectation is of what you need to do to keep yourself safe." [MFW9]

A casual worker reported other failures to communicate WHS information effectively:

[S]ome Occ Health and Safety ... updates to remind us of ... well-being, opportunities of support that's there in the university would have been really, really helpful... from the greater university ... human resources ...[there hasn't been] not a lot of engagement with us as workers... I'm not a full-time tenured academic. I'm an ongoing long-term casual ... maybe those communications were going out to full-time people, but they're certainly not coming out to us. [FW8]

Other organisations appeared to have a much better culture for ensuring healthy working conditions in the home environment and took measures around ergonomic issues. One manager related:

They had one of the work health and safety guys had a camera set up and he was like "This is how you set your chair up." He showed us how you stand, what level your desk should be. So, there's a lot of interactive - and you could put in comments and questions, and they would get back to you. Like, he was live. So there's been a lot of that. They're really pushing that early on, because they knew people were working from home in not ideal situations. Because originally, if you wanted to do work from home, you had to have a study, you had to have a desk. And then it became you can sit on your sofa, but don't do it for too long, because we really would like you to sit at a table. But then you couldn't even buy a computer desk or a chair to start with, in Sydney. When everybody got sent home, it was pretty much you go to Officeworks or Ikea and no ergonomic chairs. Ikea sold out of desks. You just couldn't get them for love or money in that March period. [MFW16]

The same organisation gave practical tips on ergonomic issues, and making use of equipment employees might already have at home:

All the detailed stuff about how to set up...your desk and what is the right eye-line for your computer screen – all the actual, physical... stuff that will make your back better ... They put up a whole bunch of exercises you should do if you're sitting at home all the time. Like, this is what you should do. You shouldn't stand for too long, you shouldn't sit for too long. If you want to stand, you know, have a sit-stand desk, how about get a whole bunch of books, and put it on your desk? Like, they gave us really practical options of how to adjust the desk and the computer screens, without having to go to Officeworks and buy a sit-stand desk.

4.4.3 Responsibility for WHS

The question for who is responsible for WHS in the context of remote working has long been considered a barrier to flexible work arrangements. In the present study, flexible workers (and managers) felt that the responsibility for WHS issues at home was unclear:

[T]he WHS issue ... could be problematic. If someone falls over and says "Well I was working", how do you know that? Or if say you're sitting at a desk at home which really gives you a bad back or you don't have adequate lighting or something...? It's kind of your responsibility, but it's not ... that WHS stuff is not very clear ... [and] could be improved on. [FW19]

One manager saw a necessity for "a comprehensive list of all the people who do require special setups. When we spoke to the safety, health and wellbeing people they didn't really have that list" [MFW3].

The question of who pays for a suitable ergonomics set-up was also raised:

If they're sitting badly at a desk, it doesn't matter where that desk is, they're still going to be sitting badly at the desk. So, if you're office-based, it's much more likely, particularly also because, from my perspective, the public service will not spend money, or it won't reimburse its employers, and it's not within the tax system and structure to reimburse employees to make those changes that would benefit and stop an injury from occurring. Because you can't get back exactly what you pay for say something like an office chair. And it's pushed a lot of the risk back onto the individual and their home environment. [FW31]

Responding to WHS issues can be challenging. One manager of flexible workers commented: "[W]hat do you do if they're clearly getting depressed, they're not producing and you're all remote working? That's a whole separate aspect of work health and safety policy and protocol that, I've never seen written down. What if they stopped answering their phone?" [MFW13]

Warning signs may not be apparent:

[B]eing isolated like this, it's very easy for your head to run away and make things up in your own head and not have things addressed. You definitely lack the picking people's emotion, like their physical appearance and gestures and things, you definitely miss seeing all of that, so you'd lack a lot of context on how you take things that are said in an email or a phone call. There's no body language involved a lot of the time.

If you're working in an office and you're saying hi to the same person every day, they can tell ... if you were down or not yourself. ... working from home, nobody sees you day-to-day, ... it would just get missed [FW1]

4.4.4 Ergonomic conditions and sedentary work

Ensuring flexible workers have suitable workstations and an appropriate physical work environment is a major challenge for many organisations. Ergonomic risk assessments are much more challenging in the home-working environment and require innovations from established WHS management systems to adequately assess the work environment. Indeed, findings from the current study suggests that an improper ergonomic set up is a barrier to safe flexible work. One flexible worker revealed that:

In the beginning I was working just off a dining chair and that went on for maybe four to five months and then I had to invest in a proper chair. And that was \$2-300 and my employer ... didn't provide any support around that. But I started to get really, really bad back pains and shoulder pains.

I didn't have a proper table and monitor, and chair in the beginning because I didn't know how long the whole process was going to go on for, I was kind of waiting it out versus working with what I had. I ended up working in really uncomfortable positions, sometimes on the sofa, sometimes at the table, sometimes outside.

And after four or five months when everything was still really up in the air I was like, you know what, I'm just going to invest ... this is getting too much, I'm actually in physical pain waking up to work ... I'm in this situation for eight, nine hours a day and it's just not, it's not safe. [FW5]

Another flexible worker found that:

I just noticed people becoming more unhealthy. [B]oth my manager and one of my work colleagues [have] complained about how they've become more sedentary, they've put on weight. My work manager in fact had serious issues with his legs. He's an older man, sort of in his early sixties, and he's basically said he was having real trouble with his legs, just walking ... It's because he was under a lot of work pressure, but he was not moving. He had a lot of work on - we've all had a lot of work on - but he just said he just wasn't moving, and being as active as ... he would be if he was catching the train into the office [FW11]

A manager of flexible workers noticed “some people were hitting the booze, too much earlier and not doing exercise.” [MFW13]

Concerningly, some workers were endangering their health due to lack of adequate equipment: “I know a lot of people have returned to the office, despite what the recommendation is, and I think for them that’s they’re not having the appropriate equipment or setup.” [MFW9] This could easily be addressed, as another organisation showed:

[A]t the very beginning of it, when we were all shifting to working from home, in the first week, I went to a designated office that they had all around the state to pick up a keyboard and extra kit that they had, so I could replicate my home office and two screens and all of the other stuff. So I think they did that really well and they responded really quickly and they were able to provide kit for people to be able to do it. [MFW12]

Allocating financial resources to cover at least some of the cost of setting up an ergonomically suitable home office is a facilitator of safe and successful flexible work. Some organisations either purchased equipment for their staff or gave them money to do so themselves, but many organisations did not. FW13 relates:

They provided us with a set amount of money to set ourselves up safely and I think that's helpful if you're talking about different socioeconomic backgrounds. Even if you're working in a place where you're earning X amount of money, you don't know where that's money going, that that person's earning ... [I]t's just a bit of money-where-the-mouth-is a little bit, like they want it to be successful to be working from home.

In a similar vein, FW32 notes:

I didn't have a monitor, and luckily my housemate gave me one. But I would have been resistant in buying one, because I never use it unless I'm working.

Whereas my work laptop, I one hundred percent need an extra monitor or two, to do the work that I do ... going to the working from home arrangement [and using] what you have at home – it wasn't ideal for me. ... I don't like to make people pay for my stuff, but I think it would have been good.

I'm connected to NBN and it's terrible. I'm just thinking back to all the VPN issues I've had, because to access at home, you need to be connected to our VPN at work – terrible. There was one stage, I don't know what was going on, but I really just couldn't connect at all for hours at a time, and it was such a time waster.

The sedentary flexible worker

"I just noticed people becoming more unhealthy. So, both my manager and one of my work colleagues – they've both complained about how they've become more sedentary, they've put on weight."

Some organisations were criticised for their lack of support for employees' physical ergonomics:

We have a great big HR and Occ Health and Safety Department, and they did nothing. They did nothing to say, "This is how you should ready your home workspace. Make sure you've got this. Make sure your chair is –" ... [W]e have all those kind of ergonomic assessments at work to make sure your chair heights and your desk heights and your – but at home you're just kind of grabbing any space you can. [FW8]

[Organisation name] won't buy furniture for employees, and yeah, you can claim it off your tax, and that's great. I have a neck issue, which is quite severe, so I went and I spent 1,300 bucks on a chair and it's so much better than the chair I have at the office. I bought two monitors. I have a dedicated space, it's a whole room. I have bought a printer. I can afford to do that upfront, which not everybody can ... But I think a lot of people either cheap out or can't afford it or maybe a combination of both. So you've got people sitting at home – and it's fine to sit at your dining table, don't get me wrong, I've worked from my dining table for a while – but they're sitting without proper equipment ... There's been absolutely no effort made at all to ensure workplace health and safety at home. [FW17]

Aside from costs incurred by an employee that would normally be borne by the employer, this quote highlights a number of issues. Firstly, the lack of ergonomic assessments and providing employees with necessary equipment means that some workers will be working in sub-optimal physical conditions that may lead to injury. Secondly, there is an equity issue in that lower-paid employees may be less likely to have an adequate ergonomic set-up. This is both because employees on lower income would be less likely both to purchase things like office chairs themselves or to have a spare room/dedicated workspace. Thirdly, the interviewee alludes to the fact that while workers can work in sub-optimal conditions for a certain length of time, they cannot do so indefinitely.

A few flexible workers said they were taking less sick days while working remotely. This could be problematic for wellbeing:

I feel I could never take a sick day, and sometimes I felt really crook, but even if you've got gastro you can still run to the loo every five minutes if you're working from home ... I've actually really struggled with that ... but I've had one or two days I probably shouldn't have worked, but I felt like had to, because I was working from home. [FW17]

4.5 Overviewing Phase 2 findings: Facilitators and barriers to psychologically-safe flexible working

Drawing on the job demands-resources model approach (Demerouti et al., 2001), the wellbeing of flexible workers is argued to be a product of the balancing of work job demands and resources in the work environment. Strain results when insufficient resources (organisational, team, individual) are available to meet psychological demands of the work. The major disruption to normal working due to the COVID-19 crises introduced new job demands to many workers, while organisations sought ways to manage these new demands to ensure business continuity and wellbeing. This brief section considers the job demands and resources that were identified from the interviews as impacting wellbeing in flexible workers. For the purposes of this discussion, these factors are labelled either facilitators or barriers to flexible working.

These facilitators and barriers that influence a psychologically safe flexible working can be considered at different interacting levels of the work system. Firstly, at the level of the organisation as a whole. This level is determined by policies adopted at a senior leadership level, their implementation and communication, and organisational culture, including the prioritisation of worker wellbeing. The organisation is in turn impacted by the external environment, including the regulatory system as it relates to flexible work arrangements and, more specifically, from the point of view of the present study, working under COVID-19 restrictions. Secondly, is the team level, for example support received by workers' direct line manager or supervisor, and dynamics within their team. Thirdly, the task and work environment level relate to job design and the tasks or projects workers are carrying out, and the physical environment the work takes place in. Fourthly, at the individual level, a number of personal factors influence the experience of psychologically-safe flexible working, including personal preferences and self-management skills. Table 4.4 summarises these facilitators and barriers under four work system levels.

From a work-systems perspective, it is the fit between these different work system elements at each level that determines whether flexible working is both effective and psychologically safe for employees. Figure 4.1 below captures the key facilitators of effective and safe flexible working identified from the Phase 2 interviews at each of these levels. As Figure 4.1 illustrates, there is interaction between all of these levels in supporting psychologically safe flexible working. For example, organisational policies for flexible work arrangements can flow down to line managers, while a strong organisational culture can positively influence manager and employee attitudes towards remote working; personal preference for remote work may be impacted by the resources provided by the organisation or the nature of the task; and a supportive work team can enhance the experience of support and lessen the impacts of social isolation.

Table 4.4 Facilitators and barriers of safe flexible work by level

Work-system level	Facilitators	Barriers
<i>Organisation level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear guidelines/policy • Culture of support for flexible working • Trust of senior management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of financial support to work from home • Lack of trust
<i>Team level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust from supervisor • Support from supervisor (e.g., checking in) • Social support from colleagues (formal or informal) • Good virtual communication • Good collaboration tools and processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty collaborating bouncing ideas off each other • Lack of trust • Lack of management support for flexible work
<i>Work task and environment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tasks suited to autonomous work (e.g., report-writing) • More ability to focus • Job design factors • Appropriate workstation design/technology • Appropriate physical workspace and physical conditions (dedicated space, good ergonomics, lighting, not too hot or cold) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate workstation design and technology • Poor environmental conditions • Inadequate training re technology • Excessive workload • Group project work • Poor role clarity
<i>Individual level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management skills • Personal preference • Personality - likes working alone, describes self as introvert. • Appropriate social workspace (eg., not having too many other people in the house) • Good IT and IT support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working styles and preferences • Preference to work with others in office • Potential for isolation, lack of social contact. • Inappropriate social workspace (e.g. too many other people in the house).

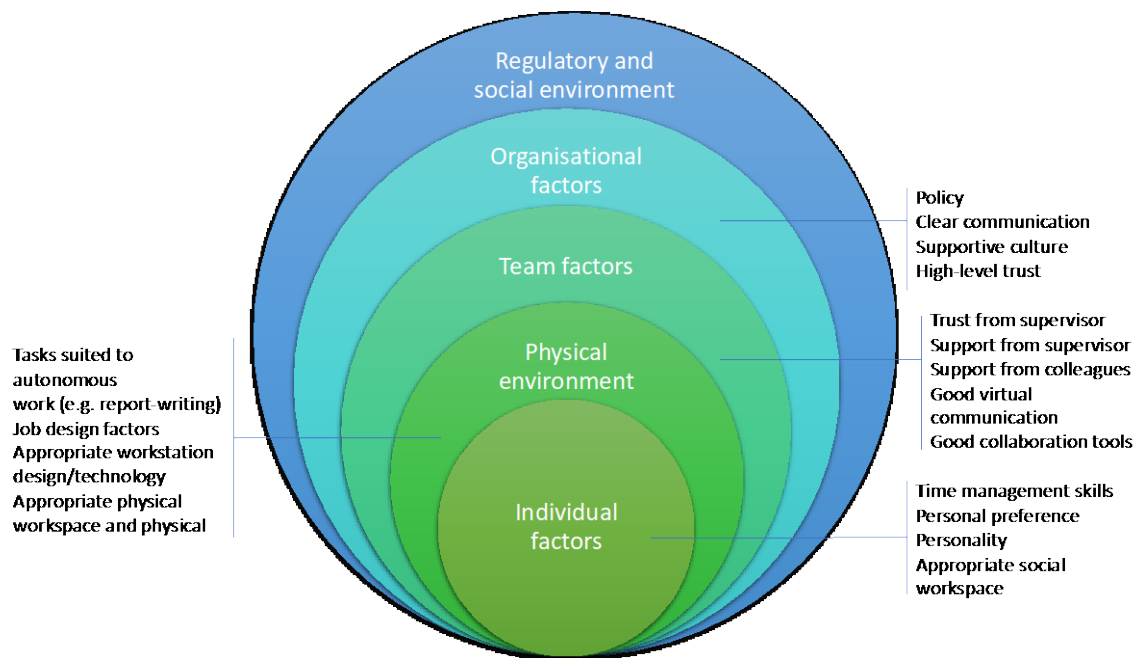


Figure 4.1. Facilitators to psychological safe flexible working as identified from Phase 2 interview

5. Discussion

Phase 2 of the research aimed to **develop new knowledge about how organisations can manage flexible workers more effectively within a psychologically safe work environment**. The study explored the perceptions of flexible workers and line managers of flexible workers in regard to three key concerns: the impact of psychosocial factors, positive and negative, on the work experience of flexible workers; whether such psychosocial factors disproportionately impacted workers with different demographic backgrounds; and engagement in workplace health and safety among flexible workers. It is important to note that this study was undertaken in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on work, which made flexible and remote working arrangements far more widespread than ever before in the NSW context. The sudden onset of the pandemic and government lock-downs meant that working-from-home arrangements for many organisations were unplanned, and the level of preparedness for a widespread switch to flexible working was beyond the scope of business continuity and crisis management plans of many organisations. These sudden changes left many organisations, managers and work teams unprepared and under-equipped to manage, and coordinate work, and meant work took place within sub-optimal working environments – usually the home of the individual employee.

A number of themes emerged under each of these three broad areas of investigation, and these are set out in Table 5.1 of this report. These are discussed in relation to the existing literature in sections 5.2-5.4 below. Following this, Phase 2 study limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

5.1 The association between Phase 1 and Phase 2 findings

An important purpose of the themes identified on the present study is to provide further understanding and assist with interpretation of findings from the Phase 1 quantitative survey findings. Table 5.1 sets out the relevant Phase 2 findings against each of the key findings from Phase 1 of this project. We note that not all issues from Phase 1 findings emerged as themes in the interviews, although many did, including those aspects of psychosocial risk and the work environment considered most important for effective flexible working in the literature.

Table 5.1 – Phase 2 findings associated with key Phase 1 findings

Key Phase 1 Quantitative survey findings	Relevant Phase 2 findings
<p>Flexible working does not create additional cognitive load or psychological demand on workers, compared to office-based employees.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lot of emphasis in participants’ comments on work hours, workload, and work intensity increases for flexible workers, especially around coordination and relationship aspects of managers’ work and long hours and additional work tasks for employees. • The saved commute time often converted to more productive time and longer work hours. • Blurring of work and non-work boundaries were a major concern, as were longer work hours when working remotely.
<p>Flexible workers reported significantly great levels of professional isolation than non-flexible workers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Much emphasis on social isolation from the experience of the employee • Responses ranged from extreme reactions to the loss of human contact to simply missing the day-to-day water cooler chats with co-workers. • A concern around the additional workload social isolation could create and difficulties quickly addressing work problems through in-person chats in the office. • Mental health issues associated with isolation would more likely to go unnoticed by colleagues and managers.
<p>Respondents who worked flexibly experienced a more positive working environment than non-flexible workers (including social support from managers and colleagues, quality of leadership and trust from manager).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support from line managers and co-workers was strongly evident in the interviews, especially amongst those working within team environments. • Concern about the need to support co-workers led to a number of measures introduced by both team managers and employees. These included setting up buddy systems, regularly checking in on team members, scheduled pre-workday one-to-ones with each team member. • There was a concern from some managers that there was a lack of training to ensure managers were confident in providing support and coordinating remote workers. • While trust was rated more highly by flexible workers in Phase 1, lack of trust by either line managers or senior management in their employees was cited as a barrier to flexible work by many interviewees.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust was contingent on being 'earned' in some cases, impacting the sense of trust between flexible workers and their managers during the pandemic. • Feeling trusted, rather than a micro-managing, approach, motivated employees. • The level of trust between line managers and employees/team members changed during the pandemic - in the experience that productivity persists without the need to monitor in the traditional way. • Work-life balance was enhanced for many respondents, allowing greater engagement in family life and other personal benefits.
<p>Flexible workers experienced more bullying and ill-treatment than non-flexible workers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullying is still present in this new mode of working, but in different forms - typically through emails and non-in-person modes (cyber-bullying) • It's harder to see bullying going on and therefore to intervene. • Some interviewees were bullied because they worked in flexible modes - work from home and part-time work were mentioned.
<p>Safety compliance and participation were rated significantly lower by flexible workers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some flexible workers stated that their organisation did not have work health and safety processes in place for remote workers. • The nature of work has changed, but WHS support and practices have not come into line. • Some participants did not receive support from the WHS departments where it was needed to counter ergonomics and other risk factors associated with working from home. • It was noted the WHS problems and complaints are easier to raise in the office. • Training for staff around mental health, boundary management and workload issues while working remotely was not provided to some participants. • WHS communications relevant to safe remote working were not effectively applied or were missing in some cases. • Responsibility for workplace health and safety when working remotely is still poorly understood. • Risk assessment for workstations and ergonomics conditions are more challenging under remote working. • Mental health issues would more likely to go unnoticed by colleagues and managers

	<p>during remote working - this needs addressing in some organisations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of provision of suitable equipment for homeworking was a barrier to safe flexible working.
<p>Vulnerable workers with ongoing disability, fixed-term workers, those with carer duties and LGBTIQ flexible workers reported higher exposure to psychosocial risks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those with disability or caring responsibilities benefited from the option to work remotely and enabled engagement with work. • The office environment could either support people with disability or issues such as access and commuting could increase the demands for these workers. • The fight for the rights to work flexibly have caused a lot of stress to those with carer responsibilities or disabilities.

5.2 Psychosocial factors

As mentioned previously, the Phase 2 study adopted a job demands-resources model lens (Demorouti et al., 2001) in considering factors that could either harm or benefit flexible workers, with the wellbeing of flexible workers argued to be a product of the balance work job demands and resources in the work environment. The literature on flexible working, and in particular remote/telework and working from home modes of flexibility, highlights the significant role of a prominent job demand, social isolation, in flexible worker mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Bentley et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2020). Professional isolation, a professional facet of social isolation, was found to be perceived at a significantly higher level by flexible workers in relation to non-flexible workers in Phase 1 research. In Phase 2, interviewees highlighted issues of social isolation influenced both the worker and the line manager. Workers missed in-person interactions with colleagues, felt isolated from co-workers, and found work more difficult or time-consuming as they could not readily ask for help or advice from others as was possible in the office. Managers felt isolated and also had to provide additional support to team members who were isolated, creating greater workload.

Social support was considered a positive factor in helping address the problems of social isolation and in ensuring wellbeing and performance were maintained during periods of remote working. Social support was perceived as significantly higher by flexible workers in Phase 1 of the study. In Phase 2, social support was clearly motivated by the need to support isolated workers. While organisations did not always have formal systems in place to ensure such support was provided by managers, both line managers and team members developed strategies for providing support to their co-workers. These measures including checking in on colleagues, considering the needs of vulnerable co-workers, and informal virtual or in-person

get-togethers. Interestingly, managers felt that there was inadequate training for line managers in competencies to provide social support.

Trust is a specific aspect of support, without which flexible working cannot occur effectively (Lee, 2021). In the Phase 1 research, manager trust was rated higher by flexible workers than non-flexible workers. Trust appeared to increase as a result of the pandemic and was considered motivating by team members. Line managers and supervisors appeared to learn to trust their workers through the experience during the pandemic that productivity could be maintained without the need for physical monitoring. This finding is consistent with previous research, with **Kirchner et al (2021) arguing that managers need to show trust and empowerment to get the best out remote workers.** Trust is also “critical in enhancing a high psychological safety” (Lee, 2021).

For others, however, trust was considered a commodity that needed to be earned, and this impacted the sense of trust between flexible workers and their managers during the pandemic. No significant differences in quantitative demands were identified between flexible and non-flexible workers in Phase 1 research. In Phase 2, however, workload was considered an important outcome of flexible working, and remote working during the pandemic in particular. Different aspects of workload were mentioned by multiple respondents, both employees and managers. Notably these involved additional work tasks associated with working remotely and work hours, often extended as a result of not having a work commute. Furthermore, work intensity resulted due to loss of natural breaks in working that occur in office-based work. While productivity could be maintained or even increased when working remotely, it could be at the cost of greater work hours and more work intensification, with resulting impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of flexible workers. Long hours of sedentary work could also have negative physical health impacts (Eurofound, 2020a; Johnson et al., 2020).

Balancing these concerns, flexible workers noted a boost to their work-life balance, with many noting new-found opportunities to spend time with children and other family members. The ability to undertake domestic tasks during normal work hours was considered both an advantage and a burden, although several interviewees noted that the pandemic restrictions brought about greater gender equality in terms of responsibility for areas of family life such as childcare and home domestic duties. Work-life balance was a benefit of flexible working for most, however, work “blurring” into personal life could be problematic, with boundaries between work and home became less clear, also have negative physical health impacts.

Interviewees noted that hybrid flexible working arrangements were an important way to minimise the potential negative impacts of flexible working and address the prominent

psychosocial risks such as social isolation. Indeed, hybrid flexible working can be an effective tool to manage boundaries between work and non-work time (Eurofound, 2020b), and provides opportunities for regular face-to-face contact between co-workers. Thus, a hybrid model that involved working from home for two or three days per week, with the balance of the week working in the office was considered a way to reduce problems of isolation but also to enable collaboration and coordinate on through in-person contact. These findings are consistent with those from the literature (e.g., Bentley et al., 2016; Eurofound, 2020a).

5.3 Demographic differences in psychosocial factors

While the Phase 1 findings suggest some clear differences in how psychosocial factors and exposure to job demands and resources are experienced in the workplace by people from different demographic backgrounds, interviewees had relatively little to say about the differential experiences and exposures to psychosocial factors. Interviewees focused their comments around the experience for women workers, carers, workers with a disability, older workers, and workers who have experienced mental health issues.

The opportunity to work flexibly was a double-edged sword for some women, where the expectations for some were that they simultaneously performed carer responsibilities and household chores, although another view was that the pandemic provided some equality to such responsibilities between men and women. Notable amongst the interviewees' comments was the disproportionate burden of childcare and domestic duties that fell to women who worked from home. Consistent with the recent literature on the experience of women during the pandemic lockdowns (Craig & Churchill, 2021), women and men did not experience working from home in the same way and non-work tasks were not evenly distributed, placing additional workload demands on women. Of concern, the issue of domestic violence was raised during lockdown with both partners at home.

A noteworthy finding from Phase 1 was that the experience of job demands and ill-treatment from co-workers and management decreased with age. In-line with these findings, interviewees in the present study felt that older workers enjoyed the opportunity to work flexibly as this facilitates their changing lifestyle and could act as a bridge between work and retirement. Conversely, older workers were perceived to struggle with technology, making working from home via technology more of a challenge for some.

Vulnerable workers were of particular interest to the study, with Phase 1 findings indicating that workers identifying as having a disability or with carer responsibilities had higher perceived exposure to psychosocial risks while reporting lower levels of resources, including vertical trust and role clarity. Study 2 findings threw relatively little light on these issues, with participants

instead discussing the issue of access to flexible work arrangements and the different attitudes held by management towards requests to work from home in particular. A number of respondents spoke to the change in levels of trust held by managers towards flexible workers through the experience of the pandemic, although not specifically in the context of vulnerable workers.

In conclusion, there are clear differences in how the psychosocial factors considered in the study were experienced in the workplace by people with different demographic backgrounds. This suggests that a one-size fits all approach to flexible working is not appropriate. Indeed, a more inclusive approach to leading flexible workers is required that takes account of diverse circumstances and individual differences and responses. Furthermore, line managers and co-workers need to understand who in their team is vulnerable, including those who live alone, have carer responsibilities or an ongoing disability, and ensure regular check-ins with these individuals. As for all flexible workers, we recommend a hybrid model to address the most challenging psychosocial aspect of working remotely: social isolation. For vulnerable workers in particular, a balance of remote and in-person working across the working week is likely to be most healthy and will provide vital contact with both line-manager and co-workers.

5.4 Workplace health and safety engagement

The issue of WHS engagement for flexible workers is a primary focus of the project. Scholars have pointed to an “increasing invisibility of occupational health and safety in the digitized world of work,” because WHS practitioners and regulators have increasingly less access to employees (Robelski & Sommer, 2020). A primary concern for employees who work from home is problems around the inadequacy of current WHS management systems for remote work, and in particular the ability to manage risk through risk assessment of remote workplaces. Coupled with this is the question of how to engage remote employees in WHS and to enable WHS representation from distributed workforces (Robelski & Sommer, 2020). Furthermore, leadership of WHS is crucial for enabling positive outcomes in distributed workers (Nielsen et al., 2019), along with a supportive WHS culture. Finally, at the level of the individual worker there are WHS issues to tackle that relate to a wide range of concerns around boundary management, technostress, workload and work intensity (Eurofound, 2020a), and self-leadership.

In Phase 1, flexible workers perceived higher levels of psychosocial safety climate, suggesting they felt their organisation prioritised psychological health and safety and supported their workers' wellbeing, but significantly lower WHS participation and compliance. Phase 2 findings suggested that some organisations did not have WHS management systems and processes that supported flexible working, and were therefore ill-prepared to manage the health and safety of their workers. In this respect, WHS communications from the organisation to workers were not

evident in some workplaces, despite a clear need in the context of the work restrictions. In line with the literature reported above, respondents noted the challenges with risk assessments of “work from home/remote location” environment and a lack of support to ensure ergonomically suitable workstations. Reporting WHS problems when working remotely was ineffective for some, making participation on WHS more challenging. Several respondents bemoaned problems associated with prolonged static working in non-optimal ergonomic conditions, while others raised the complex issue of who is responsible for WHS in a flexible work environment, with indications that this issue is poorly understood and communicated within organisations.

The role of line-management in WHS was often mentioned by interviewees. As Nielsen (2019) notes, line managers are responsible for distributed (that is, remote) workers’ health and safety and flexible working raising the critical question of how this responsibility can be adequately ensured. Finally, training for managers and staff around mental health in the workplace is a critical missing aspect of current WHS management systems. Indeed, interviewees mentioned cases of mental health concern not picked up at the time as the worker concerned was at home. Furthermore, the impacts of enforced home working can have damaging impacts on those with underlying mental health problems, as noted by one manager. As Nielsen (2019) argues, the nature of distributed work across multiple locations make it difficult for line-managers to monitor and anticipate risks and stressors amongst their work team.

Figure 5.1 presents the findings from the current study as themes within a systems framework, with interacting WHS domain elements of WHS culture, safe design of equipment/ergonomics, engagement with WHS (people), and responsibility for WHS, with management systems and processes relevant to ensuring appropriate fit between workers and flexible working across each of the sub-system domains. Beyond the organizational boundary, the regulatory and social environment is also relevant in terms of external influences on the WHS system within an organization. We note that the elements of Figure 5.1 map well with those discussed in the literature on WHS and flexible working (Eurofound, 2020a; Nielsen et al., 2019; Robelski & Sommer, 2020), and serve as a useful platform for Phase 3 of the research, which will focus on how to enhance WHS engagement and participation amongst flexible workers.

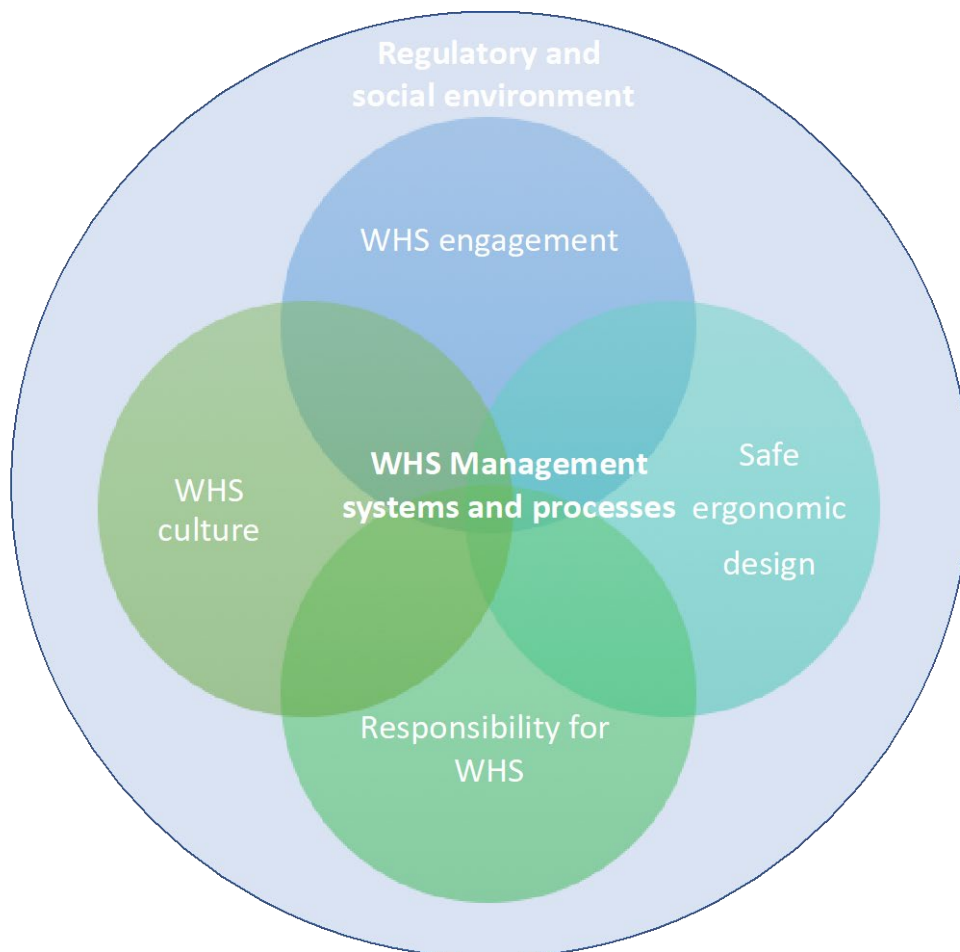


Figure 5.1. Workplace health and safety system

5.5 Limitations and future research

As with all qualitative work, the goal of this research was not to achieve a representative sample, but rather to gather deeper insights into areas of interest to the project. It should be noted that one limitation was of the inability due to ethical and practical considerations to obtain a sample that included individuals with the wide range of demographical characteristics of interest to the project, including considerations of diversity. As a result, participants did not have first-hand knowledge concerning certain vulnerable cohorts within the workforce. Little of substance was said regarding workers from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background and LGBTIQ workers, for example. Given the nature of the interview process, interviewees were not asked personal questions about, for example, their sexuality or whether they identify as having a disability. Rather, this only came up if they raised it themselves. This often meant that participants spoke either about workmates from diverse backgrounds, or generally about how they perceived the risk for different demographic cohorts, which is of more limited value.

While little was revealed in the present study about the experience of and exposure to psychosocial risk for different demographic cohorts within the workforce, Phase 1 findings

suggest that these differences can be marked and disadvantaging to the health and wellbeing of certain sections of the workforce. This is particularly true of those vulnerable workers with disability, those identifying as non-heterosexual, and those in fixed-term employment. While Phase 2 research offered some insights in regard to the challenges faced by some such workers, further research should target participants from these disadvantaged demographic and employment groups for a first-hand account of the nature and extent of psychosocial risks faced amongst flexible workers.

A further limitation of the study relates to the issue of “forced flexibility” that many of the respondents to this study were subject to. The original objective of the project was to examine the role of psychosocial risk in flexible working under “normal” circumstances. For the most part, this would have meant flexible work that was relatively well-planned and resourced. However, the timing of the study fell during the pandemic’s restrictions, meaning that the working conditions of respondents were often sub-optimal, with organisations, managers and individual workers often ill-prepared and equipped to undertake work remotely. As the study revealed, these factors had a significant influence on the experience of flexible working by our participants and, therefore, impacted our data. As a consequence, the findings of this research need to be considered within the context of the pandemic and its restrictions. Further research should consider the psychosocial work environment of flexible workers in the “new normal”, with a focus on the extent to which the job demands and resources identified in this study remain a factor, and, in particular, for those workers who continue to work from home.

It is clear from both Phase 2 findings that flexible workers experience both an added burden of demands but also additional resources such as improved work-life balance and manager and co-worker support that balanced these additional demands associated with working remotely. Further research should focus on one key aspect of support that was frequently mentioned in both positive and negative contexts: line management capabilities for relation-oriented leadership (**Bartsch et al., 2020**) in support for flexible workers. Research questions should include:

- i. To what extent are managers presently equipped to provide appropriate relation-oriented leadership for remote workers
- ii. How do managers balance relation and task-oriented leadership approaches when working with distributed teams?
- iii. What are the training needs for line-managers to ensure strong relation-oriented leadership?
- iv. What role does inclusive leadership play to consider the differing needs of a diverse distributed team?

Future research in the present project will focus on how WHS management systems can effectively respond to the needs for WHS engagement for flexible workers. The findings from this Phase 2 research will assist us to better understand the shortcomings of the current WHS systems and standards as they relate to flexible working, particularly in relationship to working remotely. In this respect, the Phase 3 study will include consideration of the five domains of WHS identified as themes in the present study: WHS systems and processes, WHS culture, employee engagement in WHS, ergonomics and physical design, and responsibility for WHS.

5.6 Conclusions

This study has painted a picture of flexible work in NSW in the shadow of the pandemic, drawing out its highs and lows, opportunities and challenges, its job demands and job resources. The experiences and ideas of flexible workers and managers have been elicited, in a way not possible in a survey. Social isolation has been shown to be an important job demand. There is a real need for more attention to be given to WHS systems and processes. The study has also found remote work to affect individuals differently. Issues surrounding work-life balance and quantitative demands were shown to be complex, with a potential for better work-life balance realised by some, but also greater workload or blurring between work and home. Flexible work should not be presented one-sidedly as solely a success story, but rather the new challenges and opportunities it poses must be understood and responded to.

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7. Appendix 1

Interview Questions for Flexible workers and Line Managers

1. Flexible and Remote Working Arrangements (FRWA) – what words come to your mind? Arrangement (e.g. if they ask shift work, overtime, weekend work, work from home, work from other location, flex-time, part-time, job sharing)
2. How would you describe the current FRWA in your organisation?
3. Diversity and FRWA – Your thoughts?
(diversity can include the following: gender, age, disability, being culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), parental status, marital status, carer responsibility)
4. Regarding the current FRWAs in your organisation:
 - a. What is working well in your view? List three things.
 - b. What can be improved? List three things.
5. Risks, hazards and safety (e.g. psychological, physiological and physical) and FRWA – Your thoughts and experiences.
 - a. Are risks and hazards related to FRWA more pronounced for some demographic cohorts within your organisation than others? – provide examples.
6. Engaging with work health and safety processes while undertaking FRWA?
 - a. What is working well in your view? List three things.
 - b. What can be improved? List three things.
7. What do you believe are key considerations in terms of factors that can affect successful and safe FRWAs at the following levels?
 - a. Individual
 - b. Work-related
 - c. Organisational
8. What do you believe are key barriers in terms of factors that can affect successful and safe FRWAs at the following levels?
 - a. Individual

- b. Work-related
- c. Organisational

9. Do you have any additional comments regarding the past and present FRWAs that you would like to share? And/OR Following your experience to date, what would be 3 key messages/pieces of advice or guidance you would provide to another organisation heading towards or expanding FRWAs?