

The COVID-19 Remote Working Experiment



Introduction

Flexible work arrangements have been a trend in the ever-changing world of work a long time before the COVID-19 pandemic. Having said this, the crisis has accelerated the mass-adoption of remote working to enable organisations to keep operating in these turbulent times. While early adopters of this trend may have been unphased by the current need to work remotely, other organisations have had to put their doubts about reduced productivity, cybersecurity and data protection aside and experiment with a new, and in some cases mandatory, way of working.

Organisations, and employees alike, may be realising the benefits of remote working causing a shift in mindsets that will likely shape the future of our workspaces and routines. Others may be itching to return to their normal work environments. Therefore, questions on a permanent shift in the way we work remain. Will remote working become more widely-accepted causing many to rethink the functionality of the way they work? Or will blurred boundaries make employees eager to get back to the office?

We have collected insights on the remote working experience of over 850 workers in Malta to understand whether this will be a sustainable way of working in the long term. Participants ranged from a number of sectors, roles and age groups with 88% of respondents stating that they were employed on a full-time basis.



Level of remote working

The shift to remote working due to COVID-19 has been monumental. The speed of adoption and the significant number of workers moving to virtual ways of working has put the effectiveness of remote working to the test. The work of 95% of respondents can be carried

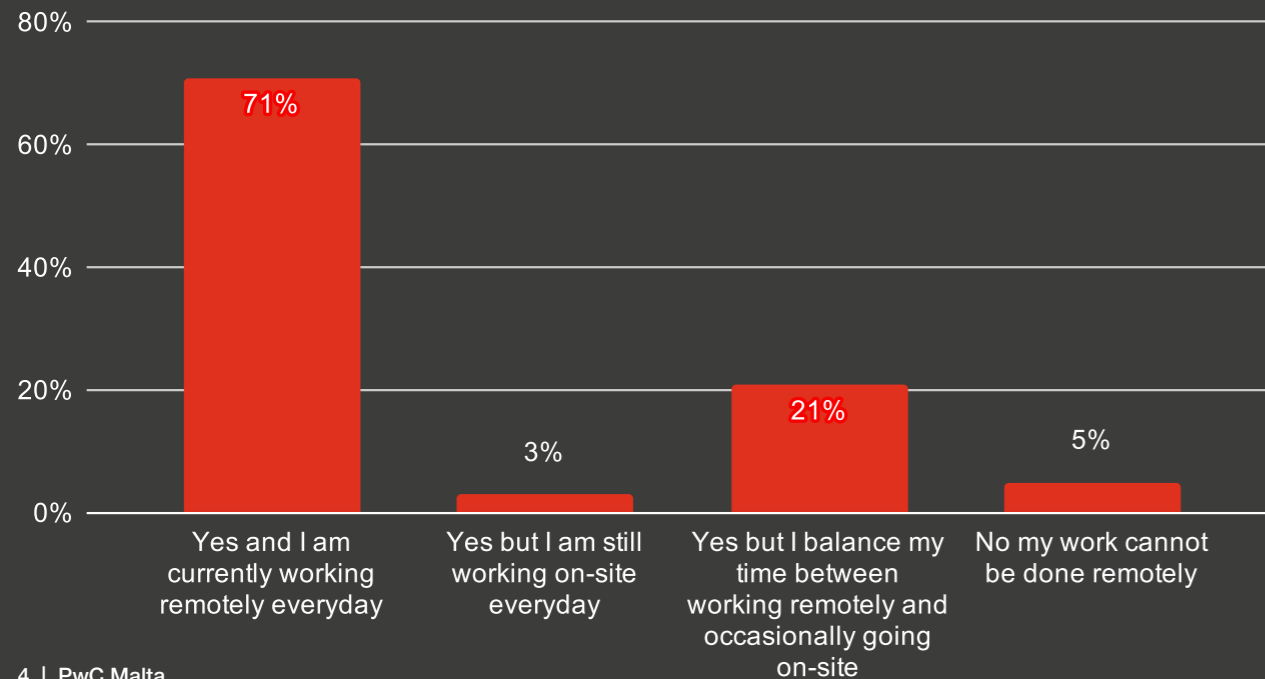
out remotely, while 5% of respondents stated that their work cannot be carried out remotely as they worked in sectors such as retail, child care and health care. The majority (71%) of survey participants confirmed that they were working completely remotely.

This shows a considerable shift given that from these respondents 61% stated it was their first experience of working remotely.

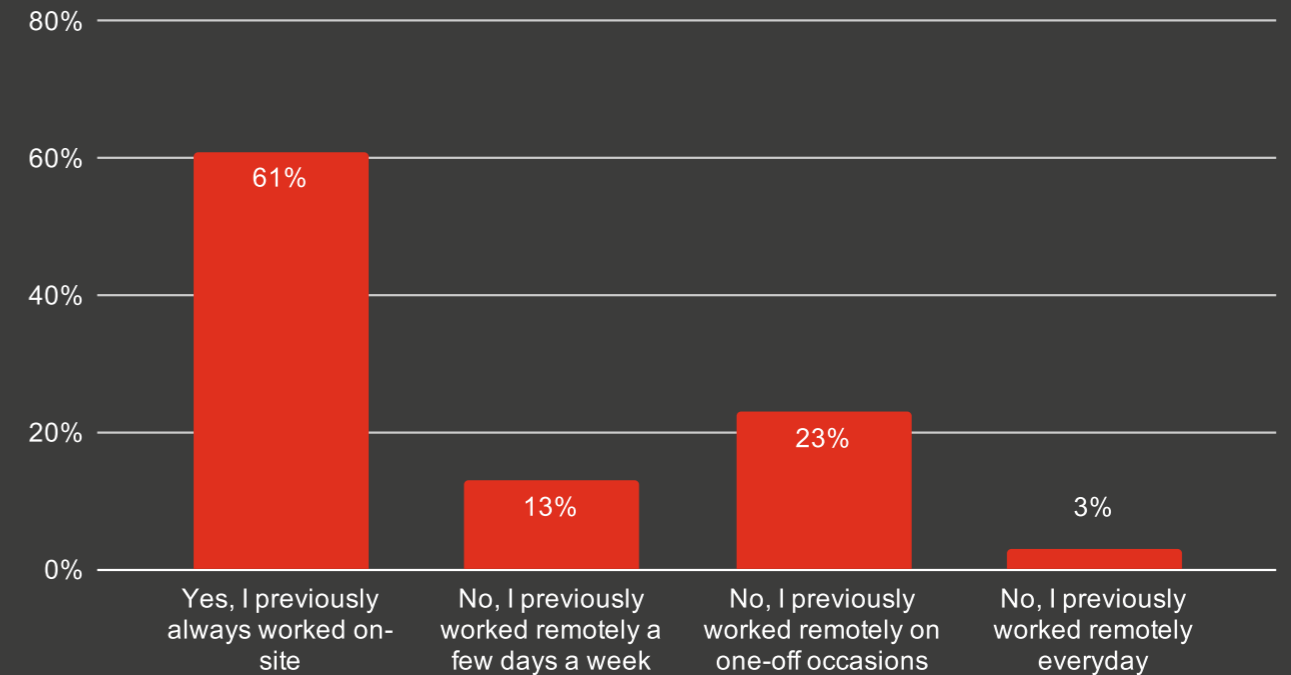
21% stated they balanced their time between working remotely and occasionally going on-site while the remaining 3% stated they were working on-site everyday, notwithstanding their job allowing them to work remotely.

The main reasons for not working remotely included senior management not allowing employees to work from home due to fears of reducing productivity and organisations not being set up to work remotely due to limitations such as infrastructure, systems, etc.

Does your role enable you to potentially work remotely?

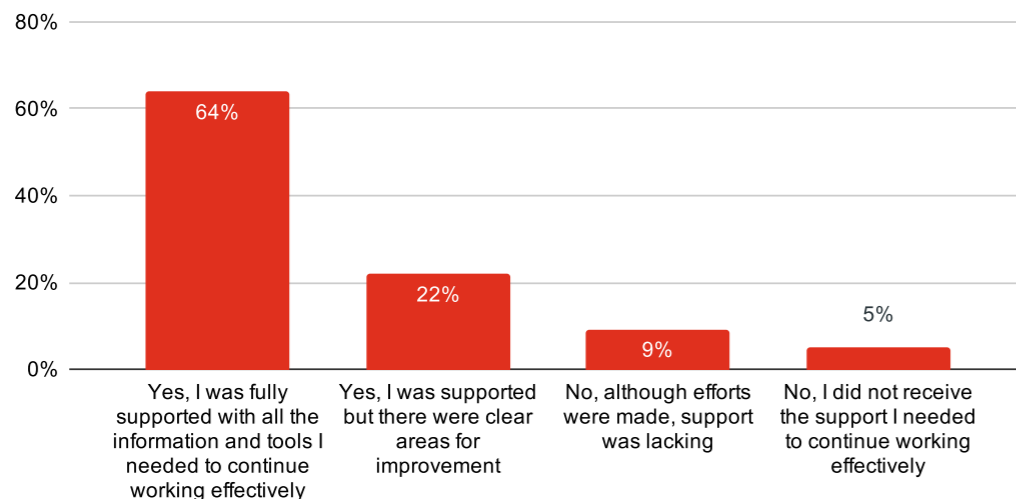


Is this your first time working remotely?

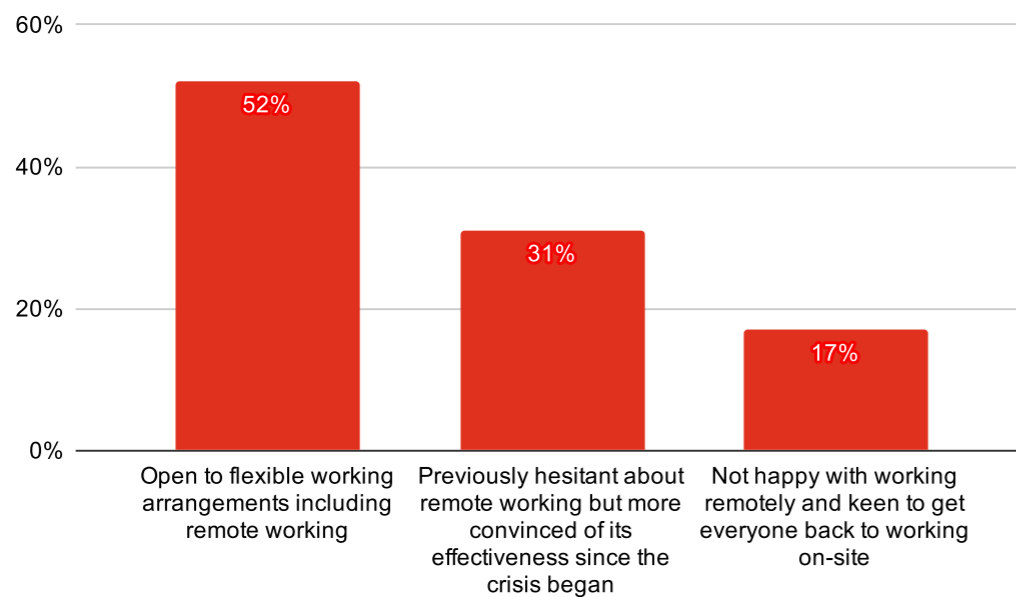


Effectiveness of remote working

Has the support you received from your organisation been helpful in guiding your new working patterns (e.g. safety & well-being guidance, working from home tips, tools to carry out tasks more efficiently, etc.)?



What has senior management's attitude been towards remote working?



In undergoing this shift to a new way of working, 64% of respondents felt fully supported by their organisations to enable them to continue working effectively. 91% of participants went on to describe communication as being 'easy' during these

circumstances either due to the effective tools provided or because management and staff have adapted to this new way of communicating.

These results link to a key finding that 44% found that their productivity had

actually increased when compared to working on-site. In fact, **31% stated that management had become less hesitant on this new way of working after experiencing its effectiveness during the crisis.**





Upholding standards

Make it clear that quality, security, confidentiality and exceptional service remain a key priority.

Dress for the day

Encourage your employees to still get ready for their day, even when working from home. The idea is to look presentable and feel your best self as this helps in sustaining your productivity and well-being.

Virtual etiquette

Ensure high engagement, limited multitasking and no phones during virtual meetings to ensure all are attentive and meeting agenda is met in the time set out. Be wary that not everything requires a meeting so respect each other's time.

Team alignment is key

Ensure your team is aligned on goals, expectations, preferred ways of working and communicating. Set targets and communicate future vision that will give the team direction.

Ensure available support

When working remotely, the importance of support remains crucial. Ensure employees can easily reach out to keep teams not only physically but mentally healthy as well.

Develop a routine

Set a ritual with your team and encourage a disciplined way of managing their days. This could mean a scheduled daily check-in or close of business call to ensure employees shut off in the evening. Also, plan for the time needed for each team member to recharge and remain productive.

How to keep productivity up when working remotely in the long-term

The remote working experience

Increased productivity was not the only advantage of remote working highlighted amongst respondents. Spending less time travelling to work, the feeling of making a positive contribution to the environment, as well as, being more focussed due to less office distractions and interruptions from

colleagues were the top three advantages of working remotely. Other benefits highlighted were the ability to spend more time with the family during the day and feeling less stressed due to a flexible work environment that helped many maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Respondents also found that this new way of working allowed them to better manage their work-life balance and also felt that not being constrained to standard office hours allowed them to work when they were most focussed and productive.

In fact, 69% of respondents described their remote working experience as a positive one. Only 9% appeared to view their remote working experience as a negative one, with 22% being neutral. The remote working experience was viewed the most positively by the group falling between ages 24-35 while it was viewed the most negatively

by those aged 56 and over. The largest percentage of those who viewed the experience positively were those who lived alone. This could indicate that remote working is more difficult with children and roommates possibly due to increased caregiver responsibilities and distractions. Taking such aspects into consideration, this result could shift

once schools and child care facilities re-open. Key highlights were that managerial roles viewed their experience slightly more negatively than those that did not hold a managerial position and those working in IT were the department who were most positive about their remote working experience.

Initiatives that encourage these positive experiences should be implemented in a post pandemic world, even if employees return to the office. If factors like contributing to the environment, flexible working and a healthy work-life balance are important to employees, these should not be foregone once things return to normality. Such efforts will encourage retention, attraction and engagement.

Despite the benefits, there were also key challenges experienced by remote workers. The most popular challenge was that many felt pressure to be more productive and prove they are working. Participants also highlighted that feeling lonely as a result of reduced

levels of human interaction and social encounters with coworkers was a challenge they were facing. Additionally, respondents also highlighted that blurred boundaries meant more hours of work and reduced work-life balance.

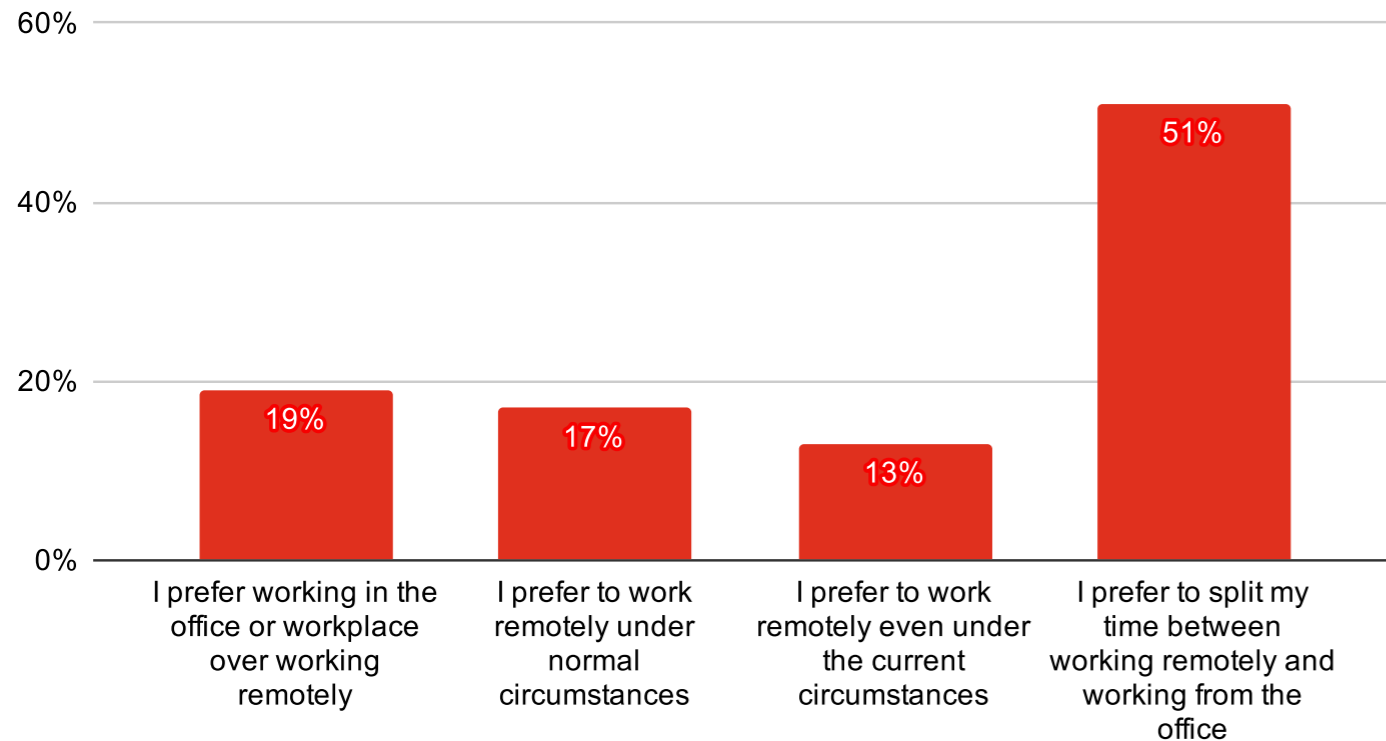
A permanent shift

While some see this new way of working as a temporary shift, others see this approach as a long-term change. In fact, most respondents see themselves working remotely up to 1-2 days a week post

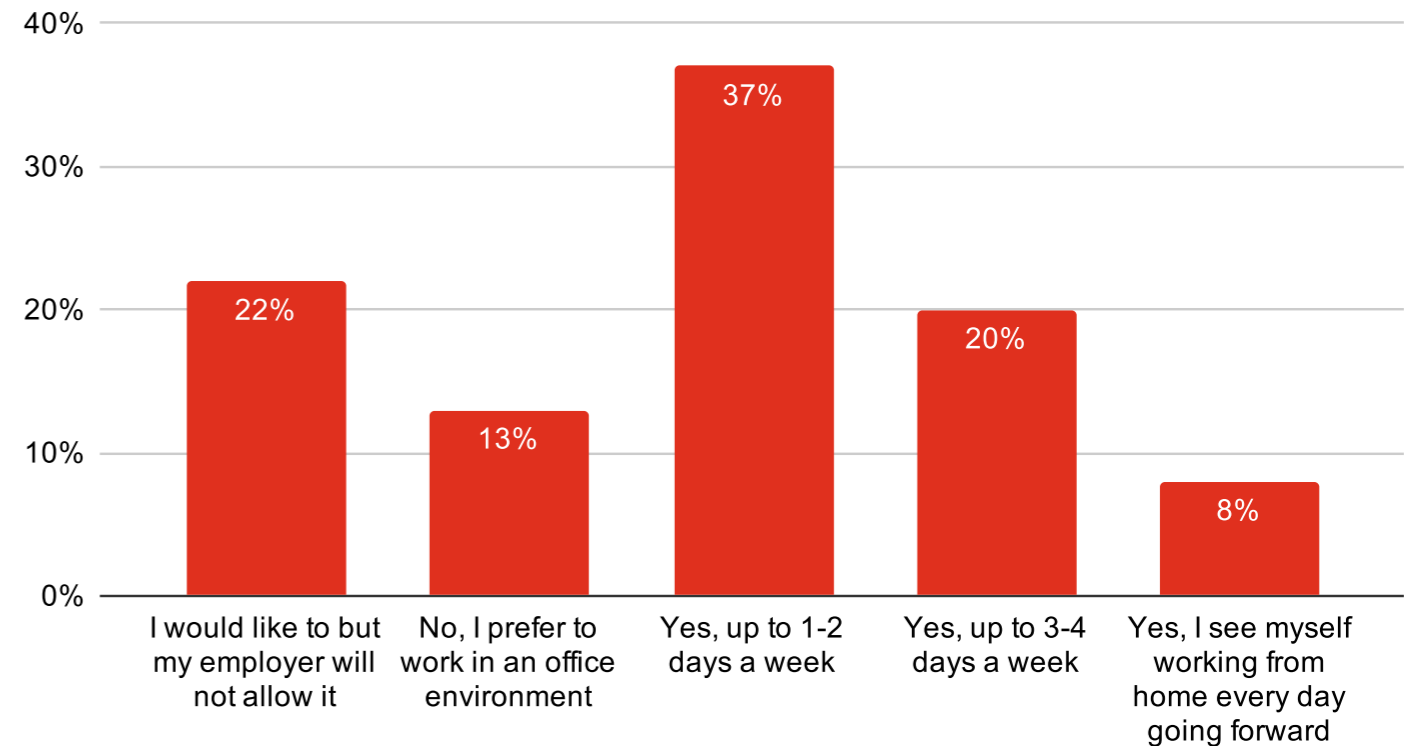
crisis with **51% saying their ideal way of working would be to split time between working from the office and working remotely**. Only 19% stated they preferred to work from the office or workplace

over working remotely. A key highlight is that **22% stated they would like to continue to work remotely post crisis but their employer will not allow it**.

Where do you prefer to work?



Do you see yourself continuing to work remotely post crisis?



Before shifting to this new way of working, there are a number of elements organisations need to give importance to and efforts to be made in ensuring a smooth and successful transition.

CALENDAR

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	
21	22	23	24	25	26	

Adopt the right technology



Having the right technology is critical in successfully working remotely. The absence of technology was a clear stumbling block that hindered employees from working from home. In fact, one of the main reasons as to why participants were working on-site despite being able to work remotely was due to the organisation not being set up with the required

systems, infrastructure, etc. to work remotely. Concurrently, technology was seen as essential to those working remotely with 92% stating that they had access to the resources (e.g. materials, equipment, technology, support services, etc.) they needed to do their job effectively. Connectivity, IT infrastructure and communication tools were found to be the most important resources that allowed workers to continue to be effective in their work whilst working remotely.

Many may have learnt, through this remote working experience, that digital transformation is no longer something that can be postponed but that it is an area of business that requires immediate attention and investment. Organisations cannot tell people that they can work remotely if their technology infrastructure and processes do not allow employees to do so effectively. Additionally, it is not simply about supplying the equipment but also ensuring your workforce is digitally capable of using the provided tools to their full potential which may require upskilling efforts.



Acknowledge the role of senior management



Senior management play a critical part in an employee's experience of remote working. As stated earlier, many felt pressure to be more productive and prove to be working. In fact, 46% stated they spend more time working when compared to working onsite. When asked what additional elements would enhance employees' remote working experience popular responses included:

- More trust from management to be productive while working remotely;
- More consideration by senior management for work-life balance, working hours and other commitments outside work (such as childcare, eldercare or other); and
- The need for a culture that does not overlook remote workers for promotions or professional development opportunities.

It is critical to address these issues concerning senior management to build an organisational culture that fosters remote working.



A permanent shift to remote working requires a change in culture

Create a clear division between work and personal time

Although we can be connected 24/7, it does not mean we should be. Create a culture that respects personal time and needs.

A culture of understanding

Working remotely could mean more distractions, noise in the background and special appearances by children and pets in video calls. No need for apologies, it happens to all of us.

One size does not fit all

Working remotely often comes with additional responsibilities. Efforts must be made to instil a culture of flexibility to accommodate different individual needs. An employee's need for flexibility may differ to another's but is equally important. Communication with your team is critical in ensuring this is successful.

The tone from the top

A cultural shift starts with top management leading by example. This applies in all aspects from trusting employees to perform while working remotely, maintaining engagement with employees as done in the workplace, going offline past work hours, using online tools and ensuring regular communication.

Be true to your values

Fostering strong relationships, encouraging empathy and making efforts to consider each other's well-being does not only apply in an office. Encourage a culture where you check-in, catch up and stay connected no matter where you work from.

Accountability at the heart of organisational culture

Transparency amongst team members is a must when introducing a new way of working. Everyone must be committed to and accountable for their performance, wherever they are working from. Ensure performance management is focussed on outcomes and deliverables rather than employees' physical presence at the office.

Make trust the default

Counter the unspoken assumption that not working in the office means working less. Move from the belief that people need constant supervision to the mindset that people are trustworthy until evidence emerges to the contrary. Trusting relationships are key to an empowering and autonomous culture.

A culture that accommodates all working practices

As people start to work from the office while others remain working remotely, ensure no one feels isolated. Any communication should reach all employees including those working remotely. This may require efforts such as enabling the ability to join key meetings and events virtually, or using online communication tools.

Prioritise employees' well-being

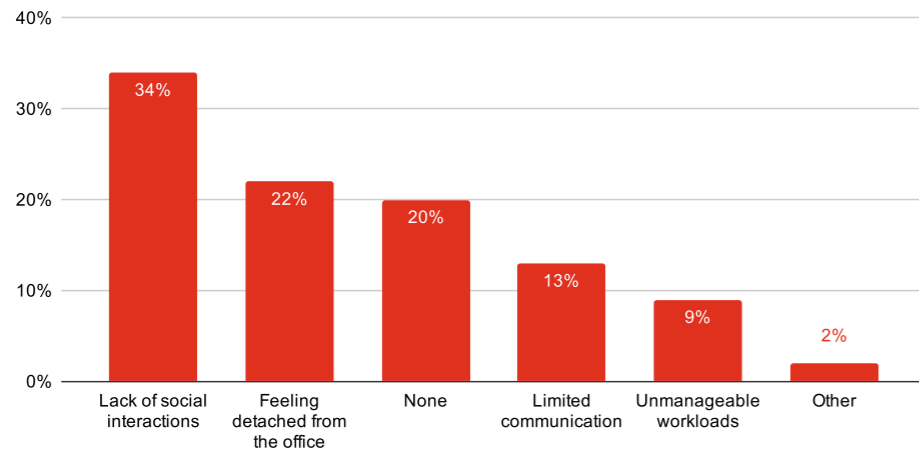


This should be a priority on an organisation's agenda no matter the working practices implemented. However, it is even more important when employees are working remotely as it may be

more difficult to pick up on signs that an employee is struggling. Respondents stated that the two most likely factors that will impact their mental health if they were to continue working

remotely would be lack of social interactions and feeling detached from the office. In fact, feeling lonely was amongst the top challenges experienced in this new way of working.

What would impact your mental health if you were to continue working remotely?



Organisations need to consider their people experience no matter where an employee is working from. This could mean keeping up team activities and social encounters even if it is through virtual coffee breaks. Enhancing the people

experience also means fostering the managerial culture of 'checking-in' not checking-up on employees. Not all catch-ups need to be focussed on work, but should also focus on sharing praise for goals reached and show interest in what an

employee is feeling regularly. Additionally, be clear on when people need to be available and enable 'protected time off' to avoid blurred boundaries that could intensify an 'always on' culture, leaving people more stressed.

Communicate legal and regulatory obligations



From the survey, ensuring continued compliance with data security and GDPR obligations was the least popular challenge of remote working. This could indicate that employees may not be aware of their responsibilities in these areas when working remotely. Although maintaining confidentiality and privacy while working in an office environment may be second

nature to employees, are they aware that such standards and principles must be maintained also when working remotely? Employers must be aware of their obligations and ensure their workforce is informed and reminded of their confidentiality obligations and the need to abide at all times by data protection laws, such as GDPR, regularly. Ensuring organisational

policies and procedures are up to date and cater for situations of remote working is necessary, but not enough. Organisations must go a step further and ensure compliance to such policies and procedures no matter the working environment.



Ensure the right remote working set-up



When asked about the top improvements required to make a more permanent shift to remote working, enhancing remote working set-ups, better connectivity and improved technology/equipment were amongst the top five responses with local participants. These could be areas where organisations and Government introduce funding to encourage the uptake of remote working in the long-run and aid issues such as air pollution, time wasted in traffic and limited parking, amongst others.

Funds could target factors such as ergonomic furniture and increased bandwidth to improve employees' remote working experience.

Having said this, support is not limited to funding. Unless otherwise agreed, the employer is responsible for providing, installing and maintaining the necessary equipment as well as for providing an appropriate technical support facility. There should be a teleworking agreement in place for remote workers and such agreement should be in writing. This agreement should not only stipulate rights and obligations of the employer and the employee, but also set out the

parameters of this arrangement such as the use of equipment, costs, allocation of time, monitoring and other matters. Additionally, it should be ensured that employees work in a healthy and safe environment. In practice, employers may possibly consider reserving the right to make inspections, in a reasonable manner and depending on the circumstances at hand, to ensure home working areas are adequate and that working patterns and levels of work are not detrimental to the health and well-being of employees.





All facets of remote working need to be prioritised if your organisation is considering a permanent shift to this new way of working, to capitalise on the benefits and address the challenges. Initiatives must not only focus on maintaining productivity while working remotely but go beyond, including a revamp of the organisational culture

and technology infrastructure to equip the organisation to effectively make these changes to working practices. Employers must also be well-aware of their legal and regulatory obligations as well as factors impacting the well-being of their workforce in the new working environment. The remote experiment has highlighted key benefits but

it has also made gaps within organisations more evident. If organisations are looking to make a more permanent shift to remote working such gaps need to be addressed to ensure success.

Methodology

Onest Market Intelligence Ltd. was used for the distribution, data analysis and visualisation of PwC's survey. The results outlined are based on a one-time survey conducted during May 2020 among a random sample of people, with a margin of error of +/- 3%. The survey aimed to gather insight on the public's experience of remote working

and their views on whether this can become a sustainable way of working. The survey had 875 full respondents. The majority of the people surveyed (88%) are full-time employees, with only around 7% employed part-time. All respondents are aged 18 or higher, with the most common age group being the 36-45 year group. The largest group

of respondents were from the financial sector (21%) with other respondents from a variety of sectors including education, gaming, ICT and healthcare.

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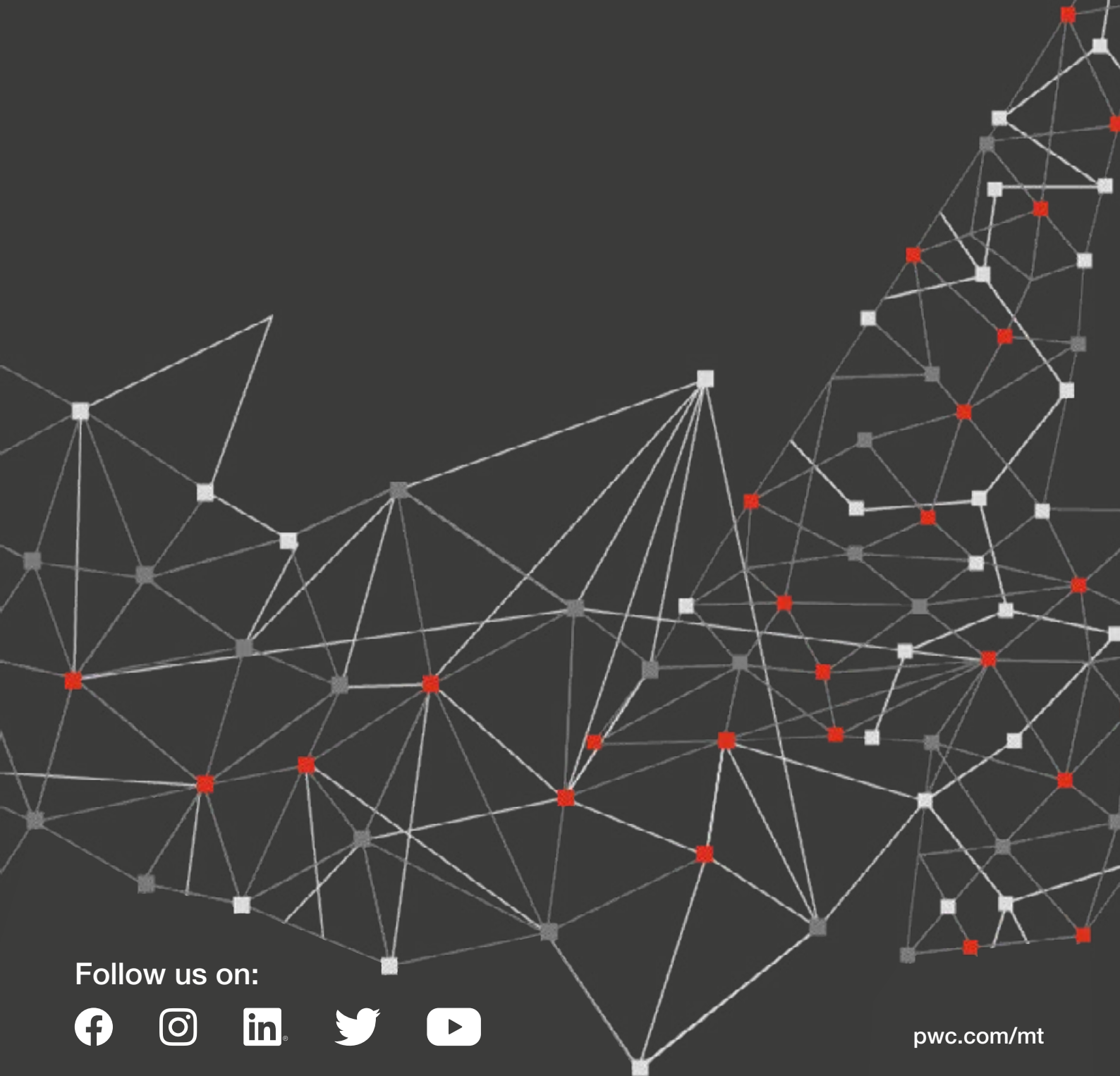
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