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Productivity Commission

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Working from home can work itself out

PC submission

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee inquiry into the Fair Work Amendment (Right to Work from Home) Bill 2025

January 2026

Acknowledgment of Country

The Productivity Commission acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to their Cultures, Country and Elders past and present.

About us

The Productivity Commission (PC) is the Australian Government's independent research and advisory body on a range of economic, social and environmental issues affecting the welfare of Australians. Its role, expressed most simply, is to help governments make better policies, in the long-term interest of the Australian community.

The PC's independence is underpinned by an Act of Parliament. Its processes and outputs are open to public scrutiny and are driven by concern for the wellbeing of the community as a whole.

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Key points

- **Following the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home as a substitute for working from a workplace (such as an office) has become relatively common. In 2025, around 36% of all employed people reported usually doing some work from home, and of these about half reported working between one and four days a week from home.**
- **There are costs and benefits to both workers and employers from working from home. How these play out in practice will differ across individual employers and employees, depending on their characteristics and circumstances, such as the nature of jobs performed. Not all jobs are amenable to working from home. But for those that are, current institutional settings appear to support effective negotiation on working from home between workers and firms in different contexts, and allow adaptation, innovation and experimentation.**
- **Many Australian employers and workers have found a hybrid 'sweet spot' when it comes to working from home. The need for a legislated right to request to work from home is therefore not clear. Employers already have the ability to allow workers to work from home where it benefits them, and many already offer hybrid work arrangements. In addition, a legislated right to request working from home arrangements has the potential to impede employers and employees from arriving at mutually beneficial arrangements – although the realisation of this outcome depends on how the grounds for employers refusing requests are interpreted and applied in practice.**

The Productivity Commission welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee inquiry into the Fair Work Amendment (Right to Work from Home) Bill 2025 (FW Amendment Bill). The FW Amendment Bill proposes amending the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) to introduce a statutory right for all employees to request to work from home up to two days a week, and requires employers to consider reasonable adjustments that could accommodate the request. To refuse a request, employers must show the job cannot be practically done under the proposed hybrid arrangement; they cannot rely on the 'reasonable business grounds' test that applies to the right to request flexible working arrangements.[1]

The PC published a research paper on working from home in September 2021. Since that time, it has monitored developments in the research and policy landscape relating to working from home. This submission draws on our research paper and other recent literature and data.

[1] The right to request flexible working arrangements, set out in section 65 of the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth), applies only to employees who are pregnant, have responsibility for children of school age or younger, are carers, have a disability, are 55 or older, are experiencing family and domestic violence or are providing support and care to a family or household member experiencing family and domestic violence.

Working from home has remained common post-pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home as an alternative to working from a traditional workplace was relatively uncommon.[2] Only about 8% of employees reported working any of their usual working hours from home, with more than half of these working from home one day or less per week (PC 2021, p. 11).

In 2020, the onset of the pandemic prompted rapid change in work practices (box 1). Working from home became an essential way of getting work done. Where firms were previously reluctant, they were forced to establish work-from-home arrangements. Many workers also had their first experiences of working from home. The share of businesses that reported having employees working remotely more than doubled from 20% to 42%, and the share of employees working from home at least some of the time skyrocketed to 40% (PC 2021, pp. 11, 15–16).

Box 1 – The COVID-19 pandemic: A forced experiment in working from home

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced businesses and employees to experiment with working from home. Many discovered that working from home was possible, and were able to adjust work practices to make remote work more effective, for example by adopting videoconferencing software. Surveys from 2020 show that workers' experiences of working from home were generally positive (Beck and Hensher 2022, p. 275), and the majority (85%) of people who could work remotely wished to continue doing some remote work (Mattey et al. 2020, p. 4; NSW IPC 2020, p. 29). Similarly, many employers expressed support for continuing home-based work, and expected working from home to be a persistent feature of work (Beck and Hensher 2022, pp. 278–282).

Following the initial discovery that working from home was practically feasible, firms and workers continued to experiment with work-from-home arrangements, even after public health mandates had ceased. While the initial uptake of working from home in 2020 involved firms adopting broadly the same model – where most or all employees in many businesses worked remotely most of the time – this second wave of experimentation saw firms adopting different models based on their judgements about what worked best for them – a process that involved negotiation between employers and workers, trial and error and adjustment over time.

The proportion of workers working from home has since stabilised, with the most common arrangements reported by employers being two or three days onsite, or no minimum requirement but with workers encouraged to attend the office regularly. Firms and workers continue to tweak their work-from-home policies and adapt their work practices as they gain more experience in what works for them; however, work from home is likely to be an enduring feature of work, with many employers indicating they plan to maintain their current hybrid working arrangements.

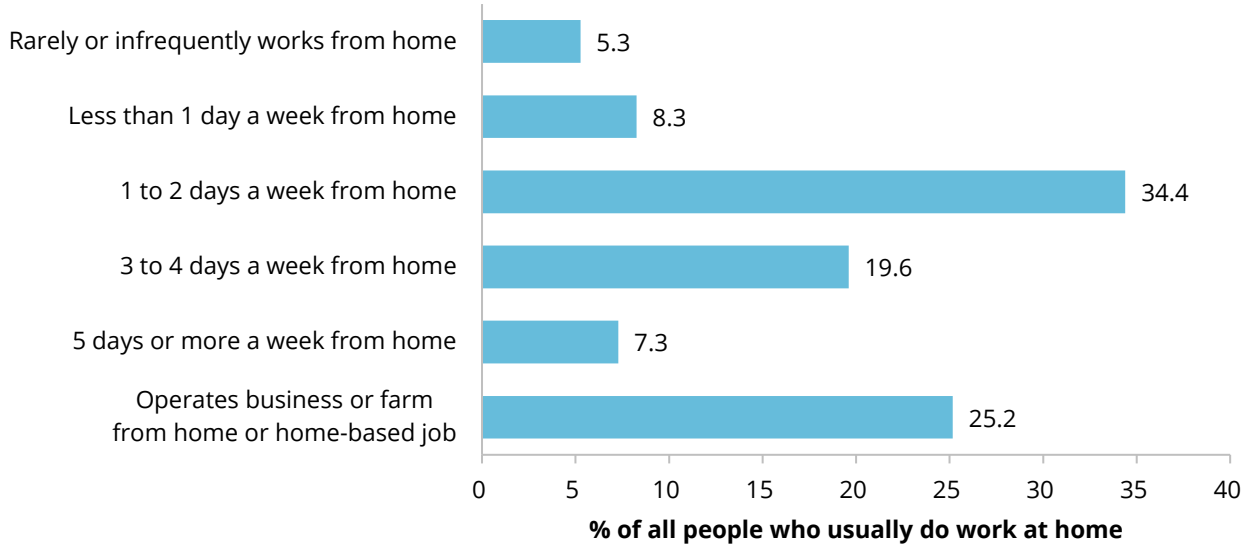
Source: ABS (2025b); AHRI (2025); PC (2021).

[2] In this submission, we generally use the terms 'work from home' and 'remote work' to refer to home-based work that *replaces* work done at a workplace (such as an office, factory, hospital or building site – also referred to as 'onsite'), rather than home-based work that *extends* work done at a workplace (for example, logging on after hours). That said, the studies and data we draw on do not always distinguish between these two types of home-based work.

Since that time, working from home has been a persistent feature of work for many businesses and employees. In particular, hybrid work – where work is conducted from home some of the time and onsite for the remainder – has become common practice. In 2025, around 36% of all employed people reported usually doing some work from home, and of these about half reported working from home between one and four days each week (figure 1).

Figure 1 – Hybrid work is now a common arrangement

Percentage of workers with different work-from-home arrangements, as a proportion of all workers who usually do any work from home



Includes all employees and owner–managers of incorporated and unincorporated enterprises who report usually doing any work at home.

Source: PC estimates based on ABS (2025b).

The costs and benefits of working from home vary by context

Since the widespread adoption of working from home in 2020, there has been significant discussion about its costs, benefits and effects on productivity. These effects differ across workers and employers depending on circumstances and characteristics, including the sector or industry, size of employer, experience of employee, and nature of jobs performed. For some occupations, such as nursing, factory work and bricklaying, working from home is not practical or possible, given the need for physical interaction with people or equipment. For many other jobs, however – particularly those traditionally done in an office – working from home may be feasible, at least part of the time. The optimal amount of remote work will therefore vary according to context, and it is important that workers and employers are able to negotiate mutually beneficial arrangements specific to their circumstances. Rather than focusing only on the aggregate effects of working from home on productivity (which is often the subject of public discussion), it is useful to set out the incentives faced by employers and employees regarding work from home, and how these can play out and lead to employers and employees striking mutually beneficial agreements.

What factors do workers consider when negotiating work-from-home arrangements?

In negotiating work-from-home arrangements, workers seek to maximise the benefits of the employment agreement to themselves, while minimising the costs. The employment agreement consists of a bundle of terms and conditions related to the worker's employment, including the wages they receive and any work-from-home arrangements.

For many workers, a key benefit of working from home is the time saved, for example from avoiding the commute to the employer's location (Hopkins et al. 2025, p. 55). Based on the Global Survey of Working Arrangements, Aksoy et al. (2023, p. 599) estimated that Australians save an average of 78 minutes in commuting time per day when working from home. This time saving can allow workers to spend more time on paid or unpaid work, on leisure or with family (ABS 2025a; Hensher et al. 2022).

Relatedly, working from home can allow workers to enjoy greater flexibility, work–life balance and job satisfaction (AHRI 2025, pp. 24–25; Bloom et al. 2024; Hopkins et al. 2025; Susilo 2020). Workers can, for example, pick up children from school, run a load of laundry, work while waiting for deliveries or tradespeople, or attend to local errands during lunch time. The benefits of greater flexibility have been found to be more pronounced for women, consistent with women often being responsible for a greater proportion of household work and care (Bloom et al. 2024; Hopkins et al. 2025, pp. 32, 55; Laß et al. 2025).

At the same time, workers can experience costs from working from home. For example, they may feel isolated (Mooi-Reci and Wooden 2025, p. 3), disconnected from colleagues (AHRI 2025, p. 3) and lonely, particularly with extended periods of working from home (Sundermeyer 2025). For some, home life may distract and make it difficult to concentrate on work at home, or working at home may blur the boundaries between employment and home, complicating work–life balance (Mattey et al. 2020, p. 5; Xiao et al. 2021).

Some research also suggests that workers may need to take a pay cut or lower wage growth prospects to work from home (Barrero et al. 2023, pp. 37–38; Beadle and Brooks 2025). Others find that working from home results in fewer promotion opportunities – although the evidence is inconclusive, with differential effects between men and women in some cases (Bloom et al. 2024; Mooi-Reci and Wooden 2025, p. 30). Fewer promotion opportunities could be particularly pronounced, for example, where employees and their contributions are less visible to employers or where senior roles require a physical presence in the workplace.

In weighing up the costs and benefits of the employment agreement, employees may be willing to make trade-offs. For example, Australian research suggests that some people are willing to take sizeable pay cuts to work from home: Beadle and Brooks (2025, p. 2) find that after controlling for other factors, people working from home are likely to earn around 5.8% less.[3] This is broadly consistent with evidence from the US, where a field experiment testing job applicants' preferences suggested workers were willing to accept an 8% wage cut, on average, for the option to work from home in a full-time job (Mas and Pallais 2017). Cullen et al. (2025) also find that, among a sample of technology workers, the average worker may be willing to forego around 25% of their total compensation to work from home rather than having a fully in-person position. However, not all workers will be willing to trade off pay to work remotely: a study using small business survey data from the US throughout the pandemic suggests that, while around one in five workers indicated they would be willing to accept a pay cut of at least 10% to continue remote work, 60% stated they were unwilling to trade off any pay (Bartik et al. 2025, pp. 18–19).

[3] This is corroborated by De Freja et al. (2022) who found that, in the UK, remote workers experienced post-pandemic wage growth between 2% and 7% less than those in other occupations.

What factors do employers consider?

Like workers, employers also seek to maximise benefits and minimise costs to themselves when striking employment agreements. Employers generally aim to maximise productivity, often as a means of maximising profit, while costs to employers include wages paid to workers, worker training and induction costs, and investments in information and communications technologies, among other things.

Allowing workers to work from home can have benefits for employers. For example, because of its benefits to employees, some employers have considered greater work–life balance to be a key benefit of hybrid work arrangements (AHRI 2025, p. 16). This is consistent with research that links employee happiness with greater individual and firm-level productivity (Bellet et al. 2019; Fang et al. 2025; Krekel et al. 2019; Sovbetov 2025).

Some Australian employers have also cited increased worker retention as a top advantage of hybrid work arrangements (AHRI 2025, p. 16) and some international studies find that flexibility can significantly reduce employee quit rates for certain employee groups (Bloom et al. 2015, 2024). However, this may not always be the case – analysis of Australian longitudinal data produces varied relationships between employee retention rates and working from home (Mooi-Reci and Wooden 2025).

But allowing workers to work from home can also have costs to employers. For example, many employers point to difficulties fostering connection, collaboration and workplace culture as significant challenges associated with working from home, and cite these as reasons for requiring workers to be in the office more often (AHRI 2025, pp. 17–18; Curtis 2023, p. 362). Some studies find that working from home, especially fully remote work, may make collaboration more challenging (Ghaderpour et al. 2025) and reduce informal opportunities to share knowledge (Masters 2023; Ryan 2024) and the strength and variety of social networks (Masters 2023; Yang et al. 2022). In certain cases, this is linked to lower employee performance (Van der Lippe and Lippényi 2019, pp. 70–71) and innovation (Brucks and Levav 2022; Gibbs et al. 2024).

Costs to employers in some cases may stem not from individual workers being less productive at completing tasks, but from fewer ‘spillover benefits’ that arise when workers gather in a central location, such as incidental conversations that enhance the quality of work. The question of how working from home affects a firm’s productivity is therefore broader than whether a particular worker’s job can be performed remotely.

Overall, whether the productivity effects of working from home are positive or negative for an employer depends heavily on their circumstances and characteristics, as well as those of their employees and the form of work-from-home arrangements being pursued (box 2). In addition, employers can make changes to work practices and worker capabilities that moderate the effects of working from home, although doing so may also entail costs. Evidence suggests that employers are already recognising that managers in a hybrid work environment require additional capabilities and training to overcome barriers to productivity (Hopkins and Bardoel 2023, pp. 13–14; Lundy et al. 2025), and some are taking steps to provide this training – for example, the Australian Public Service Academy offers a course in managing remote and hybrid teams (Australian Government 2025).

Finally, like workers, employers may also be willing to make trade-offs between the features of an employment agreement. For example, where working from home results in a decline in worker productivity, employers may still be willing to allow work from home if the decline in productivity is more than offset by the ability to pay workers less.

Box 2 – What has research found on the link between work from home and productivity?

The productivity effects of working from home on workers vary according to a range of factors including individual characteristics and the types of work undertaken (Anakpo et al. 2023; Laß and Wooden 2025, p. 161). Overall, evidence suggests that working from home, and well-managed hybrid work in particular, does not harm worker productivity in the short term, and can even improve it in some circumstances (Anakpo et al. 2023; Angelici and Profeta 2020; Bloom et al. 2024). That said, much of the evidence focuses on knowledge-based work, with scant evidence relating to other types of work. Workers with more need to interact with clients, or with a higher share of group work, for example, could be less productive at home.

In addition, research has also revealed several underlying patterns with respect to the effect of work from home on productivity.

First, the productivity effects of fully remote work are different to those of hybrid work. Fully remote work is more likely to result in lower productivity than hybrid work because some aspects of work, such as communication and collaboration, are more difficult to perform in an entirely virtual environment (Curtis 2023, p. 362; Gibbs et al. 2023, p. 37). In contrast, hybrid work facilitates collaboration on days workers are co-located, while still allowing workers to take advantage of the benefits of remote work for part of the week.

Second, the effects of working from home on productivity may in some cases be a question of coordination, rather than work location itself. For example, being split across virtual and actual meeting rooms can result in lower productivity than if everyone were in one or the other (Gibbs et al. 2024), suggesting that coordination, such as specified office days, can improve productivity. Even having one person in a different location to others can significantly reduce productivity for those in the office (Emanuel et al. 2023).

Third, productivity effects can vary over time and across workers within individual firms. Research suggests that, under a work-from-home scenario, the productivity of more experienced employees can increase in the short term, including because they spend less time mentoring others (Choudhury et al. 2022; Emanuel et al. 2023). However, this benefit comes at a cost to less experienced employees because of a lack of mentoring opportunities, which could reduce their future productivity (Emanuel et al. 2023). Due to the recency of widespread working from home, there is not yet sufficient evidence on the long-term effects of working from home on productivity.

Work-from-home outcomes depend on labour market conditions

In negotiating employment agreements, the extent to which workers and employers are successful in having their demands met will depend on labour market conditions. For example, where workers prefer to work partly from home, they may require higher wages to attend the workplace on a full-time basis, or conversely, may need to accept lower wages in order to work from home. Whether workers are successful in commanding higher wages in return for being fully onsite will depend on factors such as the scarcity of particular expertise in the labour market and the difficulty of switching jobs.

Employers, for their part, may need to pay wage premiums to require workers to be fully onsite if labour market conditions require it, or accept that not paying a premium may result in some employees choosing to leave. Alternatively, some employers may see benefits to both the workplace and employees from allowing

hybrid work, and recognise that these are sufficient to avoid location-related variations in wages. In choosing different courses of action that suit them best, employers collectively generate a range of work-from-home options across the economy, into which workers can self-select over time by switching into jobs that better meet their preferences.

Australia appears to have arrived at a sensible middle ground

The dynamics described above have been repeated many times over since the widespread adoption of working from home in 2020. Work-from-home arrangements have now largely stabilised: in 2025, the most commonly offered work-from-home arrangements for full-time workers were two or three days at home and two or three days at the workplace, and most employers planned to maintain their arrangements over the next two years (AHRI 2025, pp. 8, 14). These observed hybrid arrangements reflect the evidence that well-managed hybrid work has neutral or slightly positive effects on productivity, particularly for white-collar jobs, while fully remote work is likely to be less productive (box 2). Thus, Australian employers and employees overall appear to have landed on sensible work-from-home arrangements, suggesting that the process of experimentation, negotiation and adjustment described in the PC's 2021 report is largely working as anticipated.

In this context, the need for a legislated right to request to work from home is not clear. Importantly, employers already have the ability to offer work-from-home arrangements where this benefits them – for example, by making it easier to attract workers or increasing employee satisfaction – and many already offer hybrid work arrangements. Introducing a right to request to work from home may, at best, have indiscernible effects on work-from-home arrangements agreed between employers and workers. At worst, it may impede the ability of employers and workers to come to mutually beneficial arrangements if employers are unable to refuse requests they believe have genuine costs, such as those that flow from reduced collaboration.

Key to whether employers will be unable to refuse such requests will be how the grounds for doing so are defined and interpreted. The FW Amendment Bill proposes allowing employers to refuse a request if the change would make performing the inherent requirements of an employee's duties impractical or impossible. At this juncture, it is unclear what would constitute an 'inherent requirement' – specifically, whether inherent requirements could include the need to attend a workplace in person to generate the connection and collaboration benefits often cited by employers. These benefits, although sometimes difficult to capture and measure, have undeniable effects on productivity. We anticipate that over time case law will define what 'inherent requirements' are; however, there are risks of a 'chilling effect' in the interim – that employers will not refuse requests for fear of being prosecuted, given the uncertainty. In addition, an overly narrow interpretation of 'inherent requirements' by the courts may result in workers being able to work from home for part of the week, even when this results in net losses to the Australian community (because, for example, decreases in the firm's productivity, incorporating reduced spillovers, may outweigh the benefits to the firm's workers collectively).

Thus, there appears to be limited evidence to suggest that including a right to request to work from home up to 2 days week is needed in the National Employment Standards. Moreover, the inclusion of such a right could lead to arrangements that are less than ideal from a community-wide perspective. In 2021, the PC suggested that governments should continue to 'monitor labour market and regulatory settings to ensure they remain fit for purpose: that they are fair as well as flexible and efficient and that they continue to promote the safety and protection of workers' (PC 2021, p. 5). This remains our position.

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