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— Analysis

# Is the work from home honeymoon over?

The novelty of working from home seems to be wearing off as experts feel the urge for social interaction makes people yearn for the office environment again.



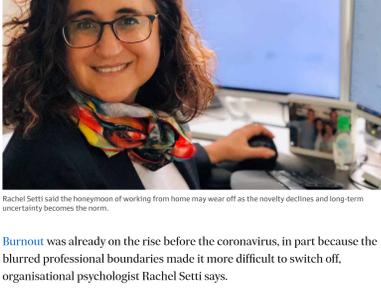
**Natasha Boddy**  
Work & Careers reporter

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Has **working from home** started to lose its shine?

Between Zoom fatigue and being stuck at your computer all day with not enough breaks to working at your kitchen bench for weeks and juggling **full-time work with home-schooling the kids**, we shouldn't be surprised if we're starting to feel unmotivated or less productive, experts say.



Rachel Setti said the honeymoon of working from home may wear off as the novelty declines and long-term uncertainty becomes the norm.

**Burnout** was already on the rise before the coronavirus, in part because the blurred professional boundaries made it more difficult to switch off, organisational psychologist Rachel Setti says.

"For some people, the initial state of remote working would have felt like a honeymoon period – away from the daily grind, more family time," Setti says.

Workplace expert **Michelle Gibbings** agrees. "What I'm hearing across the board from clients is they're getting to the end of the day, they feel like they're working longer hours, they're exhausted and yet they feel like they're getting less done," Gibbings says.

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When the working from home experiment began earlier this year, most workers said they were **more productive working at home** than in an office and a third believed the switch had made them less stressed, a survey of more than 5000 people found.



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But have we started to cool on the idea?

Dr Yvette Blount, an Associate Professor at the Macquarie Business School and member of the Centre for Workforce Futures, thinks so.

"We're social beings and we need some face-to-face interaction," she says.

"The only way you develop relationships and solve complex problems is if you're in a face-to-face situation – and I think that technology just can't recreate that."

She believes working from home for extended periods will eventually lead to economic and productivity declines.

Recent research revealed **four in five Australian workers miss interacting in-person with their teammates** on a daily basis, and one of the top three stresses is an inability to switch off and disconnect.

"This 'always on' culture is really problematic in terms of the separation between work and home," Blount says.

**Requests for mental health assistance have increased** by as much as 40 per cent as Australians struggle with the pandemic.



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A 2015 paper from the Stanford Graduate School of Business on a pilot study of a call centre employees in China who worked from home found productivity increased, staff turnover decreased and employees were happier. But when the work from home policy was rolled out across the company, it was unsuccessful. The main reason? Loneliness.

Dr Melissa Giles, consulting director at management consultancy Interchange, agrees the novelty of working from home is wearing off as time goes on.

"It started off as an interesting new way of working and now, after a few weeks, I think people are starting to get over it," Giles says.

"I think one of the reasons people might be struggling working from home is the lack of choice and lack of control. They can't just go into the office when they want to.

"The other thing is the cognitive load of it. We're learning new tech, new ways to collaborate. None of this is the way we have worked in the past – and so we're not able to operate on autopilot.

"I think partly why people are finding it so exhausting at the moment is that we're so out of our comfort zone in terms having to operate in a different way."



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The shift home has been a steep learning curve for many managers, says Giles, who did her PhD on flexible work arrangements.

"One of the barriers to flexible work arrangements pre-COVID-19 were managers, and I think a lot of that came down to managers being able to trust their employees to work from home.

"But also having the skill set to manage a remote team. It takes a different skill set to manage employees that you can't see and that you can't directly talk to," Giles says.

Setti says people may be missing friends, family and support networks as feelings of isolation set in and this can be especially true for the one in four adults who live alone.

"The ambiguity of not knowing when this will end can impact our sense of emotional wellbeing. Overlay this with financial concerns and we can see how people may end up feeling anxious and vulnerable," Setti says.

Blount believes there will be many workers who are anxious to return to working in an office environment.

"They miss the social interaction, they miss the ability to get things done, they miss the separation between work and home," she said.

"If we're too remote, what will happen is people will start being in their little silos and then you're not working as a team and it starts to get very disconnected."

Workers will want to return to the office environment, at least part-time, when **COVID-19** restrictions are over.

"I think this is a really good opportunity to take a step back and say 'OK, working from home is a good thing for work-life balance, for traffic congestion, for flexibility,'" Blount says. "Let's have a really good, critical look at this and see how we can make sure that we embed this in a way that's going to be appropriate for people's productivity, for people's wellbeing, to meet the organisation's objectives."



Dr Yvette Blount believes we are starting to suffer from work-from-home fatigue.

## Shaking up the routine

So until we can return to the office, how do people stay motivated and maintain stamina?

### 1. Do something rewarding every day.

This is different for everyone so choose what makes you feel good, Setti says.

"Make sure that it is 'guilt-free' by viewing it as an investment in yourself which yields a significant ROI in terms of your wellbeing, productivity and output," she says, referring to the return on investment.

Gibbings says people are also motivated by progress.

"What are the many milestones you're having through the week or the day ... because you know you have achieved something and you've got something done."



Michelle Gibbings recommends time-blocking your day, which involves working on particular tasks for a specific period.

She recommends time-blocking your day which involves working on particular tasks for a certain time. Multi-tasking can be an ineffective way of working.

"Then when you get to the end of the day, you can see what it is that you've achieved. When you time-block your time, you are typically more productive," she says.

### 2. Set work-life boundaries.

Avoid the temptation to blur the boundaries by stretching out your working day so it ends up encroaching into your down-time.

Setti recommends, where possible, sticking to the parts of your previous work routine that you enjoyed, like reading the newspaper or having a (virtual) coffee with a co-worker.



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Gibbings says it is vital to have a routine and have regular breaks.

"Have a start time and have a finish time, and it's important to have breaks during the day so carving out time for lunch, and that includes getting outdoors, going for a walk ... so something physical that is taking you away from just sitting in front of a computer all day."

### 3. Keep moving.

The benefits of physical activity are well known but many of us are moving much less since the shift to remote work. A recent survey from the Heart Foundation found two in five workers said they had been walking less.

"We've lost the incidental exercise we used to do in our daily commute and walk around the office," Setti says.

"Ensure you get up and move every 20 minutes, and get out into the sunshine and fresh air daily."

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