

Budget 2021 – Employment

Working from home overview

The Budget’s significant funding for hard infrastructure and to support women’s economic engagement and safety fails to provide leadership on, or direction for, the transition into a post COVID working life that learns from our experiences with working from home during the pandemic.

It is clear that many workers will want to continue a hybrid model of working from home part-time. This could present significant opportunity to create a more flexible, equitable working life, but it requires leadership and incentives from government to take advantage of these opportunities.

Working from home

Through the COVID pandemic there has been a rapid and large-scale shift towards working from home for many employees. Research suggests that both organisations and employees expect, and would prefer, this significant shift to continue through a permanent hybrid model of working from home part-time and working in the office part-time. For example, multi-national research by the [McKinsey Global Institute](#) suggests that “more than 20 percent of the workforce could work remotely three to five days a week as effectively as they could if working from an office”.

Such working arrangements will affect employees’ abilities to balance paid work and caring responsibilities, as well as impact on workforce planning, and on transport and urban development needs in the future. All of these effects are highly gendered.

The 2021/22 Budget contains no specific measures to provide strategic direction or funding to manage such a transition.

Gender implications

Why is this an issue for women?

Research demonstrates that while many workers have found remote work delivers productivity benefits, it also increases pressure, particularly on those with caring responsibilities, to manage the intersections between their working time and private lives. (See for example, in the UK context, Zoe Young “Work after Covid: lessons from lockdown for resilience and recovery” in Global Institute for Women’s Leadership [Essays on Equality](#) King College London, 2021, p. 43).

Women report the most difficulty in managing their paid work and caring responsibilities, including while working from home.

Opportunities to work from home are only available to some workers, and are concentrated amongst more highly skilled, knowledge-focussed [workers](#). It is important that any large-scale shift to remote or hybrid working models is managed strategically to avoid exacerbating inequalities within the workforce, many of which will have gender effects.

It is important that organisations manage future working arrangements to ensure gender inequalities are not exacerbated, but that ongoing arrangements help workers better balance their paid work and caring responsibilities in a gender equitable manner, and that any gender gaps in preferences do not mean women fall further behind in their career aspirations. Government must provide leadership and incentives and consider regulation, as appropriate.

This leadership should include support and incentives for men to more equally participate in unpaid caring and domestic work. The imbalance in this unpaid work burden between women and men is one of the key barriers to gender equality in Australia and internationally, and it is time the Australian Government seriously focused on this challenge.

Should a significant structural shift towards a hybrid working model emerge post-COVID, this will have significant effects on [urban development](#), as regional and suburban centres flourish at the potential expense of central business districts. The female dominated retail sector and more male dominated public transport sector will likely be affected.

While the Budget includes a [commitment](#) to \$348.0 million over four years from 2021-22 “...for a package of measures to support regional Australia’s sustainability, resilience and job creation” (2021 Budget Paper No. 2: Budget Measures, p. 169), it is not clear that this is informed by strategic thinking about how the future of work might affect our urban and social infrastructure needs, nor with a view to “build back better” post-COVID.

It is disappointing that the 2021/22 Budget fails to consider the ramifications of any such changes and to provide leadership in shaping a more equal future.

What are the 2021 Budget impacts on women?

The missed opportunity to consider the future workforce arrangements to emerge from the pandemic means ongoing changes will be inadequately managed. Some employers may consider the effects on women and men’s work and career opportunities, and there is already emerging literature to support them on this. However, many will not. This is likely to mean that gender inequalities will be exacerbated.

Any long-term effects on the mix and location of retail and transport hubs will affect women and men differently. It is likely that, at least in the medium term as the economy adjusts, effects will fall most heavily on employment prospects in female dominated retail centres in central business districts.

Recommendations

- The Department of Education, Skills and Employment, with advice from the Office for Women and the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, should carefully monitor changes to working arrangements following the pandemic and identify gender implications.
- Government should work with employers, business, unions, academia and relevant civil society organisations to develop best practice models to support workers to manage hybrid working models in ways that support and promote gender equality.
- The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications should develop a strategic approach to urban and social infrastructure that will be needed into the future to support workers to better manage their paid work and caring responsibilities within a more permanent hybrid working model.
- Government should support civil society to develop a gender equality focused recovery plan, similar to the Canadian Feminist Recovery Plan.

References

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