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# Working from home after the COVID-19 pandemic: An estimate of worker preferences



by Tahsin Mehdi and René Morissette

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# ***Working from home after the COVID-19 pandemic: An estimate of worker preferences***

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As is now well known, the COVID-19 pandemic substantially increased work from home in Canada and many industrialized countries. In January 2021, 32% of Canadian employees aged 15 to 69 worked most of their hours from home, compared with 4% in 2016 (Mehdi and Morissette 2021).

This development raises an important question: to what extent will Canadians work from home once the COVID-19 pandemic is over? The answer to this question has potentially significant implications for future traffic congestion, public transit use, greenhouse gas emissions, demand for office space in city centres and for housing in suburbs, and the dynamism (or lack thereof) of retail trade stores and restaurants located in downtown areas. It depends not only on the proportion of Canadians who will work from home but also on the number of hours they will work from home every week.

If relatively few employees work from home, and if those who do so work relatively few hours from home every week, traffic congestion and greenhouse gas emissions—to name a few variables—will decrease to a lesser extent than if a large proportion of Canadians telework and work most of their hours from home. To capture both the proportion of employees who work from home and the number of hours they work there, one needs to estimate the **overall share of total hours** that employees might work from home after the pandemic.

To estimate this share rigorously, data on employers' preferences for telework as well as employees' preferences for telework need to be combined. Since the former preferences are currently not available,<sup>1</sup> a partial answer can be provided based on employees' preferences for this work arrangement. Using a supplementary question, which was added to the February 2021 Labour Force Survey, this study estimates the overall share of total hours that employees might prefer working from home once the pandemic is over.

In February 2021, **new teleworkers**—individuals who usually worked outside the home prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but worked most of their hours from home during the week of February 14 to 20—were asked the degree to which they would prefer working from home once the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

Focusing on employees who had been with the same employer since at least March 2019, Mehdi and Morissette (2021) show that 80% of these new teleworkers would like to work at least half of their hours from home once the pandemic is over—41% would prefer working about half of their hours at home and the other half outside the home, while 39% would prefer working most (24%) or all (15%) of their hours at home. The remaining 20% would prefer working most (11%) or all (9%) of their hours outside the home.

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1. While the Canadian Survey on Business Conditions measures the percentage of businesses that report being likely to permanently offer more employees the possibility of working remotely or to require telework once the pandemic is over, it contains no information on hours worked. As a result, it is difficult to convert such information into a share of hours that employers would like to see being performed from home.

By combining information on employees' preferences for telework with data on the hours they usually work, it is possible to estimate the total number of hours that **new teleworkers** might prefer to work from home once the pandemic is over.<sup>2,3</sup> Furthermore, if one assumes that **other teleworkers**, who usually work from home, will work all of their usual hours at home once the pandemic is over, one can estimate the total number of hours they will work from home after the pandemic. Adding the estimates obtained for the two aforementioned groups of employees and dividing the resulting sum by the total number of hours usually worked by all employees, the overall share of total hours that employees **might** prefer working from home once the COVID-19 pandemic is over can be computed.

This overall share likely represents an **upper bound** for the overall share of total hours that employees **will** work from home after the pandemic. This is the case for several reasons. First, the preferences of some new teleworkers for working from home might not be fully satisfied by their employers once the pandemic is over.<sup>4</sup> Second, the pool of workers in February 2021 excludes many individuals who were not employed, but had worked in retail stores, restaurants, hotels and the entertainment industry. If some of these individuals—most of whom cannot work from home—return to their former employers after the pandemic, the share of hours worked from home by all employees will end up being lower than the share estimated above. Lastly, some employees, who expressed preferences for telework in February 2021 because they feared viral infections, might change their mind and prefer working on the business premises once the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

With these limitations in mind, the results of the calculations outlined above are shown in Chart 1 and Table 1. They indicate that once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, the hours that Canadian employees might prefer working from home amount to, in the aggregate, 24% of their total work hours (Table 1).

How does this estimate of **worker preferences** in a post-COVID-19 context compare with the share of total hours worked from home by employees prior to COVID-19? In 2016 and 2018, employees worked no more than 5% of their total hours from home (Chart 1). Therefore, the overall share of total hours that employees **might** prefer working from home once the COVID-19 pandemic ends equals almost five times the overall share of total hours they worked from home prior to COVID-19.

In line with the notion that jobs held by highly educated workers are more conducive to telework than those held by less educated employees (Deng, Messacar and Morissette 2020), the share of total hours that employees might prefer to work from home after the pandemic is substantially higher among the former group than among the latter. The number of hours that degree holders—employees with at least a bachelors' degree—would prefer working from home amounts to 44% of their total hours, compared with 9% for employees with a high school diploma or less education.

Likewise, the share of total hours that women would prefer working from home (28%) is higher than that of men (22%), partly reflecting the fact that jobs held by women tend to be more conducive to telework than those held by men (Deng, Messacar and Morissette 2020).

Table 1 also shows that, since the beginning of the pandemic, the share of total hours worked from home has increased much more among highly educated workers than among their less educated counterparts. In April 2020, the hours worked from home by degree holders amounted to 67% of their total hours, compared with 8% in 2018. By February 2021, the corresponding percentage was 53%. By contrast,

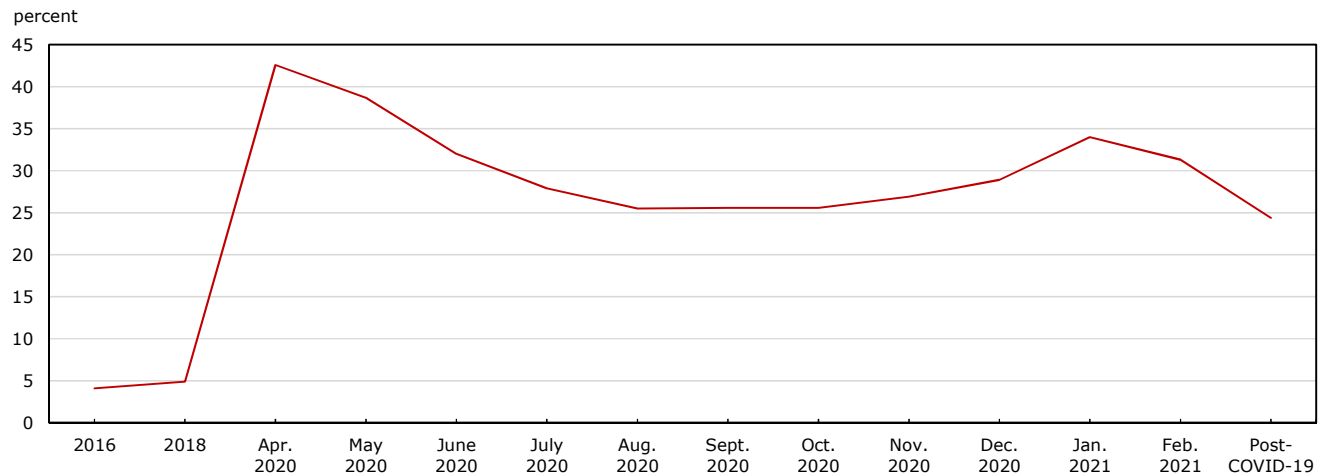
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2. This can be done for all new teleworkers, i.e., after removing the tenure restriction used by Mehdi and Morissette (2021).
  3. It is assumed that new teleworkers who prefer working: a) all (none, half) of their hours from home will work all (none, half) of their usual hours at home when the pandemic is over; b) most of their hours from home (outside the home) will work 75% (25%) of their usual hours from home.
  4. This effect will be attenuated—and could possibly be overturned—if some employers require some of their employees who do not wish to work from home to do so.

employees with a high school diploma or less education saw their share of total hours worked from home increase from 2% in 2018 to 16% in April 2020 and subsequently fall to 11% in February 2021.

The degree to which the preferences of Canadian employees regarding work from home will be satisfied by their employers once the pandemic is over remains to be seen and will be worth monitoring.

**Chart 1**

**Share of total hours worked from home by employees from 2016 to February 2021, and share of total hours that employees might prefer working from home once the pandemic is over (post-COVID-19)**



**Note:** The sample consists of employees aged 15 to 64, excluding full-time students and full-time members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

**Sources:** Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, April 2020 to February 2021, and General Social Survey, 2016 and 2018.

**Table 1**

**Share of total hours worked from home by employees from 2016 to February 2021, and share of total hours that employees might prefer working from home once the pandemic is over (post-COVID-19), by selected characteristics**

				Education			Age group		
	Both sexes	Men	Women	High school or less	Some post-secondary	Bachelor's degree or higher	15 to 34	35 to 54	55 to 64
	percent								
2016	4.1	3.9	4.2	1.7	3.7	6.8	2.9	4.4	5.4
2018	4.9	4.4	5.5	2.2	5.0	7.8	3.6	5.5	5.9
Apr. 2020	42.6	36.3	50.3	16.4	35.7	66.6	41.8	45.2	36.4
May 2020	38.7	32.6	46.3	13.0	32.5	63.6	36.8	44.5	27.5
June 2020	32.0	27.4	38.0	9.6	27.9	55.1	26.8	35.5	32.0
July 2020	27.9	24.2	32.7	7.9	22.8	53.7	24.6	31.7	25.1
Aug. 2020	25.5	22.2	30.1	6.8	21.8	49.1	22.3	29.3	23.1
Sept. 2020	25.6	22.5	29.6	8.5	20.7	45.0	23.1	28.5	22.3
Oct. 2020	25.6	21.9	30.3	8.1	21.2	45.0	23.5	28.6	21.2
Nov. 2020	26.9	23.8	30.9	8.5	21.7	46.8	25.9	29.2	22.5
Dec. 2020	28.9	25.9	32.6	9.3	23.1	49.8	27.4	31.4	24.7
Jan. 2021	34.0	30.2	38.6	11.4	27.0	56.9	33.1	37.1	26.9
Feb. 2021	31.3	28.6	34.7	11.0	25.1	52.8	31.1	33.6	25.8
Post-COVID-19	24.4	21.6	27.8	9.0	19.7	43.7	24.2	26.6	19.1

**Note:** The sample consists of employees aged 15 to 64, excluding full-time students and full-time members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

**Sources:** Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, April 2020 to February 2021, and General Social Survey, 2016 and 2018.

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## References

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