

# What is 2020 teaching us about the future of work?

A comprehensive survey conducted by Iva Durakovic (UNSW), Lisa Munao, Head of Workplace Design and Innovation (Davenport Campbell) and Kathryn Marshall (Davenport Campbell) questioning Australians on workplaces changes since COVID-19 has given us a great deal of insight into what the workplace might look like moving forward.



*Toyota Melbourne Steve Brown Photography*

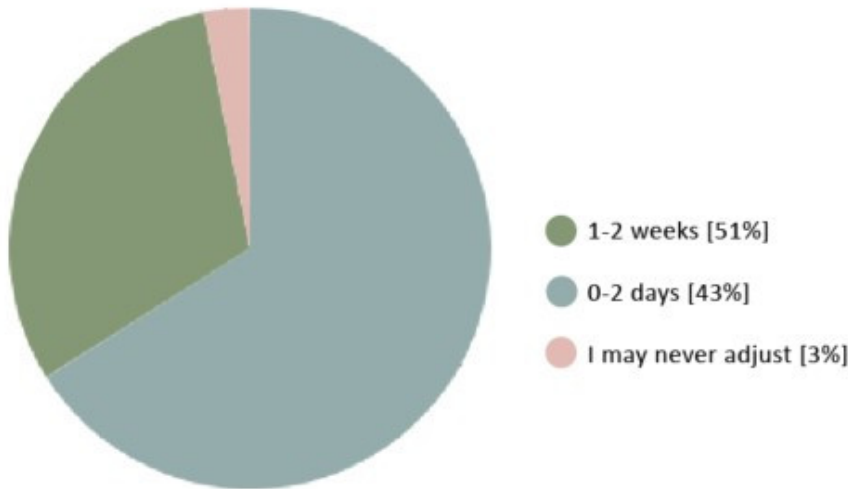
Tags: [Covid-19](#), [davenport campbell](#), [UNSW](#), [workplace culture](#)

We have been tackling issues of flexible, distributed working, and the ultimate work life balance for decades; then 2020 comes along. Within the span of a few short weeks the world has shifted to a distributed workforce, working and schooling from home seemingly with minimal protest or glitch.

## **No time for overthinking or change management (as we know it)**

Thrown into a global survival mode and on the brink of recession, individuals and businesses are doing their best to maintain business as usual, doing whatever necessary to keep a roof over their heads and their loved ones safe and healthy. Working remotely in this environment has created a complex notion of choice, and we are not driven by our usual incentives. In this high-stakes situation, uncertainty and fear are powerful motivators to keep even the most rogue of employees accountable, but these are unsustainable long-term drivers, with potentially serious mental and physical health implications. However, as adaptive human beings, we will develop new behavioural patterns as the dust settles. For workplace designers trying to pre-empt what is next, this unique moment in time offers an opportunity to learn more deeply about what's important and redefine the essentials of the future physical workplace.

Remote working seems to be instinctive, with 66% of respondents acclimatising within days and only 3% feeling that they may never adjust.

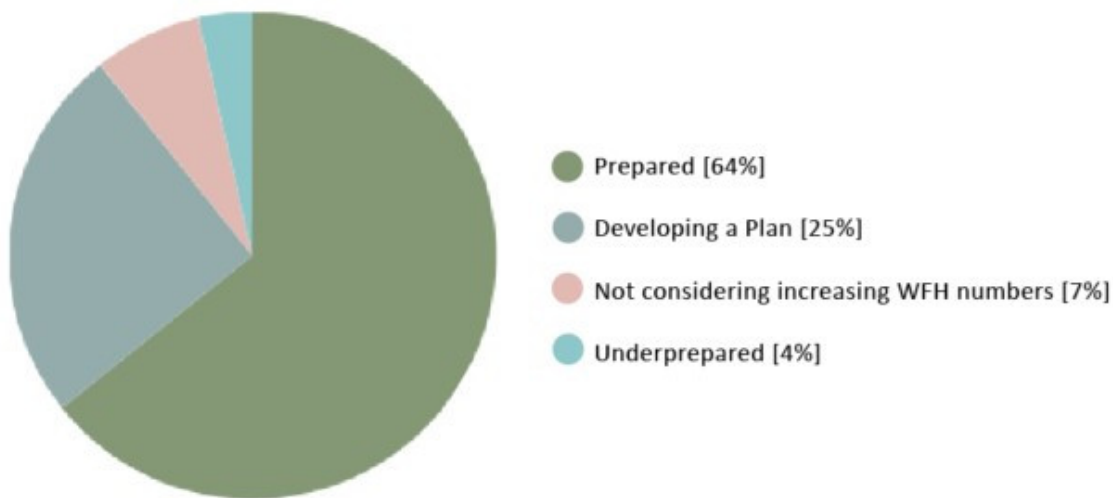


*Individuals – Q12 – How quickly have you adjusted your work style from the workplace to remote working?*

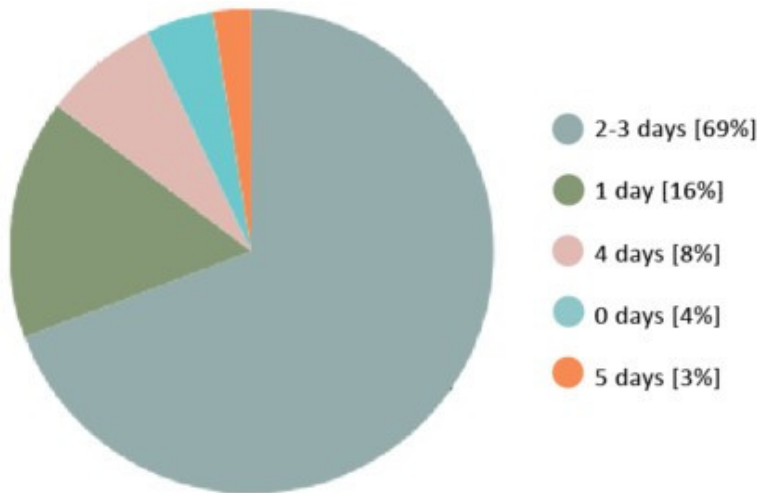
*\*Percentage represents combined responses 'Immediate and instinctive' and 'A couple of days'*

*\*\*Percentage represents combined responses '1 week' and '2 weeks'*

Resulting from years of strategic workplace change, the survey shows that 83% of organisations have an existing flexible work policy in place. But while the data shows that 89% of organisations feel prepared or are developing a plan for an increase in remote working, only 3% of individuals would choose to work from home full time. A substantial 69% would prefer to work remotely 2-3 days a week and only 4% would choose to be in the office full time. The real challenges of increasing remote working are yet to emerge but the value of commercial workspace has not dissolved just yet.



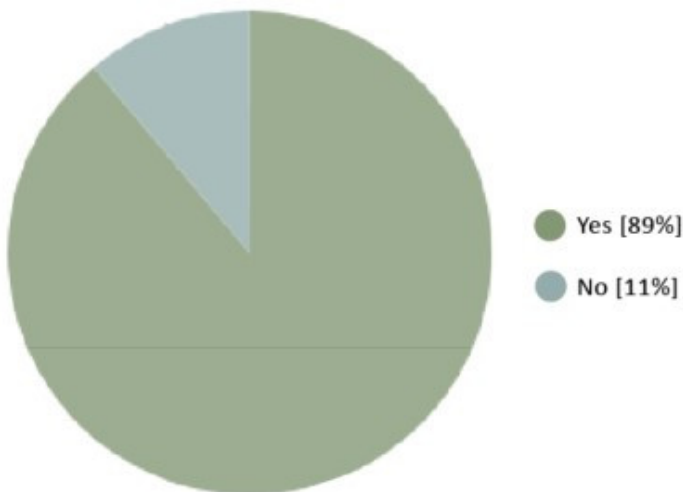
*Organisations – Q11 – How prepared is your organisation for an increase in the number of employees who may wish to continue working from home?*



Individuals – Q17 – If you had the choice in the future, how many days a week would you like to work from home?

***“Genuine flexibility is having both office and remote workplaces available. There are efficiencies and inefficiencies from both and a balance needs to be found.” [anonymous participant]***

When asked whether they felt that the design of their current workplace and workstyle had enabled the transition to remote working, 89% of participants agreed. So, workplace design is doing its job well, right? The answer is a little more complex. As one respondent noted, “WorkPLACE is less of an influence than WorkSTYLE”. The physical workplace does not exist in isolation; its design is a complex web of people (culture), place and technology in a symbiotic relationship to ultimately foster behaviours that result in productive work outputs.



Individuals – Q20 – Do you believe the design of your workplace and your work style have enabled you and your team to make the transition to working remotely?

**“Our offices were designed with flexibility in mind and to allow our people to choose where and how they work. Supported by the right technology and flexible working policies, our firm**

was in a very good position to quickly adapt to the majority of our population to work from home in a quick and efficient manner.” [Business Leader, KPMG]

Remote working is not suddenly working, but the sudden timeframe of this shift has eliminated room for lengthy change management and approval processes that would typically underpin significant workplace transformation.

“We brought forward our transition to Teams and promoted use of it collaboratively with great success.” [Jane Tisch, National Operations Manager Premises at Mirvac]

Prepared or unprepared, many organisations have had to make quick decisions to enable their people to work from home. Most notably, investments in technology and infrastructure have been taken out of the too hard or expensive basket and implemented swiftly.

## A shared experience across industries

One of the most interesting outcomes of the current situation is that beyond one sector, state, or demographic, we are seeing seismic shifts in how we work. Davenport Campbell’s workplace impact survey captures a snapshot of the working from home [WFH] landscape and individual experiences in April 2020 through a cross-section of Government, property & construction, technology, finance, media, sales & retail, professional services, manufacturing, health, human resources, research, education, defence & telecommunications sectors.

Individuals and organisations are startlingly aligned. The top three challenges that organisations faced in this transition were maintaining culture, workplace health & safety concerns and productivity.



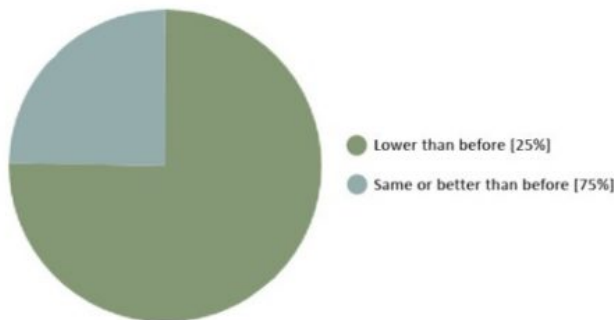
*What are the top 3 challenges that your organisation has faced in the rapid transition to remote working?*

*(Respondents could select as many options as relevant to them. Percentages below represent the top 4 selections.)*

Yet individuals reported feeling more trusted, more productive, and more autonomous since the shift.

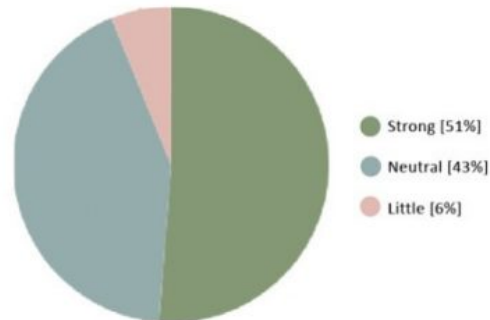
**Individuals - Q5 - Perceived productivity since shift**

Respondents were asked to rate on a 5 point Likert scale of A Lot Better than before – Much Lower than before. Results for Same or better than before are a combination of those that said ‘Same as before’ (36%) + ‘Slightly better than before’ (24%) + ‘A lot better than before’ (15%). The results for Lower than before are a combination of those that said ‘Lower than before’ (24%) or ‘Much Lower than before’ (1)%



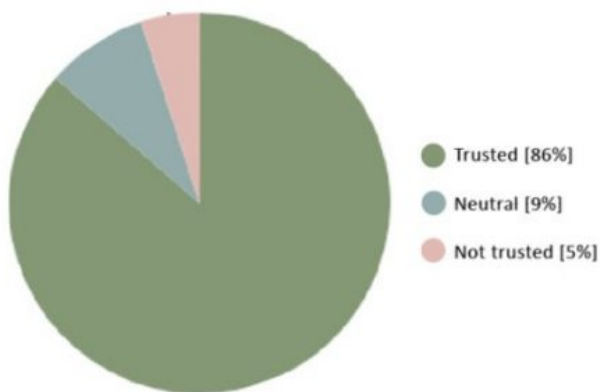
**Individuals – Q8 – Sense of value to the organisation since shift**

Respondents were asked to rate on a 5 point Likert scale of Very Strong – Very Little. Results for Strong are a combination of those that said ‘Very Strong’ (10%) + ‘Strong’ (41%). The results for Little are a combination of those that said ‘Very Little’ (2%) or ‘Little’ (4)%



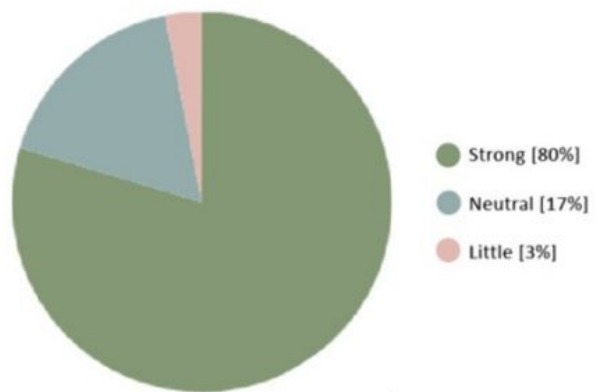
**Individuals – Q9 – How trusted do you currently feel?**

Respondents were asked to rate on a 5 point Likert scale of Completely trusted – Not trusted. Results for Trusted are a combination of those that said ‘Completely trusted’ (56%) + ‘Somewhat trusted’ (31%). The results for Not trusted are a combination of those that said ‘Not always trusted’ (4%) or ‘Not trusted’ (1)%



**Individuals – Q10 – Autonomy & ownership over work since shift**

Respondents were asked to rate on a 5 point Likert scale of Very Strong – Very Little. Results for Strong are a combination of those that said ‘Strong’ (49%) + ‘Very strong’ (30%). The results for Little are a combination of those that said ‘Little’ (3%) or ‘Very Little’ (0)%



## Trust

Historically, one of the greatest inhibitors to major workstyle change has been organisational trust – organisations simply do not trust, for various reasons and to various degrees, that all of their employees will be accountable and productive if they are not present or supervised. Interestingly, the survey data suggests



that companies have built a solid foundation of trust across their teams and workplace culture. And for those that may not have, COVID-19 has forced organisations to shift leadership mindsets and to embrace trust building behaviours such as treating employees as equal partners, focussing on shared goals, and doing what is right regardless of personal risk.

Many have said that the virus has been the great equaliser amongst us all. During this time we have seen employees of all fields and roles rise to the challenge through accountability and responsibility – meeting deliverables and developing unique and personal work methodologies amidst the juggle of toddler care, the washing machine and DIY project temptations. The unexpected wellbeing benefits of remote working are evident.

***“I think the biggest problem is the perception that staff are not productive or dedicated when working from home; my experience is that it is wrong. My team have managed their work-life balance well and have become more productive, yes there will need new checks and balances put in place. Still, the benefit to the staff, the employer and the environment is fantastic....It is the transition that needs, needed to happen, for those industries where it is applicable.”***  
***[anonymous participant]***

Productivity keeps business afloat, so it is not surprising that it is perceived as one of the top challenges for organisations, and we should be conscious that we may start to see dips and variations emerge as WFH fatigue sets in. But with 48% of organisations investing in online collaboration tools, this concern over productivity could simply point to an uncertainty over how the day to day tasks, delivery and communications between clients, customers and stakeholders will pan out with new and remote technologies.

## **So, what is important? And what do we value?**

The crisis is driving global upskilling and innovation, and ruthlessly testing assumptions about the way we do things and why. We each have an opportunity to re-establish what we value about the workplace and the essentials for working at our best in a post COVID-19 world of work. For employees, the experience so far has shown how deeply we crave face to face connection, collaboration, and community.

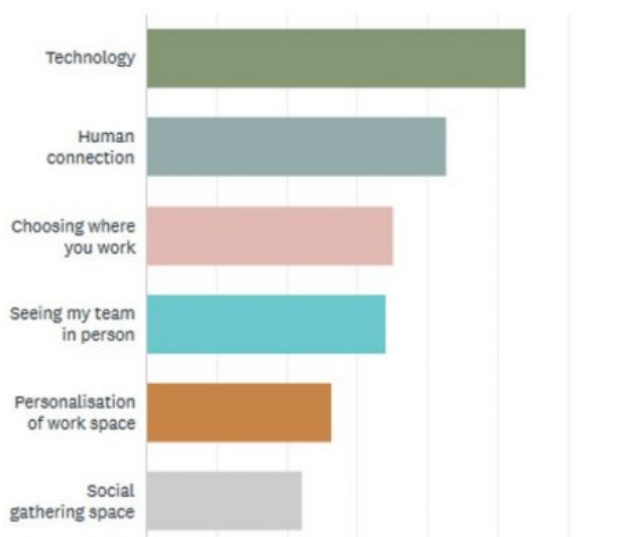


*Individuals – Q18 – If you were working part of your week from home, what would you come in to the workplace for? Respondents could select as many options as relevant to them. Percentages reflect the top 4 selections.*

As for what are emerging as the most valuable enablers of work, this survey snapshot reveals what most workplace researchers, designers and strategists would already recognise; that technology must be an enabler for our work and support efficiency.

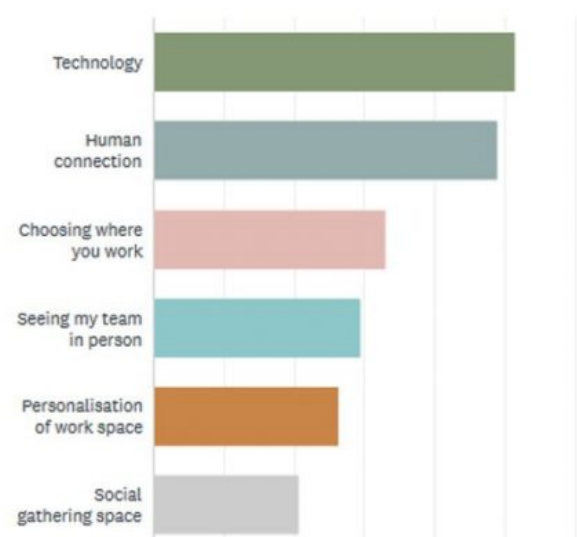
### Individuals – Q25 – From the current situation, what have you found to be the most valuable enablers for work?

[Respondents were asked to rank from 1-Most important to 6-Least important]



### Organisations – Q8 – From the current situation, what have you found to be the most valuable enablers for work?

[Respondents were asked to rank from 1-Most important to 6-Least important]



Though we have unexpectedly discovered that technology can replace and often streamline face to face meetings, we are social beings that seek human connection and validation. Research has long supported the importance of personal choice in workplace satisfaction, productivity and wellbeing; and at this stage, the proof is in the pudding. The ability to exercise choice over our workday and location is emerging as an important glue in holding a satisfied, remote workforce together.

***“I have less meaningless interruption, but connect daily with the team which is more than when in the office!” [anonymous participant]***

## How long will the honeymoon last?

If 83% of people are satisfied with remote working, 75% feel the same or more productive, 87% feel trusted by their organisation and 79% feel a strong sense of ownership over their work, will we ever have to commute to an office again?

Some would suggest that the honeymoon is already over with the make-shift nature of our WFH set up playing ergonomic roulette, increasing levels of screen fatigue and the heightened struggle of maintaining healthy boundaries between work, life and home-schooling in place. The risks of burnout and isolation are also very real. One does also question whether we are, to some extent, being such good, productive workers because we are still being driven by fear and uncertainty.

The novelty of getting half-dressed has certainly worn off and some of us will be missing the opportunity to parade our stiletto collection or the hum of an open-plan floor just enough to download the office playlist. For others, returning to their previous work environments might be a culture shock.



Ideally, as long as our work is delivered, the increased opportunity for personal choice in the emerging WFH landscape means we can filter who we interact with, when and how, based on our needs. In our own space we can protect our time and environment from unwanted intrusions, though some of us have yet to shape these boundaries. One participant noted the “clear cut work directions” and “less meaningless interruptions” offered by technology and remote working, and another remarked that “focused work – couldn’t be better”. Such wellbeing factors are perhaps unexpected but valuable efficiencies in the productivity equation that should be acknowledged by organisations in their return to work strategies.

***“Less people traffic allows (me) to focus for longer. Remote meetings tend to stick to topic and finish quicker” [anonymous participant]***

Davenport Campbell’s survey was snapshot of April 2020. What the WFH and physical workplace landscape looks like in July and beyond is anyone’s guess and that’s exactly what stage two of this longitudinal study seeks to learn.