



Remote Working during COVID19

New Zealand National
Survey: Initial Report
July 2020

A *Work Futures Otago*
Report

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Work Futures
OTAGO

Trends,
Disruptions
& Transitions

Ngā mihi – Acknowledgements

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Work Futures Otago

The Work Futures Otago project analyses and forecasts the trends, future projections and potential disruptions in New Zealand with a time horizon of 2040. We utilise many different methodologies, including the power of a narrative approach. This allows us to construct scenarios that draw together the drivers, differing voices and potential consequences of long-term change. By engaging people in narratives, we focus on perspectives and build sensitivities around future plausibilities. We develop scenarios using the Delphi technique to engage experts in conversations about the future. Our rigorous and in-depth data analysis informs stakeholders, policymakers and civic leaders.

We have completed studies on Dunedin to 2030, ICT in Dunedin to 2040, and High Value Manufacturing Across Aotearoa New Zealand to 2040, and are currently exploring Remote Working during COVID19, as well as the Ageing Workforce of the Future, Low Carbon Economies and Building Resilience for the Future. We produce industry reports and academic papers. Our funding has mostly come from the University but we are involved in national applications based on our work.

Our current research, prompted by the COVID19 pandemic, aims to understand employee experiences of remote working during these unprecedented times. We are interested in the adjustments made by both individuals and organisations to enable working from home, and how this impacted employee well-being and productivity, both during Lockdown and into the future. We aim to identify and understand the lessons that can be learnt by both organisations and employees regarding the sustainability of remote working post COVID19.

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Executive summary

New Zealand, like many countries worldwide, went into Lockdown on the 26th March 2020 due to the COVID19 pandemic, but unlike other countries New Zealand went hard and emerged quickly. Working life began to return to normal in June. During Lockdown many people, some of whom had no previous experience of working remotely, worked from home. This provided an unexpected opportunity to explore New Zealanders' perceptions of remote working, and to use this to inform the Future of Work in New Zealand.

The **New Zealand Remote Working during COVID19** survey was launched on 5th May 2020, during the first few days of Level Three (of New Zealand's four-level alert system), with the majority of the 2,560 responses received during this alert level. The survey was advertised through the social media channels of Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as through professional networks such as the Human Resource Institute of New Zealand and Tourism Industry Aotearoa. Our aim was to distribute the survey as widely as possible, and gain responses from a broad range of workers who could and did work from home.

Questions related to participants' experiences of working from home, their thoughts on the future of remote working, as well as how they felt their organisations responded to the challenges working from home raised. The survey included a mixture of closed and open questions. In this report we provide basic descriptive insights from the data, but our intention is to interrogate the data further to answer specific research questions.

The demographic profile of respondents was surprising, with 80% indicating they were female. This might suggest that female remote workers were more inclined to want to have a voice, and engage, in the remote working world.

The sample was predominately New Zealand European (79%) and most continued to earn the same income (81%). In addition, the majority of participants were employees (92%), who were employed in the public sector (54%), particularly education, or public and civil service roles (25%). This suggests that many responses were from those in professional roles, and it is acknowledged that these roles may not experience the same level of post-COVID19 job losses. Many participants shared their "bubbles" with their partners (72%) and dependent children (38%), and they predominantly came from Otago (28%), Wellington (22%) and Auckland (20%).

According to our data, prior to the outbreak of COVID19 and the subsequent Lockdown, 38% of New Zealanders had NEVER worked from home, while a further 36% had worked at home every now and again, which meant a total of 74% had no regular experience of the home working environment. This, therefore, was a new experience and challenge to many, one met with resilience and enthusiasm.

When asked whether they would like to continue to work from home, 22% suggested that they would like to work from home daily, but the majority (67%) indicated that they would prefer a mix of working remotely a few times a week or month. This suggests different models of remote working should be

considered by organisations, and that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Participants were also relatively optimistic about the possibility of continuing to work from home in some way, post Lockdown.

When asked about their productivity, 35% found it was similar while 38% thought they were more productive while working at home. While we acknowledge that this is self-report data, it does give us an indication of participants' perceptions of their individual productivity, which each organisation can explore further. The majority of people found it easy or somewhat easy to work from home, suggesting this as a real possibility in the future.

The key challenge for New Zealanders working from home was not being able to switch off from work (35%). Furthermore, 1/3 found collaboration and communication with their co-workers to be harder. Others found it difficult to stay motivated because of home distractions such as having to look after and/or home-school children. Some of these distractions are likely not to be present in a post-COVID19 world. A total of 17% of participants found no challenges.

The lack of a commute to work was the key opportunity participants gained from working at home, as well as the resulting expenses reduction. However, comments also revealed extra costs associated with being at home, such as heating and increased bandwidth needs. In addition, participants appreciated being able to manage their own time, which enabled many to get more work done, and provide balance to the tricky home/work overlap that was ever-present during Lockdown.

Unfortunately, 8% of participants did not have the right equipment and a further 65% either provided some or all of their own equipment. Moving forward organisations need to ensure employees have all the appropriate equipment to perform their jobs effectively and safely, otherwise organisational challenges around health and safety will emerge. This was reinforced by the key organisational confidence questions in which the two areas requiring the most improvement were well-being support and ergonomic and health and safety advice. We do acknowledge that given the two-day warning of the imminent arrival of alert Level Four, and the subsequent national difficulty in obtaining technology, this was a unique set of circumstances.

Other than these issues, the results demonstrate that the majority of respondents were confident in the way that their organisation handled the move to working from home during COVID19. This was reassuring given the quick move to the home environment. Not only was organisational confidence high, but participants were also complementary about the way their managers handled the situation, and supported their wellbeing.

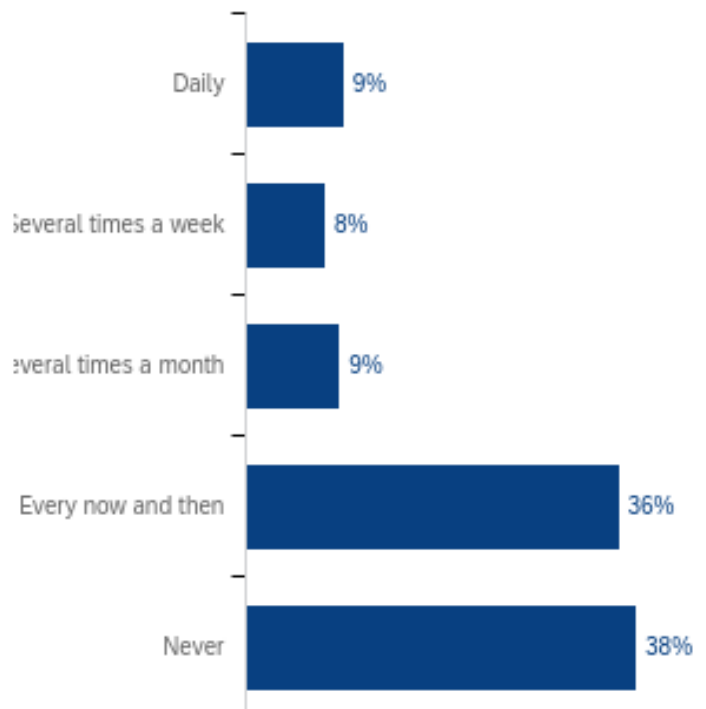
When asked what their top three challenges were to working from home in the future, 35% of participants saw no challenges. However, 65% saw challenges. This may be because the Lockdown period forced working from home, which was unsuitable for some organisational roles. In addition others identified not having adequate equipment as a challenge. Notwithstanding, the majority of participants who saw challenges for ongoing work from home cited a lack of organisation or manager support.

Working from home

Previously little regular WFH

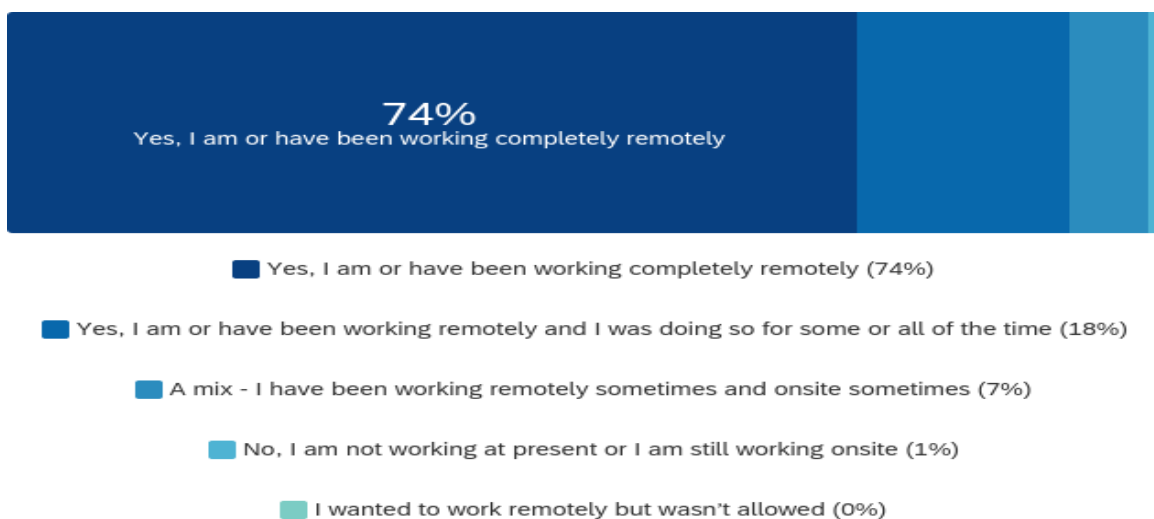
A total of **74%** had no regular experience of the home working environment.

Prior to the outbreak of COVID19, and the subsequent Lockdown, 38% of New Zealanders had NEVER worked from home while a further 36% worked at home every now and again.

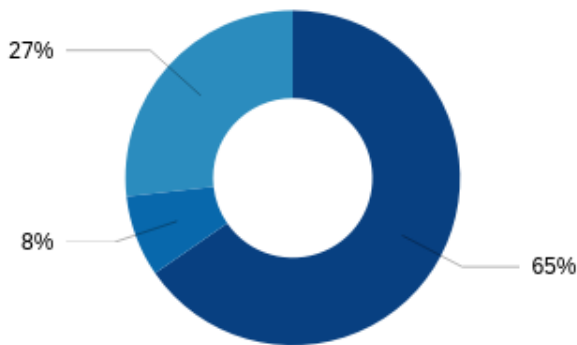
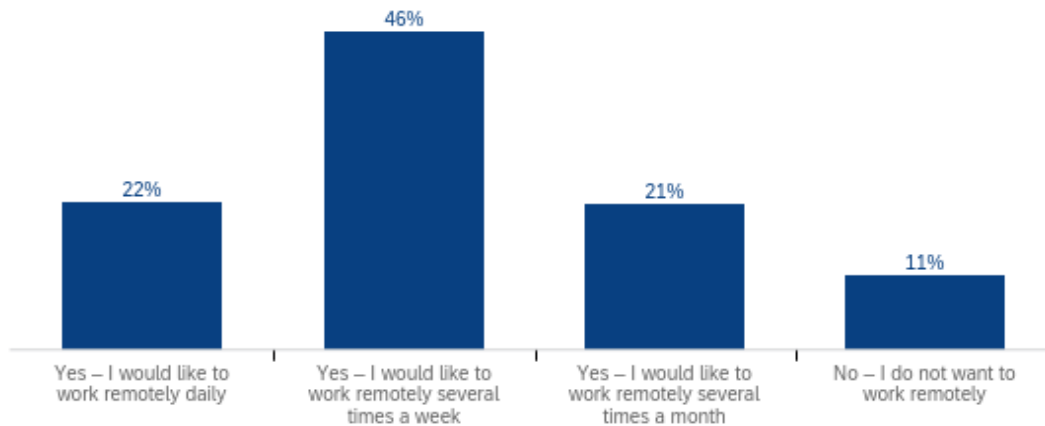


Then Lockdown

When Lockdown began, **92% of respondents were fully working from home**; only 18% of these people had any prior experience of working from home. This was a major shift organised for many within a couple of days.



Working from home in the future



■ Optimistic
 ■ Pessimistic
 ■ About the same

Remote working option wanted

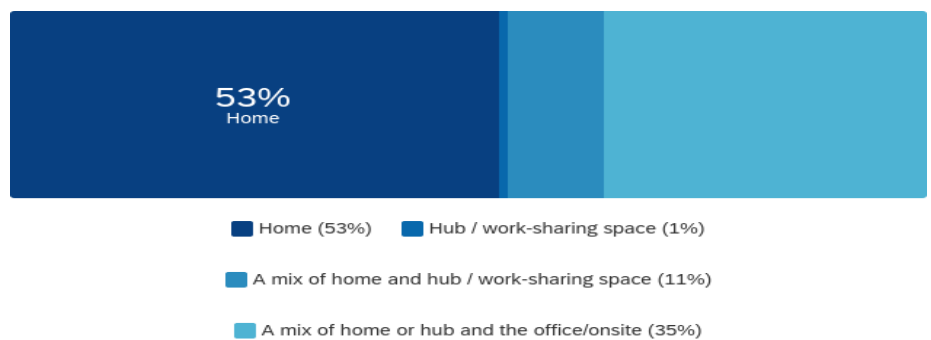
When asked whether they would like to continue to work from home 22% suggested they would like to work daily from home, but the majority would prefer a mix - **67% would like to work remotely a few times a week or month**. This suggests different models of remote working will be appropriate for different people.

Optimism in the air

Only 8% of respondents were pessimistic about being able to work from home in the future, while a **staggering 65% were optimistic** and 27% about the same. That means employees think their organisations will respond positively to being more flexible about where they work.

Future workplaces

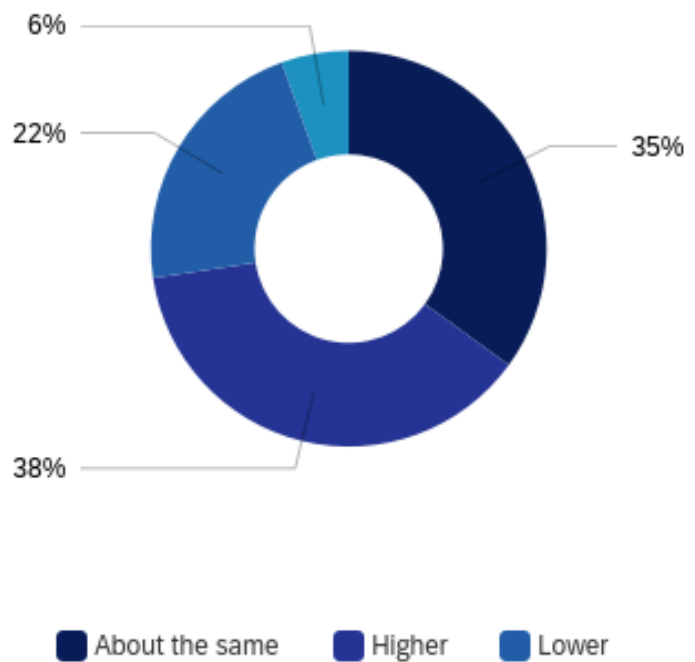
When thinking about remote working in the future most wanted to **work in the home environment**, with little support for shared working spaces.



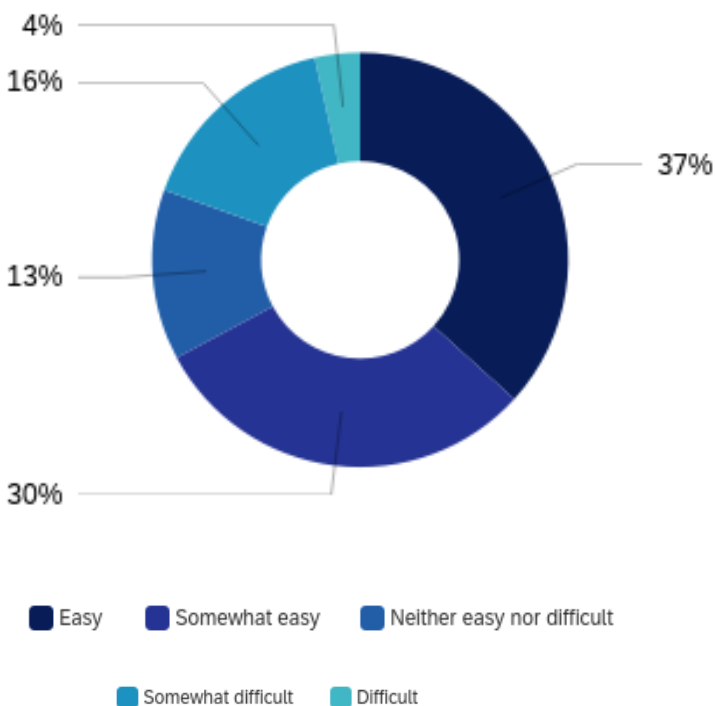
Reality: productivity and ease of working from home

Productivity high

35% of participants found their productivity was similar working at home while **38% found themselves to be more productive**. Given the unique circumstances during Lockdown, such as childcare or caring responsibilities, this was higher than anticipated.



It is impossible to say as the demand for our products/services/business has changed



Relatively easy to work at home

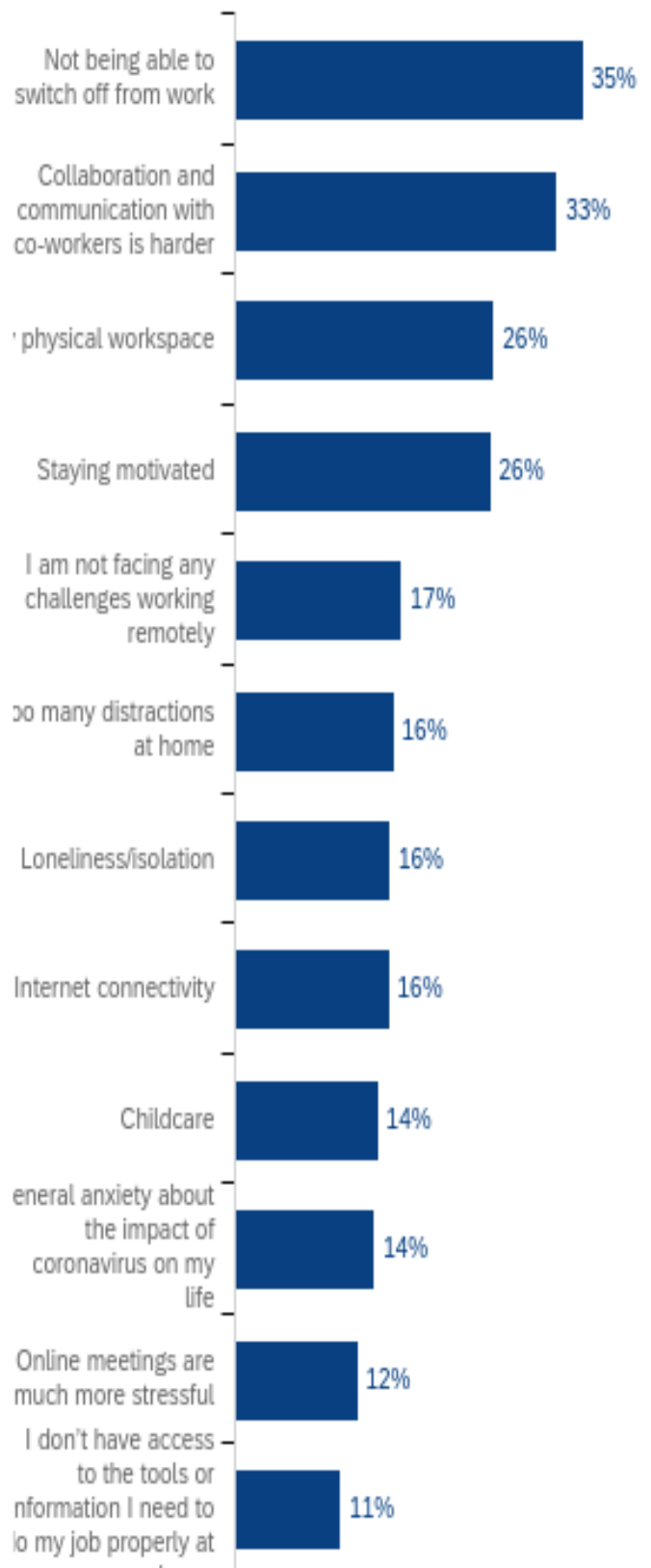
Only 20% of respondents found it harder to worker from home, while 13% thought it was neither easier nor more difficult. However, **67% found it easy or somewhat easy to work from home**. With more planning and time, this figure is likely to increase.

Challenges and opportunities

Challenges

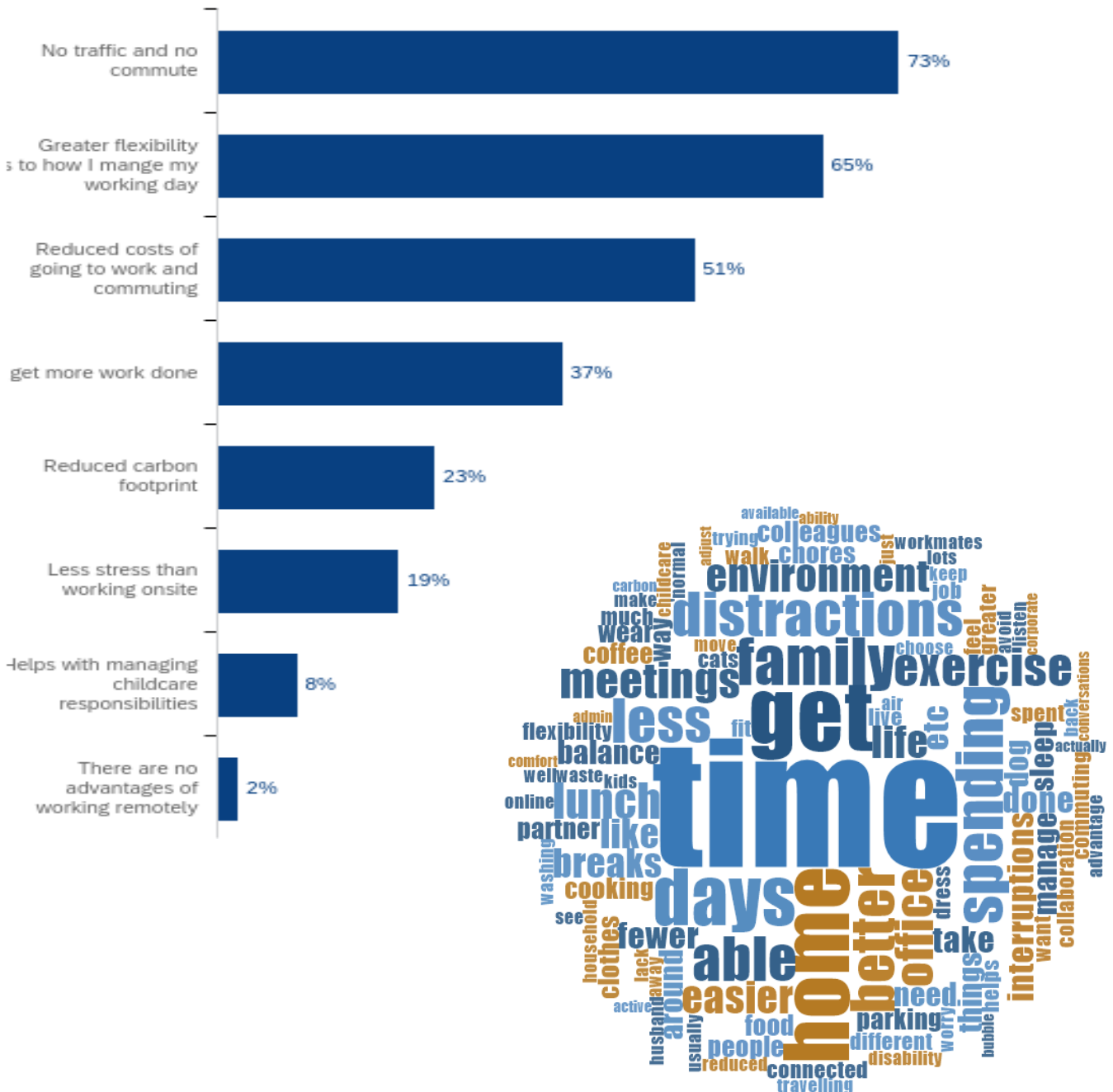
The key challenge experienced by respondents was **not being able to switch off from work** (35%). Furthermore one third found collaboration and communication with their coworkers harder. Others found it difficult to stay motivated, or suggested there were too many distractions at home, including children. A total of 17% of participants found no challenges.

Exploring the open-ended responses to challenges, through a word cloud, we can see that Zoom meetings and home-schooling were challenging, as too was family responsibility generally.

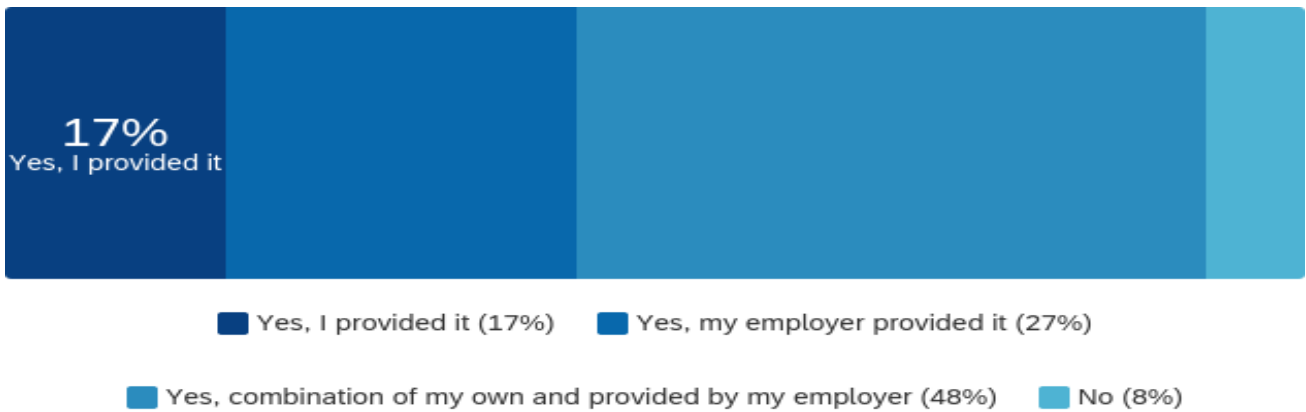


Opportunities

The key opportunity participants gained from working at home was the **lack of commute to work and the resulting cost reduction**. In addition, participants appreciated being able to manage their own time and thought that they actually got more work done. This is also reflected in the open-ended responses where more time and lack of distractions are highlighted. Family is also strongly prevalent suggesting that increased family time was an advantage for many.

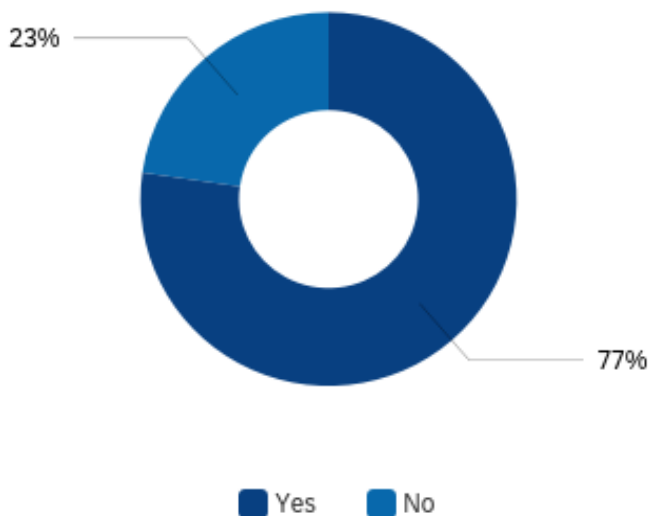


Workspace and equipment



Equipment lacking

From the responses received it can be seen that 8% did not have the right equipment and a further **65% either provided some or all of their own equipment**. Moving forward organisations need to support employees to have the right equipment, otherwise organisational challenges around health and safety at work will emerge. When asked what equipment they needed chair, laptop, printer and desk can be clearly identified in the word cloud.



Dedicated workspace

Surprisingly **most people have a dedicated workspace at home**, but the qualitative comments revealed that those who didn't struggled with both distractions and health and wellbeing.

Organisational confidence

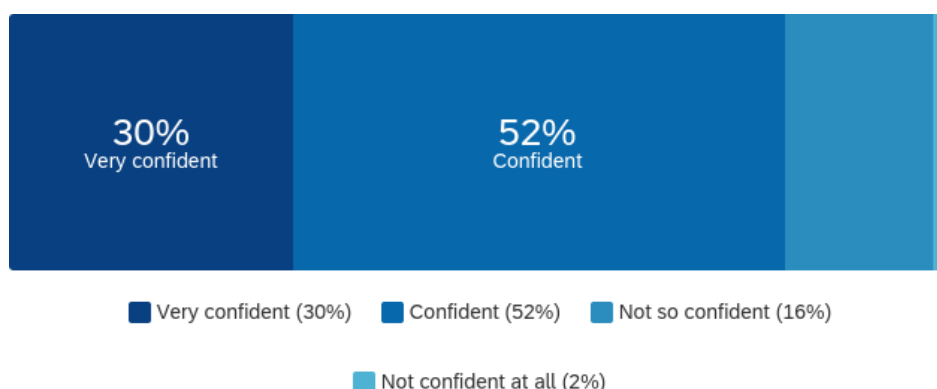
| | Strongly Agree (%) | Agree (%) | Neither Agree nor Disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Strongly Disagree (%) |
|--|--------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| My organisation is regularly communicating with me | 68 | 23 | 4 | 4 | 1 |
| I feel informed by my organisation | 58 | 29 | 6 | 5 | 2 |
| I feel supported by my organisation | 50 | 31 | 10 | 7 | 2 |
| I feel part of the team | 51 | 31 | 10 | 7 | 2 |
| My organisation is doing its best in the circumstances | 61 | 26 | 6 | 5 | 1 |
| My organisation is providing me with well-being support | 39 | 29 | 18 | 9 | 5 |
| My organisation is providing me with ergonomic and health & safety advice for working remotely | 23 | 25 | 20 | 18 | 14 |

High organisational confidence

The results in the table above reveal that the majority of respondents were **confident in the way that their organisation handled the move to working from home** during COVID19. It was reassuring to see that people felt their organisation did a very good job given the quick move to home. The two areas – highlighted in the horizontal box above - where there was room from improvement was in the well-being and health and safety support, suggesting that any future working from home scenarios need to carefully consider this. This is also reflected below in the managerial support and resources questions participants answered (see below).

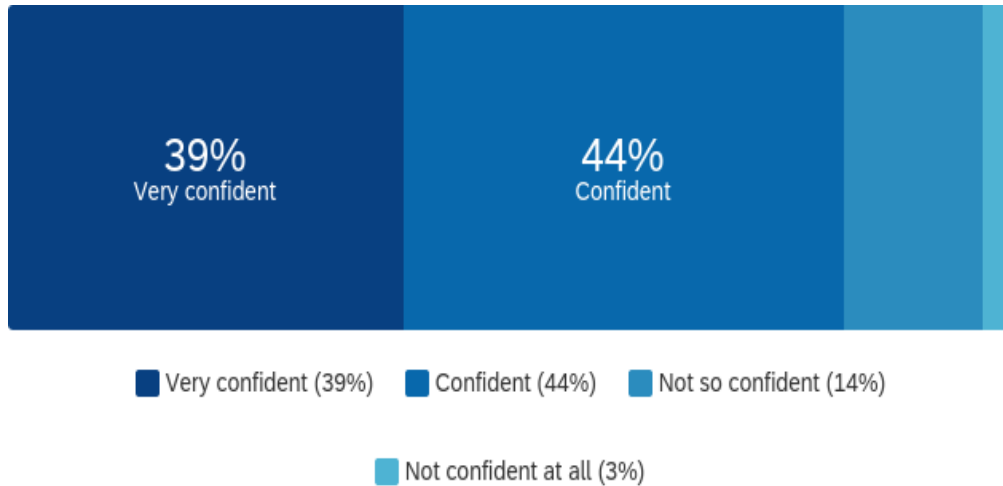
Resources & company benefits

It can be seen that organisational support was strong with 82% of participants feeling confident their organisation had supplied them with appropriate resources to work from home during the pandemic.



Organisational leadership

Participants were **overall highly confident in the leadership** of their organisations to make the right decisions through the Lockdown period. A large number (82%) were also confident in the organisational support they had or would receive during this crisis.



Managerial and organisational support

Participants were asked about how their manager or employer could support them to adjust to working from home. The key themes which emerged from the thousands of responses were:

- Nothing – many people were very happy with how they were supported
- Equipment – particularly office chairs and the impact of poor equipment on health and well-being
- Cloud based storage and adequate software
- Financial support for heating and internet costs
- Clear goal setting – with the remote environment some managers did not set clear expectations
- Feedback – clear, concise and timely feedback was wanted
- Flexibility and understanding
- Trust
- A request to keep contact to business hours
- Increase/improve team collaboration – have regular check-ins

Wellbeing support

We specifically asked about well-being support provided by employers. Although there was a good range of support provided by the organisations our sample were employed by, it may be skewed by a large public sector response, and a lack of representation of small businesses. Many respondents also suggested that they received no wellbeing support. Both formal and informal opportunities for support were evident.

Formal

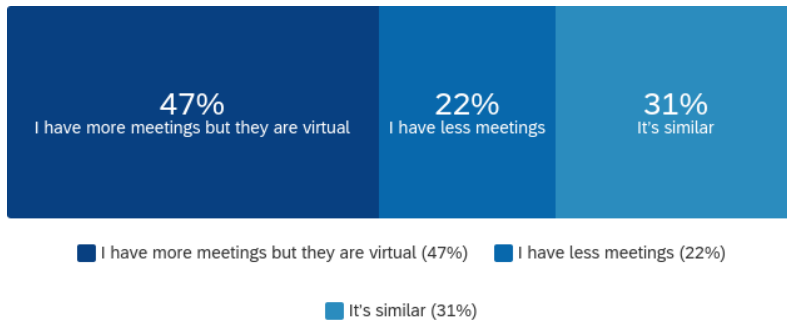
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)
- Access to counselling
- Ergonomic advice
- Extra time off
- Online resources
- Care package
- Streaming exercise classes

Informal

- Social groups on zoom – “Friday night drinks”
- Well-being check-ins
- Regular contact

Participants were also asked what more would they like their employers to do. **Many answered with “nothing”**. However there were also many comments with suggestions – sometimes conflicting – on what employers could do to help with wellbeing during Lockdown. The majority of suggestions can be summed up as **“talk to me and trust me.”** Participants wanted to be trusted to make the right decision on when they went back to work and to be able to continue with both flexible working and flexible hours. Many participants also wanted more communication and regular check-ins from managers, although they mentioned having managers being positive and showing empathy and concern. A few participants indicated that they wanted less micro-managing and zoom meetings. Finally, a smaller number of participants just wanted their manager to keep them in employment and return to paying them a full wage. They saw that as the largest contributor to their wellbeing.

Communication

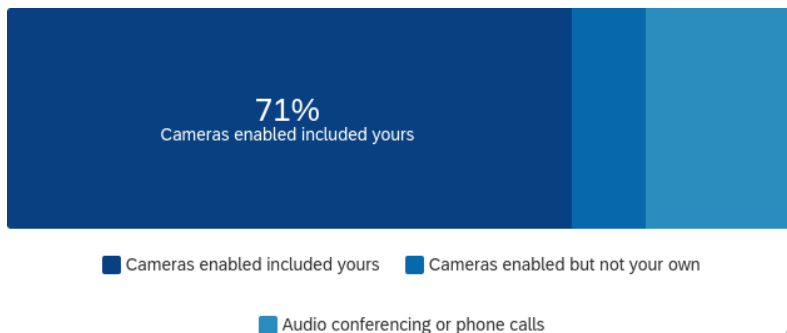
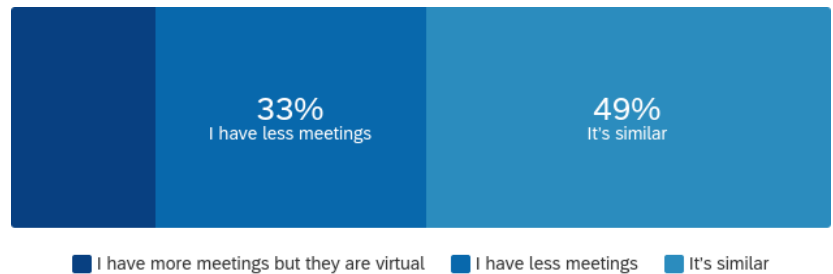


Remote working with colleagues

Nearly half of participants reported having **more meetings** although they were virtual, while about 1/3 had a similar amount.

Remote working with people outside the company

Nearly half of participants reported having more virtual meetings with people outside of the organisations. 33% had less meetings.

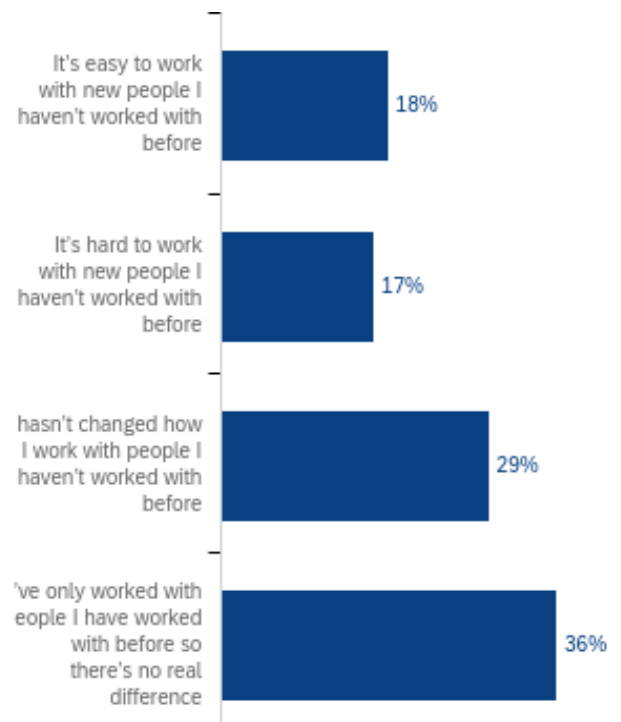


Video conferencing

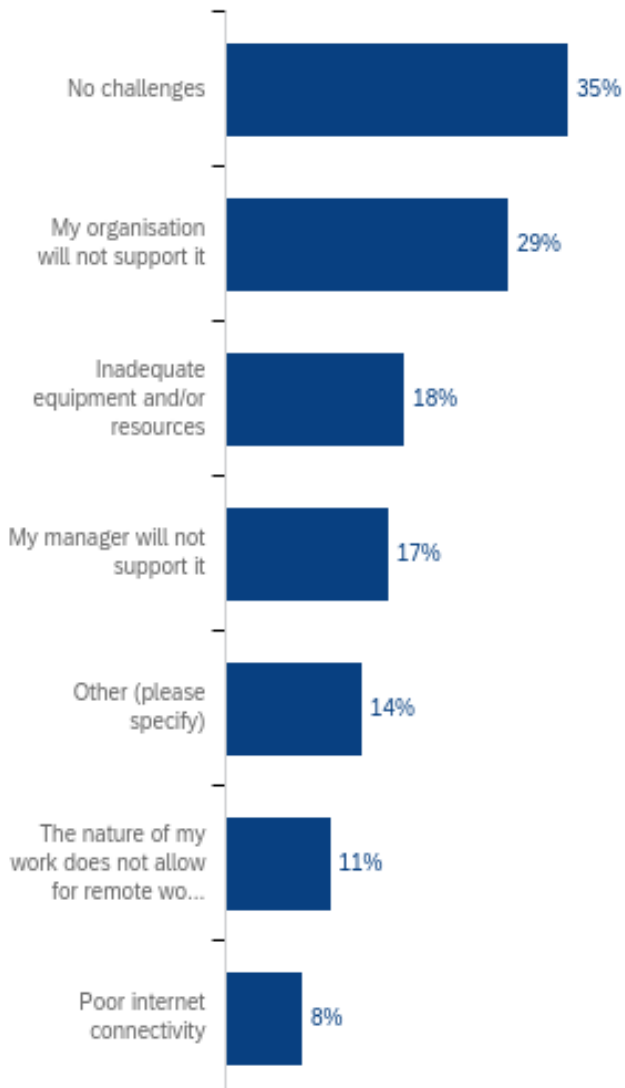
The majority of people prefer to have both their own and others' **cameras on while communicating online**.

Working with new people

About 1/3 of respondents did not work with new people during the Lockdown. Of those who did engage with new people, most found no difference, while a similar number found it easier (18%) or harder (17%).



Challenges to working from home post Lockdown

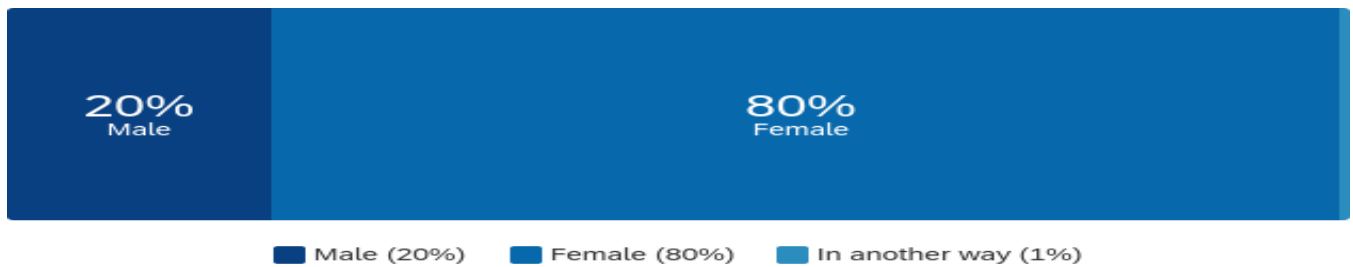


Top three challenges

When asked what their top three challenges were to working from home in the future, approximately **35% of participants saw no challenges**. However, 65% of participants saw some challenges, the main one being a lack of organisational support (29%), as well as a lack of manager support (17%).

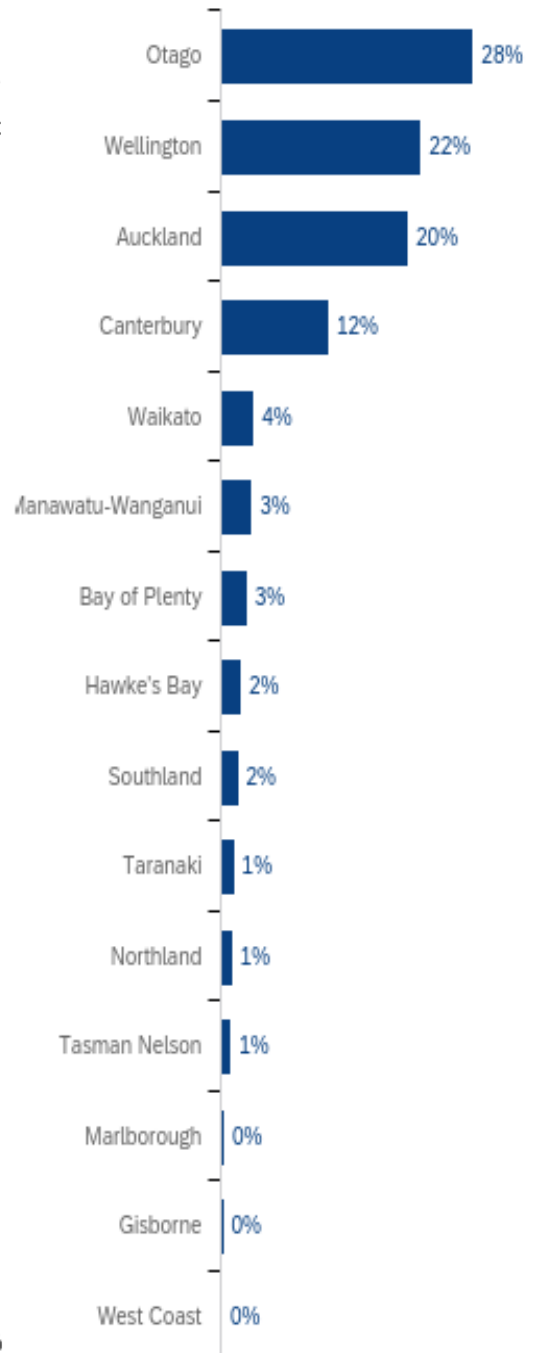
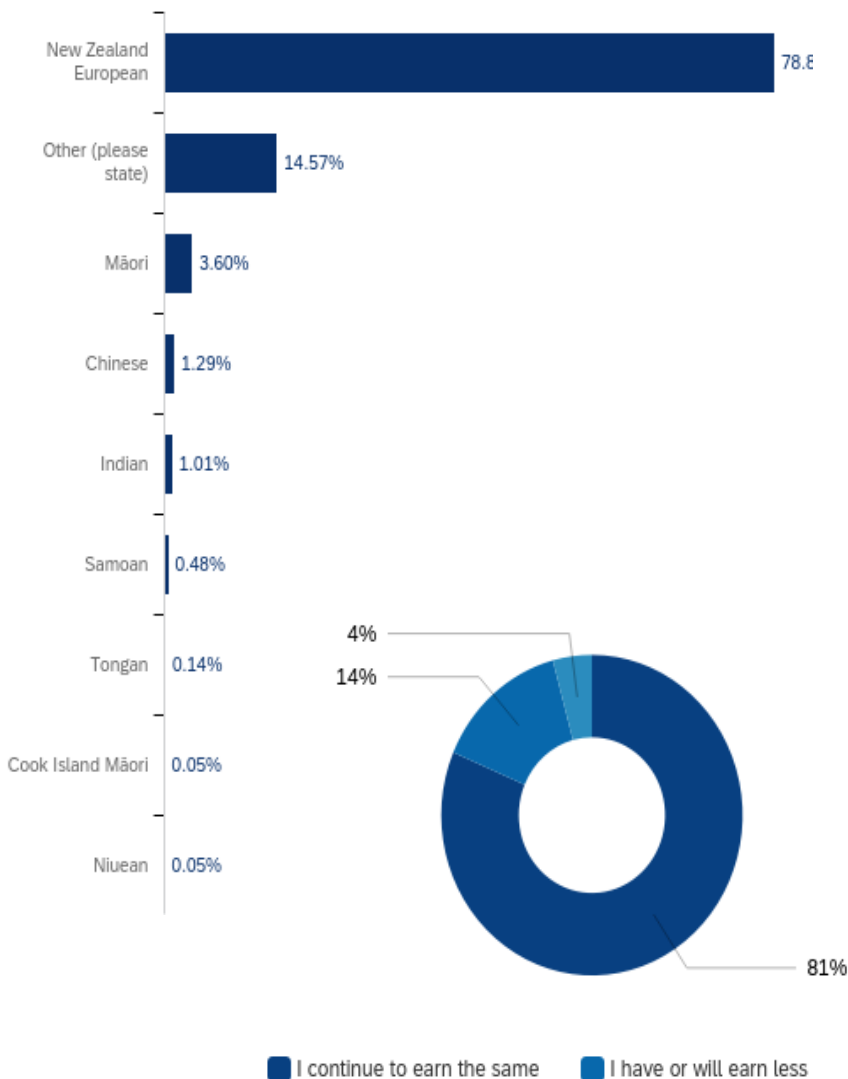
Other reasons cited were inadequate resources or equipment (18%) or that the nature of their work did not allow for remote work (11%). Both of these could potentially be addressed by organisations.

Participant and employer demographics



Participant demographics

Participants were mainly female (80%), NZ European (79%) and continued to earn the same money (81%). Unsurprisingly, the majority were employees (92%), 54% came from the public sector, and 25% from the education, public and civil service. Participants shared their bubble with their spouse (72%) and dependent children (38%) and predominantly came from Otago (28%), Wellington (22%) and Auckland (20%).



Employer demographics

Most respondents were employees. Just over half worked in public sector and a similar number worked in large organisations.

