

Postpandemic hybrid work: opportunities and challenges for physical activity and public health

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Hybrid work, typically considered to combine work from the traditional office and at home, is not a new phenomenon. In the decade before COVID-19 use of this work model was relatively rare—around 15% of workers in the USA—despite the technology being available to enable remote work.¹ However, the pandemic instigated changes whereby hybrid work is now *modus operandi* for many. In Australia, there was around a twofold increase in people working from home one or two times a week in April 2022 (46%), compared with before COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020 (24%).² Even as restrictions ease, work from home is likely to stay as part of a ‘new normal’ hybrid work paradigm that combines days away from home at the office, with other days working from the office at home.

OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN HYBRID WORKERS

The large-scale uptake of hybrid work presents new challenges, but also opportunities for promoting physical activity (PA) and health in workers. Hybrid work could enhance PA opportunities for workers by providing flexibility to integrate occupational (moving breaks while otherwise sitting), leisure (gym classes), lifestyle (walking) and incidental (housework) activities into 24-hour daily routines. This level of flexibility addresses one of the most significant barriers to behaviour change in a large proportion of the

working population, namely finding the time to engage in health promoting PA. It is interesting to note that New Zealand researchers reported an increase in PA during lockdown for those not meeting WHO guidelines before COVID-19 (ie, 150 min of moderate intensity PA/week).³ These increases were attributed to factors synonymous with hybrid work, such as forming good activity habits that fitted with daily work routines at home and being able to sustain these habits through high levels of autonomous motivation.

CHALLENGES FOR HYBRID WORKERS TO MAINTAIN AND IMPROVE PA

Challenges include addressing reductions in active commuting on work from home days and increases in sedentary home-based work and leisure practices that have inevitably limited the time and opportunity to be physically active. Indeed, while some may have benefitted, there is a developing body of evidence that many others working from home during the pandemic evidenced decreases in overall PA and

increases in sedentary behaviour.^{4 5} A recent Dutch survey reported increases in extensive screenwork (>6 hours/day) from pre-COVID-19 (69%) to during (87%) COVID-19 and increases in sitting during both work and leisure time.⁶ However, to what extent these changes were related to other aspects of the pandemic, such as lockdowns and lack of access to exercise facilities, remains unclear.

Another challenge is the demarcation of employer versus employee responsibility when working from home. For example, a German court recently ruled that an employer had a duty of care to cover an employee insurance claim for an injury sustained on the ‘commute to work’ from bed to a nearby work desk in the same house.⁷ Might this same logic apply to work-related inactivity and sedentary behaviour at home? If so, companies will need to be convinced of their obligation to promote PA and health at home and adapt existing traditional office-based interventions to this context, if the home is also the workplace and responsible for sedentary and unhealthy routines.

INEQUITIES IN ACCESSING THE BENEFITS OF HYBRID WORK

While researchers and practitioners embrace the potential of hybrid work for office workers, this work model remains inaccessible for many occupations in sectors such as transport, retail, hospitality, construction, manufacturing and healthcare; truck drivers, builders, factory workers and nurses need to be onsite to

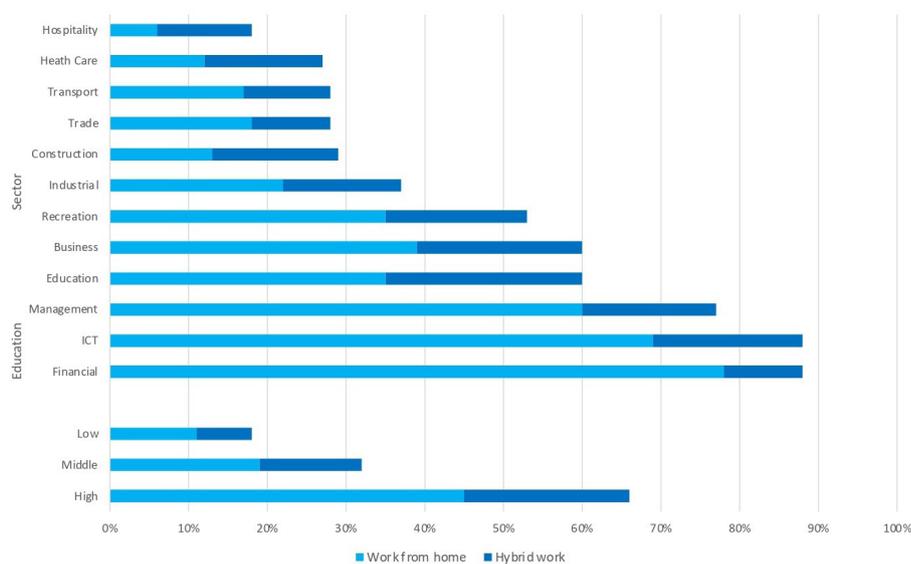


Figure 1 Proportion of the Dutch working population (%) that worked only from home or engaged with hybrid work in 2020 relative to occupational sector and education level (data adapted from Oude Hengel *et al.*,⁶ on more than 58 000 workers). ICT, information communication technology.

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do their job. The data in [figure 1](#) illustrate that in 2020 at least 60% of Dutch workers in these sectors did not work from home or engage in hybrid work during COVID-19; those with lower levels of educational attainment, which includes many employees from the transport, construction, trades and manufacturing sectors, were also much less likely to have the option of hybrid work.⁶ These types of workers, who are least able to access the potential health benefits of hybrid work, are also those in society who are socio-economically disadvantaged, the most inactive and sedentary outside of work, and at greatest risk of developing chronic diseases and conditions.⁸

THE FUTURE FOR HYBRID WORK AND PA

Looking forward to the postpandemic PA and public health opportunities and challenges for workers, we should take care not to further widen health inequalities by prioritising hybrid work in some occupational groups at the expense of others who lack the autonomy to choose where they can work. Let's take advantage of the PA opportunities hybrid work presents for office workers, yet also use the momentum for change COVID-19 has stimulated to shine a light on how the benefits of the hybrid work paradigm can be expanded to those that work outside the office. This is a challenging proposition, but a solution

might involve organisations providing non-office workers with more flexibility and autonomy on 'when' rather than 'where' work occurs, thereby creating opportunities to intersperse and balance work with rest and PA.

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