

Chapter 10


Addressing Wellbeing for Remote and Home Working in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Working outside of a physical workplace is expanding through the growth of the gig economy and because of the working from home processes enforced as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Working outside of the physical confines of a single workplace has always been present across many industries, such as transport and construction, education, defence, and mining. With the development of the online economy, the nature of business and working has been transformed. The internet, mobile phones, and specialist apps have supported new business development, disrupted industries, and opened new ways of working beyond the traditional workplace, including gig work. The COVID-19 pandemic forced millions to work away from the workplace, typically at home. The trend globally is towards working away from the traditional and regulated workplace. This chapter will examine worker wellbeing external working arrangements in two different contexts in Australia: long distance

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commuting in the West Australian mining sector and enforced working from home arrangements occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic.

PURPOSE OF THIS CHAPTER

This chapter addresses the challenges of remote working within two quite different contexts in Australia. They are long-distance fly- in- fly out employment (FIFO) in the mining industry and working from home arrangements that were legally imposed as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This forced large parts of the workforce to work online and away from the physical workforce. The contexts for the two cases differ by industry, employment conditions, and employment regulations. However, in the two cases the working arrangements generated consequences that challenged employee wellbeing, especially psychosocial health hazards. The challenge for stakeholders was how to mitigate the risks and to address the challenges. In the two cases the challenge these risks posed for worker wellbeing were identified through public inquiry and reviews from workplace regulators. Subsequently legislative and industrial relations changes were introduced that mitigated some of these risks. Major changes in working arrangements, in the case of the COVID response, unexpected, have unforeseen consequences for worker wellbeing. The chapter reports on the two cases and cites information that is available in the public domain.

The Multiple Forms of Remote/External Working

There have been long standing remote work arrangements, especially involving isolated work sites and remote communities, and in industries involving extensive travel and working away from home and a central business location in such industries as trucking, shipping, flying, mining, tourism, agriculture, and defence industries (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). It can involve commuting long distances and staying onsite at remote mining, agriculture harvesting, defence, fisheries, and construction sites. Remote working is common in industries that are found in isolated regions where production and services is supported by migratory and transitory workforces, often linked to short-term and seasonal work, in the construction of infrastructure (roads, ports, and railways); agriculture; tourism; fisheries; mining; health; education; policing and security services (Stanford, 2017). For traditional remote work, which is physically anchored to one location, there are studies that highlight the hazards of loneliness, isolation, and substance abuse present in remote mining and

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