



CENTRE FOR
**TRANSFORMATIVE
WORK DESIGN**



Curtin University

FUTURE OF WORK INSTITUTE

HOW TO LEAD FLEXIBLE WORK

A GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL POLICY AND
PRACTICE FOR MANAGERS

Innovative research.
Informed leaders.
Inspired workers.

Make tomorrow better.

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About Us

The Future of Work Institute promotes productive and meaningful work as an essential foundation of a healthy economy and society. We seek to understand the impact of the digital age in the workplace, particularly the effects of artificial intelligence, changing demographics, and changing patterns of aspiration and mobility.

The Centre for Transformative Work Design is a Research Centre where passionate organisational psychology researchers and professionals are working together to transform work under the directorship of Australian Research Council Laureate Fellow, Professor Sharon K. Parker. We conduct high quality, independent and innovative research to understand the role of work design in generating healthy and productive work.

Foreword

This project, funded by the Western Australian State Government (details below), aims to provide evidence-based and practical resources that inform and enhance the experience of flexible working. The resources provide strategies for employees, teams, and managers to maximise the benefits and reduce the risks of flexible work, and thereby help to support businesses, government, and not-for-profit agencies.

The project is part of the Centre for Transformative Work Design's research program and supports the Thrive at Work initiative; both of which are part of Curtin University's Future of Work Institute.

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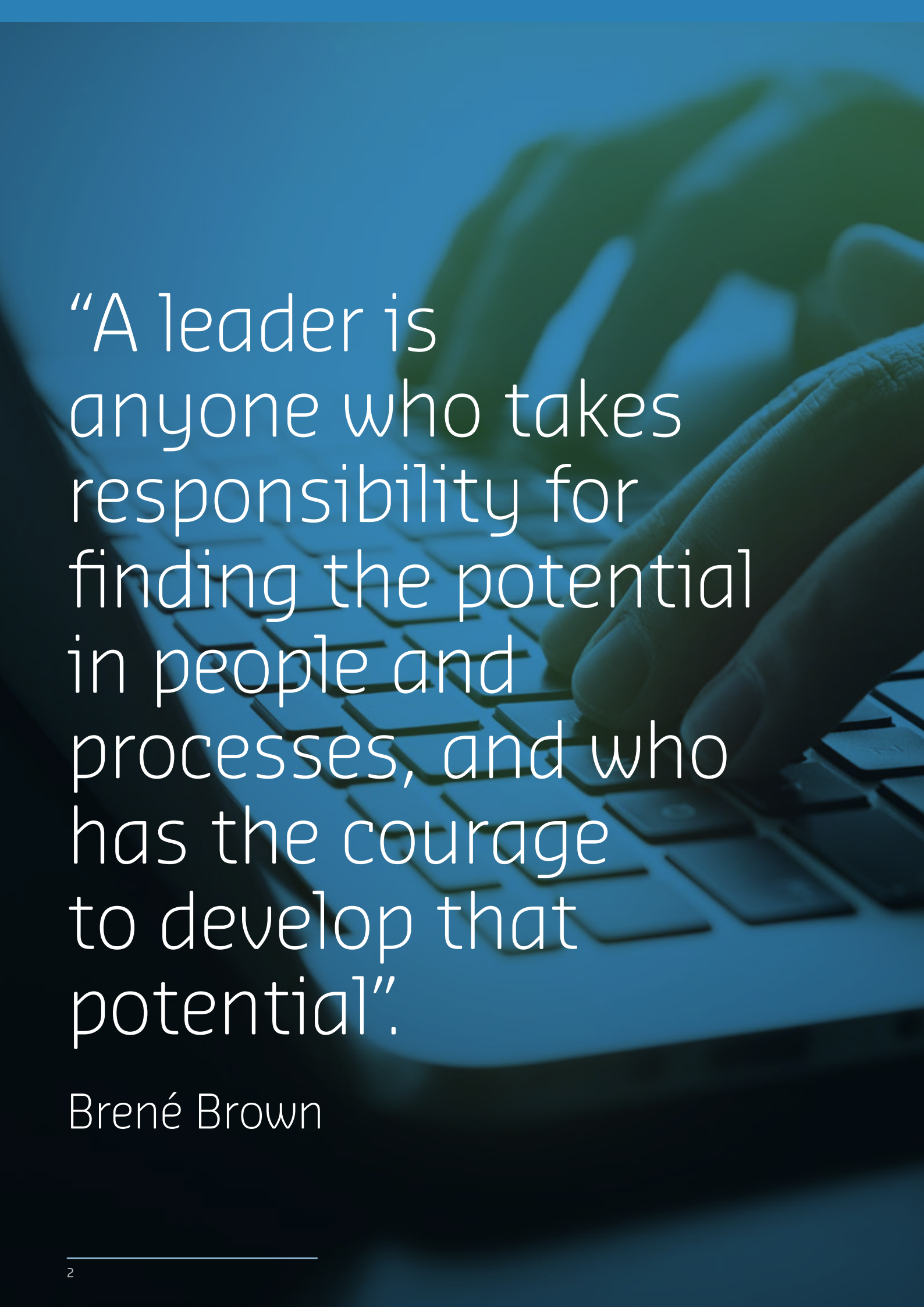
Glossary of Terms

For ease of reading, the terms 'manager' and 'leader' have been used interchangeably throughout this document, and refer to a person responsible for overseeing the work of employees or a team.

However, we acknowledge that leadership and management are different processes, which is outlined in *Appendix B* under *Leadership Styles and Capabilities in the Flexible Working Context*.

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“A leader is anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential”.

Brené Brown

What's in this guide?



In the context of flexible working arrangements,^a leaders face unique challenges to support their employees to get their job done and stay healthy.

The content of this guide is based on a comprehensive review of academic literature, supporting anecdotal evidence from a sample of industry and government agencies, and findings from the Future of Work Institute's global longitudinal research in the flexible working context (please see *Appendix A* for more details).

The evidence-based recommendations for managers are structured around the SMART Work Design model, a holistic framework that can be used to design meaningful and motivating work that improves well-being and enhances productivity (see p. X for more details).¹

In addition to the current guide, two additional guides have also been

created using the above approach and can be accessed via the links below:

- For individuals: **"How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers."**
- For managers of virtual teams: **"How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers."**

An overview of the project background and aims, as well as a brief literature review of flexible working arrangements and relevant organisational psychology concepts can be found in *Appendix A* and *Appendix B* of this guide, respectively.

This guide provides evidence-based recommendations on how to effectively lead and manage flexible working to optimise the well-being and productivity of employees.



QUICK LINKS

- Page 21: Overview of the SMART Work Design model
- Appendix A: An overview of the project background, aims and our global Thrive at Work from Home survey
- Appendix B: Literature review of flexible working arrangements and relevant organisational psychology concepts

^a Flexible working arrangements, as described here, are work arrangements in which employees perform tasks in a location away from the primary workplace (e.g. from home) and interact via information and communication technology (ICT) for at least some part of their work schedule.²

Successful Flexible Working – An Overview

FLEXIBLE WORKING AS THE “NEW NORMAL”

Several decades ago, a renowned futurist, Alvin Toffler, predicted – “work is not necessarily going to take place in offices or factories. It is going to take place everywhere, anytime”.¹ In other words, work is not a place where you go but rather something you do - with flexibility in both work location and working time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this prediction such that flexible working has become a

reality for many around the globe, with organisations and workers forced to rapidly shift work from the ‘traditional’ office location to taking place at workers’ own homes to protect the health of the community.

This forced increase in flexible working is likely to have a lasting impact on the future of work and establish flexible working as a ‘new normal’ beyond the duration of the pandemic.³ For example, in one survey of 127 company leaders, representing HR, Legal and Compliance, and Finance and Real Estate, 82% of respondents asserted that they intended to

maintain flexible working at least some of the time. Nearly half (47%) intended to allow employees to work remotely full time going forward, building more resilient business operations and meeting employees’ appetite for more flexibility.⁴ Results of our global Thrive at Work from home study (see *Appendix A* for more information) showed that 89.1% of individuals who were working from home four or more days per week during the COVID-19 restrictions in April 2020, were keen to continue working from home at least some of the time (see the following graphs).

“Work is not necessarily going to take place in offices or factories. It is going to take place everywhere, anytime.”

Alvin Toffler (1980)



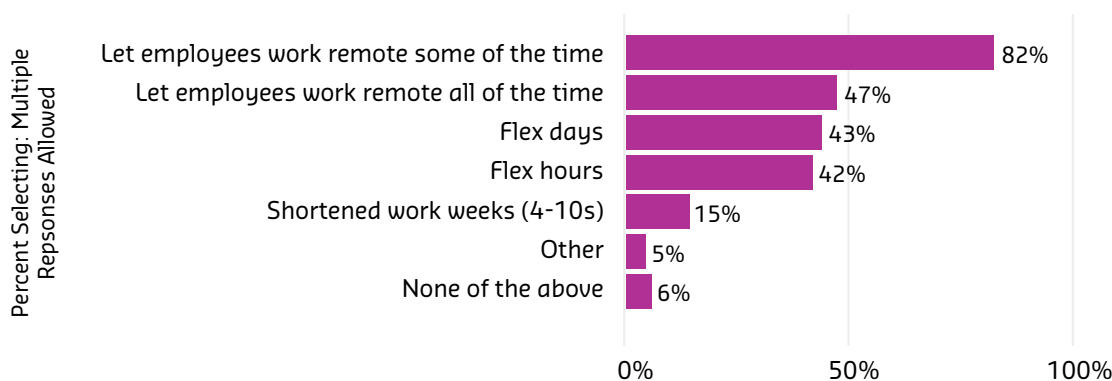


LEADERS' AND WORKERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Company leaders' appetite for flexible working after COVID-19⁴

Percentage of company leaders who selected the responses outlined below (multiple responses were allowed).

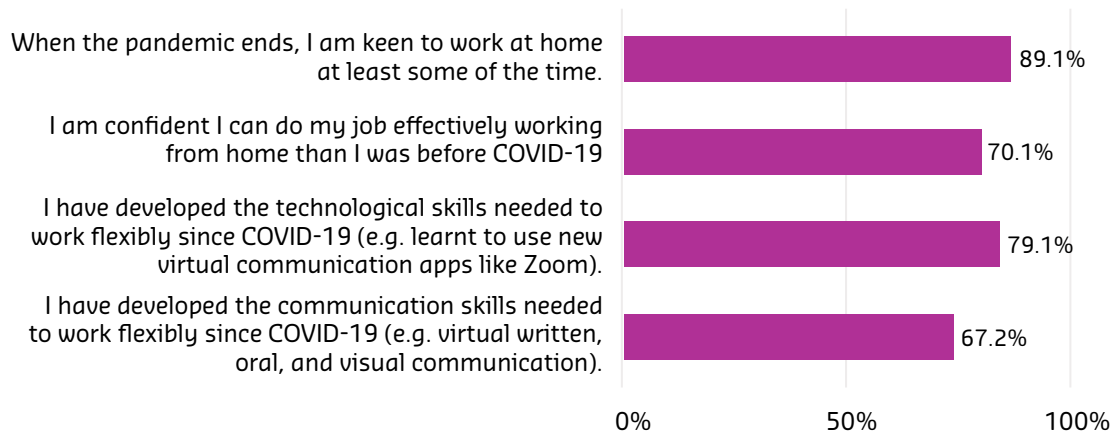
Company leader intentions regarding flexible working after COVID-19



Source: Gartner *Return to the Workplace Benchmarking Against Your Peers* Webinar Poll (5 June 2020).

Workers' appetite for flexible working after COVID-19

Percentage of employees who agree or agree strongly to statements about their desire to work from home in the future, and skills learned (Results based on 201 employees working from home more than four days per week during the COVID-19 restrictions; study wave 4 of our global Thrive at Work from home study - see *Appendix A* for more information).





WHAT IS FLEXIBLE WORKING?

Flexible work - also known as telework, telecommuting, virtual work, mobile work, flex work and remote work⁵ - has become an increasingly widespread practice due to globalisation and innovations in technology that allow work to be done anywhere, anytime. Flexible work is an umbrella term for an alternative work arrangement in which employees perform tasks in a location away from the primary or central workplace and interact via information and communication technology (ICT), for at least some part of their work schedule.²

The two dimensions of flexibility

There are two dimensions of flexibility that underpin flexible working arrangements: (a) flexibility in the scheduling of work, and (b) flexibility in where work is accomplished.⁶

Flexibility in the scheduling of work includes the provision of flexibility in the timing and duration of work hours, such as 'flex-time' and compressed work weeks.

Flexibility in where work is accomplished involves the use of ICTs to enable workers to carry out work from anywhere (e.g. in the office, or away from the central workplace, such as working from home). Location flexibility can vary by intensity, ranging from being away from the office full-time (e.g. working from home 100% of the time) to being away on a part-time basis (e.g.

working from home 1-2 days per week and working in the office for the rest of the time). It can also look different depending on the type of flexible working location:^{7,8}

- Mobile teleworking - an employee is not located at any one location but travels between locations.
- Telecentres - local locations that are utilised by the organisation to reduce commuting time and costs.
- Co-working spaces - a shared membership-based office that provides remote workers and freelancers with internet access, meeting rooms, community events and other amenities.⁸
- Working from home - sometimes referred to as telecommuting or remote working, this is where an employee carries out their work tasks from their home.

Flexible work is an umbrella term for an alternative work arrangement in which employees perform tasks in a location away from the primary or central workplace and interact via information and communication technology (ICT), for at least some part of their work schedule.

Benefits and challenges of flexible work

Flexible working arrangements can bring a lot of benefits for both organisations and employees, while at the same time they can also involve physical and psychosocial risks for employees, if not managed well.^{2,9,10} The table below provides an overview of the risks and benefits of flexible working (see *Appendix B* for more details).^{9,11} Of note, some features of flexible working can pose both risks and benefits. For example, some people experience lower work-home conflict as a result of flexible work, yet others experience higher work-home conflict.

Implementing successful flexible working requires intentionally reducing the risks and maximising the benefits of flexible working through evidence-based strategies. With effective strategies in place, flexible working arrangements can promote employee mental health, well-being and performance.^{2,15}

THE ROLE OF LEADERS IN MAKING FLEXIBLE WORK SUCCESSFUL

Leaders play an important role in fostering the mental health, well-being, and performance of employees.^{21,22,23} Broadly, the managerial “levers” for making flexible working successful comprise the understanding and implementation of both *formal flexible working policies* and *effective flexible working practices*.

BENEFITS OF FLEXIBLE WORK	RISKS OF FLEXIBLE WORK
• Time and cost savings from reduced commuting¹² • Greater autonomy and flexibility¹³ • Increased work motivation¹⁴ • Increased organisational commitment¹⁵ • Increased productivity¹⁵ • Lower work-home conflict² • Increased performance² • Higher job satisfaction² • Lower turnover² • Improved well-being¹¹	• Lack of social connection and increased feelings of professional isolation¹³ • Increased work-home conflict¹⁶ • Reduced ability to detach (“switch off”) from work¹⁷ • Increased role ambiguity^{18,19} • Perceived lack of promotion opportunities¹³ • Reduced support and feedback¹⁹ • Injuries, if there are no safety protocols in the home working space (e.g. ergonomic workstation setup, protocols to avoid electrical and trip hazards)²⁰



A close-up photograph of a person's hands typing on a silver laptop keyboard. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal filter. The text is written in a white, sans-serif font across the center of the image.

Flexible working policies support managers to make consistent and reliable decisions, promoting a culture of fairness and equity.

Flexible Working Policy



In this section we will look at the benefits and challenges of flexible working policies and informal flexible working arrangements, and what strategies managers can apply within the policy context to optimise the health and performance of their employees.

A formal policy on flexible working arrangements describes the principles, guidelines and procedures related to flexible working arrangements and conditions. It provides an overall framework for complying with legal requirements as well as the responsibility and accountability of both the employer and employees.²⁴ As such, it is essential that managers understand the flexible working policy in their organisation to ensure their practical approach aligns with this policy.



UNDERSTANDING FLEXIBLE WORKING POLICY: WHERE TO START?

- Invest time to understand the flexible working policy in your organisation. For example, you could schedule a meeting with a member of the HR team to clarify any questions you might have about the flexible working policy.
- If your organisation does not have a formal flexible working policy, raise this for consideration by the leadership or HR team.
- To see examples of key features of a flexible working policy, check out the article below:
 - **Developing a flexible working arrangements policy** (by the Australian Government Workplace Gender Equality Agency)

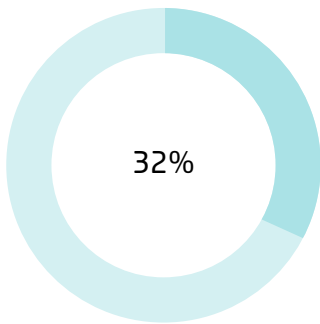
However, much flexible working is based on an informal negotiation and agreement between employees and their direct manager. Such informal flexible working arrangements are often implemented in an ad hoc way to meet the needs of individual employees.^{25,26,27}

The statistics below give an indication about the prevalence of pre-COVID flexible working practice, formal flexible working policies, and informal flexible working arrangements in the Australian working population.

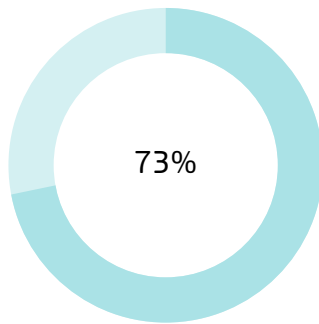
Informal flexible working arrangements are often implemented in an ad hoc way to meet the needs of individual employees.



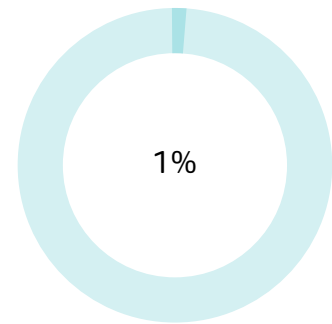
FORMAL AND INFORMAL FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS – WHAT DO THE STATISTICS SAY?



The most recent pre-COVID-19 data available on the prevalence of flexible work in Australia indicates that 32.1% of working Australians regularly worked from home.²⁸



In 2019, 72.7% of Australian organisations reported having a formal flexible working policy or strategy in place.²⁹



The results of the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamic in Australia (HILDA) survey show that only 1% of respondents have a formal flexible work arrangement in place.³⁰

While the majority of Australian organisations report having a formal flexible working policy, the majority of workers who engage in flexible work report doing so on an informal basis (HILDA survey).^{29,30}



BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF FORMAL FLEXIBLE WORKING POLICIES

A formal policy on flexible working arrangements not only assists employers to meet basic legal obligations, but also creates clarity around entitlements and expectations for employees.²⁴ Moreover, it supports managers to make consistent and reliable decisions around flexible working, which promotes a culture of fairness and a sense of security and equity among employees.^{24,25}



Flexible working arrangements in Australian legislation

The Fair Work Act 2009 (FW Act) provides employees in the national workplace relations system with a legal right to request flexible working arrangements if they meet certain eligibility criteria.³¹ Employers must seriously consider a request for flexible working arrangements but may refuse a request on reasonable business grounds.³¹ To find out more about this legislation, visit the link below:

- **The right to request flexible working arrangements** (by the Australian Government Fair Work Ombudsman).

Moreover, the law requires organisations to take on a duty of care for the health and safety of their workers and others at the workplace. This includes where workers are working from home.³²

Workers also have a duty to take care for their own health and safety, and must follow any reasonable policies their employer provides.³²

Policies might include completing ergonomic workstation checklists and following any other reasonable safety policies and directions, e.g. removing trip hazards at home.

As with any other work environment, workers must inform organisations of any work-related incidents or injuries that occur while working at home and are encouraged to report health and safety concerns.³²

Flexible working policies ideally include guidelines to minimise both the physical and psychosocial risks of working from home.

To find out more about specific guidelines, Australian legislation, as well as legal information specific to Western Australia, visit the links below:

- **Who is responsible for ensuring that my workers have a safe workstation set up to work from home?** (by Safe Work Australia)
- **Tips to reduce work-from-home risks as injury claims rise** (by the Australian HR Institute)
- **Duties under WHS laws** (by Safe Work Australia)
- **Employers – your responsibilities** (by the Government of Western Australia).



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Creating a flexible working policy from scratch

During the COVID-19 restrictions an Australian engineering and manufacturing company had to develop a flexible working policy from scratch, as around one third of their employees transitioned into working remotely permanently and full-time.

Based on a compilation of best practice recommendations (including information from the book *“Remote: Office Not Required”* by Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson), the company’s flexible working policy includes information on how to transition into remote work, how employees’ can get reimbursed for expenses associated with working from home, how to set up ergonomic work stations at home, and other content to cover the company from an insurance point of view.

Research has shown that a formal flexible working policy can reduce absenteeism and increase productivity, employee loyalty, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment.^{24,33} This can help retain talent, lowering recruitment and training costs.²⁴ In sum, a transparent flexible working policy benefits both the business and its employees.



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Flexible working policy to endorse working from home within guidelines

A Western Australian energy provider updated their flexible working policy following the period of COVID-19 restrictions, in which many employees worked from home.

The organisation ensured that feedback from employees was taken into account to draft the update to the flexible working policy.

The guiding principles include a general endorsement of employees working from home, i.e. if an employee has a preference to work from home they are not required to justify their flexible working arrangement with a specific reason.

While the updated policy allows more flexible and fluid processes, it limits working from home to a maximum of 40% of an employee's working time. Moreover, the updated policy encourages weekly opportunities for teams to engage in face-to-face interactions in the central workplace: on one designated day per week the entire team is required to be present in the office.

The updated policy will be trialled for 6 months to allow for adjustments based on the organisation's experience in this time period.

Flexible working policies support managers to make consistent and reliable decisions, promoting a culture of fairness and equity.

However, there are also some downsides of formal flexible working policies: It has been suggested that formal flexible working arrangements grounded in the formal policy might lead to a sense of entitlement.^{33,34} Employees might take the formal arrangements for granted and will not view them as incentive for enhanced effort.³³ As such, formal flexible working arrangements might not entail the same level of performance improvement that has been observed for informal arrangements (see section *Benefits and Challenges of Informal Flexible Working Arrangements*).^{33,35,36}

Supporting this argument, it has been found that the positive association with employee outcomes is weaker in organisations where flexible working policies had been in place for longer than where they had been introduced more recently.³⁷ Moreover, formal flexible working policies can be quite rigid with limited latitude for managers to accommodate the individual needs or preferences of employees. These downsides of formal flexible working policies can be mitigated by granting managers the autonomy to support additional informal flexible working arrangements with their employees, if required.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF INFORMAL FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Research tells us that informal flexible working arrangements between employees and their line manager can increase work performance, organisational commitment and job satisfaction: informal arrangements that accommodate the preferences and needs of employees foster a perception of manager support and give rise to feelings of appreciation for being helped to manage the interface between their work and non-work lives.³³ The informal nature of the arrangement can be seen as the manager's good will and is not taken for granted, which creates a sense of obligation on the part of the employee. This sense of obligation motivates behaviours that are perceived to be valued by the manager who has granted the arrangement, in order to reciprocate the favour.^{33,35} This idea is in line with *gift exchange theory*, which suggests that if the employer provides a "gift" to the employee by paying wages or other benefits above what is required by the market, the employee will in turn respond with a "gift" of performance above the norm.^{33,35,36}

Similarly, the employee's belief that their specific needs have been accommodated through an informal arrangement may also foster feelings of commitment to the manager as well as to the organisation, since for many employees the line manager in effect represents the organisation.^{31,38}

It has also been argued that the lack of security of the informal arrangement might motivate the employee to attempt to deliver a higher level of performance to "protect" his or her arrangement.^{31,37}

Informal arrangements may be characterised by ongoing negotiations between the employee and his or her manager to the benefit of both parties, which is unlikely to occur with formal arrangements.³⁹ The ongoing negotiations imply that informal

flexible working arrangements are more flexible than formal written arrangements, with managers taking into account individual circumstances and preferences to enhance the person-job fit for their employees. A higher person-job fit can in turn increase employee well-being and job performance (to learn more about person-job fit, read the section *Flexible Work and Individual Differences in Appendix B*).^{40,41,42,43}

However, informal arrangements can entail some challenges for employees and organisations: flexible working arrangements that are solely based on managers' discretion may lead to perceptions of inequity among employees, particularly if some

managers support flexible arrangements while others stay resistant to non-traditional ways of working, or support them for some people and not others.^{25,44} Employees may also fear the withdrawal of such informal arrangements with little notice, if the control is entirely with individual managers. Informal arrangements are not seen to have the same level of legitimacy as formalised flexible working arrangements that are grounded in formal policy. As such, the perceived insecurity and potential inequity could mitigate the positive impact of informal arrangements on organisational commitment and job satisfaction.³³



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

What PwC learned from its policy of flexible work for everyone

Anne Donovan is the U.S. People Experience Leader at PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers) and in this Harvard Business Review article she explains what PwC has learned about flexible work:

"You need to toss out the rule book. To build a culture of flexibility, you must first reimagine what flexibility means today. Remember, to create behavior change, you need to allow for variance and creativity and agility. In other words, be "flexible" when creating a flexibility culture. A policy guide or a formal program can work against you. It seems counterintuitive, but having rules in place actually hinders the development of a truly authentic culture. At PwC, we loosely call it "everyday flexibility." It isn't something we mandate that all teams adopt; it's a mentality and a way of life that should be individualized for each person.

Flexibility for a caregiver might mean being able to leave work early to take an elderly parent to a doctor's appointment. For a parent, it might mean taking a midday run, so evenings can be spent with their children. And for others, it could simply be taking an hour in the afternoon to go to a yoga class and recharge. When we look at flexibility this way, it's easy to see why formal rules actually hinder adoption and progress. It's impossible to have a one-size-fits-all approach for flexibility. We let our teams figure out what works best for them, as long as they deliver excellent work, on time. The rest is all fair game."

From: *What PwC Learned from Its Policy of Flexible Work for Everyone* (by Anne Donovan, published on Harvard Business Review).



FOSTERING THE BENEFITS OF BOTH INFORMAL AND FORMAL FLEXIBLE ARRANGEMENTS

Flexible working policies should themselves have some flexibility

Organisations should ideally provide a formal flexible working policy to meet legal obligations, reduce physical and psychosocial risks of flexible working, and provide basic security, consistency, and clarity for their employees. At the same time, policies need to leave latitude and autonomy for line managers to arrange personalised informal arrangements with their direct employees in order to accommodate individual needs and preferences. Some employees may need to manage school drop-offs and pick-ups, other people may need to attend to elderly

relatives, and yet others may have voluntary or other commitments outside of work. A single, rigid policy cannot accommodate all of these requirements. A flexible working policy must therefore be flexible in itself, allowing negotiation in the way that flexible working is carried out to meet different needs and desires.

Manager training and participation can reduce inconsistencies and resistance

As both formal policies and informal arrangements can be unevenly implemented across work units by different managers and therefore create feelings of inequity amongst employees,^{25,45} organisations should provide flexible working policy training to all managers. The policy training should also include a component on *effective flexible working practice* (e.g. covering topics such as how to manage informal arrangements, how

to apply effective remote performance management practices, how to manage workers that are out of sight, and how to foster good work design in the flexible working context). Organisation-wide manager training ensures consistency in implementing policies and confidence in applying effective flexible working practice, both of which can reduce managers' resistance to flexible working.⁴⁴

A formal flexible working policy should allow autonomy for managers to arrange personalised informal flexible working arrangements.



MANAGERS' SELF-CONFIDENCE IN THEIR ABILITY TO MANAGE EMPLOYEES OR TEAMS REMOTELY

Our global Thrive at Work from home study (see *Appendix A*) showed that a substantial number of managers who were working from home most or all of the time lacked confidence in their ability to manage workers or teams remotely:

17.6% of the 131 managers in our study expressed low self-confidence in their ability to manage workers remotely. 19.8% reported lacking the confidence to influence remote workers to do their job well, and 18.7% reported lack of confidence in their ability to coordinate a team of remote workers effectively.

Training on effective flexible working practice can help address these issues amongst managers and promote a positive work environment in which both managers and employees can thrive.

The resistance to formal flexible working policies can also be influenced by the perceived level of procedural fairness^b: A lack of consultation with managers during the development and advancement of a flexible working policy can contribute to perceptions of low procedural fairness, which in turn can undermine effective implementation.²⁵ It has been suggested that some managers might feel alienated if they have been compelled to introduce policies on which they had not been consulted.^{25,46} Hence, it is important that managers have the opportunity to participate in the process and provide relevant feedback. Moreover, a participatory approach, that involves consulting both managers and employees for the development and advancement of a formal policy, ensures it is tailored to the unique and specific needs of the organisation's workforce, which in turn is associated with positive work-related attitudes.

A reduction in resistance can also be facilitated by providing a platform for voicing concerns and openly discussing strategies to manage flexible workers in a way that still enables the achievement of managers' objectives and team goals.⁴⁴

A participatory approach, that involves consulting both managers and employees for the development and advancement of a formal policy, ensures it is tailored to the unique and specific needs of the organisation's workforce, which in turn is associated with positive work-related attitudes.



^b Procedural fairness (also known as procedural justice) is defined as the fairness of the processes that lead to outcomes. The perception of procedural justice is enhanced, when individuals feel that they have a voice in the process or that the process is based on consistency, accuracy, ethicality, and lack of bias.⁴⁷

Navigating flexibility: balancing formal flexible working policy and informal arrangements

Merely communicating and implementing formal policy is rarely enough – in particular if a policy does not cover or apply to an employee's specific needs and preferences, managers should try to find a compromise with their employee on an informal basis. This can positively impact the employee's work performance.^{33,35,36}

However, if an employee requests a long-term flexible working arrangement that isn't reflected in the formal policy, then a formal and secure arrangement may be more beneficial for everyone. In this case, managers should encourage their employee to follow the formal application process in accordance with the policy to record their long-term flexible working arrangement.



REJECTING AN EMPLOYEE'S FLEXIBLE WORKING REQUEST

Sometimes managers need to reject an employee's request for a specific flexible working arrangement on reasonable business grounds (e.g. when business objectives cannot be met with the specific arrangement in place). In this case it is important that managers:⁴⁸

- Are open about their belief that the request can't be accommodated from the outset.
- Explain legitimate concerns and explore how these can be overcome together with the employee.
- Are open to suggestions, as often some compromises can be made and finding a balance may be in the interest of everyone.
- Discuss the request in an informal face-to-face meeting (ideally collocated in the office, alternatively via video call), as employees may not appreciate if their manager hides behind a formal letter or process. An informal conversation can make the employee feel they are heard and have a voice.





In conclusion, it is clear that both formal flexible working policies and informal arrangements have advantages for employees and organisations. Formal policies should be applied by all managers consistently, but it is crucial that they allow enough flexibility so that informal personalised arrangements can still be granted.

Merely communicating and implementing formal policy is rarely enough – in particular if a policy does not cover or apply to an employee's specific needs and preferences, managers should try to find a compromise with their employee on an informal basis.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: FLEXIBLE WORKING POLICY

- Be a role model for your employees by following the procedures and guidelines outlined in the flexible working policy yourself and ensuring the its consistent implementation.
- Send the flexible working policy to your team and schedule a discussion to allow any concerns or questions to be raised.
- If a policy does not cover or apply to an employee's specific needs and preferences, try to find a compromise with your employee on an informal basis to support them, particularly if a short-term arrangement for a few weeks or a couple of months is required.
- Participate in the ongoing development of the formal flexible working policy. For example if the formal policy in your organisation does not include guidelines to protect employees from the physical and psychosocial risks of flexible working, raise this concern with the leadership or HR team. The SMART Work Design model (see next section) is a helpful evidence-based tool that can inform policies and provide guidelines around reducing the psychosocial risks of work.
- If you are unsure how much flexible working you should allow as part of an informal arrangement, consider the information outlined under Supporting the Right Balance of Remote Work in the Relational section of this guide.

Flexible Working Practices



In addition to the consistent implementation of a *formal flexible working policy* and the support of personalised informal arrangements, leaders need to foster successful flexible working by applying *effective flexible working practices*.

For the purpose of this guide we understand effective flexible working practices as the application of evidence-based practical strategies that are grounded in the science of organisational psychology and have been shown to optimise outcomes for both employees and organisations.

In this guide we use the SMART Work Design model as an evidence-based tool to structure practical strategies around five key themes, which combined provide foundational ingredients for creating engaging, meaningful, productive, and healthy work.^{1,49}

GOOD WORK DESIGN AND THE SMART WORK DESIGN MODEL

Decades of research has shown us that good work design practice positively impacts individuals, teams and organisations.⁴⁹ Work design can be defined as “the content and organisation of one’s work tasks, activities, relationships, and responsibilities”.¹

Good work design refers to work that provides employees with sufficient levels of autonomy, social support, and feedback, and contains healthy levels of demands such as a tolerable amount of workload and time pressure. Good work design helps protect against the psychosocial risks that can occur in work. A wealth of research has shown the positive effects of good work design in terms of preventing harm, enhancing well-being, and increasing productivity.^{1,49}

A blue-tinted image of a laptop screen displaying a video conference with nine participants in a 3x3 grid. The participants are diverse in age and ethnicity, all smiling. The laptop keyboard is visible at the bottom.

Research has shown
that good work
design can prevent
harm, enhance
well-being, and
increase productivity.

Bad work design refers to work that entails physical or psychosocial risk.^{50,51} A psychosocial risk is an aspect of work design that can be particularly damaging to psychological health if not controlled. Psychosocial risks include excessive demands that are not tolerable (e.g. very long work hours), a lack of control and autonomy, no opportunities for learning or growth, poor social support, a lack of role clarity, and negative relationships. These psychosocial risks significantly increase the likelihood of employees experiencing stress as well as developing physical and mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.^{50,51}



For more information about work design and its history, visit the

Centre for Transformative Work Design.

In addition to the implementation of a formal flexible working policy and personalised informal arrangements, leaders need to apply effective flexible work practices.

The SMART Work Design model, developed by Australian Research Council (ARC) Laureate Professor Sharon Parker at the Future of Work Institute, is a framework to design meaningful, motivating, productive, and healthy work.

The model consolidates decades of work design research in order to provide a more holistic and accessible approach.

The SMART Work Design model comprises five key themes that promote positive outcomes and contribute to a thriving organisation: Stimulating, Mastery, Agency, Relational, and Tolerable Demands (see sections below for more information about each theme). A large body of research indicates that these five areas of work design influence performance, motivation, mental health and well-being.⁴⁹



WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS OF SMART WORK DESIGN?

- **Preventing Harm**

SMART Work Design practices can protect individuals from harm by eliminating or minimising the risk of physical and psychological harm before it occurs.⁵²

- **Enhanced Well-being**

Introducing positive work design principles through the SMART model can help improve employee well-being, which extends beyond the absence of mental ill health towards a sense of thriving. This has been linked to individuals being more committed to their organisations, more creative, more engaged, higher performing, and more innovative.^{1,53}

- **Increased Productivity**

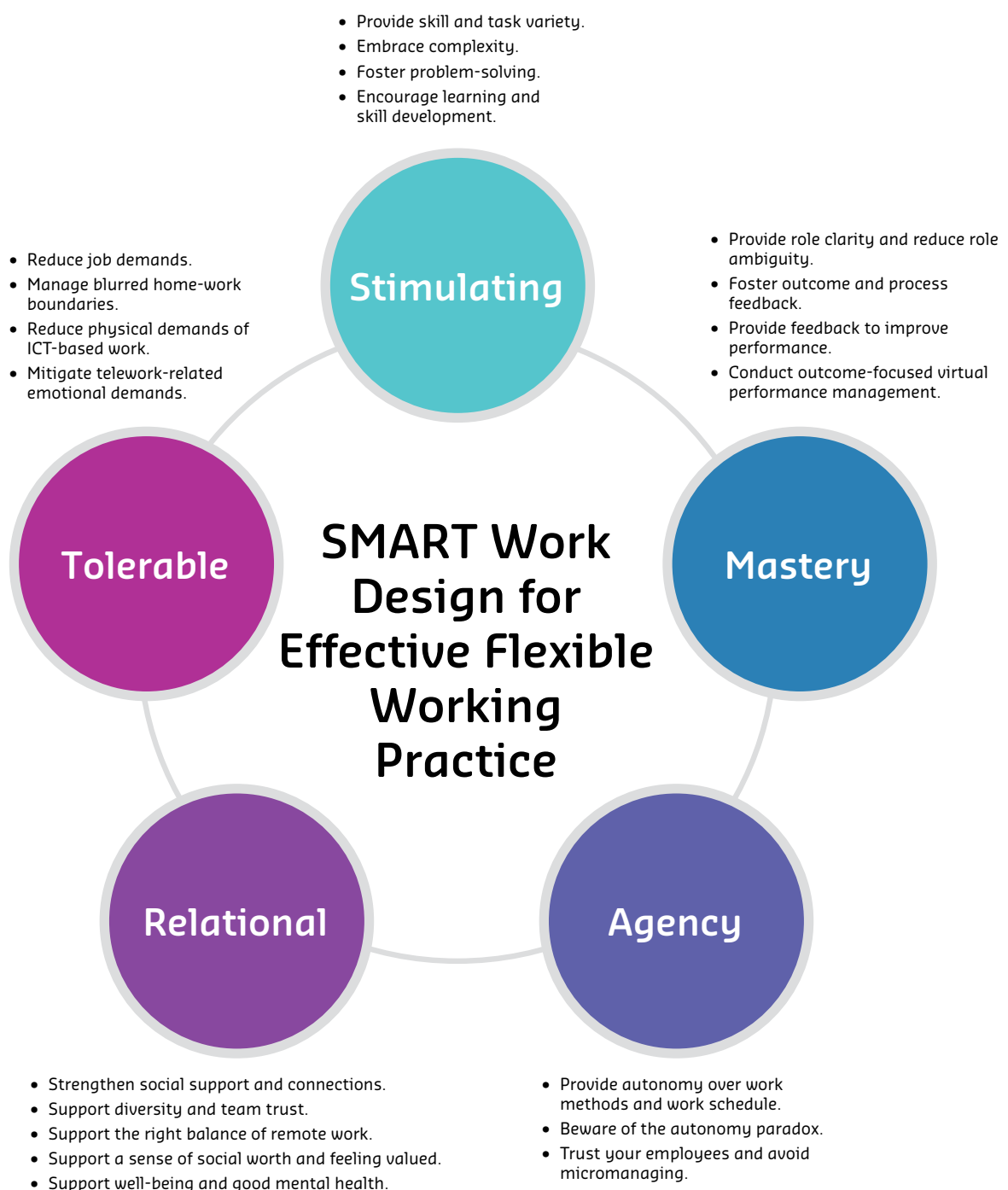
Research demonstrates that good work design can result in significant financial benefits to organisations through both cost savings and productivity gains.⁵⁴

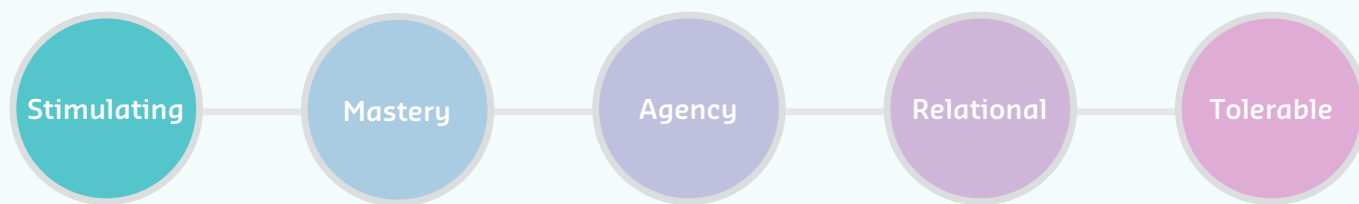
For more information about SMART Work Design, please visit the **SMART Work Design** website.

Applying SMART Work Design Strategies

A summary of practical SMART work design strategies can be found in the diagram below. The following sections provide a definition of each SMART Work Design theme as well as the evidence-base for the outlined strategies.

The SMART Work Design framework is a helpful tool for managers to design meaningful and motivating work for their employees.





STIMULATING: FOSTER VARIETY AND EMBRACE COMPLEXITY

Stimulating work refers to the extent to which a job involves solving challenging problems, has a range of different tasks, and involves having enough work to do. In highly stimulating jobs, individuals are likely to:

- use a wide variety of different skills and abilities to complete the work;
- carry out a number of different tasks to achieve their goals;
- need to 'think outside the box' to create solutions to problems.

Fostering task and skill variety

Stimulating jobs provide a high degree of task and skill variety. Task variety refers to the degree to which an employee performs a wide range of tasks in their role. It is usually closely linked with the degree of skill variety in a role, as different tasks are likely to require different skillsets and abilities to complete the work. If a role lacks opportunities for employees to use their skills and only includes a narrow variety of tasks (e.g. monotonous and repetitive tasks), it is likely that employees find their role boring and non-stimulating. Employees with flexible working arrangements often complete solely ICT-based work when working remotely (e.g. working on a laptop all day), which can be perceived as narrow task variety, in particular if the ICT-based tasks are repetitive. Results of our global Thrive at Work from home study (see *Appendix A*) showed that a substantial number of individuals who were working at home during the pandemic restrictions for four or more days per week

experienced low task variety (16.9%). Furthermore, the survey found that remote workers who had greater task variety were significantly more satisfied with their job.

Non-stimulating work with low variety carries risks for both employees as well as organisations: Employees can become disengaged, have lower job satisfaction and get "bore-out," which involves feelings of demotivation, anxiety and sadness and can turn into burnout, depression and even physical illness.^{1,55,56} Repetitive narrow tasks can cause biomechanical strain or musculoskeletal injuries.⁵⁷ For example, the risk for musculoskeletal injuries and visual strain can be higher for flexible workers than for traditional office-based workers due to the nature of primarily ICT-based work, limited access to an ergonomic workstation and a lack of incidental movement during the commute and in the workplace (e.g. walking to talk with colleagues).^{20,58}

For organisations, the risks of narrow, repetitive or passive work include wasted talent, impaired performance, higher accident rate, turnover and absenteeism, as well as less and slower return to work after an injury or illness.⁵⁹

Despite the above research findings, managers and HR professionals often tend to cluster similar tasks into one role for "higher efficiency," instead of evenly distributing responsibilities and monotonous tasks across team members.^{60,61,62}

With regard to skill variety and skill enhancement, not consistently being in the central workplace can reduce opportunities to participate in stimulating development activities.⁶³ Flexibly working employees might miss out on informal learning

from others, onsite training and interpersonal networking, all of which use and develop a variety of work-related and interpersonal skills and provide exposure to new, stimulating information.

Remote workers who had greater task variety were significantly more satisfied with their job.



THE SERIOUS DANGER OF BOREDOM

- Longitudinal research from the University College of London investigated the extent to which individuals experienced a sense of boredom at work over a three year period. It was found that those who frequently experienced boredom at work were 2.5 times more likely to die of a heart problem than those who were not.⁶⁴
- Studies from the past two decades show boredom increases the risk of anxiety, depression, drug and alcohol addiction, anger and aggressive behaviour, reduced interpersonal skills, and performing poorly at work.⁵⁵

To avoid the risks of non-stimulating work, managers need to consider ways to design flexible work in a way that fosters sufficient task and skill variety.

Beyond distributing responsibilities and monotonous tasks more evenly across team members, managers can provide opportunities for job rotation⁶⁵ or encourage their employees to engage in job crafting^c (see footnote for definition): job crafting is a useful “bottom-up” strategy that individuals can proactively engage in to make their work more stimulating.^{66,67} Job crafting leads to increased engagement in work, better well-being, and performance.^{68,69,70}



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: SKILL AND TASK VARIETY

- Check in with your employees to understand if they are sufficiently challenged by the tasks they have been given, e.g. by scheduling a face-to-face or virtual one-on-one meeting.
- Ensure all your employees are allocated a variety of tasks. For example, you can make a list of the different types of tasks and responsibilities that your employees undertake. What skills do they use, what activities do they do and who do they interact with? Can you find a way to increase variety by mixing things up for your employees, such as allocating activities differently, or providing job rotation opportunities?
- Regularly ask your employees what skills they would like to develop that could benefit their role. Be sure to allow time for skill development, including when an employee is working remotely. There is bountiful online learning and development resources that can be accessed from any location.
- If elements of the roles you oversee are quite repetitive, brainstorm together with your employees how you can improve the way in which the job is performed. However, some tasks are repetitive by nature, so in this case make sure your employees are able to intersperse more monotonous tasks with more engaging tasks regularly.
- Encourage knowledge sharing and collaboration among your employees. For example, ask your employees to share tips on how to work from home more effectively, or encourage them to coach others in their area of expertise (which also helps develop your employees’ ability to coach, and consolidates their learning).
- Highlight how your employees can engage in job crafting to make their work more stimulating whilst also meeting their work goals. Refer your employees to the website below and to the individual guide “How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers” to learn more about job crafting.
 - **What is Job Crafting?** (article by the Future of Work Institute on the Thrive at Work website)

To avoid the risks of non-stimulating work, managers need to consider ways to design flexible work in a way that fosters sufficient task and skill variety.

^c Job crafting is a work redesign strategy led by the employee - from the bottom up instead of from the top down by the manager. Job crafting involves shaping the way employees do their work, in a way that makes the job more engaging and meaningful (e.g. when an employee alters aspects of their own tasks in order to improve the fit between their work and their individual preferences).⁶⁷

Embracing complexity and promoting problem-solving

Work that is stimulating is often complex, multifaceted, and challenging.⁷¹ Complex tasks often require high levels of problem-solving skills and involve dealing with non-routine tasks.⁷²

Jobs high in cognitive complexity require a great deal of concentration without interruption, so they are well suited for flexible working, since workers are less likely to be interrupted when they are working from home (provided that there is an appropriate work station and ICT set up).⁷³

The opportunity to do complex work is not only important for well-being, engagement and productivity, but is also associated with cognitive functioning later in life: A study of 10,079 twins suggests that greater complexity of work, and particularly complex work with people or data, may reduce the risk of dementia or Alzheimer's disease in late life of employees.^{74,75}

Results of our global Thrive at Work from home study (see Appendix A) showed that a high level of problem-solving during remote work was associated with greater job satisfaction, task adaptivity (i.e. the ability to successfully adapt to changes in work tasks) and task proactivity (i.e. the ability to initiate changes to the way a task is carried out). According to other research studies, both task adaptivity and task proactivity are in turn associated with higher work performance and greater internal work motivation.⁷⁶

In sum, it is beneficial for both the organisation and the employees if managers ensure their employees have challenging tasks and sufficient opportunities for problem-solving while working remotely and in the main workplace.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: COMPLEXITY AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

- Encourage your employees to continuously improve processes. Ask them if they see a better way of doing things regularly.
- If you or one of your employees identifies a process that's not working, encourage your employees to figure out a way to solve the problem themselves first before suggesting a solution.
- Review what kind of tasks your employees are working on to ensure that sufficient levels of problem-solving are involved. Embrace complexity and don't hesitate to give your employees new challenges or more challenging tasks.
- Allow your employees to work from home when their current tasks involve high cognitive complexity, so that they can concentrate without interruption.
- Facilitate learning and growth by allowing time for your employees to reflect after they have completed a project. For example you could ask them to keep a learning journal to write down their key learnings and process improvement ideas after each completed project.
- To find out more how to foster problem solving and complexity in virtual teams, read the Stimulating section of the guide for managers of virtual teams: **"How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers"**.

A high level of problem-solving during remote work is linked with greater job satisfaction, task adaptivity and task proactivity.



M MASTERY: PROVIDE CLARITY AND FEEDBACK

Work that enables high level of mastery is work in which employees

- are clear on what they do and why;
- receive feedback and recognition from supervisors and peers in addition to feedback on performance from the job itself;
- understand where their job fits in the bigger picture of the organisation goals;
- have the resources (e.g. training, information) needed to do their job.

When employees have clarity, feedback, know where their work ‘fits’, and have the relevant job resources, they are more able to master their core tasks and perform effectively.

Role clarity is a critical enabler of effective flexible work

Role clarity refers to the degree to which employees have a clear understanding of the tasks, responsibilities, objectives, and expectations of both their own role and that of their colleagues or team members.^{77,78,79} When role clarity is high, there are clear expectations around ‘who does what’ within the team or department.



THE BENEFITS OF ROLE CLARITY

Numerous studies show that a high degree of role clarity is beneficial for employees and organisations in both the virtual and non-virtual working context. It is associated with:

- Higher levels of employee job satisfaction⁸⁰
- Reduced turnover⁸⁰
- Higher collective well-being of team members, especially in relation to understaffed teams⁸¹
- Increased extra-role performance and team engagement⁸²
- Fostering the development of trust within collaborating employees⁸³
- Better team coordination⁸⁴

Research has shown that flexible work – if it’s not managed well – can increase role ambiguity,¹⁹ which refers to uncertainty over the expectations involved in performing a task or carrying out an activity in one’s role (i.e. inverse of role clarity).¹⁸ It has been suggested that role ambiguity is higher in the flexible work context, when the employee is physically away from the office and has to rely on ICT to communicate and connect with the workplace.

However, remote working can also have a positive effect on role clarity if it is managed well. Due to the physical separation, managers should use output-based controls^d (i.e. focus on desired end results of work), instead of behaviour-based controls^e (i.e. judging employee performance based on observable activities).² This type of management involves clearly defining goals, desired outcomes, duties and tasks, which reduces the levels of role ambiguity in the virtual context as compared to the traditional work environment.^{85,86,87}

Together with role clarity, interpersonal trust and the effective communication of expectations and requirements are particularly important for successful virtual collaboration.^{79,88} Effective communication norms help establish and sustain role clarity and interpersonal trust, while high interpersonal trust among team members helps sustain role clarity and communication norm alignment. Since role clarity significantly impacts employees’ project satisfaction and performance, it is important that managers support the establishment of interpersonal trust and effective communication norms alongside role clarity in order to ensure that employees know what they are supposed to do and how they contribute to their project.⁷⁹

d According to organisational control theory,^{89,90} which describes the managers’ choice of individual control modes, output controls focus on measurable results within an organisation (i.e. desired objectives, targets or milestones, such as number of sales, number of services/products delivered on time, level of customer satisfaction).

e In contrast to output controls, behavioural controls involve regulating or controlling the actions and activities that ultimately lead to results rather than outcomes or results themselves. In particular, various rules and procedures are used to standardise or to dictate behaviour and activities. Behaviour controls begin with basics of where and when to work and how to do the job.^{89,90}



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Regular virtual meetings increase role clarity

It is especially important for leaders to check in with their employees around role clarity when changes occur in the environment or team. During the COVID-19 lockdown, a small, Perth-based creative agency set up three regular virtual team meetings per week. One meeting was compulsory to attend, with flexibility provided to allow people to work through the meeting as needed. The remaining two virtual meetings were optional to attend, and involved the team manager making themselves available to answer any questions, discuss any concerns, and clarify expectations, responsibilities, and tasks.

Moreover, it is crucial that managers invest more time in providing clarity when tasks are complex and abstract, as well as when employees work across several teams and/or report to several managers, as this can create conflicting messages.⁹¹

It is important to note that providing role clarity isn't a 'one-off task', instead managers need to check in with their employees on a regular basis to ensure that the expectations around their roles are clear.

While clearly defining roles helps foster role clarity, leaders need to be aware that defining roles too tightly can be detrimental to employee well-being and performance by reducing autonomy.⁹² Providing sufficient autonomy to make decisions about how and when tasks are completed is important for successful flexible working and will be discussed in detail in the *Agency* section of this guide.

While clearly defining roles helps foster role clarity, leaders need to be aware that defining roles too tightly can be detrimental to employee well-being and performance by reducing autonomy.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: ROLE CLARITY

- Ensure your employees have a clear understanding of the tasks, responsibilities, objectives, and expectations of both their own role and that of their team members. At the beginning of a new project explain what tasks need to be completed and what the objectives are, and provide plenty of opportunities for your employees to ask clarifying questions.
- Link in with the HR team to ensure the job description and position description reflect what an employee is actually doing. If you identify discrepancies make time to discuss this with your employee.
- Provide information around feedback mechanisms and how the performance of your employees will be evaluated. Instead of judging employee performance based on observable activities, try to use output-based controls to foster a clear definition of desired outcomes, duties and tasks.
- Encourage team members to share information about their tasks and responsibilities to increase transparency across the team and ensure team-level role clarity. To find out more about role clarity in the specific context of virtual teams (including a team charter exercise) read the Mastery section in the guide for managers of virtual teams: **"How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers"**.
- Establish effective communication norms, in particular around how information is shared between employees and yourself (e.g. what type of medium or virtual tools are used to share different types of information?).
- Support the development of interpersonal trust amongst your employees and between your employees and yourself. To find out more about this, read the *Relational* section of this guide.

Fostering outcome and process feedback

Feedback from others contributes significantly to a sense of mastery and refers to the degree to which co-workers and managers provide clear information about performance.⁹³ Feedback can take two forms:⁹⁴

- outcome feedback (information about performance, or the outcomes of the work); and
- process feedback (information about how an individual performs a job).

In the flexible working context the number of opportunities for direct feedback (in particular process feedback) can be reduced, as the work performed by remotely working employees may not always be physically observed by managers or their co-workers. However, regular feedback is important in any working context: it can improve both virtual and non-virtual performance because “it guides, motivates, and reinforces effective behaviours and reduces or stops ineffective behaviours”.⁹⁵

Managers and employees can provide feedback either to individual employees or to the whole team.⁹⁶ We will focus on manager strategies to increase feedback at the individual level in this guide. To dive deeper into team-level feedback and how certain feedback strategies can reduce social loafing in virtual teams, refer to the guide for managers of virtual teams: **“How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers”**.

Individual-level feedback on outcomes and processes is important for employees, even if their work comprises primarily teamwork. This allows them to see how their individual efforts contribute to the overall performance of the team, which in turn has been found to increase individual effort and contribution to the team.^{98,99,100}

Virtually working employees that receive feedback from their team members about outcomes and processes show better performance and conflict management strategies compared to those who receive no feedback.^{96,99,101}

Results of our global Thrive at Work from home study (see *Appendix A*) showed that 48.5% of employees who were working from home four or more days per week disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement ‘This week, other people in the organisation, such as managers and co-workers, provided information about the effectiveness (e.g. quality and quantity) of my job performance’. This indicates that there is much room for improvement in terms of providing regular feedback to individuals working flexibly. Therefore, it is important that managers adopt

various strategies to improve the quantity and quality of feedback their employees receive not only from themselves, but also from their team mates and clients.

In the flexible working context the number of opportunities for direct feedback can be reduced.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: FEEDBACK

- Regularly provide feedback at both an individual and team-level on the performance or outcomes of the work as well as on the processes involved (i.e. how an individual performs a job and how a team is functioning). Schedule regular one-on-one meetings for individual level feedback and regular team meetings for team-level feedback.
- Provide opportunities for team members to give each other feedback. After the completion of a project, encourage teams to schedule a feedback meeting where they can provide each other with feedback around decision-making, communication, and outcomes. This also helps employees to learn and adapt, and to improve their behaviours for future projects.
- Foster a positive feedback culture where positive contributions are regularly acknowledged. For example, you could include team recognition as a regular agenda item for your weekly virtual team meetings: invite team members to share relevant positive recognition of their colleagues’ contributions and share your own positive observations about the team’s and individual team members’ performance and processes. You could also create a team channel on a platform such as Microsoft Teams to share and celebrate positive feedback.
- Share feedback about your employees’ work that you have received from internal or external clients directly with your employees.

f Social loafing occurs when team members exert less effort because they know their individual efforts are not directly observable and thus they believe their contributions are unlikely to be rewarded.⁹⁷

Feedback to improve performance: How to conduct virtual performance management

Flexible working reduces the number of opportunities for direct supervision, as managers are often not able to observe how teleworkers perform their work.⁷³ Many managers who oversee teleworkers are concerned about performance appraisals and struggle with devising a way to measure performance due to the reduced presence of the employee in the workplace.^{82,102} Therefore, there needs to be a slightly different approach to performance management compared to the traditional office-based work context. This includes grounding performance evaluations in output-based controls, which involves the appraisal of performance based on the output, products, or deliverables of work, not on the process or behaviours involved in producing the output.^{2,102,103} By focusing on the work output, managers will be able to keep performance at acceptable levels regardless of the amount of direct supervision.¹⁰⁴

It has been found that performance management and feedback systems that focus on goal-setting and/or output-based performance greatly facilitate flexible working.⁷³ In most cases, little to no modification is needed to provide employees who work off-site with a clearly defined set of measurable performance objectives which can then be monitored and assessed by their managers via timely (virtual) feedback.⁷³

In implementing such methods, it is important that HR practitioners and managers link objective metrics to performance objectives and communicate expectations clearly to all employees.¹⁰³ Breaking down employee work into objectives, projects, tasks, and action items, as well as assigning, tracking, evaluating, and rewarding work output dramatically increases a manager's knowledge of work activities in the remote working context.¹⁰⁴ This approach also improves role clarity and consistency in establishing expectations, which in turn enables managers to objectively determine whether those expectations are

being met.¹⁰⁴ However, it is crucial that these managerial controls are not characterised by excessively tracking employees' work outputs or micromanaging, as too much control can reduce the sense of autonomy and impact productivity negatively.¹⁰⁵ In our global Thrive at Work from home study (see *Appendix A*), excessive performance monitoring was significantly related to increased psychological distress whilst working from home.

If the virtual performance management process and expectations are clearly communicated and micromanaging is avoided, employees will likely perceive high levels of justice and fairness, which in turn contributes to employee satisfaction and well-being.¹⁰³



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

End of day journaling to set clear goals and track achievement

A Western Australian energy provider encourages employees to participate in end-of-day journaling: At the end of a working day, employees can fill out a journal template to list their key achievements of the day and to set clear goals for the next day. At the end of the week, the journal template encourages employees to reflect on their key learnings during the week. The journaling can support employees with planning and tracking their achievements, which can increase a sense of mastery.

In the context of performance management, the end-of-day journals can provide managers with more transparency about their employees' ongoing activities, goals and achievements.

Moreover, the reflection process serves as a daily ritual that can support employees with their transition from work into their personal lives at the end of the day.

The lack of direct supervision opportunities in the flexible working context can make it challenging for leaders to manage performance effectively, in particular if an employee is a poor performer (i.e. he or she does not deliver the expected performance with regard to output, products, or deliverables).

Regardless of the level of performance that is appraised, managers need to consider through which medium (i.e. ICTs) a performance conversation takes place, as this topic can be quite daunting for employees. According to media richness theory, face-to-face interactions provide the richest information compared to audio calls and emails.^{106,107} Face-to-face interactions provide verbal, nonverbal, social, and personal cues which enable workers to understand the information more easily and clarify questions instantly.¹⁰² This is not possible when feedback occurs asynchronously (e.g. via emails or chat messages). Moreover, face-to-face meetings increase familiarity as well as trust, and create a common ground with respect to shared vocabulary and work practices. They also facilitate clarifying goals and individual roles, while fostering cohesion, which in turn helps to build commitment to a way forward.^{108,109} Hence, a face-to-face conversation can be considered the most suitable medium in order to facilitate performance evaluations and positive change, with the advantage of providing employees with the opportunities to ask clarifying questions in a trusting environment.¹¹⁰

However, in the flexible working context performance conversations sometimes cannot be organised in person, so it is important to assess which available electronically mediated communication tool provides the richest information. Ideally, such conversations would take place via video call (e.g. via Skype, Zoom, Teams), as the face-to-face nature of this type of communication is more personal than asynchronous forms.^{108,111} It also allows managers to observe non-verbal body language and see what their employees' work setups are like, e.g. whether they're working from a home office, a kitchen, or a closet.



BEWARE OF UNFAIR BIASES

In the hybrid working context (i.e. when employees work remotely only part of the time and onsite for the rest of their working time), managers need to be aware of certain biases that might distort performance appraisals unfairly. Studies have found that managers place more emphasis on direct observations of workers in the office than on information gained from the virtual realm when assessing overall worker effectiveness and performance.¹¹² Hence, managers need to consciously consider what performance information they take into account when assessing employees, and whether they have given virtual cues as much weight as observations in the office.

When dealing with an employee who has just recently started to underperform, it is important to start by identifying the factors that could be impacting their work. For example, have there been recent organisational changes or difficulties in the employee's personal life? For some employees, working from home brings new technical and self-management challenges, so it might be reasonable to offer a time-limited grace period and support to allow them to get used to remote working.¹¹¹

It's important that managers try to discover together with their employee which obstacles are hindering their performance and what went wrong in the process. For example, managers can use the guided reflexivity approach and prompt their employee to reflect on and discuss their working strategies (e.g. decision-making), processes (e.g. communication), and outcomes.^{113,114}

Moreover, managers can ask them how they will improve their goals, strategies and processes in the future.

A collaborative approach and encouraging the employee to make their own reflections facilitate learning and ownership of the discussed changes.¹¹⁵

To avoid larger performance issues in the future, leaders need to be proactive and coach their employees through problems to facilitate optimal performance.¹⁰⁴



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Return to office-based work to recalibrate performance

A substantial number of employees of an Australian engineering and manufacturing company has transitioned to working remotely full-time. In the rare cases in which productivity has suffered, any performance management conversations have been held in person.

The company found that the most effective way to manage performance issues was to ask the employee to return to the office to get back on track, and to give them the opportunity to talk through the issues in person (e.g. to identify whether the root cause for the reduced performance was a lack of job clarity or difficulties in the transition to home office).

Moreover, it was fundamental to question the work modality's suitability to the work being undertaken separately and prior to asking the employee's willingness and ability to perform.

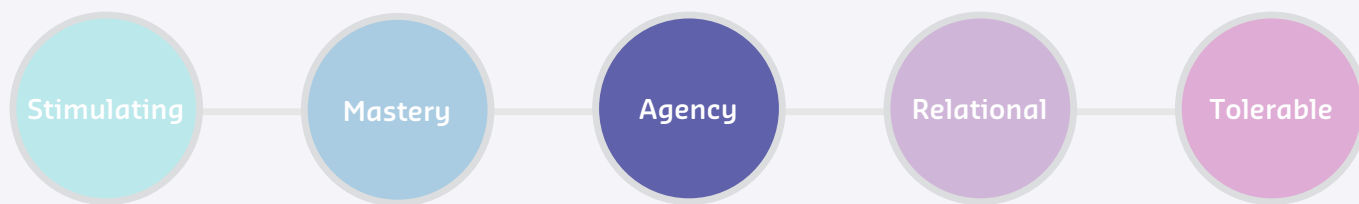
With this, more clarity around the source of the issue in a safe, trusting environment could be gained.

Moreover, it is important that leaders conduct regular performance and feedback conversations to ensure that their employees are clear about their performance goals and objectives, as well as how to achieve these goals. These conversations should not just be part of the annual performance review process and will result in increased role clarity and performance.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: PERFORMANCE- MANAGEMENT

- Set clear performance objectives and measures with your employees. Discuss objectives, goals, processes, methods, and communication, and explain how your employees can track their performance against these criteria. Avoid micromanaging and ensure that performance criteria are based on results or outputs.
- If a meeting in person isn't possible, use rich ICTs that allow virtual "face-to-face" communication, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams video calls, to communicate your performance appraisals. Avoid using emails or phone calls for performance conversations, unless it is a simple and straightforward matter.
- Be much more explicit and verbal in video calls than you would be in an office meeting. Display an open and warm communication style and pay close attention to body language, both yours and your employees. On screen, it's much harder for you to judge the subtext of your interactions. Did you just offend your employee or is their video frozen? Because you're not in the same room, there are no context cues and misunderstandings are likely.¹¹¹
- Conduct regular performance and feedback conversations, not just as part of the annual performance management process. Especially after you had a performance management conversation about poor performance it is important to schedule more frequent feedback meetings with the employee to support them getting back on track.
- Don't forget to include the following in your performance conversations: highlight areas in which your employees are doing well and provide positive feedback. To support your employees' continuous learning and growth, discuss with them relevant (online) training and professional development opportunities that might be useful to improve weaknesses or enhance strengths.



A GENCY: ALLOW YOUR EMPLOYEES GREATER AUTONOMY TO THRIVE

Agency refers to the amount of autonomy, control and decision-making influence that an employee has in their job regarding where, when and how they do their work. For example, jobs with a high degree of agency allow workers to

- control the timing and scheduling of their tasks;
- decide upon the best methods of completing a task, including the chance to be proactive and show initiative;
- make decisions independently and feel empowered in doing so;
- have some influence over where they work, that is, engage in flexible working.



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Providing autonomy over work times

An Australian engineering and manufacturing company provides employees with autonomy over when and how they want to work, as long as the work gets done and the expected outcomes are met. The company's CEO stated that this is particularly important for busy parents who are not getting enough time with their families: The autonomy to format their day as they wish allows to break up their work into chunks rather than working eight consecutive hours, which allows them to pick up their kids from school etc. Some parents even prefer to work a few hours on the weekend to have more time for their children during the week.

According to the company's CEO, it is crucial to provide this autonomy and flexibility to meet employees' preferences and needs and to stay competitive as a workplace.

The ability to work anywhere and anyplace fosters employee autonomy, while increasing the pressure to always be available.

Agency is most closely connected with the universal need for autonomy (for more information please read about Self-Determination Theory in the section *Flexible Work and Individual Differences* in Appendix B). Research has shown that autonomy is a vehicle for desirable worker outcomes such as

- Work engagement¹¹⁶
- Employee well-being¹¹
- Enhanced individual performance^{117,118}

Flexible working naturally affords a high degree of job autonomy by having control over work scheduling,¹¹⁹ work location and the use of ICT.^{2,120}



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Autonomy promotes thriving

A WA Government agency survey on employee experiences working from home during COVID-19 found that autonomy was associated with reduced burnout and increased job satisfaction, productivity, and self-goal setting behaviour. It was also associated with a greater level of thriving at work, specifically via increased:

- Confidence – one's belief in their ability to perform tasks and behaviours required to do their job.
- Purpose – the feeling that one's work has meaning and purpose.
- Energy – the feeling of being energised and enthusiastic about work.
- Growth – having a strong focus on learning and development.
- Relationships – the feeling of being connected to others.



Beware of the autonomy paradox: greater autonomy can lead to lower perceptions of autonomy

There are some paradoxical effects that are noted in the research literature regarding the impact of workers' ICT usage on job autonomy. Research conducted with knowledge workers found that the more autonomy workers have, the harder they work, devoting more hours to work (i.e. work intensification).¹²⁰ As a result, workers can feel constrained and controlled by their work which in turn reduces their sense of autonomy.¹²⁰ So, on the one hand, ICT facilitates the ability to work anywhere and anyplace, increasing employee autonomy,¹²¹ but on the other hand, it also increases expectations of responsiveness and accessibility (i.e. connectivity demands), thus diminishing their autonomy.¹²⁰

Autonomous flexible workers intensify their work practices such as working longer hours for multiple reasons, such as

- balancing work and home duties throughout the day (e.g. school pick up/drop-offs, appointments);
- spending the time that they would normally commute to and from work as additional work hours;
- putting in additional effort due to a greater sense of obligation, as working from home is often perceived as a "reward" that cannot be taken for granted.^{37,122}

It is important to be aware of this paradox as a leader, since strategies and practices can be put in place to minimise the negative effect of the autonomy paradox.

Moreover, ICT usage can expose employees to higher managerial control through electronic monitoring, which can add to the perceived pressure to be always available, reducing workers' perceived scheduling, work methods, and decision-making autonomy.¹²³

Trusting versus micromanaging remote workers

Managerial control is characterised by excessive monitoring and micromanaging behaviour. According to our global Thrive at Work from home study (see *Appendix A*) one main reason why managers monitored too closely was that they did not trust their employees, with 27.4% doubting the ability of their employees to perform their jobs. This is in line with other research showing that managers who cannot “see” their direct reports sometimes struggle to trust that their employees are indeed working.¹²⁴ If managers do not trust their employees, they might develop an unreasonable expectation that those employees need to be available at all times, which consequently disrupts their employees’ work-home balance and causes more job stress.¹²⁵



In sum, micromanaging and tethering employees to the desk is not a good way to get the best out of them.¹²⁸ Instead, managers need to trust their workers, give them autonomy, and then focus on managing the outputs of their work (i.e. output-based performance management), rather than their inputs (e.g. their presence).¹²⁸ An extreme version of

this strategy is a Results Only Work Environment (or ROWE), in which leaders take little or no notice of when, where or how employees work, as long as they deliver the expected results. This approach has been shown to be effective for high performance, and is also associated with reduced turnover and improved health behaviour of employees.^{129,130}



WHY CAN MANAGERIAL MISTRUST AND MICROMANAGING REDUCE PRODUCTIVITY?

The productivity benefits of teleworking over office working largely arise because of the greater autonomy afforded to remote workers.² Managerial mistrust increases micromanagement behaviour, which in turn reduces autonomy of employees – this implies that high levels of mistrust and micromanagement can impact productivity negatively, as the benefits of remote work are unlikely to arise.¹⁰⁵

Moreover, leaders of virtual teams could inadvertently reduce team trust through excessive monitoring or micromanaging behaviour, which in turn will have negative effects on the team’s performance.^{105,126,127}



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Trusting employees to work remotely

According to the Executive Director of People and Culture of a not-for-profit organisation delivering community health and care services across Australia, trusting employees is part of the organisation’s culture.

Managers trust that their employees can work autonomously and are motivated by the organisation’s vision and values to do their work well. The organisation’s challenges with flexible working is not about trust, it is about how to foster connection so that employees still feel connected to the organisation while working remotely.

Instead of controlling what employees are doing while they are working from home, managers focus on an outputs-based performance measurement. According to the organisation’s Executive Director of People and Culture, managers are not concerned about when, where and what their employees are doing, they just want to know that the job will get done.

In this organisation, flexible working is not about the explicit management of an employee, but about good leadership and giving employees the autonomy to craft their jobs in a way that will work for them when working remotely.

The ability to work anywhere and anyplace fosters employee autonomy, while increasing the pressure to always be available.

For these reasons, managers should give employees autonomy over the hours they work, as well as the order they do their tasks, at an appropriate level that suits the situation, the job and the person: It's not always feasible to give employees complete autonomy over work hours, e.g. if the job involves customer service at particular hours, or if they are part of a highly interdependent team that requires some overlapping hours to support collaboration and coordination.¹²⁸

Moreover, autonomy doesn't need to mean anarchy: it is reasonable of managers to expect their employees to be share when they can work and when they can't, and to be available for key meetings.¹²⁸

Leaders need to understand that autonomy doesn't mean less communication with employees, as frequent communication is even more important when employees have autonomy. However, instead of checking up on people as a way to micromanage them, leaders need to check in with people and

provide them with the necessary information, guidance, and support to work autonomously.¹⁰⁵ To learn new skills of delegation and employee empowerment, it is recommended that leaders attend trainings on how to devolve job autonomy in the flexible working context.¹⁰⁵



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Trusting employees to work remotely

In an Australian engineering and manufacturing company, where a substantial number of employees has transitioned to working remotely full-time, low productivity and performance has been rare. The company's profitability, revenue as well as customer satisfaction levels have not dropped during or after the transition to remote working.

According to the company's CEO, the transition to remote working was not about controlling employees that could not be trusted, it was more about listening to employees that could be trusted to find out what type of environment they needed to perform well.

For example, employees who were not getting as much done at home self-identified the issue and initiated discussions to make changes to their work arrangements (e.g. coming into the office more often). The company's CEO ascribed this proactive behaviour to the high alignment of employees with the company's culture and values, with integrity being the company's number one value.

Moreover, the company took the view that trust issues are not generated out of a change to the work modality, as employees need to be trusted regardless of the working arrangements. According to the company's CEO, it was important to discern the difference prior to transitioning to remote work.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: AUTONOMY

- Avoid micromanaging or excessively monitoring your employees' inputs. Instead, convey to your workers that you trust them, set clear goals and provide them with autonomy to make their own decisions about how and when to accomplish their tasks as much as possible.¹²⁸ For more information, check out this blog post by ARC Laureate Professor Sharon Parker:
 - **'Tethered or trusted? The "There's no excuse not to be at your desk" phenomenon'** (by Professor Sharon Parker, CTWD website).
- To minimise the risk of exercising too much managerial control, make sure you focus on results and output-based performance management (as outlined in the *Mastery* section), while still providing sufficient support and frequent feedback to ensure enough guidance and role clarity.
- To avoid the autonomy paradox, encourage your employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance and stick to their usual amount of working hours. Establish communication norms and expectations, specifically around responsiveness during after work hours. Don't electronically tether your employees to the desk through expectations of constant availability. For more strategies to support a healthy work-life balance, read the *Tolerable Demands* section.
- To read more about specific strategies for managers of virtual teams, refer to the Agency section in the guide: **"How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers"**.



RELATIONAL: FOSTER SOCIAL SUPPORT, WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

Relational job aspects refer to the amount of support an employee receives from the people they work with, meaningful connections with others, and a sense of doing work that is valued by others. Jobs that are highly relational are likely to involve

- employees and supervisors who support each other and show personal interest;
- having connections and social contact with peers;
- some connection with the people who benefit from the work, leading to a sense of feeling valued.

One of the most cited risks of flexible working arrangements is a lack of social connection and social support, as employees are physically separated from the workplace and are more than likely to be excluded from formal or informal discussions with colleagues and supervisors.¹³ In the flexible work context it is therefore particularly important that leaders apply strategies to make their employees' work more relational in order to avoid the negative outcomes of poor relational design, e.g. higher risk for job stress and burnout, as well as lower organisational commitment, job satisfaction and employee well-being.^{53,131}

Moreover, the need for relatedness belongs to the three universal psychological needs described by Self-determination theory (to learn read the section *Flexible Work and Individual Differences* in Appendix B).^{132,133,134} The need for relatedness must be satisfied for employees to maintain optimal performance and achieve psychological growth and well-being.¹³⁴

Strengthening social support and connections between leaders and employees

Social support is the degree to which individuals experience being valued, cared for and supported in the workplace.¹³⁵ Social support can be provided by co-workers and/or managers, and is made up of two aspects:^{135,136}

- Instrumental support (i.e. practical help to complete the work: providing assistance, advice, work-related information, or feedback to help get the job done);
- Social and emotional support (i.e. listening to a colleagues' problem as well as the provision of sympathy, caring, comfort, and encouragement).

When social support is high in a team, it means that team members have opportunities to meet and get to know their team members and their manager on a personal level. The degree to which co-workers and managers provide social support in the workplace influences an employee's experience of work.¹³⁷ For example, high social support at work increases commitment to the organisation, job satisfaction, job involvement and employee well-being,^{71,138,139} while detrimental (e.g. disrespectful) workplace relationships can negatively affect an individual's emotional well-being, and is a predictor of depression.¹⁴¹ In line with this it has been shown that employees with a low level of social support at work have a 24% – 44% higher risk of experiencing poor mental ill-health.⁵⁹ Interestingly, there was no reported difference in effects between whether this support came from co-workers or supervisors.⁵⁹

The lack of social connection and social support is one of the most cited risks of flexible work.



Furthermore, from an instrumental support perspective, colleagues and managers who provide help and clarification on tasks can reduce an individual's role ambiguity, role conflict, job stress and workload, which in turn can increase job satisfaction and organisational commitment, and reduce burnout risk.^{142,143,144}

Team members with strong relationships are more likely to encourage and support each other, and feel trusted to experiment and take risks, which is critical for innovation.¹⁴⁵



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Connection in the workplace

A Western Australian energy provider encourages managers to make a conscious effort to schedule frequent team check ins and to build in more personal elements. For example, in regular virtual team meetings employees can be invited to take turns to give a brief tour of something interesting in their house.

Moreover, the organisation has initiated virtual bring-your-pet meetings, virtual themed dress-up meetings (e.g. all employees wear a certain colour), ICT-based quizzes and virtual Friday social catchups.

By encouraging frequent and informal social contact between co-workers virtually and non-virtually, leaders can create a culture in which employees feel psychologically safe to communicate and build supportive relationships with their team members.¹⁴⁶ For example, leaders can create opportunities for co-workers to virtually interact by scheduling 'virtual morning teas' or by including five minutes at the beginning and end of each team meeting for informal and unstructured conversation.

By encouraging frequent and informal social contact between co-workers virtually and non-virtually, leaders can create a culture in which employees feel psychologically safe to communicate and build supportive relationships.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: SOCIAL SUPPORT AND CONNECTIONS

- Encourage employees to interact on non-work related issues through virtual platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Slack, so that they can get to know each other better. For example, non-work channels could be based around restaurant recommendations, pets, or virtual social events.
- Take the lead in initiating informal conversations at the beginning or end of virtual meetings. For example, you can share a funny story about your adventures at home and invite your employees to share something more personal as well. Think of questions in advance that you can ask your employees in case the conversation stalls.
- Where possible, phone call or video call rather than email. Ideally, aim for videoconferencing (e.g. Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp), especially for longer collaborative meetings.
- Schedule regular video-supported one-on-ones with your employees to check in and provide support and feedback.
- Suggest your team start each day or shift with a short 5-10 minute 'virtual huddle' where everyone touches base and discusses any potential issues or areas where they may benefit from support.
- Encourage your employees to ask for help from colleagues if they have a complex work problem - sharing knowledge and skills not only helps solve the problem, it also helps build trust within the team.
- For more tips on how to build quality connections at work, read ARC Laureate Professor Sharon Parkers' blog via the link below:
 - **"High quality connection (And we're not talking about the Internet)"** (by Professor Sharon Parker, CTWD website).



Apart from developing cultural awareness through culture specific training programs, it is important that leaders support a general sense of trust among team members.

Supporting diversity and team trust to improve social support and cohesion

Leaders face unique challenges when managing cultural diversity in virtual and hybrid teams, as research has found that diverse virtual teams exhibit higher levels of conflict and lower levels of cohesion than non-virtual teams.^{147,148,149} This can be due to differences in language, cultural values, and time zones.¹⁵⁰ Virtual and hybrid teams (especially those with members located in different countries or regions) are more likely to form sub-groups based on these demographic attributes, and to suffer from performance issues as a result.^{151,152}

In light of these challenges, it is important that leaders learn how to manage diversity effectively. Apart from developing cultural awareness through culture specific training programs,¹⁵³ it is important that leaders support a general sense of trust among team members. Trust facilitates cooperation, coordination, and information processing, as well as positive team-related attitudes, and also helps individuals suspend their judgements, overcome misunderstandings and conflicts, and increases the sharing of information.^{126,127,154,155} This is particularly relevant in culturally diverse teams, but the establishment of trust in the flexible work setting is also very important in teams without cultural diversity. Research has shown that trust is an important



predictor of employees' overall adjustment to virtual work.¹⁵⁶ Trust is even more important for the performance of virtual teams than for the performance of non-virtual teams, due to the inherent uncertainty that team members must operate under in virtual settings.^{126,127,157}

For evidence-based manager strategies to foster trust and to manage diversity in virtual teams, refer to the Relational section in the guide: **"How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers"**.

Supporting the right balance of remote work

How do we get the best of both worlds?

In organisations that still have physical office locations, but can support flexible working arrangements due to primarily ICT based work tasks, the existing possibilities for working remotely (e.g. from home) might present managers with the question of how much remote work they should grant their employees. What should managers consider if their employees request a regular or potentially permanent remote working arrangement? How much remote working is too much?

On the one hand, numerous studies have demonstrated the overall beneficial effects of remote work arrangements and autonomy on important outcomes such as job satisfaction, role stress, work-family conflict, turnover intention, job performance and employee well-being.^{2,158}

On the other hand, studies show that collaboration, connection, and maintaining organisational culture is easier in the office, and that people who spend the majority of their time working remotely are lonelier, experience social and professional isolation, and perceive threats to their professional advancement as they may be overlooked with regards to promotion and training opportunities.^{158,159}

"Hybridizing" might be a great way to get the best of both worlds.

The current research landscape is complex and implies that there is no one-size-fits-all response to the question of how much time away from the office is most beneficial for both organisations and employees. Essentially, the most appropriate response might be that "it depends on the situation". Leaders need to consider many factors, including the type of work tasks, individual differences, the organisational culture and climate, as well as the employee's stage in the employee life cycle.

Considering the benefits and disadvantages of both types of working, some in-office days and some out-of-office days (to the extent it is feasible given the type of work people do) is likely to be optimal for most workers' well-being and performance. In conclusion, "hybridizing" might be a great way to get the best of both worlds.¹⁶⁰

A meta-analysis^g of 46 studies indicated that high-intensity telecommuting (more than 2.5 days a week) accentuated the beneficial effects of remote working on work-family conflict, but harmed relationships with co-workers.² The authors of the study conclude that employers can maximise the stress-lowering benefits of telecommuting and its positive impact on work-family conflict by allowing employees to spend most of their time away from their central work location.

However, at the same time employers need to intervene to manage the damaged co-worker relationships that result from such an arrangement. One such intervention could be to designate one specific day per week as collocated for the team, where face-to-face meetings, working lunches, and informal social activities are scheduled.²



Leaders can protect against employee isolation by initiating open discussions of ways in which isolation can be ameliorated.¹⁵⁸ They can also encourage their employees to create social support networks and good communication with colleagues (see practical strategies in the sections above). Furthermore, providing information about career opportunities and mentors to employees may be crucial to alleviate the perceived threats in their professional advancement that can result from a physical absence from the main workplace.¹⁵⁸

If the office is going to become a collection of employees not working together, it essentially becomes no different from a coffee shop (though perhaps with better Internet and worse coffee).

Mitigating the contagiousness of offsite work

Another important consideration involves how many employees within an organisation or department are granted flexible working arrangements. In order to avoid feelings of inequity and its negative consequences, it is important that employees with similar roles and circumstances enjoy the same privileges. However, if many people choose to work offsite simultaneously, employees who choose to work from the office may not experience the social or productivity benefits they expect from being around their colleagues and managers. When no one is around consistently, employees who prefer working from the office end up joining colleagues who spend some or all of their time working elsewhere, compounding the problem.¹⁶²

^g A meta-analysis is a quantitative study design to systematically assess the results of multiple different studies to derive conclusions about that body of research.¹⁶¹

This issue is summarised well by the authors of a study on the contagiousness of offsite work:

“If the office is going to become a collection of employees not working together, it essentially becomes no different from a coffee shop (though perhaps with better Internet and worse coffee)”¹⁶²

This issue supports the recommendation to implement certain days in the week where all members of an organisation, department, or team are required to be present in the office. However, while some form of regularisation of remote working may be desirable, it needs careful management to optimise overall equity, trust, morale and flexibility.¹⁶³ Formalisation of procedures may come at the expense of a sense of justice for those employees who have come to expect that they can work from home when desired.¹⁶³

Concentrating at home, collaborating onsite

Leaders also need to consider the types of tasks an employee does when negotiating flexible work practices. Research on flexible workers suggests that people’s ability to concentrate is higher on home days, and they also have a lower need for recovery.¹⁶⁴

Hence, tasks high in cognitive complexity may be best suited to working from home, since they require a great deal of concentration without interruption.⁷³

However, face-to-face meetings in the office are likely to be the best option if the tasks involve collaborating, as interpersonally complex work can be more challenging with ICT-based communication (e.g. Teams or Zoom) than in person.¹¹⁰

Of course, what works best will also depend on your employees’ individual situation. If they have an office to themselves at work, concentration at work may be just as good as at home (or even better, if they have small children who could interrupt them at home).

Supporting individual differences

In addition to the type of tasks involved, leaders need to consider the individual preferences and needs of their employees to achieve a good person-job fit (to learn more about person-job fit, read the section *Flexible Work and Individual Differences* in *Appendix B*). For example, workers may differ in the extent that they value a sense of belonging to the organisation or team (relatedness), or autonomy, and thus require different levels of agency and

Research has found that a high intensity of remote working may be most suitable for workers who are high in need for autonomy, and low in need for relatedness.

social interaction.¹⁶⁵ The needs for autonomy and relatedness belong to the three universal psychological needs described by Self-determination theory (to learn more read the section *Flexible Work and Individual Differences* in *Appendix B*).^{132,133,134} According to the theory individuals differ with regard to these needs and different environments can vary in terms of the extent to which they support the satisfaction of these needs.¹⁶⁶ Research has found that a high intensity of remote working may be most suitable for workers who are high in need for autonomy, and low in need for relatedness.¹⁶⁷

In addition to varying psychological needs, employees’ preferences for a certain flexible working arrangement and associated supports can vary due to differences in personality and living arrangements. Managers need to consider for whom different intensities and frequencies of flexible working may or may not be the right fit and how a potential misfit could be supported better by certain management behaviours.

To find out more about the research on individual needs and personality, and to learn about how your employees can discover their personality as well as individual preferences in terms of autonomy and relatedness with simple self-assessment tools, refer to our guide for individuals: **“How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers”**.



Supporting and socialising a new team member

When thinking about flexible work, it is important to consider an employee's stage in the employee life cycle. New team members might be faced with additional challenges in a flexible working environment due to the limited opportunities to connect with colleagues and learn about the organisational culture.

Not being able to observe one's colleagues makes it challenging for remote newcomers to tacitly learn organisational and team norms. It is likely that remote team members will feel more socially isolated and excluded from the team, even if they interact frequently via ICT.¹⁶⁸ It has been suggested that the frequency and nature of team interactions strongly influence the effectiveness and pace of on-boarding in virtual teams.¹⁶⁸ Specifically, virtual teams performed better when they had more structured processes and frequent interactions. Informal interactions, whether face-to-face or over ICT, also play a crucial role in integrating a newcomer into an existing team and opportunities to explicitly share norms, expectations and standards with newcomers are important.¹⁶⁹ Research suggests that encouraging one-on-one, non-work-related interactions between remote newcomers and their teammates will increase a newcomer's social integration.¹⁶⁸

As a warm welcome is crucial in gaining loyalty from remote workers, leaders could consider scheduling a face-to-face team meeting in the office to welcome new starters and to introduce them to their new colleagues, instead of, or in addition to, a virtual team meet-and-greet. During the on-boarding phase of a new employee, leaders could consider to ask their long-term employees to spend a little bit more time in the office than usual. This might not only promote social connection, feelings of inclusion and learning of organisational norms, but provide more opportunities for feedback, which in turn increases a new employee's sense of mastery.

New team members might be faced with additional challenges in a flexible working environment due to the limited opportunities to connect with colleagues and learn about the organisational culture.



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Onboarding a New Employee Remotely

A Western Australian energy provider who implemented a roster system during the COVID-19 lockdown (i.e., teams worked two weeks in the office followed by two weeks at home) found that using a buddy system was the key success mechanism to onboarding remotely. New employees who were rostered to work from home were assigned an in-office buddy to help them settle in and learn the ropes. A bonus learning to come out of this process was the effectiveness of using screen-share as a learning tool for new employees. Both trainees and trainers reported finding this much easier and more comfortable than the usual way of hovering over each other's shoulders.





Balancing autonomy and social connection

In sum, the question of how much remote work is best seems to be a question of finding the right balance between providing agency and opportunities to connect in the office, whilst also taking into account individual and business needs

With intentional strategies and practices to minimise the risks of too much remote work in place, leaders can confidently grant their employees flexibility and autonomy around their work time and place, while simultaneously ensuring office presence and face-to-face meetings at appropriate times.

The question of how much remote work is best seems to be a question of finding the right balance between providing agency and opportunities to connect.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: SUPPORTING THE RIGHT BALANCE

- As a simple rule of thumb, encourage your employees to work in the office for collaboration tasks and to work from home for tasks that involve high concentration.
- Encourage your employees to discover their individual preferences for remote or office work with self-assessment tools. For example, refer them to the self-assessment tools in our guide for individuals: **“How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers”**.
- Schedule one-on-one meetings with your employees to discuss their individual needs and preferences and what they have learnt about them through their previous work experience and completing self-assessment tools. This will help you get to know their individual profile and situation better and provide insights about the areas in which they might need more or less support from you.
- Learn more about how to support individual differences. For example, you can read the following two articles on how to manage introverted and extroverted employees in a remote working context:
 - **How to manage extroverts remotely** (by Edie Louise Diemar, on the Australian HR Institute website)
 - **How to manage introverts remotely** (by Edie Louise Diemar, on the Australian HR Institute website)
- Foster “hybridizing” skills and ensure your employees’ work is designed in a SMART way at home AND in the office.
- Involve your team in deciding how/ where /when to work from home or from the office, with the aim to achieve both high levels of agency and relational aspects. Try different strategies to see what works best for you and your employees.
- Promote the office as a place where employees want to come. To learn more about this in the context of longer periods of forced remote work (e.g. due to the safety restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic), read our article on how to facilitate returning to the office:
 - **Returning to the Office: Four F’s to Facilitate Re-Entry** (by Professor Sharon Parker, CTWD website)

Supporting a sense of social worth and feeling valued

Another important aspect of highly relational work is perceiving a high level of task significance and social worth (i.e. a sense that one's work significantly impacts others, is appreciated by others, and contributes to the bigger picture). When employees perceive their jobs as high in task significance, they experience their work as more meaningful, i.e. more purposeful and valuable.^{116,170,171}

Numerous studies have shown that the experience of social worth and meaningfulness at work is associated with various benefits, including increased overall well-being, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, motivation and performance.^{172,173} If employees have a sense of meaning in their job, they generally feel that what they do is valuable and worthwhile, contribute to something bigger than themselves, or makes a difference in other people's lives (i.e. it has social worth).^{172,174,175}

Of course, not everyone has a visibly meaningful job, and when working from home there are limited opportunities to directly interact with the people who benefit from the work. However, research suggests that meaning is not so much about the job itself, rather, it's about how workers view their job and what elements of their work they choose to focus on.¹⁷⁶

It has been shown that employees who made the choice, conscious or not, to see their work as merely a job, were less happy, than their colleagues who viewed what they did as valuable and worthwhile – even if in reality they were carrying out the same task.^{67,176,177} For example, an accountant who works at a community college can find meaning in her work not because she is keeping the accounts balanced, but because she feels her work allows others to advance themselves through education.

Many employees may not be aware of how their work is meaningful, especially if they work remotely and don't interact with the beneficiaries of their work. To restore a sense of social worth and meaningfulness, leaders can encourage their employees to engage in cognitive job crafting to reflect on what they find meaningful and significant in their work.^{172,176} Moreover, they could intentionally provide opportunities for their employees to have direct contact with the people who benefit from their work (e.g. clients), which in turn can improve job performance.¹⁷⁸ Apart from these strategies, leaders can introduce internal recognition programs that acknowledge employees' contributions to the bigger picture.

Studies have shown that the experience of social worth and meaningfulness at work is associated with various benefits, including increased overall well-being, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, motivation and performance.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: SOCIAL WORTH AND FEELING VALUED

- Encourage your employees to reflect on the following question: In which ways can your work – directly or through a chain of events – affect other people's lives in a positive way or serve a greater good? Encourage them to be creative and take into account the butterfly effect; the idea that a seemingly insignificant event can have major consequences (e.g. a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the world can set off a chain of events that results in a tropical storm on the other side of the world).
- Provide opportunities for your employees to have direct contact with the people who benefit from their work. In a remote setting this contact could be via email, phone or video calls.
- Share targeted feedback with employees about how their efforts and work have contributed to the broader goal of the organisation. Making individual tasks seem less isolated can help employees to feel they are making a more significant contribution to the 'big picture'.
- Implement a recognition program to publicly acknowledge your employees' contribution to wider company goals. In addition, you can encourage co-workers to take the time to recognise the efforts of their peers in person or via email/chat.

Supporting well-being and good mental health

As outlined above, relational aspects of a job include the level of instrumental support as well as social and emotional support an employee receives from their manager. Providing a high level of social and emotional support to employees also involves supporting an employees' well-being and good mental health.

While flexible working arrangements can have a positive impact on employee well-being and mental health (e.g. due to reduced stress and work-family conflict), the psychosocial risks of flexible working can also have a negative impact (e.g. social isolation, increased home to work conflict).^{11,158}

Regardless of the work location or arrangement, employee mental health is an important topic for leaders, in particular due to the high prevalence of mental health issues in the working population.^{179,180} One in five Australians in any given year experience mental ill-health, with almost 50% of the population experiencing mental ill-health at some stage in their lifetime.¹⁸¹

The high prevalence of poor mental health and well-being results in businesses losing billions of dollars in lost working hours, low productivity and turnover costs.^{182,183} Including flow-on effects on a macroeconomic level, mental ill-health has been estimated to cost the economy almost \$60 billion a year.¹⁸⁴

The promotion of employee mental health and well-being does not only deserve greater attention in order to minimise costs, but also to support employees, organisations and industry to thrive, and with this to create a positive impact on society as a whole.^{180,185,186}

Beyond the organisation's duty of care, the business case for an effective mental health strategy is clear: an analysis by PwC showed that for every dollar spent on successfully implementing an appropriate action to increase employee well-being and to create a mentally healthy workplace, there is on average \$2.30 in benefits to be gained by the organisation in terms of improved productivity and lower numbers of compensation claims.¹⁸³

These figures demonstrate the importance of broader organisational mental health and well-being initiatives, such as the *Thrive at Work Initiative*, which also includes strategies based on the SMART Work Design model (see info box *Thrive at Work Initiative*).

Leaders play an important role in facilitating the broader organisational mental health strategy and have a responsibility to support the mental health and well-being of their employees.^{21,22,23}

Leaders play an important role in facilitating the broader organisational mental health strategy and have a responsibility to support the mental health and well-being of their employees.



THRIVE AT WORK INITIATIVE

Thrive at Work is a world-first well-being initiative centred on designing work that helps employees, organisations and industry to thrive. Led by the Future of Work Institute at Curtin University, Thrive at Work has been developed with leading mental health bodies – for and with, businesses.

The Thrive at Work initiative is based upon an integrated, evidence-based framework and underpinned by decades of research on work design. The Thrive at Work Framework consists of nine building blocks, clustered within three over-arching pillars. Organisations that use the framework as a basis for their mental health and well-being strategy can be confident that they are taking a holistic approach that not only focuses on helping people in workplaces to get well again (Mitigate Illness), but also on helping people stay well (Prevent Harm) and be the best they can be (Promote Thriving).

The nine building blocks are comprised of key evidence-based strategies that assist in the achievement of the building blocks and three over-arching pillars.

Pillar	Building Block	Key Strategies
 Mitigate Illness Monitor, accommodate, and treat illness, ill-health and injury.	 Detect & Support Illness	 Employee training to support others  Monitor mental health  Remove barriers to support  Employee Assistance Program
	 Accommodate Illness	 Injury management process  Return to Work process
	 Increase Individual Resources for Help-Seeking	 Employee training to help self  Stigma reduction for help-seeking
 Prevent Harm Minimise harm and protect against risk.	 Increase Job Resources	 Stimulating job resources  Mastery job resources  Agency job resources  Relational job resources
	 Ensure Tolerable Demands	 Tolerable demands: thinking, organisational, load & time, emotional, relational, activity & physical, time & location, environmental
	 Increase Individual Resources for Preventing Harm	 Job crafting for stress reduction  Resilience and coping
 Promote Thriving Optimise well-being and generate future capabilities.	 Create Conditions for Growth	 Organisational support for growth  Transformational leadership  Strength-based capability development  Continuous learning practices
	 Create Conditions for Connection	 Diversity practices  Opportunities for belonging  Beneficiary contact  Internal knowledge exchange  Community engagement
	 Increase Individual Resources for Thriving	 Job crafting for personal growth  Positive psychology practices

Thrive at Work provides organisations with a methodology for developing a mental health and well-being strategy and action plan. The process provides step-by-step guidance and resources for organisations to:

- Prepare a business case, form a project team and get the right resources and support
- Evaluate current mental health practices against the Thrive at Work Framework and identify areas for action (i.e. with the self-guided Thrive at Work Assessment Tool, or an expert-facilitated Thrive Audit)
- Build a well-being strategy and action plan that identifies key steps to becoming a thriving organisation
- Develop mechanisms for tracking the success of the strategy and action plan over time.

To learn more about the Thrive at Work Initiative, visit the **Thrive at Work website**.

Workers who are experiencing mental health issues might need additional support from their manager. In the remote working context, it can be difficult for managers to notice changes in the mental health of their employees due to the lack of frequent face-to-face contact. Hence it is important that leaders invest time to increase their mental health awareness and intentionally check in with their employees with one-on-one video calls.

Beyond detecting, supporting and accommodating mental health conditions it is important that leaders minimise harm and protect their employees against the psychosocial risks of remote working arrangements. This can be achieved by applying strategies to improve stimulating, mastery, agency and relational job resources, ensuring job demands are tolerable (see section *Tolerable Demands* in this guide), and increasing individual resources like resilience and coping strategies.

Furthermore, it is important that leaders foster positive mental health and well-being to promote thriving: Well-being is a central criterion of mental health and can help to prevent the onset of mental health issues,^{182,187,188} as well as alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety

disorders.^{189,190,191} Numerous studies have shown that the benefits of increasing employee well-being is not limited to the prevention of mental health problems, but in addition, well-being and happiness at work are one of the major sources of other positive outcomes in the workplace, including higher creativity, loyalty, productivity and resilience.^{185,188}

Leaders can implement strategies that create conditions for growth and connection, as well as increase their employees' individual resources for thriving, for example through positive psychology practices. Promoting well-being and happiness is one of the cornerstones of the field of positive psychology,¹⁹² a branch of psychology which is focusing on the scientific understanding of human flourishing.¹⁷⁵ Studies have shown that positive psychology practices can be effectively shared online via any web-enabled device, which is particularly important in the flexible working context.^{193,194,195}

For example, an online employee well-being program encouraging employees to complete brief positive psychology activities (such as gratitude journaling, mindfulness exercises, reflecting on personal strengths, random acts of kindness, humorous breaks, and brainstorming

meaningfulness at work), can significantly improve both general and work-related well-being.¹⁹⁵ Leaders could encourage employees to participate in online well-being programs, or could even integrate positive psychology practices into team meetings themselves (e.g. start with a brief mindfulness meditation, sharing a humorous story, or invite their employees to share something they're grateful for).

In sum, it is crucial for both organisational success and employee mental health that leaders invest time in developing their capabilities to mitigate mental ill-health, prevent harm, and promote thriving in their employees.

Since flexible working arrangements can increase employee well-being if they are managed successfully,¹¹ the application of the evidence-based strategies outlined in this guide can contribute to supporting the well-being and mental health of flexible workers.

Leaders could encourage employees to participate in online well-being programs, or could even integrate positive psychology practices into team meetings themselves.





STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Increase your understanding and knowledge of mental health, the different types of mental illnesses and how to support employees experiencing mental illness. To find out how you can select an effective training program read the good practice guide on the Thrive at Work website:
 - **Leader mental health training programs** (by the Thrive at Work Initiative)
- Be vigilant for signs of changes in the mental health of your employees. If you think your employee's mental health seems to be deteriorating, schedule a one-on-one meeting to start the conversation (ideally face-to-face, or video call if face-to-face isn't possible). Check out the resources below to learn more about signs and symptoms of mental ill-health, how to have a conversation about mental health in the workplace, and how to support your employees with a mental health condition:
 - **How to ask staff R U OK - A practical guide for the workplace** (by R U OK and The Centre for Corporate Health)
 - **Having a conversation: discussing mental health in the workplace** (Online training by beyondblue)
 - **Managing someone with a mental health condition** (by Heads Up, the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance and beyondblue)
 - **How to support your staff during COVID-19** (by the Black Dog Institute)
 - **8 Ways Managers Can Support Employees' Mental Health** (Harvard Business Review Article)
- Find out what resources your organisation currently offers to support the well-being and mental health of its employees. Do employees have access to an Employee Assistance Program or other mental health support? You could discuss your organisation's mental health and well-being strategy with HR or your colleagues to increase your understanding of the available resources and processes.
- If your organisation doesn't have a broader mental health strategy yet, discuss this with your HR team or leadership board. To support the business case for workplace mental health initiatives you can include the convincing statistics provided on the Thrive at Work website:
 - **Business case** (by the Thrive at Work Initiative)
- Integrate positive psychology practices into your team meetings. For example, you can start meetings with a brief mindfulness meditation, share a joke, funny meme, or humorous story, or invite your employees to share something they're grateful for (and share something yourself, too!).

To learn more about the impact of gratitude exercises on mental health and well-being and to see a list of 50 reflection questions to facilitate the experience of gratitude in your team, read the article by ARC Laureate Professor Sharon Parker below.

- **Life is short: Gratitude as we ease out of lockdown** (by Professor Sharon Parker, on the CTWD website)

To learn more about positive psychology and to find a selection of positive psychology interventions that can be applied in the workplace, read the article by Madhuleena Roy Chowdhury below:

- **19 Best Positive Psychology Interventions and How to Apply Them** (by Madhuleena Roy Chowdhury on PositivePsychology.com)
- To learn more about the importance of employee well-being, read the section *Flexible Work and Employee Well-being* in Appendix B of this guide.
- Apply strategies to improve stimulating, mastery, agency and relational job resources, while ensuring job demands are tolerable (see *Tolerable Demands* section for practical strategies to establish tolerable job demands).



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Supporting the mental health of flexible workers

A large multinational mining company has introduced additional strategies to support the mental health and well-being of their employees during the COVID-19 restrictions, when employees were coordinated in two groups that alternately worked from the office and from home every other week to comply with social distancing regulations.

For example, the company introduced a *well-being share* at the start of all virtual and non-virtual meetings, in addition to their traditional *safety share*. The *well-being share* was an opportunity to share what's working well and where extra support is required. Managers also used this space to celebrate the achievements of each employee, share good news stories and to connect the efforts of the team to the wider business goal. As a result employees could see their work is purposeful and important for the bigger picture, and the direct relationship between leaders and employees was fostered. Leaders were encouraged to follow up with one-on-one meetings if they noticed their employees might not be coping so well.

Moreover, employees had access to the company's Employee Assistance Program and peer supporters (i.e. nominated employees who are passionate about promoting mental health and well-being, and attended formal training for the peer supporter role). For every department there was a number of peer supporters that could be approached openly and safely by employees experiencing problems. This was particularly important for employees who did not feel comfortable to share their problems directly with their leaders. The peer supporters could provide support and resources, and speak to the leaders on behalf of the employee if desired.

The evidence-based strategies outlined in this guide can contribute to supporting the well-being and mental health of flexible workers.



TOLERABLE DEMANDS: REDUCE WORK-HOME CONFLICT AND TELEWORK- RELATED PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL DEMANDS

Work with tolerable demands is characterised by job demands that are manageable with the available resources, such as time, knowledge, and support. Job demands include

- high workload and time pressure (e.g. long working hours with little breaks or limited time for recovery);
- work-home conflict (e.g. experiencing incompatible demands between work and family roles);
- role conflict (e.g. receiving conflicting instructions from different managers);
- ICT demands (e.g. ICT-related interruptions, software crashes, internet instability during video calls);
- physical demands (e.g. heavy lifting, noise exposure, prolonged sitting);
- emotional demands (e.g. managing angry customers or traumatised patients; ICT hassle related frustrations).

When employees have adequate resources to manage their demands, employee engagement can be fostered.¹⁹⁶ However, if the level of demands exceeds the individual's ability to meet those demands, employees may experience job stress, burnout, and worsening mental health, which is often indicated by increased anxiety or

depression.^{197,198,199} Physical health may also be impacted, as jobs with high demands are associated with a higher risk of cardiovascular disease.²⁰⁰ For organisations, jobs with intolerable demands may lead to higher accident rates, turnover, presenteeism and absenteeism, as well as more workers' compensation claims and slower return to work after injury or illness.^{199,201}

For the purposes of this guide, we focus on how leaders can help employees manage job demands that are particularly pertinent to flexible working, that is, work-home conflict due to blurred home-work boundaries, the physical demands of ICT-based work, and telework-related emotional demands.

Other important demands that relate to virtual work, such as workload with high time pressure, and high ICT demands, are addressed in the *Tolerable Demands* section in the guide: **"How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers"**.

Research-based strategies for employees to manage work-home conflict and ICT demands (such as ICT hassles, ICT overload, and learning-induced ICT demands) can be found in the *Tolerable Demands* section in the guide: **"How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers"**.

Managing blurred home - work boundaries

Flexible working arrangements can help employees to combine work and home roles, however, research shows inconsistent results with regard to the experience of work-home conflict for individuals working from home.^{202,203,204}



Work-home conflict is a type of inter-role conflict in which the role demands stemming from one life domain (work or home) are incompatible with role demands stemming from the other domain.²⁰⁵ The direction of this conflict can go two ways:²⁰²

- **Work-to-home conflict** (i.e. work interfering with private life: for example, working late and missing family activities, or responding to work emails whilst trying to engage with family)
- **Home-to-work conflict** (i.e. private life interfering with work: for example, being preoccupied at work due to family stress at home, or missing an important meeting due to having to pick up kids from school).

While some studies found flexible workers experience a decrease in both work-to-home conflict and home-to-work conflict,^{206,207} others studies found no link,^{208,209} and still others found an increase in work-home conflict.^{14,210,211}

When working from home, greater work-home conflict may occur due to the lack of traditional work-home boundaries associated with office-based work, such as physical and time-related boundaries. For example, home and work activities take place in the same physical location, and work is permanently accessible due to its primarily ICT-based nature, resulting in the pressure to be constantly available.²¹² When employees

struggle to manage the blurred boundaries between work and home, job satisfaction and performance can decrease, while family related conflict may increase.^{2,120,213,214,215}

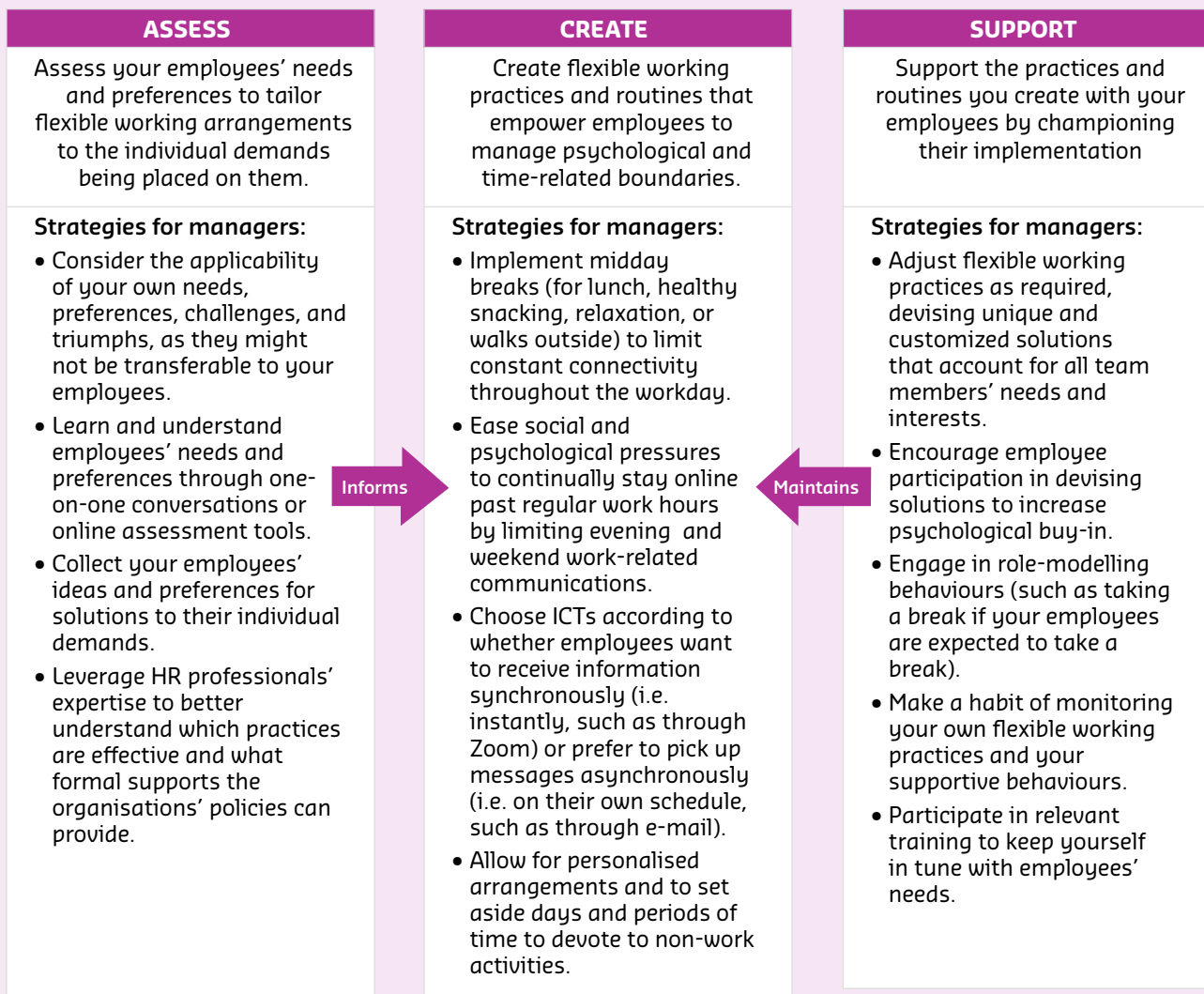
Our global Thrive at Work from home study (see *Appendix A*) found that a key driver of psychological distress was work-home conflict. Furthermore, 37.1% of those working from home all or most of the time agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘This week, the demands of my work interfered with my home and family life.’

To reduce the experience of work-home conflict for flexibly working employees, managers can establish and optimise work-home boundaries,

which in turn can enhance employees’ health, well-being, and performance.²¹³

It has been suggested that managers can apply the *assess-create-support framework* (outlined in the information box and the section below) to address employees’ daily boundary control needs and challenges effectively.²¹³

ASSESS-CREATE- SUPPORT FRAMEWORK²¹³



Assess employees' needs and preferences

It is important that managers become aware of and understand each employee's boundary management preferences and needs. Research suggests that although some employees prefer to separate work and non-work roles (i.e. "segmenters"), others prefer to blend work and non-work roles (i.e. "integrators").^{213,216} For example, segmenters might require stringent impermeable boundaries to perform their best, whereas integrators might require increased flexibility and prefer more permeable boundaries.²¹⁷

To learn about their employees' specific circumstances and needs, managers can schedule one-on-one conversations and leverage self-assessments tools (e.g. the *Center for Creative Leadership's* WorkLife Indicator, a tool to measure an individual's boundary management approach;^{213,218} or the tool to discover individual work-home segmentation included in the guide for individuals: "**How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers**").

For more strategies, refer to the assess column of the *assess-create-support framework* in the information box.

Create flexible working practices and routines

On the basis of the information gained from assessing employees' needs and preferences, managers can work with employees to tailor psychological and time-related boundaries between work and home, taking into account differences in whether and how employees prefer to separate or integrate work and non-work roles.

Encouraging breaks can enable employees to take time off from their computers and not feel guilty for doing so. Research shows regular breaks help increase employees' energy and reduce end-of-workday fatigue.^{219,220,221}

Moreover, managers can reduce the psychological and social pressures to routinely stay on the job past regular work hours by discouraging working after hours (at least for those employees who have not set up work-at-night arrangements).²¹³ However, the effects of late-day communication can vary between individuals: Whereas integrators may be able to leverage after-hours contact to exercise greater flexibility in a healthy way, segmenters are likely to struggle when they feel pressure to work after hours.^{213,222}

Research suggests that asynchronous electronic communication (such as e-mail) might be less invasive at home than synchronous electronic communication (such as face-to-face meetings conducted via Zoom or Slack).^{223,224} Managers could consider varying their use of these tools to match the different needs of segmenters and integrators.

For more strategies, refer to the create column of the *assess-create-support framework* in the information box.



INDUSTRY EXAMPLE

Supporting Recovery through Non-Work Activities

Google, a multinational technology company that specialises in internet-related services and products, announced a company-wide holiday to encourage recovery and address work-from-home-related burnout during the coronavirus pandemic.²²⁵

Strategies like this can encourage recovery from work and devoting time specifically to non-work activities.



Support the practices and routines by championing their implementation

Research suggests that the informal support employees receive from managers in achieving work-life balance is more important than the formal support through organisational policies.²⁰⁷

Leaders who engage in family-supportive behaviours can help employees manage work and family roles,²²⁶ which in turn fosters lower work-home conflict. It has been shown that family-supportive behaviours and compassionate support are especially critical during societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when people face more family demands (see information box below).²²⁷



LEADER SUPPORT AND COMPASSION DURING SOCIETAL CRISES CAN REDUCE WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

A study on transitions to working from home during the COVID-19 restrictions showed that employees experienced more work-home conflict, in terms of incompatibility between work and family needs, when they preferred to segment work and home activities, experienced more ICT hassles, and had less compassionate leaders.²²⁷ This was in turn associated with lower job satisfaction and job performance, as well as higher turnover intent.

Hence, leaders who are compassionate (e.g. who can recognise and empathise with their employees' concerns), offer emotional support, and help with technology hassles can particularly foster a more positive transition to home working in times of societal crises.²²⁷

Managers should continuously adjust flexible working practices to optimise solutions for the best interests of all employees.²²⁸ Research indicates that solutions developed in collaboration with employees provide the most effective form of support in terms of improving employees' physical health and job satisfaction.²²⁹

Furthermore, it has been shown that managers' boundary management behaviours are witnessed and emulated by their employees, so it's important that managers practice what they preach.^{230,231}

This is particularly important in the flexible work context when employees are isolated from other co-workers and might assess which behaviours are normative by closely attending to their manager's actions.²¹³

With the support of their manager, employees will feel empowered to establish their own routines for a healthy work-life balance, resulting in happier, healthier and more productive employees.²¹³

For more strategies, refer to the support column of the *assess-create-support framework* in the information box.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: HOME-WORK BOUNDARIES

- Apply the *assess – create – support framework* and the associated strategies outlined above. Ensure you collaborate with your employees to set customised psychological and time-related home-work boundaries, so they can function well in both spheres.
- Schedule one-on-one conversations with your employees to learn about their specific circumstances and needs. You can encourage your employees to use self-assessment tools to discover whether or not they like to segment home and work activities (e.g. see *Work-Home Segmentation Preference* section in the guide for individuals: “**How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers**”). You can also explore employees' individual boundary management approaches with the WorkLife Indicator (by Ellen Ernst Kossek, Ph.D, and the Center for Creative Leadership)
- Encourage (online) training or provide tips on how employees can create boundaries between work and home when working remotely.²²⁷
- Develop a compassionate leadership style and take time to recognise and empathise with your employees' concerns.
- For more information, tips, and employee-level strategies to manage boundaries between work and home, read the *Tolerable Demands* section in the individual guide: “**How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers**”. Encourage your employees to read the *Tolerable Demands* section in the individual guide, so they can learn how to reduce work-home conflict themselves by applying physical, behavioural, time-based and communicative strategies.

With the support of their manager, employees will feel empowered to establish their own routines for a healthy work-life balance, resulting in happier, healthier and more productive employees.

Reducing physical demands of ICT-based work

Due to prolonged occupational sitting and working in fixed positions, computer-based work exposes employees to physical health risks, such as:

- musculoskeletal pain in the upper extremities and neck;²⁰
- visual strain and eye discomfort;^{20,232}
- increased risk of cancer and cardiovascular disease mortality.⁵⁸

For example, a high level of sedentary behaviour during work increases the risk of developing breast, colon, colorectal, endometrial and epithelial ovarian cancers, even if employees participate in regular moderate to vigorous physical activity outside of work.²³³

Furthermore, prolonged occupational sitting is linked to poorer mental health.^{234,235} Among Australian office-workers, sitting for more than six hours per day for work has also been associated with increased psychological distress.²³⁶

Many organisations aim to reduce these risks as part of their duty of care and to gain positive organisational outcomes.⁵⁸ Interventions that decrease prolonged occupational

sitting can reduce employee absence, turnover, occupational injury and mental distress,^{237,238} while interventions that promote physical activity during work can improve productivity, employee morale, employee engagement and a positive attitude towards the “caring” organisation.⁵⁸

Traditionally, interventions to reduce occupational sitting and promote physical activity have focused on the workplace as a static environment, with strategies attached to a physical worksite (e.g. prompts to use the stairs at work, fitness facilities, and activity-promoting workstations such as sit-stand desks, treadmill desks and cycling workstations).^{239,240} The flexible workplace presents new challenges for engaging employees in such health promotion programs, since strategies need to be accessible to workers from any location.⁵⁸

While flexible working arrangements may have a positive impact on physical activity outside of work by allowing employees to manage their own hours and increasing discretionary time, they may make habits to interrupt prolonged occupational sitting and being physically active during working times more difficult to establish and maintain.⁵⁸

Research indicates that flexible work can increase occupational sitting time, primarily due to more ICT-based communication and lack of incidental movement in the workplace, such as taking the stairs and walking to talk with colleagues.⁵⁸ Therefore, it is vital that managers support behaviours to increase physical activity, in particular since it has been suggested that individual strategies may only be effective with strong support from senior management.²³² However, approaches to develop, implement and promote interventions to reduce ICT-based physical demands should be participatory and involve all interested parties (i.e. employers, managers, and employees). This ensures employee engagement, sense of ownership, and commitment to change.^{20,242}

Research indicates that flexible work can increase occupational sitting time, primarily due to more ICT-based communication and lack of incidental movement in the workplace.

For example, leaders could discuss the health risks of prolonged occupational sitting with their team and invite them to brainstorm how to reduce sitting in the flexible work context. As it might not be feasible for organisations to provide static workplace interventions such as sit-stand desks in both offices and employees’ homes, the focus could be on location independent interventions such as virtual prompts that promote physical activity (e.g. text or email reminders to move or stretch).⁵⁸ For example, it has been found that prompts through a smart phone application were effective in reducing sedentary time.²⁴³ Moreover, office-





based health information sessions and physical activity promotion (e.g. lunch time yoga, instructor-led stretching exercises) could be made available for teleworkers via online video technology (live or on demand videos).

Since studies have shown that social support is associated with participation in workplace health activities and can increase physical activity in workers,²⁴⁴ interventions that create social connectedness may be effective in a flexible workplace: For example, buddy systems to create accountability, walking groups, and instructor-led activities with personal follow-ups, have been shown to be effective.^{58,244} At the same time, this social approach could improve the relational aspects of flexible work as employees get to know each other better. Since ICT-based communication is the most appropriate channel for these strategies in the flexible working context, managers could invite employees to brainstorm the use of online resources, social media platforms and phone applications.⁵⁸



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: ICT-BASED PHYSICAL DEMANDS

- Share information about the health risks of prolonged occupational sitting with your employees to raise awareness and motivate change. Invite them to brainstorm how to reduce sitting time when working from home and in the office.
- Encourage walking or standing meetings. For example, when working from home, employees could use their mobile phones to take part in virtual meetings while walking around.
- If feasible for the type of tasks, encourage remote working employees to complete their work in short bouts throughout the day, rather than in one set work block. For example, employees working at home could break up occupational sedentary time with active domestic tasks, gym sessions, runs, walks, or other physically active breaks.⁵⁸
- Invite employees to take turns to prepare short video supported lunch time physical activities for the rest of the team (e.g. 5-15 minutes of yoga, stretches, squats, etc.).
- Start a step-count or push-up challenge with your employees and choose a target and time-frame together for higher accountability.
- Discuss with the leadership board or HR team if your organisation can provide portable sit-stand desk equipment to support healthier flexible working.
- Participate in the interventions yourself to be a good role model for your employees.



Mitigating telework-related emotional demands

Employees with high levels of emotional demands are at higher risk of mental health disorders and reduced productivity.²⁴⁵ Emotional demands refer to conditions at work that might create emotionally demanding situations, for example when employees have to deal with strong feelings such as frustration, sorrow, anger, or desperation.^h

Encouragingly, telework has been found to have a positive impact on some emotional demands typically associated with office-based work, including a reduction in travel-related stress and irritation caused by office interruptions.²⁴⁶

The news isn't all positive however, with many studies reporting an increase in the emotional demands of telework relating to:²⁴⁶

- increased feelings of loneliness and isolation as a result of working away from the office;
- more frustration due to ICT hassles and lack of technical support;
- more guilt when calling in sick;
- more resentment regarding the impact teleworking has on home and family life and the ability to 'switch off';^{19,247}
- more emotional exhaustion due to perceived lack of social support;²⁴⁸
- more frustration and stress due to higher uncertainty and reduced role clarity, if ICT-based communication with a manager is of poorer quality (e.g. unclear or reduced communication and feedback)¹⁹
- more emotional exhaustion due to higher frequency of video calls.^{249,250}

^h Some forms of work are inherently high in emotional demands, including work that is emotionally disturbing, requires high emotional involvement, or requires workers to regularly suppress their emotions (e.g. customer service work). For the purpose of this guide, we focus on strategies for emotional demands that are associated with working from home or away from the central workplace, not with the content of the work itself.

Video calls can be stressful and frustrating for employees due to the limited social and physical cues, e.g. when having to work out when it is appropriate to speak in a team meeting.

Managers may be able to mitigate some of the negative effects of telework-related emotional demands by increasing social support, role clarity and feedback using the respective strategies outlined in the *Mastery* and *Relational* sections of this guide.¹⁹

It is important that managers ensure their employees are aware of the formal flexible working policies that address issues such as sick leave and working hours while working from home. The formal policies should emphasise the fact that employees working remotely enjoy the same rights as their office-based colleagues, which can lessen the guilt some employees experience when calling in sick on their home office days.

ICT use bring new hassles into the workplace such as ICT malfunctions, security threats, or instable internet connections, which can disrupt work and be the source of significant work stress and frustration. Research has shown that ICT hassles can negatively affect individuals' emotions, well-being and performance.^{121,251,253,254} In our global Thrive at Work from home study, participants indicated greater psychological distress when experiencing ICT related hassles and interruptions when working from home. Hence, it is important that employees have access to technical support to reduce the emotional impact of technology failure. To

further offset the negative effects of technostress, managers should identify technology-related needs and encourage relevant ICT training for employees (such as training on how to recover automatically saved documents after a software crash, or how to troubleshoot in case of audio or video issues during a virtual meeting).²²⁷

Furthermore, flexible work can increase the frequency of video calls, which can be draining and result in exhaustion. Video calls are less rich in information than face-to-face communications and peripheral awareness is reduced (e.g. it's difficult to observe people's entire body language and there is a lack of information about contextual factors).²⁵⁰ The lack of information can be stressful and frustrating for employees, for example when having to work out when it is appropriate to speak in a team meeting.²⁴⁹ In order to navigate the interpersonal dynamics and to compensate for the impaired social and physical cues, more intense concentration is necessary as compared to face-to-face meetings, which can be tiring and exhausting.²⁴⁹ Moreover, video calls increase the need for positive self-presentation, i.e. the need of individuals to present

themselves in a favourable light in a way that others will think highly of them or like them.²⁵⁵ Not only can others see an individual's face on the screen, but individuals can see their own face, which can make them even more conscious of the image they are presenting.²⁴⁹ While it is natural to want to create a positive impression, self-presentation takes energy and can become exhausting,²⁵⁶ particularly if video call meetings are scheduled back-to-back without breaks for recovery in between.²⁴⁹ Managers should encourage employees to schedule micro breaks between video calls to do something that is not related to work.^{249,257} It has been shown that micro breaks during the day restore energy and reduce fatigue.²⁵⁸

Research has shown that ICT hassles can negatively affect individuals' emotions, well-being and performance.



The experience of positive emotions can undo the negative aftereffects of unpleasant emotions such as frustration, loneliness and anger.

For example, employees could schedule a few minutes for stretching, yoga or a walk outside between meetings, which in turn will reduce the physical demands of prolonged sitting as outlined above.

Moreover, managers should encourage employees to intentionally break up their work day with brief activities that involve the experience of positive emotions such as happiness or joy. It has been suggested that the experience of positive emotions can undo the negative aftereffects of unpleasant emotions,^{259,260} such as telework-related frustration, loneliness and anger.

Leaders are key sources of emotional support for employees, in particular if they have to cope with change, uncertainty or stressors like COVID-19.²²⁷ It has been found that a compassionate manager who empathises and recognises employee concerns can relieve stress and generate positive emotions,^{261,262,263} for example when employees face anxiety over COVID-19.²²⁷ Managers who develop a compassionate leadership style may mitigate telework-related emotional demands, in particular during societal crisis events such as COVID-19.



Moreover, managers should encourage employees to attend training on coping strategies (e.g. emotion- vs. problem-focused coping strategies) and how to use them appropriately in various situations.²²⁷ Additionally, managers should ensure employees have access to information on how to deal with stress at work and how to manage work-home conflict.

If employees are overwhelmed with the emotional demands of teleworking, managers should encourage their employees to use mental health resources and support provided by the organisation (e.g. an Employee Assistance Program).

Furthermore, it's important that employees have enough time after work to develop and maintain social connections outside of work, as this can increase well-being and buffer against the experience of negative emotions and isolation while working remotely.²⁶⁴

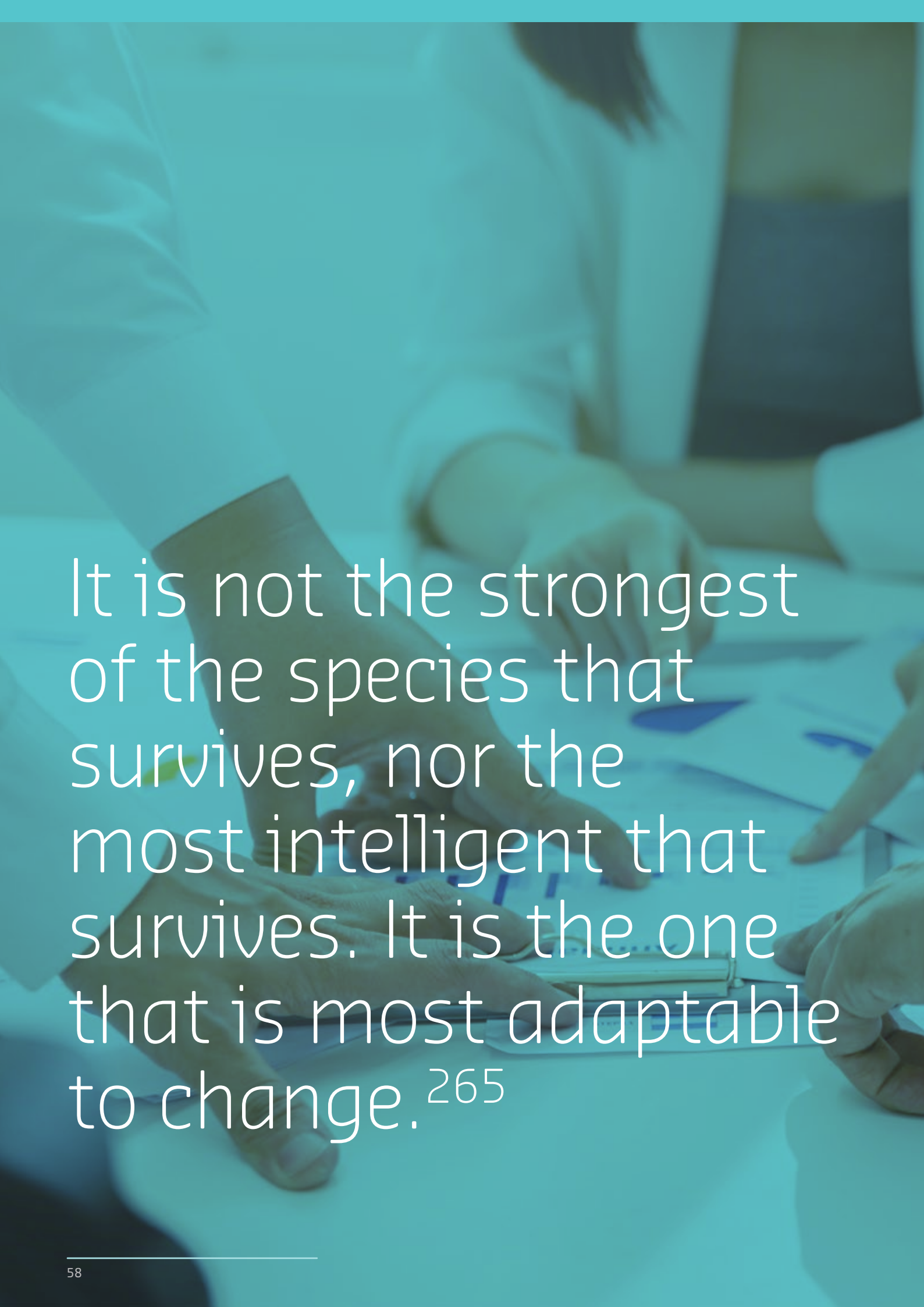
Managers who develop a compassionate leadership style may mitigate telework-related emotional demands, in particular during societal crisis events such as COVID-19.



STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS: TELEWORK-RELATED EMOTIONAL DEMANDS

- Ensure your employees are aware of the formal flexible working policies that address issues such as sick leave and working hours while working from home.
- Apply the strategies outlined in the *Relational* section to reduce your employees' feelings of isolation. Providing structured, varied and innovative opportunities for social interaction can lessen the negative emotional effects of teleworking.
- Make sure you provide a high level of role clarity and apply practices to improve frequent communication and feedback in order to reduce stress and frustration associated with uncertainty and ambiguity. Read the *Mastery* section in this guide to learn more about strategies to increase role clarity and feedback.
- To reduce the resentment that employees working remotely may feel with regards to work intruding into home life, apply the strategies outlined in the section *Managing Blurred Home-Work Boundaries*.
- Ensure your employees have access to technical support. Consider if some employees could benefit from ICT training to learn how to solve basic technical issues themselves.
- Encourage employees to avoid back-to-back video call meetings and to plan micro breaks for recovery in between virtual meetings.
- To learn more about why video calls can be emotionally draining and what to do about it, read the blog post by ARC Laureate Professor Sharon Parker below and share it with your employees:
 - **Are you a Zoom Zombie? How to take control of your virtual meetings** (by Professor Sharon Parker, on the CTWD website)
- To foster the experience of positive emotions at work, apply the positive psychology interventions outlined in the *Relational* section (under *Supporting Well-being and Good Mental Health*).
- Encourage your employees to read the individual guide, "**How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers**", so they can learn how to manage ICT related hassles and work-home conflict themselves.





It is not the strongest
of the species that
survives, nor the
most intelligent that
survives. It is the one
that is most adaptable
to change.²⁶⁵

Final Considerations



By following the recommendations outlined in this guide, leaders can effectively manage flexible working in a way that optimises both the well-being and the productivity of employees.

The managerial “levers” for making flexible working successful comprise the understanding and implementation of both *formal flexible working policies* and effective *flexible working practices*.

Formal flexible working policies should be applied by all managers consistently, but it is crucial that they allow enough flexibility so that informal personalised arrangements can still be granted.

Effective flexible working practices involve the application of evidence-based practical strategies that are grounded in the science of organisational psychology and have been shown to optimise outcomes for both employees and organisations.

The SMART Work Design model can be used as an evidence-based tool to structure practical strategies around five key themes which together provide foundational ingredients for creating engaging, meaningful, productive, and healthy work: Stimulating, Mastery, Agency, Relational, and Tolerable Demands. It is important that leaders

implement strategies that impact all five dimensions of the SMART Work Design model to be most effective. For example, only focusing on providing more autonomy (A) to employees - without also considering other aspects such as social support (R), task variety (S), and role clarity (M) - is not likely to achieve the maximum benefits of flexible working. Leaders should ideally monitor the level of SMART work design in their employees’ roles on a regular basis and identify when high job demands (T) can be alleviated by increasing job resources (SMAR).

Finally, it is critical for managers and organisations to remember that it is not a question of *whether* flexible working is more or less effective than traditional work, but *how* can it be made more effective. Considering its undeniable benefits, flexible working is likely to become the ‘new normal’ beyond the duration of the pandemic.³ To maximise employee performance, productivity, and well-being, managers need to focus on what can be done to *improve the design* of flexible work. Leaders can

experiment with what works best for their employees by actively involving employees in decisions around flexible working practices, particularly if this working style is still uncharted territory for some.

It is important to note that employees play an important role in managing themselves effectively, too. Further information on this can be found in the guide for individuals: “**How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers**”. Additionally, further strategies specifically for managers who lead virtual teams can be found in the guide: “**How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers**”.

It is not a question of whether flexible working is more or less effective than traditional work, but how can it be made more effective.

Appendix A - Project Overview

Aim

This guide provides evidence-based recommendations on how to effectively lead and manage flexible working to optimise the well-being and productivity of employees. It draws on literature and research on work design, mental health, well-being and leadership in the flexible working context.

Process

This guide was created using the following three-staged approach:

1. A comprehensive literature and desktop review of academic and non-academic literature was undertaken, with key findings synthesised.
2. A sample of industry and government agencies were engaged for anecdotal evidence on how managers and teams responded to working virtually during COVID-19.
3. Stages 1 and 2 were synthesised, and along with the Future of Work Institute's own research (see *global Thrive at Work from home survey* see the following section), this was used to develop evidence-based strategies for managers of employees with flexible working arrangements.

The following guides were also created using the above approach and can be accessed via the links below. While some of the key concepts overlap for individuals, managers and teams, each of the guides provides a unique perspective on flexible working and it is recommended that they are read in conjunction with this guide

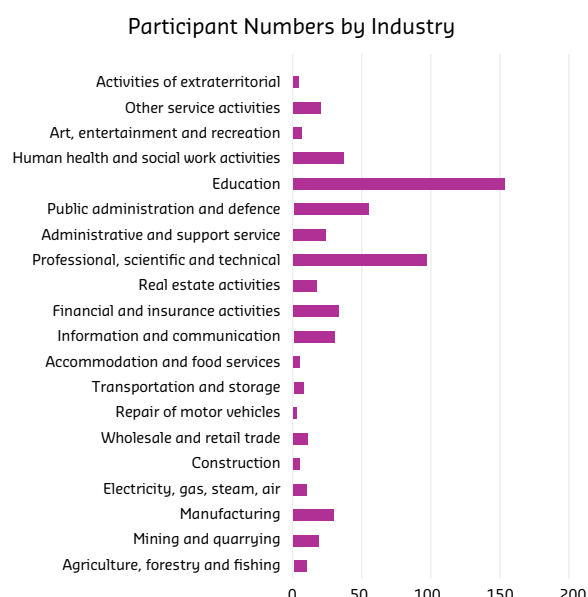
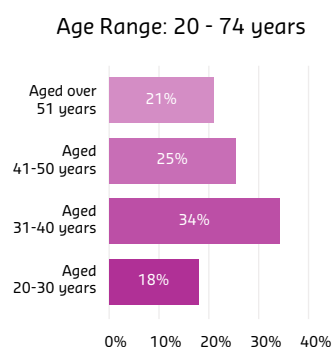
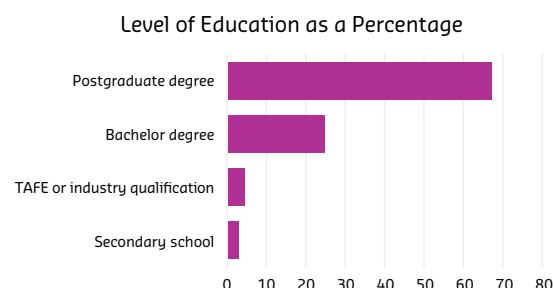
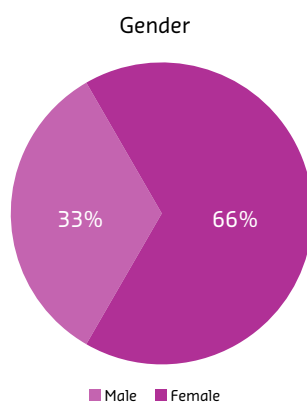
- For individuals: **"How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers"**
- For managers of virtual teams: **"How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers"**

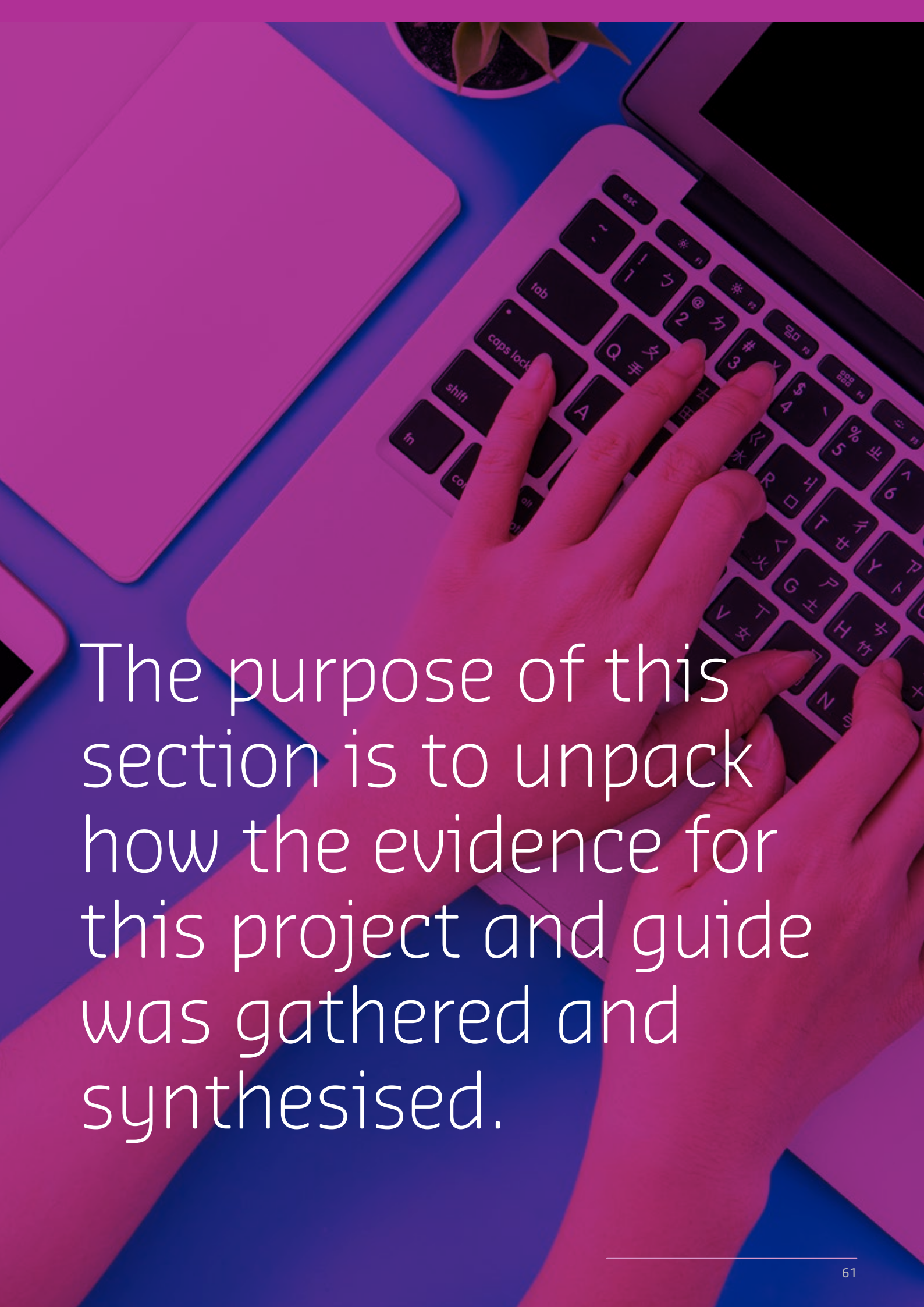
Global Thrive at Work from home survey

The Centre for Transformative Work Design (CTWD), part of the Future of Work Institute (FOWI) at Curtin University, undertook a *global Thrive at Work from home survey* with the aim to understand how workers are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and how best to support large scale working from home during this crisis. The survey explored

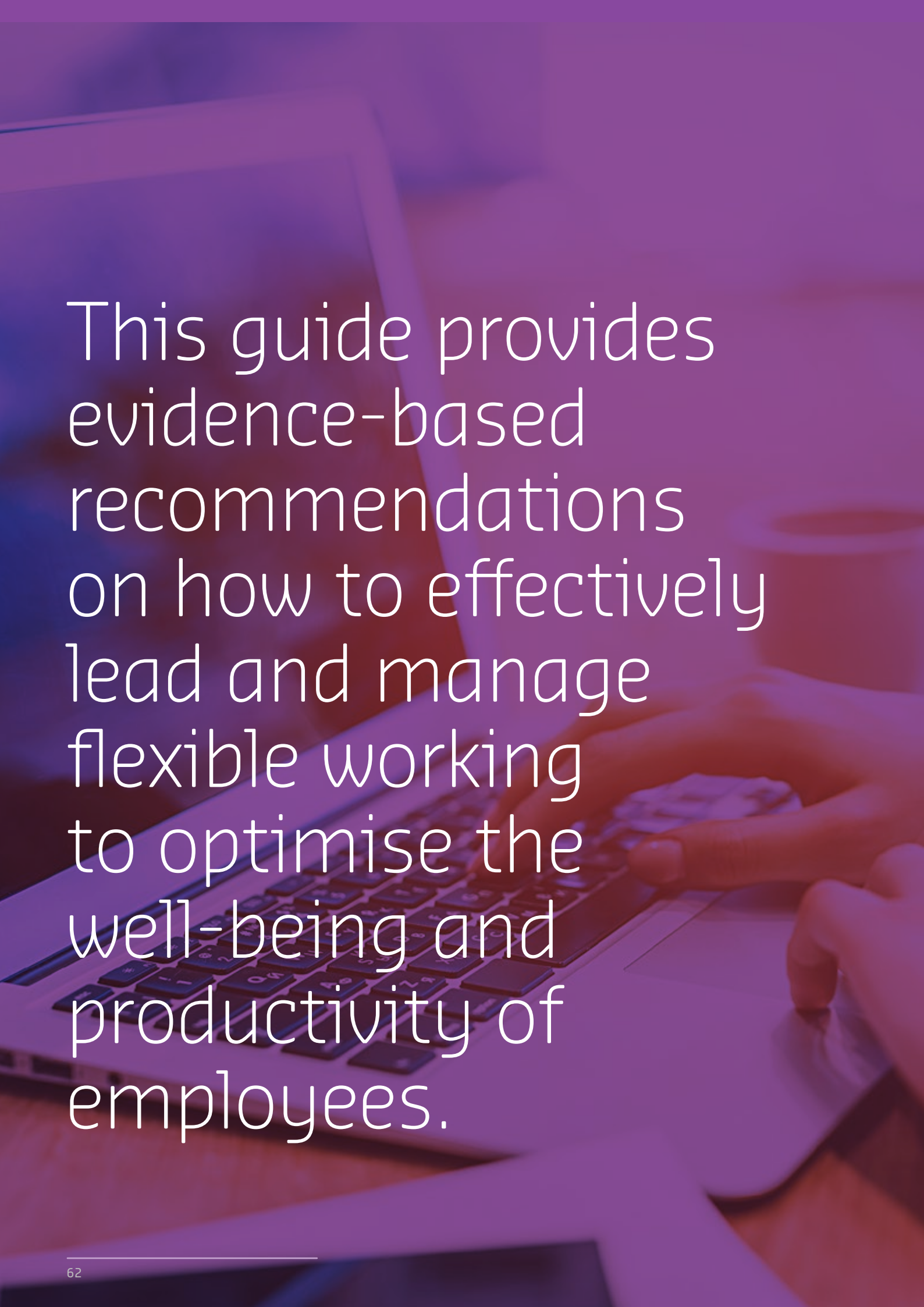
- the multiple factors involved in influencing home workers' well-being and productivity;
- employees' level of mental health and well-being;
- the strategies organisations and individuals adopted to cope with working from home.

The Global Thrive at WFH survey is longitudinal, spanning over a 6-month period that commenced in April 2020. For more information on the survey, please see this **section** on the CTWD website. This guide includes results from the *global Thrive at Work from home survey* at time 1 in April 2020, during lockdown when individuals were mostly working from home (4+ days per week). A total of 452 employees were surveyed at Time 1 with some demographic information provided below.



A photograph of a person's hands typing on a laptop keyboard. The scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent pink and purple gradient. In the background, a pink notebook and a small potted plant are visible.

The purpose of this section is to unpack how the evidence for this project and guide was gathered and synthesised.

A background image showing a person's hands typing on a laptop keyboard. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter. The text is white and positioned on the left side of the image.

This guide provides evidence-based recommendations on how to effectively lead and manage flexible working to optimise the well-being and productivity of employees.

Appendix B - Brief Literature Review

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF FLEXIBLE WORK

Flexible working is a topic of considerable interest to both researchers and practitioners, especially as a strategy to help employees manage their work and home domains. The research on flexible work is diverse and includes topics such as work-home conflict, maternity leave policies, use of technology, work distribution, virtual teams and remote performance management. Two key meta-analysesⁱ show that overall, teleworking is mainly positive, and that well-managed flexible working is effective for employees, teams and organisations.^{2,15}

Benefits and challenges of flexible work for employees and employers

A review of the literature identified the following advantages of flexible work for both the employee and employer.^{2,11,9,12,13,14,15}

BENEFITS OF FLEXIBLE WORK FOR EMPLOYEES	BENEFITS OF FLEXIBLE WORK FOR EMPLOYERS
Greater work-life balance via the ability to better coordinate work and non-work tasks	Increased work morale due to increased job satisfaction among staff who prefer flexible working
Spatial mobility, as flexible work makes participating in work possible from different places, such as remote areas	Improved ability to recruit and retain staff, as employers can position themselves as employer of choice by supporting flexible working
Increased work autonomy, as workers have more freedom to decide how to structure and schedule their work	Increased agility, as flexible work allows access to work related information regardless of time and space
Increased work motivation, which can result from having a greater sense of autonomy over work	Performance and productivity gains (e.g. due to employees being able to work in an environment with fewer distractions and to use time saved on commuting productively)
Economic advantages (e.g. reduced costs associated with commuting, food, clothing etc.)	Economic advantages (e.g. reduced costs associated with office space, equipment etc.)
Increased job satisfaction due to greater autonomy in when, where and how work is carried out	Increased organisational commitment (results of a meta-analysis showed a positive relationship between telework and organisational commitment)
Greater worker well-being (research has shown that the benefits of flexible working contribute to increased work engagement, more positive mood, and reduced sickness absence)	Reduced staff turnover (research has shown that the perceived benefits of flexible working arrangements are associated with lower turnover intentions, as individuals are more satisfied with their jobs)

i A meta-analysis is a quantitative study design to systematically assess the results of multiple different studies to derive conclusions about that body of research.¹⁶¹



The advantages of flexible working arrangements for employees can also be considered beneficial for the organisation, as they are associated with important organisational outcomes such as higher productivity, performance, and staff turnover.²

A summary of the challenges of flexible work for employees are listed in the table below, together with which sections in this guide outline manager strategies to alleviate these challenges:

Advantages of flexible working arrangements for employees can also be considered beneficial for the organisation, as they are associated with important organisational outcomes such as higher productivity, performance, and staff turnover.

CHALLENGES OF FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS FOR EMPLOYEES ^{13,16,17,18,19,20,119,120}	SECTIONS OUTLINING MANAGER STRATEGIES TO ALLEVIATE THESE CHALLENGES
Increased home-to-work conflict	Tolerable Demands section
Lower levels of psychological detachment (“switching off”) from work when working at home	Tolerable Demands section
Increased role ambiguity	Mastery section
Perceived lack of promotion opportunities	Stimulating section Relational section
Reduced support and feedback when working from home	Mastery section Relational Section
Lack of social connection and increased feelings of professional isolation when working from home	Relational Section
Risk for injuries, if there are no safety protocols in the home office (e.g. ergonomic workstation setup, protocols to avoid electrical and trip hazards)	Flexible Working Policy section Tolerable Demands section
The autonomy paradox	Agency section

If the flexible working challenges employees experience are not addressed with effective strategies, they may contribute to negative outcomes for the organisation, such as reduced performance and productivity, and increased turnover.

For a more detailed overview of the benefits and challenges of flexible work for employees, it is recommended to read *Appendix B* in the guide for individuals: “**How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers**”.

Members of a virtual team depend on technology to communicate and coordinate their activities.

Benefits and challenges of flexible work for virtual and hybrid teams

A virtual team, also known as a remote, dispersed, or distributed team, is commonly defined as “an interdependent group of people working toward a common goal but separated by a number of boundaries, such as those of space, time, culture, or organisational affiliation”.²⁶⁶ As such, members of a virtual team depend on technology to communicate and coordinate their activities.

A hybrid team is a type of virtual team that is defined by their use of both technology-mediated communication and face-to-face communication.²⁶⁷

One of the key advantages of virtual teams is the flexibility they afford organisations by pooling talent and expertise from across the world to meet the demands of the increasingly competitive global environment.²⁶⁸ On a local level, organising work virtually can allow an organisation to coordinate the inputs and actions of multiple employees across the organisation without requiring employees to be located in the same place.²⁶⁹

For these reasons, as well as innovation in collaborative software, virtual and hybrid teamwork is becoming increasingly common.²⁷⁰

Virtual and hybrid teams face many unique challenges, including:

- Difficulties in communicating and sharing knowledge across the boundaries of time and space
- Difficulties in developing and maintaining trust between team members
- Lack of team cohesion in diverse teams
- Social loafing, which is when team members exert less effort because they know their individual efforts are not directly observable and thus they believe their contributions are unlikely to be rewarded⁹⁷

These challenges are outlined in *Appendix B* of the guide for managers of virtual teams: “**How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers**”. Similarly to employee challenges that remain unaddressed, the challenges that virtual and hybrid teams may face can result in negative outcomes for the organisation if they aren’t managed well. Hence, it is highly recommended that managers of virtual or hybrid teams also apply the strategies outlined in the guide: “**How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers**”.

The challenges that virtual and hybrid teams may face can result in negative outcomes for the organisation if they are not managed well.





UNDERSTANDING THE BEST CONDITIONS FOR MOTIVATION, PRODUCTIVITY AND WELL-BEING

Understanding the best conditions for motivation, productivity, and well-being facilitates the successful implementation of practical strategies. Thus, this section summarises the research on what keeps employees well, productive, and motivated.

Flexible work and good work design

The way work is designed (e.g. the type of roles, tasks and activities individuals carry out in their jobs, and how balanced job resources are with job demands) affects how we feel about our job and can influence whether we feel motivated,

engaged, bored, or stressed at work.⁴⁹ Flexible working has the potential to both benefit and stress workers simultaneously due to the job resources and job demands that are inherent in this type of working.¹¹ Job demands (e.g. ICT demands, work overload) deplete workers well-being and result in health-related problems such as exhaustion and increased burnout, while job resources (e.g. autonomy, variety of tasks) enhance worker well-being through motivation, enjoyment and absorption at work.^{271,272} Increasing job resources with appropriate strategies can help make high job demands more tolerable and can buffer against the negative consequences of intolerable job demands.

Well-designed work can protect employees against the psychosocial risks of flexible working and a wealth of research has shown the positive effects of good work design on

A wealth of research has shown the positive effects of good work design on productivity, performance, motivation, mental health and well-being.

productivity, performance, motivation, mental health and well-being.^{49,71} The SMART Work Design model provides structure for practical strategies to promote these positive effects. For more information about work design, the SMART Work Design model, and evidence-based practical strategies please refer to the sections *Good Work Design and the SMART Work Design Model* and *Applying SMART Work Design Strategies* in this guide.

Flexible work and employee well-being

If flexible working arrangements are managed well, they can be a crucial pathway to better employee well-being.¹¹ But why is optimal employee well-being so crucial for organisational success? Let's look at why managers should invest time and energy into the well-being of their employees.

What is employee well-being?

Employee well-being is more than the absence of negative or ill-health states, rather it is commonly defined as the presence of positive feelings and functioning.^{179,182} In the literature, the general concept of well-being and the term happiness have often been used interchangeably,^{273,274} so we will present research findings on both employee well-being and happiness in this section.

What are the benefits of employee well-being?

Employee well-being does not only *feel* good, it also *is* good:²⁷⁵ A growing body of research demonstrates the tangible benefits of mental well-being for health, personal life, and job outcomes.¹⁸⁵



Since well-managed flexible working arrangements can significantly improve employee well-being, flexible working should be included in an organisation's mental health and well-being initiatives and policies. To learn more about the business case for organisational mental health and well-being initiatives, as well as how managers can promote the mental health and well-being of their employees, read *Supporting Well-being and Good Mental Health* in the *Relational* section of this guide.



Why should managers focus on increasing employee well-being?

Longitudinal, experimental, cross-sectional and randomised controlled studies show significant benefits of employee well-being for individuals and organisations:

1. Mental Health

Well-being is a central criterion of mental health.^{182,187} It can help to prevent the onset of mental health issues as well as alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety disorders.^{188,190,191}

2. Physical Health

Numerous studies have connected well-being to physical health, demonstrating associations with better self-reported health, lower morbidity, reduced risk of cardiovascular diseases, less pain, greater longevity, improved immune functioning, and better overall objective health.^{185,276,277}

3. Social and Intellectual Benefits

A growing body of research suggests that the experience of positive emotions such as joy, happiness, and contentment hold numerous social and intellectual benefits for individuals.²⁷⁸ For example, it has been found that, on average, happier people have more stable and satisfying relationships, higher incomes, higher self-confidence, better problem- and conflict-solving skills, higher activity and energy levels, and more creative ideas than their less happy peers.^{185,186}

4. Organisational Benefits

Of course, organisations can benefit from all of the positive well-being outcomes and associations described above. For example, the increase in individual creativity can foster innovative ideas. In addition, employee well-being predicts lower absenteeism,²⁷⁹ higher job satisfaction,²⁸⁰ less turnover intention,²⁸¹ better organisational citizenship behaviour,^{j,185} and higher customer satisfaction.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, well-being is associated with higher job performance and productivity, which is known as the "happy/productive worker thesis".²⁸⁰

Interestingly, happiness and well-being are not merely a correlate or consequence of success in various life domains, but also a cause of it.¹⁸⁵

j Organisational citizenship behaviour can be defined as individual behaviour that is discretionary (i.e. not part of the job description and performed by the employee as a result of personal choice), not directly or explicitly recognised by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organisation.²⁶⁹

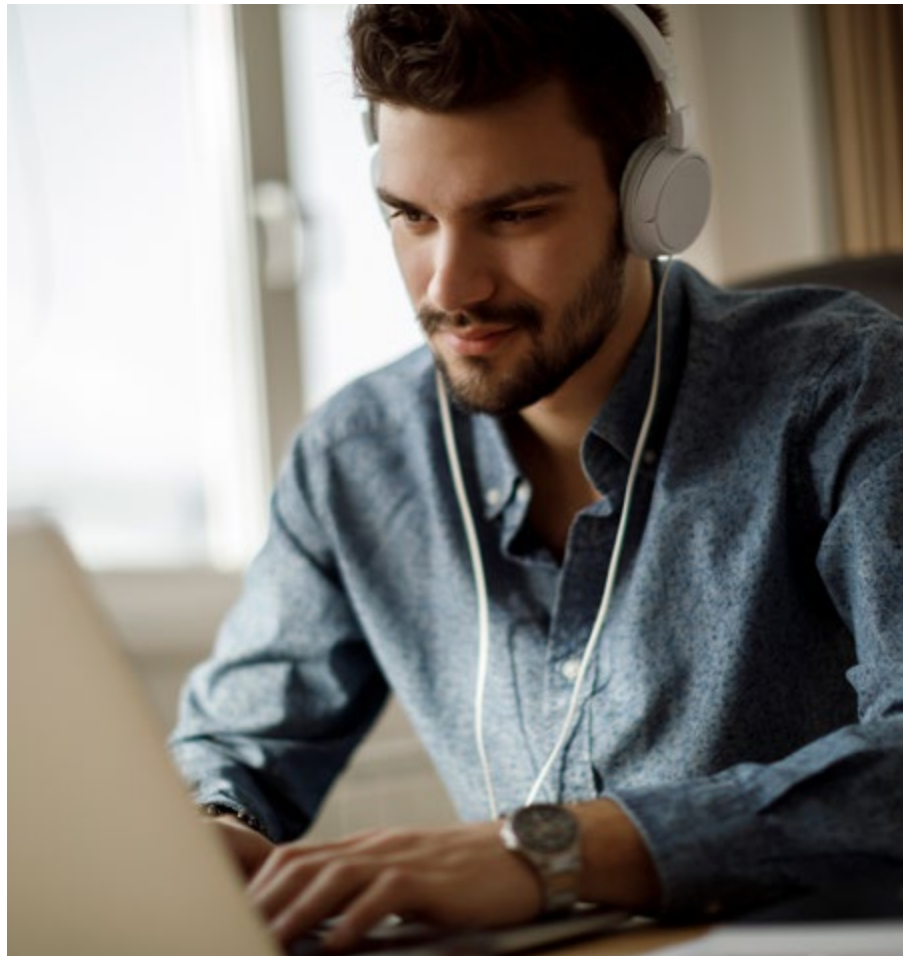
Flexible work and individual differences

As a manager, it is important to understand that flexible working practices should take key individual differences and preferences into account in order to maximise employee's well-being and productivity. For example, workers may differ in the extent to which they value autonomy or flexibility and require social interaction,¹⁶⁵ so managers need to consider that different employees might require different flexible working arrangements to meet individual needs.

Person-job fit theory describes the compatibility between individuals and the job or tasks that they perform at work. A good person-job fit means that there is good compatibility between employee needs, desires, and aspirations, and the tasks that the individual does, in terms of the resources available to the individual and the ability the individual has to manage the demands inherent in the job.^{40,283}

Research suggests that person-job fit can be enhanced by a leader's relational behaviour (e.g. how leaders interact with employees). The positive feelings employees experience from the congruence between the characteristics of the job and their individual needs and preferences ultimately enhance employee well-being and job performance.^{40,41,42,43} On the contrary, low person-job fit is associated with lower job satisfaction, greater strain, and lower well-being.^{284,285}

Therefore, managers need to consider for whom different intensities and frequencies of flexible working may or may not be the right fit and how a potential misfit could be supported better.



Employees' preferences for certain flexible working arrangements can vary due to differences in

- personality (e.g. extraverted vs. introverted employees);
- work-home segmentation preferences and perceived workplace norm (e.g. integrators vs. segmenters)^k;
- living arrangements (e.g. caring responsibilities; access to a separate work space at home);
- motivation and psychological needs (see Self-Determination Theory on the following page).

Throughout this guide, we address some of these individual differences.

To find out more about the research on individual differences (e.g. work-home segmentation preferences and personality in the flexible work context) read the guide for individuals: **"How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers"**.

Managers need to consider that different employees might require different flexible working arrangements to meet individual needs.

^k Research suggests that although some employees prefer to separate work and non-work roles (i.e. "segmenters"), others prefer to blend work and non-work roles (i.e. "integrators").^{213,216} For example, segmenters might require stringent impermeable work-home boundaries to perform their best, whereas integrators might require increased flexibility and prefer more permeable boundaries.²¹⁷



What does Self-Determination Theory tell us about employee motivation and psychological needs?

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory of human motivation and personality that explains individuals' innate psychological needs. It is concerned with the intrinsic motivation behind the choices people make, rather than external motivation such as pay, or tangible rewards.^{132,133,134}

According to SDT, there are *three universal psychological needs*: autonomy; competence; and relatedness, and the theory suggests that these needs must be satisfied for people to achieve and maintain optimal performance and well-being.¹³⁴ SDT argues that the satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs are essential for individuals to achieve psychological growth and well-being.¹³⁴ The three needs can be defined as:

- **The need for autonomy**, which describes the individuals' need to act with a sense of ownership of their behaviour and feel psychologically free.¹³⁴ In other words, it implies the need to act with a sense of choice and volition.²⁸⁶
- **The need for competence**, which refers to the need to feel a sense of mastery over the environment and to develop new skills.²⁸⁶
- **The need for relatedness**, which describes the individuals' need to feel connected to at least some others, i.e. to love and care for others and to be loved and cared for by others. This need is satisfied when individuals' see themselves as a member of a group, and develop a sense of belonging to, and close relationships with, that group.²⁸⁶

Satisfying these needs leads to intrinsic motivation, and improved mental health and well-being.²⁸⁶ Individuals differ in the extent to which they desire the fulfilment of these needs, and different environments also vary in terms of the extent to which they support the satisfaction of these needs.¹⁶⁶

To optimise employee well-being and performance it is important to understand which psychological needs may be more salient for individual employees and to understand whether these needs are likely to be satisfied within a specific flexible working arrangement. For example, research suggests that a high frequency of remote working (e.g. working at home or away from the main office) is most suitable for employees who have a high need for autonomy and low need for relatedness with one's colleagues.^{287,288}

To learn more about individual psychological needs and how to discover individual preferences with a self-assessment tool, refer to the guide for individuals: "[How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers](#)".

Leadership styles and capabilities in the flexible working context

Leadership effectiveness plays a pivotal role in fostering successful flexible work, so it's important that managers of remotely working employees consider the most suitable leadership style and develop leadership capabilities that are conducive to the flexible working context.²⁸⁹

The difference between leadership and management

The terms 'leaders' and 'managers' are often used interchangeably in organisations to describe those with a higher level of responsibility such as overseeing the work of individuals or teams. While leadership and management are both important processes that complement each other and often go hand in hand, they are not the same thing.²⁹⁰

Leadership can be defined as "a process of motivating people to work together collaboratively to accomplish great things".²⁹¹ Leadership processes involve establishing direction (e.g. through developing a vision of the future and strategies to achieve that vision), aligning people (e.g. through communicating the direction and vision), as well as motivating and inspiring people (e.g. keeping people moving in the direction of the vision despite challenges and obstacles).²⁹⁰ Leaders do not always have to hold an official management position, which means anyone can display leader behaviours.

Leadership differs from management, which is "the process of reaching organisational goals by working with and through people and other organisational resources".²⁹² Management processes include planning, budgeting, organising, staffing, allocating tasks, controlling, problem-solving and ensuring

performance.²⁹⁰ People who are in positions of leadership are often called managers, however, some managers don't provide leadership at all.²⁹⁰ Just like great managers aren't necessarily great leaders, great leaders aren't necessarily great managers.

However, both effective management and strong leadership are necessary for organisational success and thriving in a complex and volatile environment.^{290,293} Managers that are able to exercise effective leadership skills can support their employees' to perform at their best and reach their full potential.

Leadership effectiveness plays a pivotal role in fostering successful flexible work.

Virtual leadership

Research highlights some important considerations about leadership styles and capabilities in the flexible working context.

Leadership in virtual environments is considered more challenging than in face-to-face settings.^{289,294} Coordinating within teams, building trust, forming shared mental models, and managing conflict can be more difficult due to the primarily ICT-based communication and lack of personal contact.²⁸⁹ Therefore, virtual leaders, also referred to as e-leaders, are expected to invest more time and effort to support their employees in coordinating tasks, build relationships amongst distributed team members, and facilitate effective team processes.^{289,295,296,297}



What is virtual leadership?

Virtual leadership (or e-leadership) is a social influence process mediated by advanced ICTs to produce changes in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behaviour, or performance of employees, teams, groups, and organisations.²⁹⁷ Virtual or e-leadership can occur at any hierarchical level in an organisation and can include one-to-one and one-to-many interactions within and across large units and organisations.²⁹⁷

It has been suggested that traditional leadership models that are built on a foundation of face-to-face interactions may not fully explain how virtual leadership works. Specifically, how leaders provide feedback, encouragement, rewards, and motivation needs to be re-examined in the flexible working context where leadership is regularly mediated through ICTs.^{298,299,300}

Effective leadership styles in the flexible working context

Every leader or manager has their own characteristic behaviours when leading employees or teams. This determines their leadership “style”. What leadership style is most suitable for the flexible working context? The literature indicates that this is highly situational, and it may depend on many factors, including the leaders’ capabilities and preferences, the employees’ readiness (see situational leadership below) and organisational circumstances.^{301,302} Research has found that several leadership styles can be effective in the flexible working context, including situational leadership, transformational leadership, empowering leadership, and shared leadership (please see below for a non-exhaustive brief overview of these leadership styles). While each of these styles involve unique characteristics, there is

some overlap of core behaviours and in practice they can be applied in combination. The core behaviours of these styles can foster the five themes of the SMART Work Design model (please refer to the sections *Good Work Design* and *the SMART Work Design Model and Applying SMART Work Design Strategies* to learn more about the SMART Work Design model). For example, the leadership styles outlined below can promote employee autonomy (and with this a sense of *Agency*). This is particularly crucial in the flexible working context, as increased autonomy is a key factor contributing to the performance and productivity benefits of teleworking.²

Research has found that several leadership styles can be effective in the flexible working context, including: situational leadership, transformational leadership, empowering leadership, and shared leadership.





Situational Leadership

It has been suggested that it's not a question of which style of leadership is best, but when to use a certain style.³⁰¹ Situational leadership theories provide practical advice to managers on when to best apply different leadership styles.³⁰¹ Situational leadership is based on the principle that the benefits of each leadership type will depend on the competence, maturity, or "readiness" of the followers.³⁰² Subordinate employees with low levels of readiness (e.g. new employees with limited skills but sufficient motivation) are expected to benefit from a directive leadership approach, which entails giving specific instructions, monitoring employees' progress and providing feedback.³⁰³ On the other hand, employees with higher levels of readiness (e.g. with sufficient competence, efficacy and commitment) may benefit most from a participating and delegating leadership style (e.g. such as participatory leadership or empowering leadership).^{301,304}

It's not a question of which style of leadership is best, but when to use a certain style.



Situational leadership

Situational leaders adapt their style to fit the existing work environment, needs of the organisation and development level of subordinate employees. Situational leaders need to be flexible, have courage, and maintain a clear vision. They have to move from one leadership to another as the organisation's needs are continuously changing.³⁰²

Directive leadership

Directive leadership is associated with a leader's positional power and is characterised by behaviours aimed at actively structuring subordinates' work. This leadership style involves providing clear directions and expectations of compliance with instructions.^{301,305,306}

Participative leadership

Participative leaders execute leadership styles that invite input from employees on work and company decisions. The leader involves team members in goal setting, problem solving, and team building. While participative leaders allow the utilisation of their employees' talents and skills to arrive at decisions and take action, the leader is still in charge of final decision-makings.³⁰⁷

It has been suggested that situational leadership is a useful model for effectively leading teleworkers.^{308,309} Remote situational leadership includes:^{308,309}

1. **Diagnosing:** Understanding the situation the leader is attempting to influence (e.g. assessing the level of readiness of the remote employees).
2. **Adapting:** Adapting behaviour and leadership style to the contingencies of the situation (e.g. matching the leadership style to the employees' level of readiness).
3. **Communicating:** Effectively using ICTs to convey the leader's message in a way that employees can easily understand and accept.

Situational leadership theory gives virtual leaders the structure to diagnose the needs of their employees in order to know how much directive and supportive behaviour to apply, to adapt their leadership style accordingly, and to communicate successfully in the virtual environment.³⁰⁸

Situational leadership can be particularly effective in hybrid work environments, as leaders have to adapt their leadership style to employees working in the office environment and employees working remotely.

In line with situational leadership theory, combining participative leadership with other types of leadership behaviours can also be effective: for example, combining the coaching and group engagement in decision-making of participative leadership with the inspiring and supportive aspects of transformational leadership.³¹⁰



Situational leadership theory gives virtual leaders the structure to diagnose the needs of their employees in order to know how much directive and supportive behaviour to apply.

Transformational leadership

It has been suggested that transformational and participative leadership behaviours are of greater importance in teams where communication is constrained by technology.²⁹⁶

Transformational leadership is linked to higher employee satisfaction with their leaders and jobs, as well as increased team and organisational performance.³¹¹ Research has highlighted the effectiveness of transformational leadership in both, non-virtual and virtual teams.^{295,296,297,311,313}



Transformational leadership

A leader who inspires followers to perform beyond their perceived capabilities through their vision and inspiration.^{307,312} Here, the influencing power of the leader comes from their charismatic personality and displaying core transformational behaviours, such as expressing a clear vision, sharing encouraging messages that build confidence and motivation, supporting individual needs, challenging employees to think about problems in new ways, as well as praising efforts and goal achievement.^{307,312} Transformational leadership inspires people to achieve unexpected or remarkable results. It gives workers autonomy over specific jobs, as well as the authority to make decisions once they have been trained.^{307,312}

The remote transformational leaders' tools and strategies for leading remote employees can be described in four behavioural areas: idealised influence (e.g. charismatic inspiration of loyalty and displaying strong commitment to ideals), inspirational motivation (e.g. appealing to employees' emotions and communicating an enthusiastic vision with confidence in its successful achievement), intellectual stimulation (e.g. questioning assumptions and challenging employees intellectually by encouraging novel ideas), and individualised consideration (e.g. recognising unique needs and abilities of their employees).^{296,309}

In sum, the transformational leader employs his charisma to motivate his remote employees through regular electronic communications, while showing concern and awareness for their individual needs.³⁰⁹

It has been shown that leaders who increase their transformational leadership behaviours in virtual teams achieve higher levels of team performance.²⁹⁶

Empowering leadership

Studies have demonstrated the value of empowering leadership in remotely working teams.³¹⁴

For example, researchers compared two different leadership styles, directive (i.e. providing clear direction and feedback), and empowering (i.e. encouraging employees to take ownership of tasks and work amongst themselves in a team).³⁰¹ Results indicated that groups led by a directive leader performed better initially. However, empowered teams performed better in the long-term. The findings suggest that an empowering leadership style may take more time to take effect, but can have a bigger and more sustainable impact on performance, as members of the team need to learn how to work together effectively.³⁰¹ This might be due to the increased necessity to coordinate amongst team members, psychological safety and sense of control that is fostered by empowering leadership.

Providing training in empowering leadership to leaders has been recommended particularly for those organisations, whose business strategies rely on the successful functioning of geographically dispersed teams.³¹⁴



Empowering leadership

involves sharing power with subordinate employees and raising their level of autonomy and responsibility. It manifests through specific behaviours such as encouraging employees to express opinions and ideas, enhancing employees' confidence and self-efficacy, promoting collaborative decision making, and supporting information sharing and teamwork.^{301,306,315,316}



Shared leadership

Due to the increased difficulty in influencing and motivating followers in a virtual context, researchers have suggested that virtual leaders should foster shared leadership among their team members, which enhances their team's self-management ability.^{289,294,299} Shared leadership represents a process by which team members share responsibilities, mutually influence and guide each other, and make decisions collaboratively.³¹⁷ This does not require a formal leader or supervisor, as the leadership emerges within the team. Research findings support the application of shared leadership in the virtual context, and it has been shown that it enhances performance in virtual teams.^{294,318,319}



Shared leadership

The shared leadership style describes leadership that is distributed among team members, with various team members taking on leadership roles for different tasks and/or at different points in time.³¹⁹

Shared leadership is distinct from traditional hierarchical leadership, as it has an influence process that is more lateral rather than upward or downward.³²⁰

It is important to note that shared leadership among team members and leadership of a designated team leader is not contradictory. Within a virtual environment, shared team leadership supplements the traditional hierarchical leadership and structural supports.³¹⁷ As such, teams with a high degree of shared leadership are still influenced by external leadership.³²¹

Emotional intelligence and communication are important capabilities of virtual leaders

It has been suggested that a combination of soft and hard skills is necessary to lead virtual teams effectively. Social and emotional forms of leadership are more important in the flexible working context where modes of communication are leaner and greater uncertainty exists.²⁹⁶

To overcome virtual distance, it is important that leaders create an environment where people feel emotionally and psychologically safe and connected to one another and the organisation.

The skills and traits that are conducive to managing the challenges of leading remote employees include persistence, energy, excellent communication skills and emotional intelligence.³⁰⁹

The skills and traits that are conducive to managing the challenges of leading remote employees include persistence, energy, excellent communication skills and emotional intelligence.

Leaders with high levels of emotional intelligence are able to understand team dynamics and the behaviour and unique needs of their employees. With these insights they can maximise engagement and performance. This is especially important for remotely working employees or teams, as issues can be quickly amplified due to lack of personal contact.²⁸⁹

It has been found that the most effective leaders were those who communicated regularly, answered employees' questions, provided feedback, gave directions with a cordial yet assertive tone, provided mentoring, responded compassionately to their employees' concerns and appreciated employees'



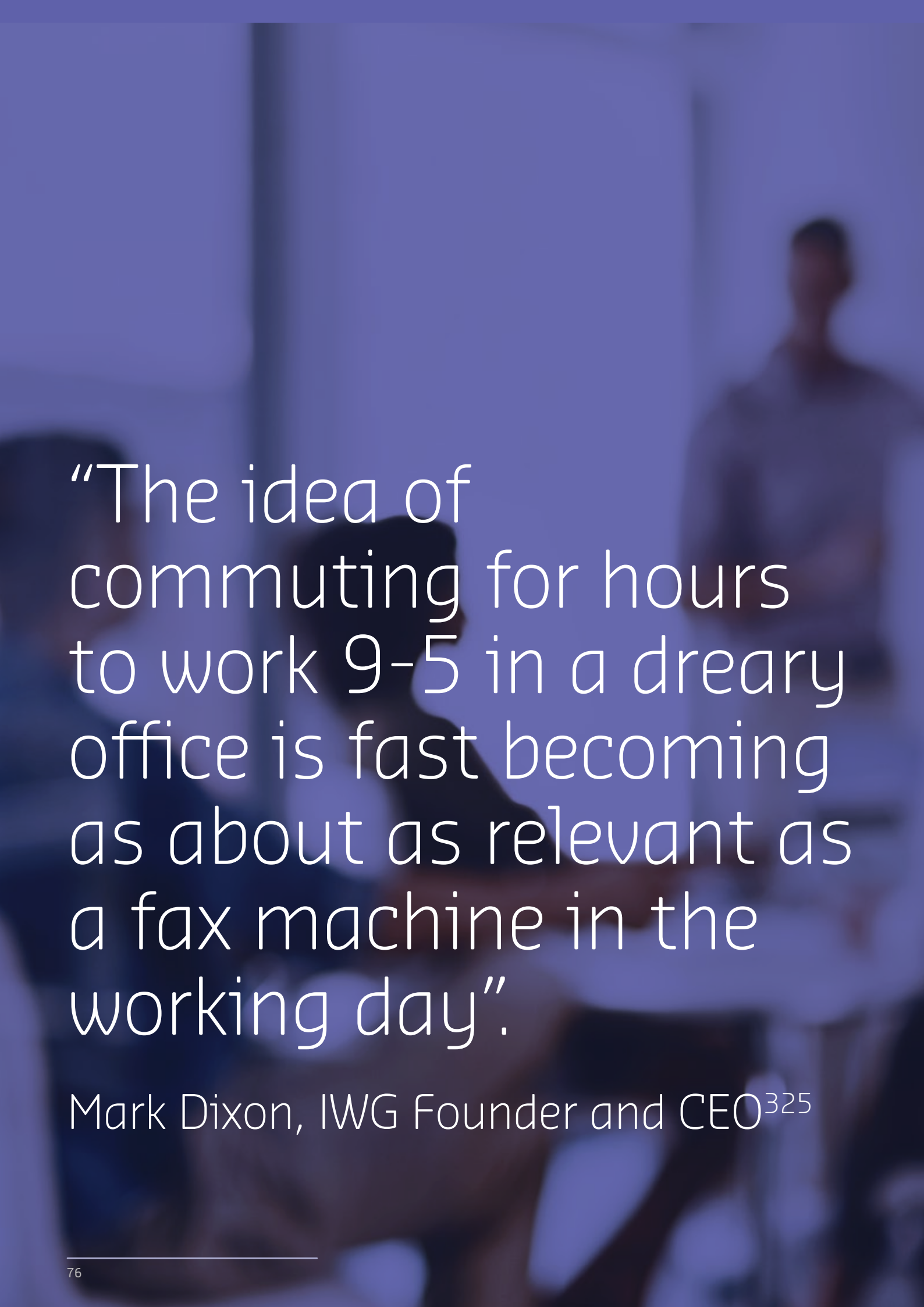


Leaders need to adapt existing skills and build new capabilities to support their employees effectively in the flexible working context.



Further Information

- Learn more about work design at our **Centre for Transformative Work Design** website.
- For more information about our demand-driven research, visit the **Future of Work Institute** website.
- For more information and resources on our Work from Home materials, visit our **Thrive at Work** from Home page
- Learn more about our Thrive at Work Initiative from our **Thrive at Work** website.
- Learn how to manage your own work design and engage in flexible working effectively in the guide: **“How to Make My Flexible Work SMART: A Guide for Workers”**.
- For more specific manager guidance on how to manage virtual teams successfully, read our guide for managers of virtual teams: **“How to Manage Virtual Teams for Success: A Guide for Managers”**.

A blurred background image of an office setting. In the foreground, a person is seen from the back, looking towards a group of people standing in the background. The image has a blue tint.

“The idea of commuting for hours to work 9-5 in a dreary office is fast becoming as about as relevant as a fax machine in the working day”.

Mark Dixon, IWG Founder and CEO³²⁵

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Contact

The Centre for Transformative Work Design engages with all sectors of the economy to transform work to create better lives for workers, better outcomes for organisations, and a better society for all. If you'd like more information about our research or are interested in working with us, please contact us.

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