

Budget 2020 – Working from Home

Working from Home Overview

Working from home has been a workplace flexibility option for decades but had not been widespread until it became necessary for nearly half of Australians in paid work during the COVID-19 response. The Government missed an important opportunity in the 2020/21 Budget to support the flexibility and productivity benefits of working from home and to ensure that it promotes more equal sharing between women and men of paid work and family obligations. Without specific measures funded through the federal Budget, there is a risk that gender inequalities in the management of these obligations will be further entrenched.

Working from Home

The Budget

The 2020/21 Budget contained no specific measures to support those working from home during the COVID-19 Pandemic or beyond, to help families to balance their paid work and family obligations. However, at the beginning of the Pandemic, the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) made available a simplified method of reporting expenses related to working from home for the purpose of tax deductions. In early October these temporary arrangements were extended until 31 December 2020. These arrangements allow the taxpayer to claim 80 cents for each hour worked at home to cover costs such as electricity and internet expenses, and the use of ICT and office furniture. There are also more complex methods of calculating tax deductions for working from home and these remain unchanged. ([Australian Taxation Office Home Office Expenses](#)).

Gender implications

Why is this an issue for women?

Women remain overwhelmingly responsible for unpaid care and domestic responsibilities in Australia. The Office for Women notes that, prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, women devoted twice as many hours to these family obligations as men did. (Australian Government, Women's Economic Security Statement 2020, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office for Women, Canberra, 2020, p. 38; see also Work and Family section). As a consequence, women are able to devote less time to paid work and are more likely to access flexible work measures to accommodate their unpaid care and domestic responsibilities.

Prior to the Pandemic, working from home was a flexibility measure less often used by families in Australia, with, for example only 15 per cent of Australian public servants accessing these arrangements in 2019 (Linda Colley & Sue Williamson, *Working during the Pandemic: From resistance to revolution?* UNSW & CQU, Canberra, 2020, p. 2).

The COVID-19 Pandemic saw a massive and immediate increase in working from home by women and men in paid work. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that nearly half of Australian men and women in paid work were working from home either all or part of the time in June (44 per cent) and August (45 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey*, 6-10 July 2020, Cat 4940.0).

During the Pandemic, 80 per cent of women and 39 per cent of men reported doing most of the unpaid domestic work in their household; women were more than three times as likely to report they did most of the unpaid caring work (Australian Government, *Women's Economic Security Statement 2020*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office for Women, Canberra, 2020, page 38, citing Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey*, 6-10 July 2020, Cat 4940.0.)

The ATO arrangements noted above, of course, apply to women and men equally on their face. However, media reports suggest that they only apply where the taxpayer is working in a specifically designated office, or where they are using a communal space such as a dining room exclusively (Samantha Maiden 'Tax deductions extended for Australians working from home' *News.com.au* 1 October 2020).

Given women's greater role in providing unpaid care for children and other family members, women are more likely to be working in a communal space shared with others and so may be less likely to make use of the simplified tax deductibility arrangements. (See also Lyn Craig, 'Coronavirus, domestic labour and care: Gendered roles locked down' *Journal of Sociology* 2020, 1-9, p. 5). It will be important for the Government to monitor the take up of these arrangements by gender and the amount of deductions accessed by women and men.

One of the unforeseen consequences of the Pandemic has been a massive reassessment of the flexibility and productivity benefits of working from home. A recent report by Williamson and Colley, based on a survey of over 6,000 federal public servants suggests that employees felt more productive and enjoyed benefits including better ability to balance paid work and caring responsibilities. Importantly, managers also recognized the productivity benefits, with over 90 per cent of managers concluding that their teams were equally as, or more, productive when working from home.

The authors note that policy may now be lagging behind practice, that there is considerable scope for policy and work design to support greater working from home by Australian employees, and that this may be '...a key piece in the puzzle of reconciling work and caring responsibilities' (Linda Colley & Sue Williamson, *Working during the Pandemic: From resistance to revolution?* UNSW & CQU, Canberra, 2020 p. 2).

As we move out of the Pandemic and women and men are able to return to work, employees may prefer to continue to work from home either all or part of the time, a survey by Boston Consulting Group suggests. However, its survey found that men were considerably more enthusiastic about returning to the office than women (62 per cent compared to 53 per cent)

(Daniel Ziffer, 'Most workers want 'hybrid' jobs at the office and at home after coronavirus, study finds' ABC News 23 June 2020).

Not all workers are able to access working from home equally as a way of managing paid work and family responsibilities. A recent World Bank survey of 36 nations demonstrates that women are more able to work from home, given the types of employment they have, and that those with greater education and higher incomes are more able to work from home ('Who Can Really Work from Home' World Bank Blogs 28 May 2020). In Australia it is likely Indigenous and some immigrant families will be less likely to have privacy and technology available at home to work effectively. In thinking about the future of arrangements for working from home it will be important to take account of these equity issues.

All of this suggests that the Australian Government should have made provision in the Budget to support Australian families to better manage their paid work and family responsibilities, with working from home as a key element.

On the contrary, however, the Australian Public Servant Commissioner has recently called on public servants to return to work wherever it is safe to do so, following the lead of the Prime Minister, who is seeking to have '...our CBDs humming again' (Matthew Cranston, 'Public Servants Told to Go Back to the Office', Australian Financial Review, 29 September 2020). This both misses an opportunity to support public servants to work more productively and to support families to balance paid work and family obligations, and fails to show Australian Government leadership.

The Budget should have included support for employers to assess and implement ongoing arrangements and included campaigns aimed at households to encourage better sharing of unpaid caring and domestic obligations. It has failed to do so.

What are the 2020 Budget impacts on women?

The Australian Government has missed an opportunity to support Australian families, to increase productivity and usher in a new way of working.

Recommendations

1. The Government should monitor the take up of tax deductibility for working from home arrangements by gender and the deductions accessed by women and men.
2. The Government should support Australian families to better manage their paid work and family responsibilities, with working from home as a key element, through support for employers to assess and implement ongoing arrangements and campaigns aimed at households to encourage better sharing of unpaid caring and domestic obligations. Equity issues should be considered and support provided to ensure that this key paid work and family option is widely available.
3. The Government should lead the way in supporting Australian families to better balance their paid work and family obligations by developing equitable and supportive policies for Working from Home as a key part of workplace flexibility for federal public servants.

References

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