



**Victorian Equal Opportunity  
& Human Rights Commission**

# **Rebuilding flexible workplaces**

## **Lessons for the post-COVID workplace**

The move to remote working and the unprecedented need for flexible work arrangements during COVID-19 has fundamentally changed the way our workplaces operate, creating opportunities to adopt and embed these arrangements as business-as-usual into the future.

At the peak of the pandemic, the Commission surveyed and interviewed Victorian workers aged 18+ years, who are parents, carers and/or have a disability, to better understand how COVID-19 transformed approaches to flexible work.

This is what we learned.

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## OUR METHODOLOGY

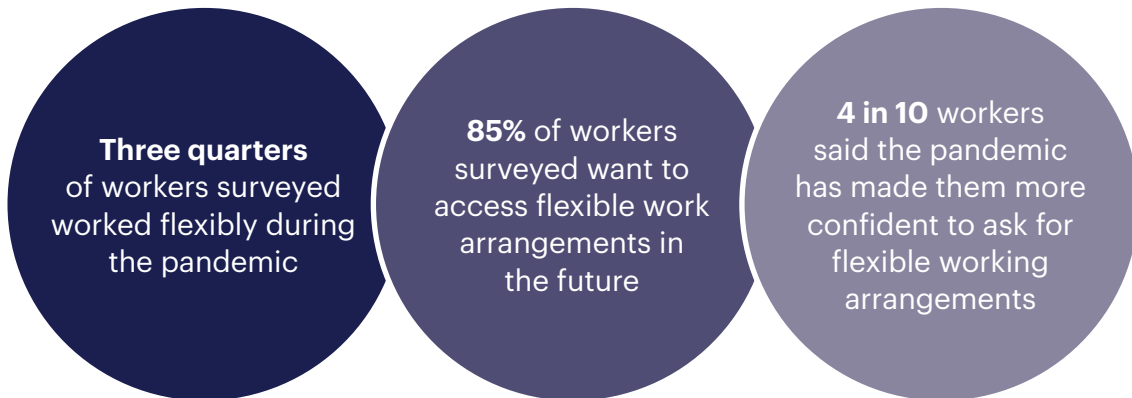
The Commission surveyed 1504 Victorian workers aged 18+ years, who are parents, carers and/or have a disability.

We supplemented our online survey with 12 qualitative interviews. The survey and interviews were conducted between 27 June 2020 and 3 July 2020. We ensured robust sample sizes by setting quotas by location, gender, age and parental/carer/disability status.

The Commission acknowledges and thanks the Victorian Public Sector Commission for its support in analysing our survey results.

# Women and men want flexible work arrangements

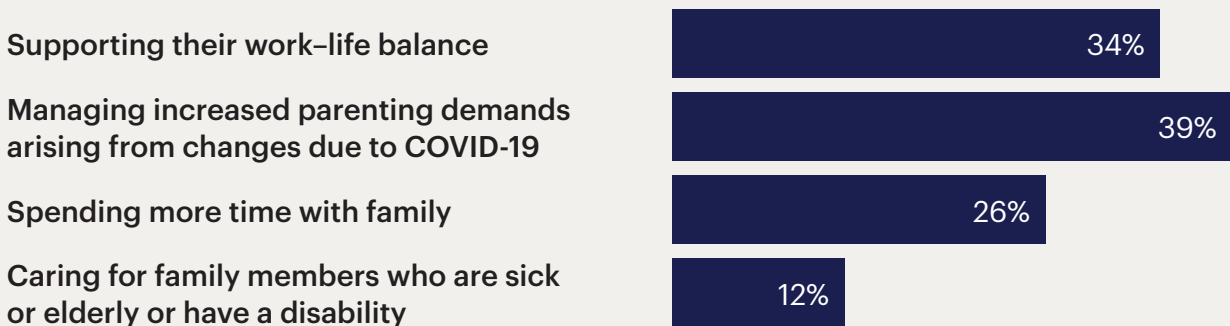
Women and men expressed a strong desire to work flexibly. All employers need to consider how they can embed flexible work practices during recovery.



## Workers see flexibility as key to maintaining balance

Workers see flexibility as an important part of balancing personal and working responsibilities throughout their working life. Access to flexible work is about more than just accommodating childcare responsibilities.

Workers reported a range of reasons for accessing flexible work arrangements during the pandemic:

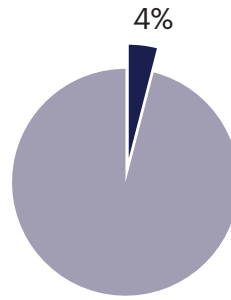


# Even small changes can support greater flexibility

Many of the flexible work arrangements that workers are seeking can be accommodated easily by employers, including those employers who have traditionally thought flexibility is incompatible with certain types of work or 'too hard'.



During the pandemic, **3/4** of workers (**77%** of women and **72%** of men) accessed one or more form of flexible working arrangement.



Only **4%** of workers reported that no flexible working arrangements were available at their workplace.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, these were the most common flexible arrangements used:

Taking leave when needed

50%

Attending personal appointments during work hours and making up any lost time

40%

Working from home or remotely

32%

Choosing what days or times to work

34%

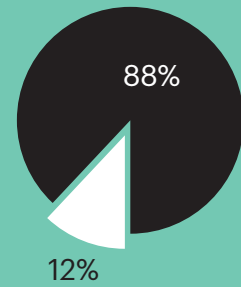


# Flexibility supports productivity and other benefits

In total, **88%** of workers surveyed had a positive or neutral experience with flexible work. Only **12%** had a negative experience.

Some groups were more positive about flexible work than others:

- **56%** of workers with disability reported a positive experience, compared to **45%** of workers without disability
- a high proportion of caregivers (**57%**) reported positive experiences of flexible work.



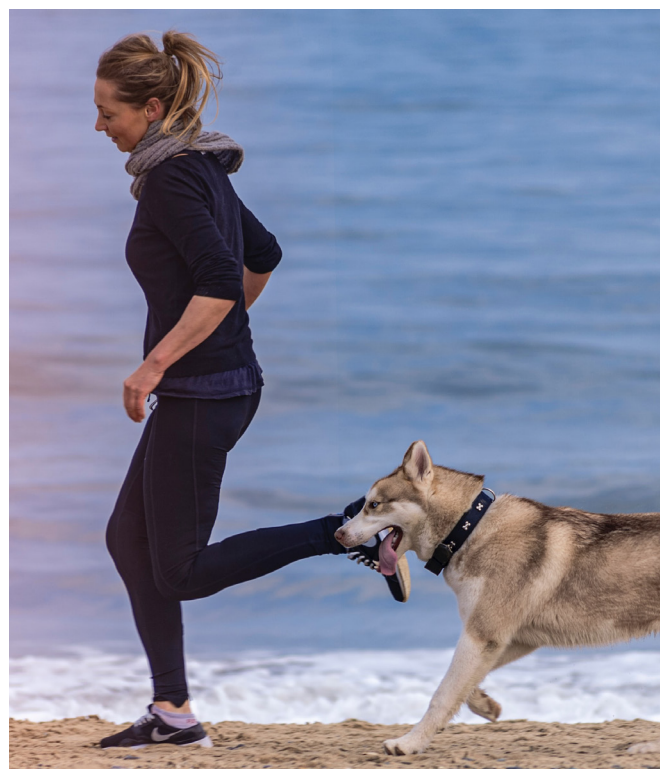
■ Positive experiences with flexible work  
■ Negative experiences with flexible work

Some of the reported benefits of flexibility:



**“Better health – diet is better due to more time to prepare meals, more exercise as I have time to walk dogs and do workouts before work. Better relationship – time to do housework. Better mental health – I have seasonal affective disorder and winter is a bad time for me. Being at home I spent more time outdoors, which has significantly lessened the effect this has had on me this year.”**

**“Less time and money to commute, which is fantastic. I am also able to take on carer duties whilst working remotely...”**



## Many workers feel unable to ask for flexibility

A significant proportion of workers surveyed who wanted flexibility didn't ask for it, fearing it would jeopardise their job security or that their employer would refuse their request.

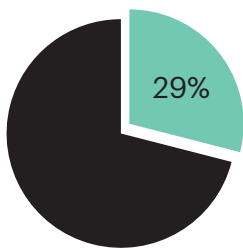
- Almost one in five workers (**19%**) wanted to ask for a flexible work arrangement but didn't
- Men were less likely than women to think flexibility was for them – about **30%** of men thought it would not be possible in their role, compared to **18%** of women.

Here are some of the most common reasons people didn't ask for flexible arrangements:



# Employers need support to understand their obligations

Many employers do not understand their legal obligations regarding flexible work and a significant number are unnecessarily or inappropriately denying requests to work flexibly.

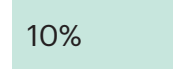


The most common reason given by employers for refusing flexible work requests was that the organisation was short-staffed (**29%** of respondents). However, most “reasons” given didn’t appear to be legitimate.



**One in four** employers told their workers they “would think about it”, but still hadn’t informed the worker of the outcome at the time of the survey.

No reason given for refusal



No flexible work policy

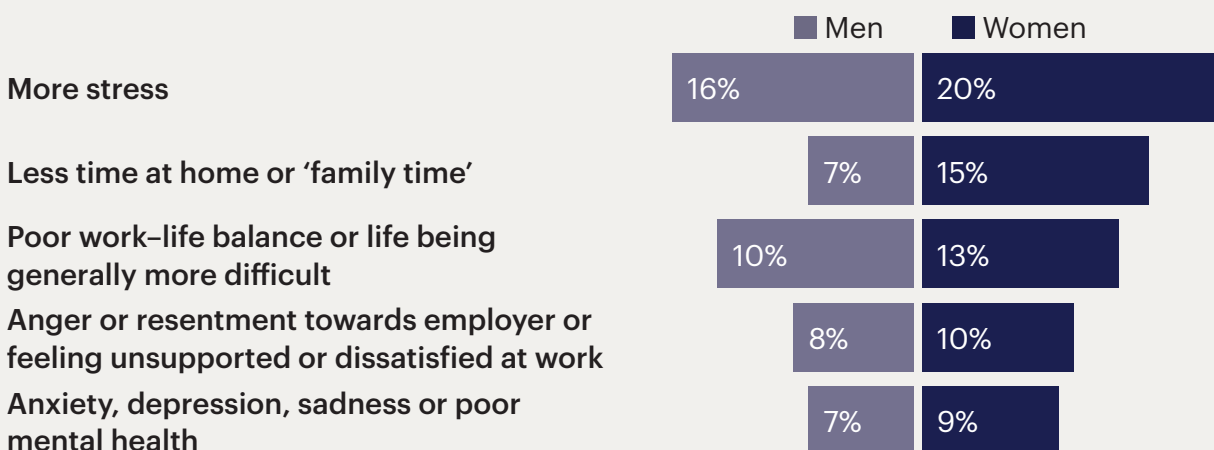


**10%** of employers did not give a reason for denying a flexible work request, and **15%** did not have a policy on flexible work arrangements.

## Denying flexibility harms workers

People who were unable to work flexibly reported a range of negative impacts, including on their mental health, family life, workload and satisfaction levels at work, with most of these issues being more prominent for women than men.

Here are some of the most negative impacts of a lack of flexibility we heard about:



# Men and marginalised groups are more likely to be refused flexible work

Stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes appear to be influencing employers' decisions about flexible work.



**18%** of men, compared with **14%** of women, had a request for flexible work arrangements to accommodate childcare responsibilities refused.

Some other groups also reported being refused at high rates:



Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people



Temporary work visa holders



People who speak a language other than English at home



LGBTIQ+ people



Carers

## Supporting workers and employers to discuss flexible work

The Commission has released a **Flexible work request planner** to support workers and employers to prepare for and consider requests for flexible work. The planner is an interactive chatbot, freely available on our website, which supports workers and managers to initiate a conversation about flexible work and create an effective plan. It includes a pathway for managers to check legal obligations, prompts to set up a successful conversation and downloadable planning tools. The Commission can also work with organisations to review policies and procedures and develop strategies to successfully embed flexible working arrangements across their workforce.

Find the planner online at [www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources/chat-about-flexible-work/](http://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources/chat-about-flexible-work/)





## What's next?

The COVID-19 pandemic has catapulted Victorian workplaces well into the future of flexible working arrangements. It has shown how many people thrive when they are afforded some flexibility in their working day and how quickly and successfully employers can establish workplace flexibility. Workplaces must learn from this experience and look at how they can embed flexible work as the 'new normal' going forward.

**“The CEO of the company is the person I report to. He was fine [about me working flexibly]. Because the businesses were impacted so much it was just about getting the work done. As long as that happened, [working flexibly] was okay.”**

**“If I could condense work to 3–4 days and have a day off that would be ideal. I’ll probably ask about it when things are back to normal. They’ll be likely to say yes; they’ve realised it’s a changing environment and a changing world.”**

The Commission heard from one worker whose employer permitted her to work from home before the pandemic, but who chose not to because many people reported to her. She hadn't previously considered the idea of condensing her working week, but the idea certainly appeals to her now.

The Commission's research points to a need for:

- 1 greater education about flexible work arrangements, including workers' entitlements**
- 2 greater support to help all employers to understand their legal obligations and how they adjust workplace practices to embed flexibility as part of business-as-usual**
- 3 workplace equality to be prioritised by the Victorian Government as part of its response to COVID-19 and recovery efforts.**

# Further information

For more on how the Commission is working to advance gender equality at work, visit our website.

For general enquiries or further information, call our Enquiry Line on 1300 292 153.

For media enquiries, contact Peter Davies on 0447 526 642 or at [peter.davies@veohrc.vic.gov.au](mailto:peter.davies@veohrc.vic.gov.au).

[humanrights.vic.gov.au](http://humanrights.vic.gov.au)