COVID-19 TELEWORK STUDY REPORT

20% OFTEN WORKED FROM HOME

57% RARELY WORKED FROM HOME

63% REQUIRED TO WORK FROM HOME

Bucknell UNIVERSITY | Freeman College of Management

CONTENTS

About the Teleworking Global Work Survey

We are currently living in an anomalous health and economic crisis for an indefinite period. Workplaces must find ways to comply with strict government regulations and requirements. To limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus, a large number of workers find themselves in telework (working from home) on a voluntary basis or because their employer requires it. This teleworking situation is unprecedented because of its scale and its sudden and hasty implementation.

Teleworkers, therefore, need to adapt quickly. They must evolve their ways of working with the support of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) at their disposal, in a context of upheaval and uncertainty. As part of this study, we seek to better understand the impact of telework on work life. We are looking at changes in behavior and attitudes towards this form of work practice, which is becoming essential. We focus on the adaptability and innovation potential that this work practice is likely to generate.

Extant research has shown the positive effects of telework on productivity and work-related stress, as well as easing workloads. Despite the significant development of new ICTs and contrary to predictions, teleworking has not been widely adopted as a common practice in the workplace. However, the implementation of telework requires, on the part of employees and managers, significant adaptation efforts vis-à-vis ICT, the implementation of innovative work methods, and a modification of behaviors and attitudes to succeed in changing the way of working. The general objective of this study is to bring a new perspective to teleworking, to analyze its impacts during a prolonged global health crisis and to learn from it for the post-crisis period. More specifically, the project involves exploring the practice of teleworking, assessing its ability to meet the changing needs of workplaces in times of crisis, validating the possibilities for innovation that this form of work practice generates, and determining the ability of individuals to adapt to a significant upheaval in their work life.

Eddy Ng, PhD
Andrew Lam, MA

Project and Partners

In the spring of 2020, a research team with academics from four countries launched a project to better understand telework following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project seeks to explore the prevalence and practice of telework among professional employees and managers as a result of the global health crisis. Surveys were conducted online in Australia, Canada, France, and the U.S. This report is based on a survey of 424 teleworkers in the U.S. only. The call for participation were communicated publicly via media releases, televised and radio news segments, as well as social media. The survey was open over the summer months in 2020.

The research team is comprised of the following:

Australia
- Lucy Taksa, Macquarie University
- Yvette Blount, Macquarie University
- Nikki Balnave, Macquarie University
- Nour Dados, Macquarie University

Canada
- Tania Saba, Université de Montreal
- Gaëlle Cachat-Rosset, Université de Montreal
- Josianne Marsan, Université de Laval

France
- Alain Klarsfeld, Toulouse Business School
- Kevin Carillo, Toulouse Business School

United States
- Eddy Ng, Bucknell University
- Andrew Lam, Dalhousie University

We thank all survey participants for contributing to our study that aims to better understand and improve telework efficiency among employees and employers.

About the Study

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global work environment has abruptly changed, forcing organizations and employees to adapt. Many organizations have implemented full-time telework[1] to protect the health of their employees and minimize the spread of the COVID-19 virus during the global pandemic. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that approximately 1 in 4 (24%) Americans teleworked in August 2020[2]. Many understand telework will continue even after the pandemic passes. It is expected that among American businesses, working from home will increase from 5 to 20 percent beyond the pandemic[3]. Similar trends are found in Canada and elsewhere, as close to one-quarter of businesses expect at least 10 percent of employees will continue to telework post-pandemic[4,5]. These trends describe a rapid change in work practices, especially since only 8 percent of all employees in the United States[6] worked from home pre-pandemic.

Aims of the Study

Considering the speed and magnitude in the adoption of telework in the workplace, and the likelihood of its continuation, the present study examines how well employees adapt to telework captured across two themes:

1. How existing telework conditions impact the quality and productivity of work, and
2. Work satisfaction and perceptual work outcomes among employees who engage in telework, and managers who coordinate tasks among organizations.

This study also highlights many opportunities and challenges facing employees, which informs organizations and employers on how to better implement telework on a longer-term basis.

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1 A work arrangement which, in practice, allows employees to perform work at an alternative worksite during regular, paid hours.
2 *One-quarter of the employed teleworked in August 2020 because of COVID-19 pandemic*, prepared by Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor (September, 2020)
3 *Firms Expect Working From Home to Triple*, prepared by Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta (May, 2020)
4 *Canadian Survey on Business Conditions: Impact of COVID-19 on Businesses in Canada,* prepared by Statistics Canada (July 2020)
5 *The number of permanent remote workers is set to double in 2021*, World Economic Forum (October, 2020)
6 *Table 3. Workers who worked at home and how often they worked exclusively at home by selected characteristics, averages for the period 2017-2018*, prepared by Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor (September, 2019)

Methodology

The survey was launched online in May 2020 and made available through the summer months of that year. Participants were recruited through media releases, televised news and radio segments, and social media (e.g., Twitter and LinkedIn). A total of 424 teleworkers in the U.S. completed the survey. This report focuses on the responses from professionals and managers who were engaged in telework during the pandemic. They were surveyed about the quality and productivity of their work, telework technologies, employer support, job satisfaction, and personal and professional lives. Findings are presented as response rates. Factors that may influence these rates, such as ICT support and workplace social connections, are also examined and discussed.

About the data

This report aims to provide data on the impact telework has on employees and managers in public and private sectors in the U.S. that followed the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adapting to Telework in the United States

Who are the Telework Employees?

This report presents results from a survey conducted in the U.S. (as part of a collaborative effort across four countries) that explores telework among employees in public and private sectors. A total of 424 teleworkers participated in the U.S. survey.

The average age of the teleworkers was 41 years old, with the oldest being 76 years old and the youngest at 16 years old (Figure 1). Slightly more than half worked in the private sector (Figure 2), and a quarter are managers or have supervisory responsibilities (Figure 3).

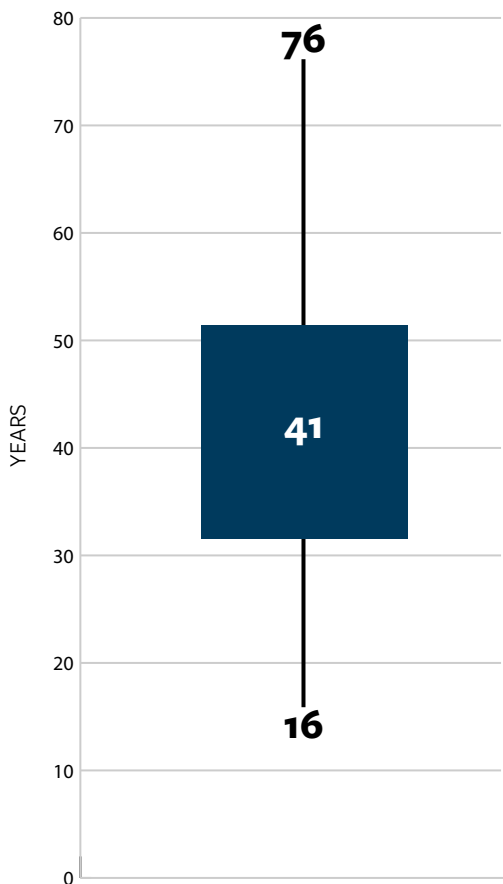FIGURE 1. Average Age of Working Professionals
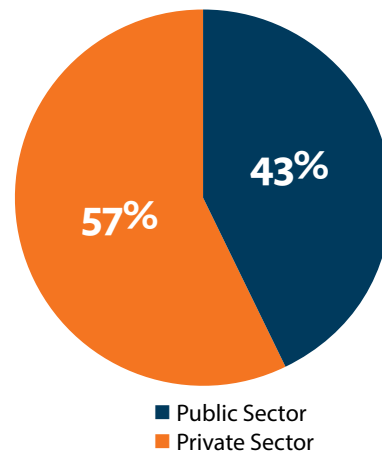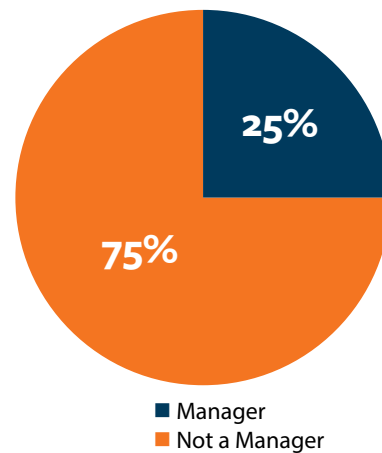

FIGURE 2. Which sector do you work in?

- Public Sector
- Private Sector

FIGURE 3. Are you currently a manager?

- Manager
- Not a Manager

More than half of the employees who teleworked were employed in organizations with 500 or more employees (Figure 4). Slightly more than half reported never having engaged in telework prior to the pandemic (Figure 5).

FIGURE 4. What is the size of your company?

9%
10%
15%
55%
11%

- 0-10
- 10-50
- 50-200
- 200-500
- 500+
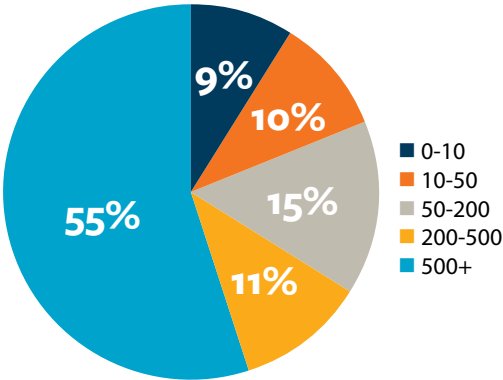
FIGURE 5. I had worked in telework for my employer before the current situation of the Covid-19 virus.

20%
23%
57%

- Never
- Sometimes
- Often
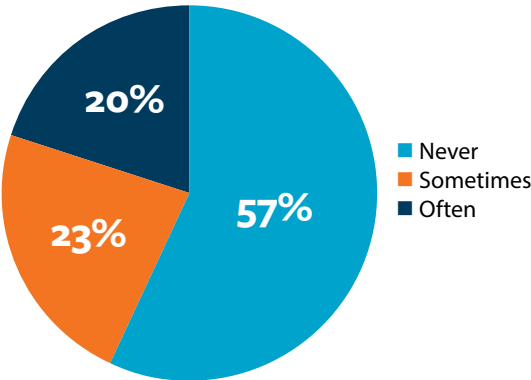
Predictably, most employees were required by their employer to telework during the pandemic (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6. Your employer demanded that you telework.

9%
27%
63%

- Not at all
- More or less
- Absolutely
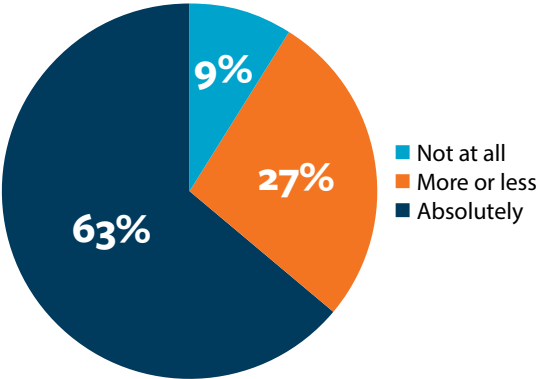
Telework Technology and Work Conditions

When asked how the sudden move to telework impacted their work quality and productivity, most employees feel ICTs improved their work outcomes. Specifically, a majority of employees believed ICTs improved work performance and helped them get more accomplished, increased overall productivity, and improved work quality (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7. Telework Technologies and Work Conditions
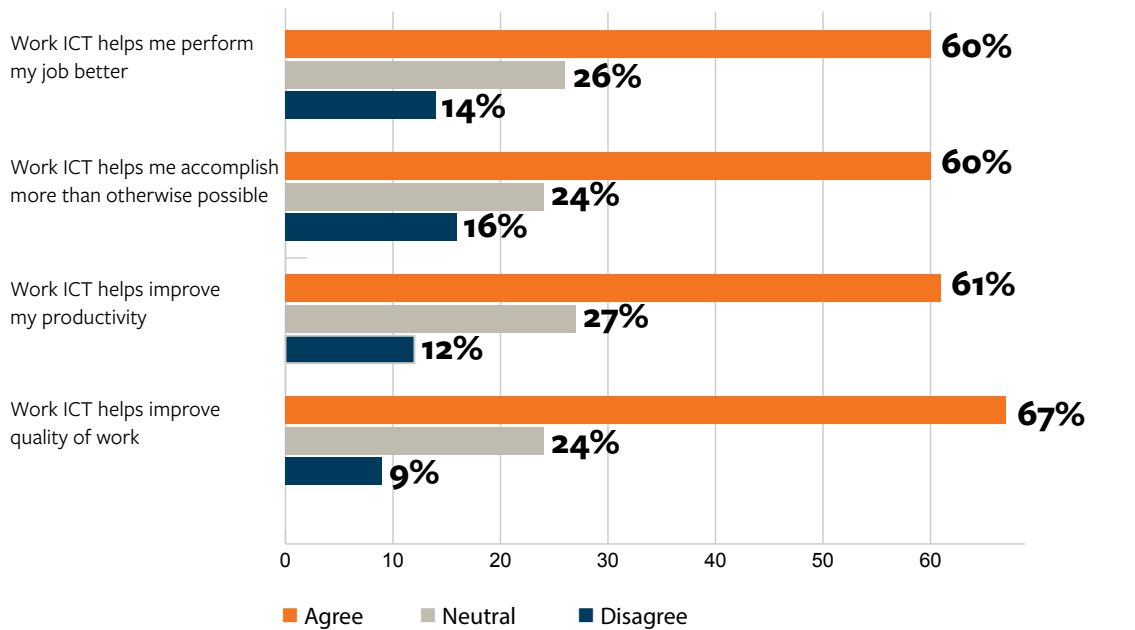
Most employees also reported that ICTs are easy to use and easy to learn (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8. Using Telework Technologies
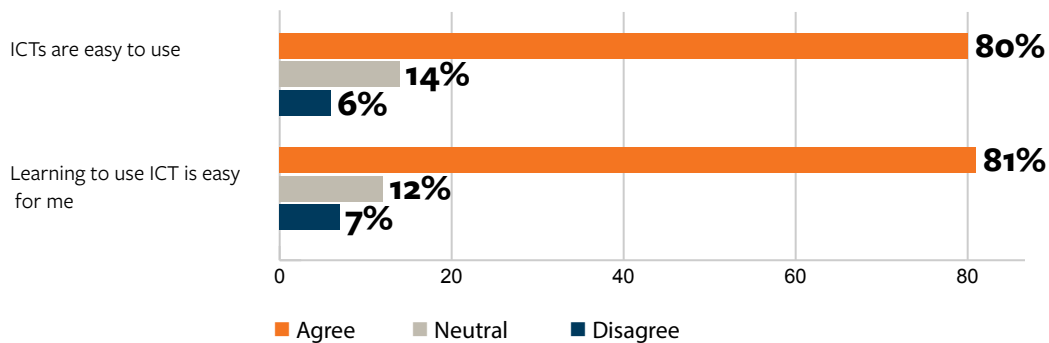
When employees were asked if they felt supported during the transition to telework by their employer, a majority responded positively. A majority of employees reported that they received the necessary support in shifting to a new teleworking environment and received the necessary support and resources. Furthermore, over half of the respondents reported that they received guidance during the transition to telework (Figure 9).
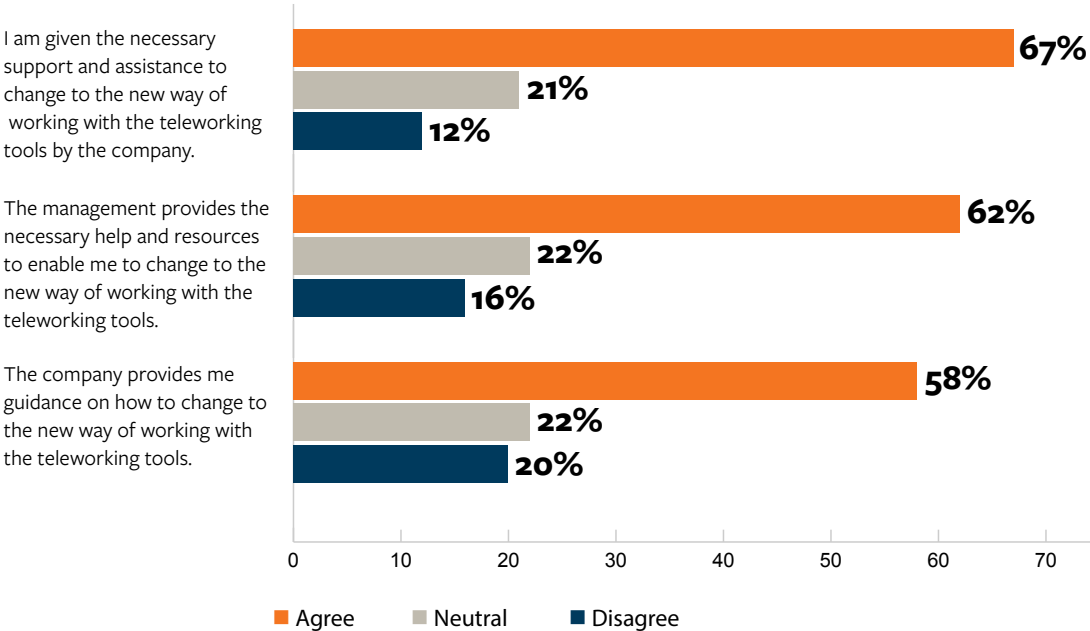
FIGURE 9. Employer Support during Telework

I am given the necessary support and assistance to change to the new way of working with the teleworking tools by the company.
- Agree: 67%
- Neutral: 21%
- Disagree: 12%

The management provides the necessary help and resources to enable me to change to the new way of working with the teleworking tools.
- Agree: 62%
- Neutral: 22%
- Disagree: 16%

The company provides me guidance on how to change to the new way of working with the teleworking tools.
- Agree: 58%
- Neutral: 22%
- Disagree: 20%

Legend: ■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree

Satisfaction with Telework

Overall, employees in our survey were satisfied with virtual work, with nearly half reporting they had good work-life balance during telework and only a quarter disagreeing (Figure 10).

However, there does not appear to be a strong preference in working from home. About half did not believe virtual work allowed them to perform better than they ever could at the office (Figure 10). It is unclear if disruptions at home (e.g., interruptions from family with school aged children who were at home during the pandemic) contributed to this. Only a quarter of employees reported that their productivity increased from virtual work.

When asked about their preferences between continuing to telework or returning to the office post-pandemic, employees were almost evenly divided between those wishing to continue and those wishing to return in person (Figure 11). Notably, employees over the age of 40 were more likely to prefer to continue teleworking, while employees under the age of 40 were more likely to prefer returning to the office.

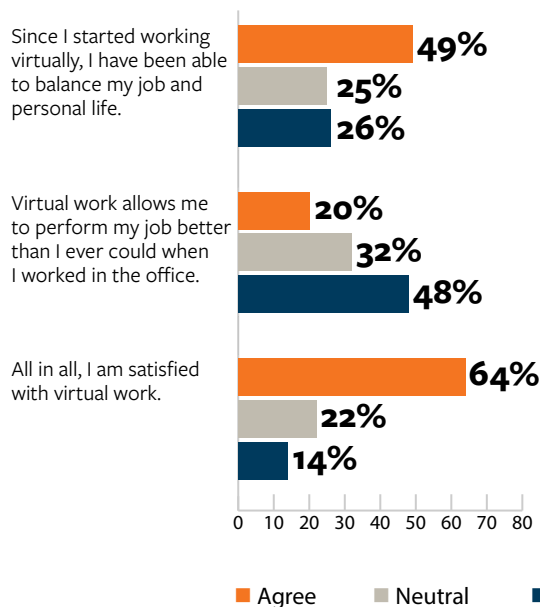FIGURE 10. Overall Job Satisfaction during Telework

FIGURE 11. Preference to Continue Telework

Since I started working virtually, I have been able to balance my job and personal life.
- 49%
- 25%
- 26%

Virtual work allows me to perform my job better than I ever could when I worked in the office.
- 20%
- 32%
- 48%

All in all, I am satisfied with virtual work.
- 64%
- 22%
- 14%

Under 40
- 30%
- 25%
- 45%

Over 40
- 45%
- 19%
- 36%
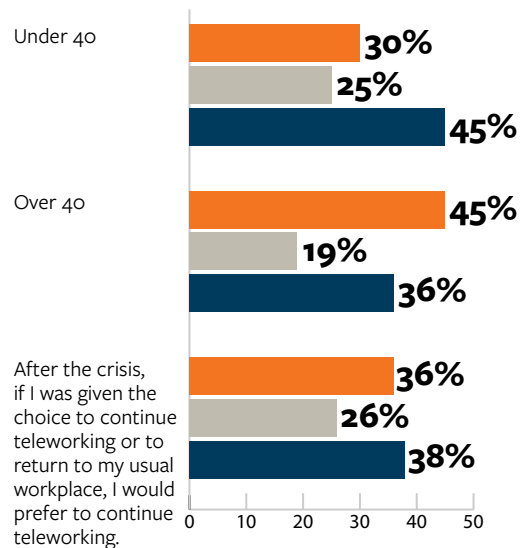
After the crisis, if I was given the choice to continue teleworking or to return to my usual workplace, I would prefer to continue teleworking.
- 36%
- 26%
- 38%

■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree

Managers were more likely than non-managers to report greater satisfaction with telework (Figure 12).

FIGURE 12. Job Satisfaction and Productivity
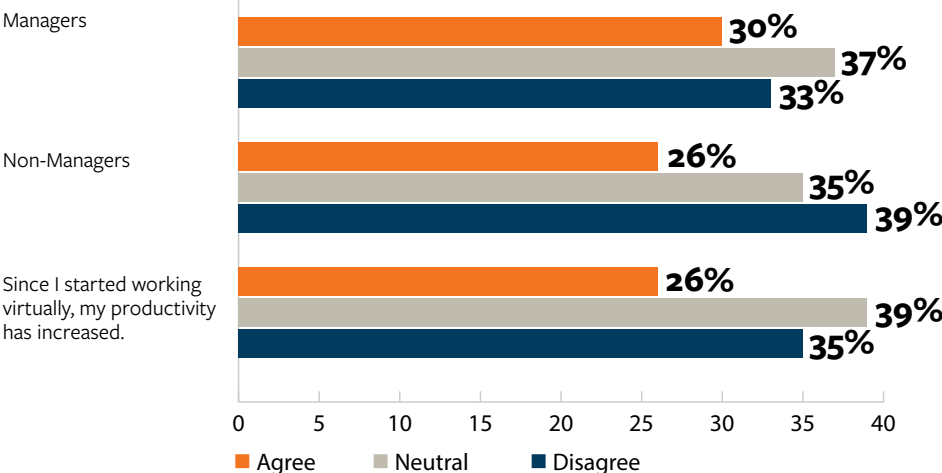
Taken together, managers and employees over 40 are more likely to prefer telework.

Management Concerns

There were few issues with work control or coordination with telework (Figure 13). A majority of respondents did not find control over team members when working from home to be a concern. There were also no concerns with getting team members to complete assigned tasks or working on the wrong tasks. Few reported team members were unresponsive. These findings suggest employees and managers were happy with virtual work control and coordination.

FIGURE 13. Perceptions of Control and Coordination
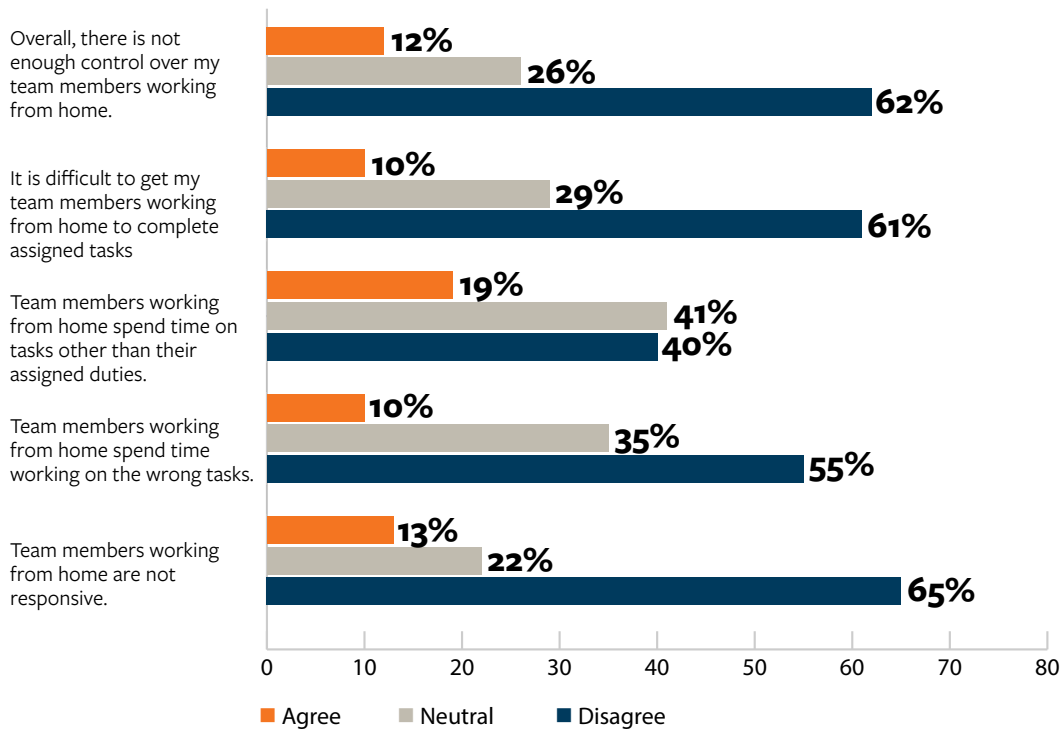
Informal and In-Person Social Connections

A majority of employees disagreed that telework negatively impacted formal interactions, but respondents reported missing out on formal interactions with others. About half of the respondents reported they did not feel out of the loop, miss out on mentorship opportunities, and did not feel left out on activities and meetings that could enhance their careers (Figure 14).
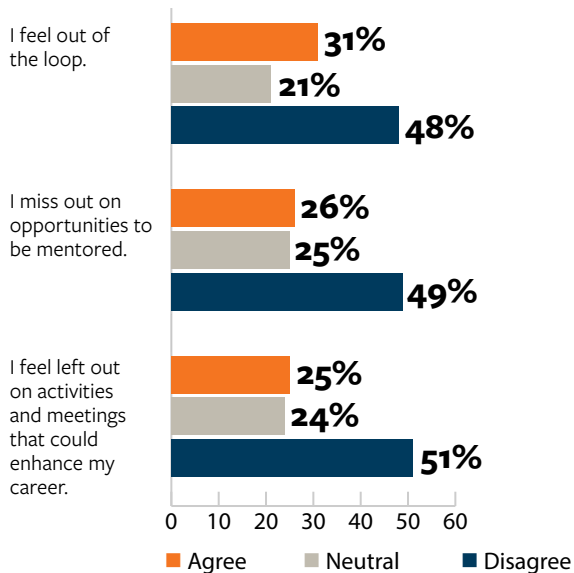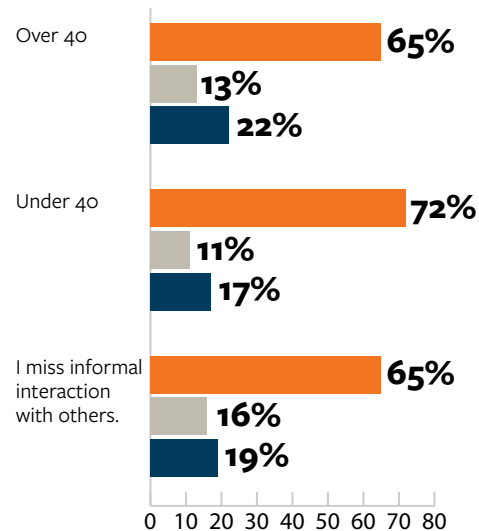
FIGURE 14. Formal Interactions

FIGURE 15. Informal Interactions

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I feel out of the loop.	31%	21%	48%
I miss out on opportunities to be mentored.	26%	25%	49%
I feel left out on activities and meetings that could enhance my career.	25%	24%	51%

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Over 40	65%	13%	22%
Under 40	72%	11%	17%
I miss informal interaction with others.	65%	16%	19%

However, two third of employees agreed that they missed the informal interactions (Figure 15). Perhaps not surprisingly, employees under 40 were more likely to indicate this than those over 40. Of note, one third of the respondents who engaged in telework missed the emotional support of coworkers. Employees under 40 reported missing the emotional support more than employees who were over 40 (Figure 16).

FIGURE 16. Emotional Support of Coworkers

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Over 40	33%	26%	41%
Under 40	46%	24%	30%
I miss the emotional support of coworkers.	37%	29%	34%
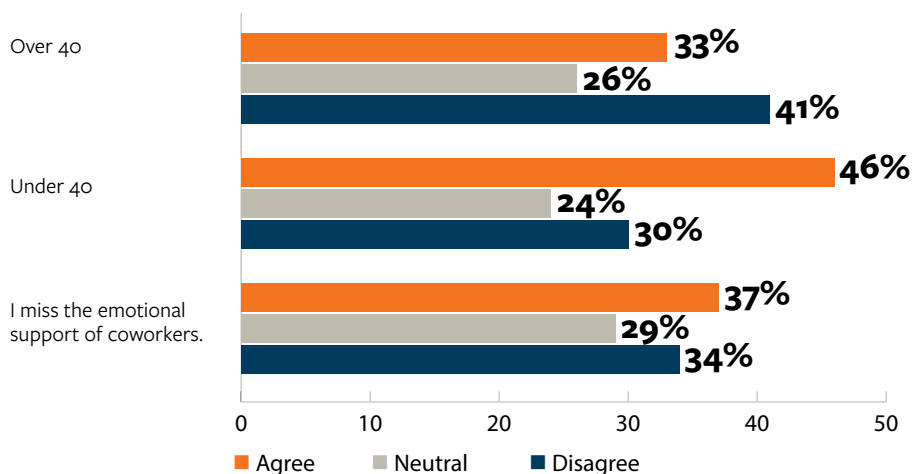
In addition to emotional support, employees also reported missing in-person interactions and feeling isolated. Both managers and non-managers missed in-person interactions when working virtually, but managers appear to miss it more (Figure 17).

While the respondents were split on feeling isolated; their responses vary according to their age and managerial status. Employees under 40 and non-managers were also more likely to report feeling isolated (Figure 18).
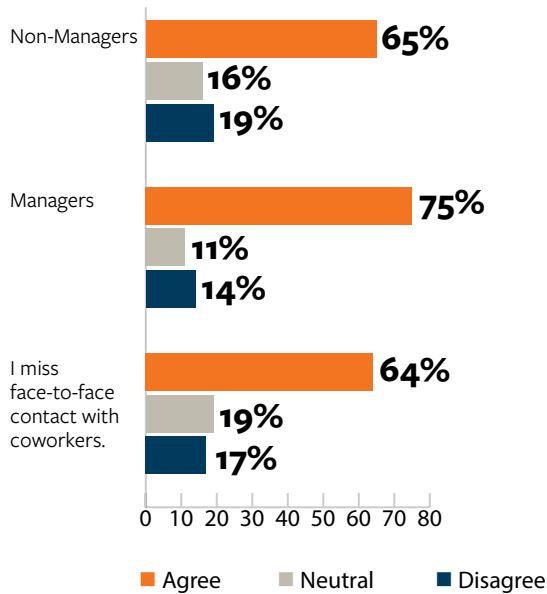
FIGURE 17. In-Person Interactions

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Non-Managers	65%	16%	19%
Managers	75%	11%	14%
I miss face-to-face contact with coworkers.	64%	19%	17%

FIGURE 18. Feelings of Isolation

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Over 40	34%	20%	46%
Under 40	47%	19%	34%
Non-Managers	42%	20%	38%
Managers	34%	20%	46%
I feel isolated.	34%	20%	46%

■ Agree   ■ Neutral   ■ Disagree
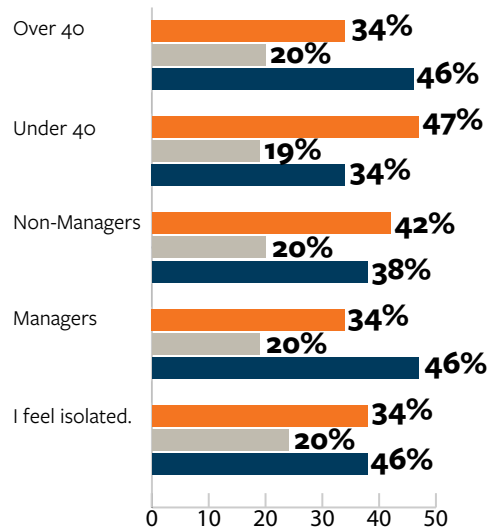
Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has very suddenly and rapidly altered working conditions for employees as organizations and employers were required to comply with federal and state-sanctioned restrictions. Organizations implementing full-time telework practices have changed how employees engaged with work, especially when using ICTs. The knowledge generated from a growing body of literature documenting impacts on work efficiency, quality of work[7], and job satisfaction[8] is vital as telework as a new way of working is expected to continue[9].

This report reports on how telework affected work life among employees in the U.S. during the early phase of the pandemic. Specifically, our findings help us better understand the changes in behavior, attitudes, and overall adaptability among working professionals and managers in both the public and private sectors. Our early results suggest that telework can be an effective and productive way of work with good transition of technological skill, support, and coordination. There appears, however, variations in job satisfaction. While employees reported overall satisfaction with telework, many (younger and non-managers) reported feeling isolated and missing in-person connections with their coworkers. Younger workers are also more likely to feel inclined to return to working in person and cite a fear of missing out and hampering their careers as a factor for this observation.

Take-aways

- A majority of employees were not engaged in telework prior to the pandemic; more than half said telework was demanded by the employer. Employees who teleworked tend to work for larger employers (500+ employees).
- Employees reported that Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) helped them perform their job better while working virtually. They found ICTs to be easy to use and most employers provided the necessary training and ICT tools for telework.
- A majority of employees expressed satisfaction with telework. Half of the respondents felt that they were able to balance personal and work life but only one in five reported that their productivity was better than working in person. Home disruptions

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7 Chang, Yuhsuan, Chungjen Chien, and Li-Fang Shen. "Telecommuting during the coronavirus pandemic: Future time orientation as a mediator between proactive coping and perceived work productivity in two cultural samples." *Personality and individual differences* (2020): 110508.

8 Novianti, Khusnul Rofida, and Kenny Roz. "Teleworking and Workload Balance on Job Satisfaction: Indonesian Public Sector Workers During Covid-19 Pandemic." APMBA (*Asia Pacific Management and Business Application*) 9, no. 1 (2020): 1-10.

9 Sander, Libby. "Coronavirus could spark a revolution in working from home. Are we ready." The Conversation (2020).

(interruptions from family with school-aged children who were home during the pandemic) could be a possible explanation.

- Managers were also more likely than non-managers to report an increase in productivity. It is possible that managers were interrupted less frequently by subordinates when working from home.

- While telework did not negatively impact formal interactions, a majority of the employees reported missing out on the informal and in-person interactions. Younger employees (under 40) are more likely to indicate this and reported feeling isolated and missing the emotional support of coworkers.

- One third of the respondents would like to continue with telework after the pandemic. Younger workers (under 40) were also more likely to prefer to return to work in person. They feared missing out on mentorship opportunities and activities that are beneficial for their careers.

Employers have an opportunity to improve on their organizational performance under pandemic conditions by adopting telework as a long-term business strategy. There is potential for greater efficiency and quality of work through continued investment in resources (skills training and career support) and infrastructure (ICTs) for teleworking employees. At the same, employers will need to put in place strategies to foster greater informal connections particularly for younger employees (under 40) who are engaged in telework. Telework can be a viable alternative to in-person work and it has the potential to improve work efficiency and reduce employer costs as we move to a remote economy.