

COVID-19 THE NEW FUTURE OF WORK

Changes after a year plus,
working from home.

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IMAGE CREDIT
GETTYIMAGES

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 forced companies and employees to change the way we work and adapt to a new reality. Canadians have proven to be resilient and changed their business and homes to survive (and even thrive) in this new environment.

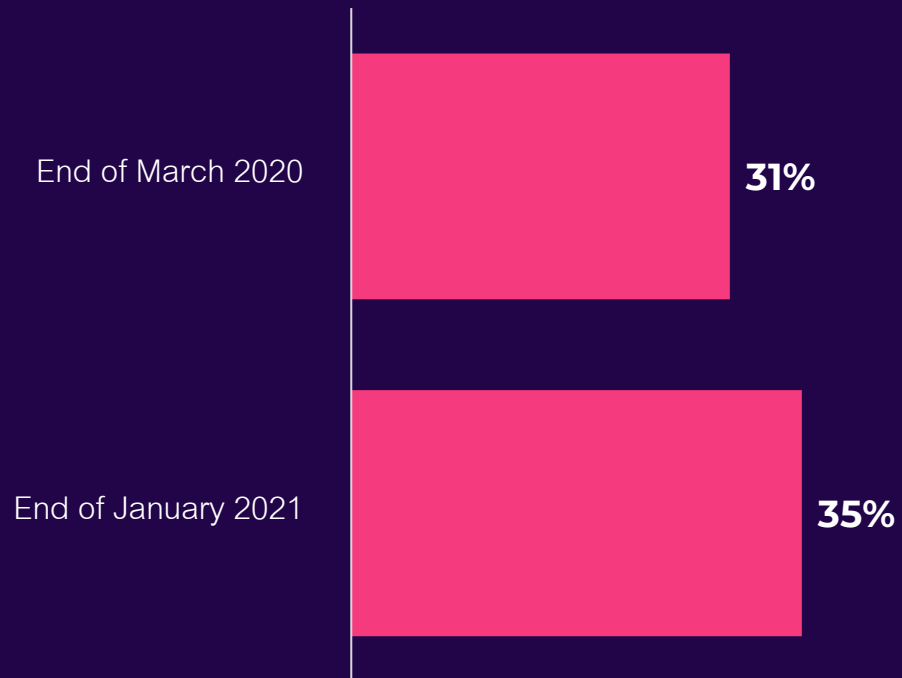
Now, over a year into the pandemic, employers and employees' focus has shifted from adapting to changes to improving their mental and physical wellbeing and planning for the many permanent changes the pandemic has started. Moving forward, employers should consider:

Remote working is here to stay. Employees expect to continue to be able to work from home.

Employees are looking to re-connect with coworkers and benefit from working in an in-person environment. Employers will need to find alternatives to foster collaboration, learning opportunities and social interactions for a workforce divided between home and the office.

Employee wellbeing continues to be critical. With 1 in 3 Canadians experiencing negative impacts on their personal wellbeing, employers will need to actively support their workforce.

Proportion of Canadians reporting remote working



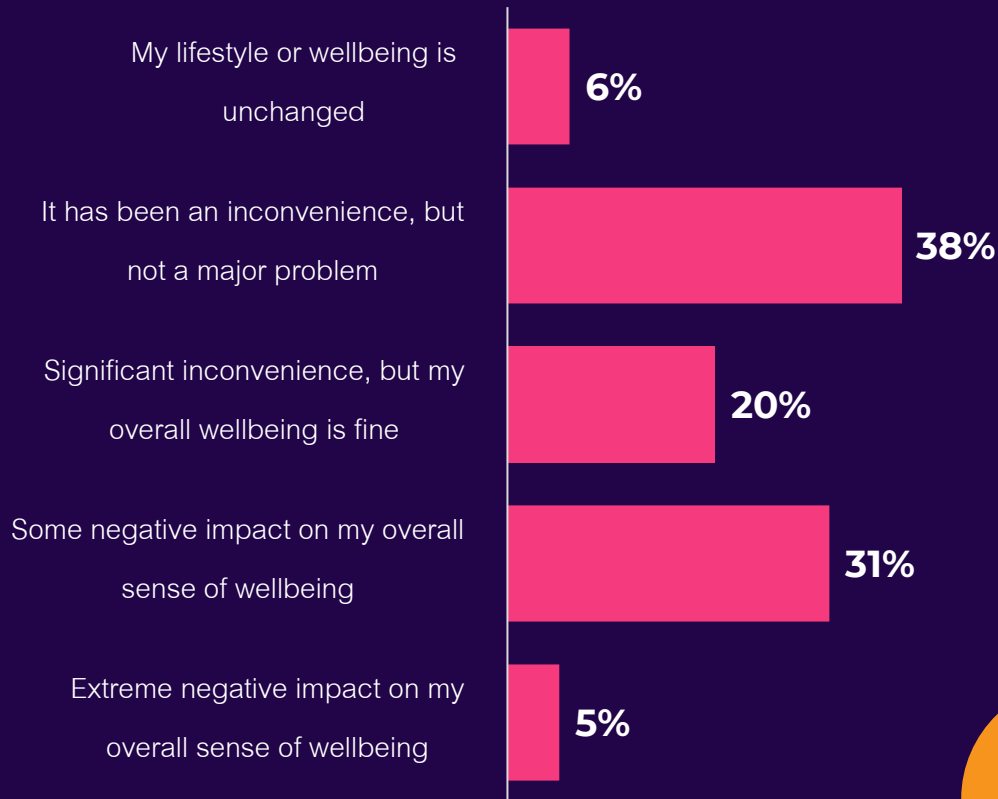
ENVIRONCS RESEARCH : SURVEY FIELDIED FEBRUARY 19TH TO MARCH 5TH, MARCH 26TH TO APRIL 2ND, 2020 AND JAN 25TH TO 29TH, 2021

REMOTE WORKING HAS STABILIZED

Throughout 2020, we saw the rapid rise of remote working arrangements in Canada as business adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, after a year into the pandemic, the share of Canadians who started working remotely have stabilized at 35%.

While many of the initial challenges of remote working have been managed and companies and employees alike have adapted to their new working environment, the negative consequences of remote working on employees' well-being and work-life balance have been widely reported – and many employees are struggling to maintain their wellbeing at this time. Understanding those Canadians for whom working remotely are a current way of work and life, can help organizations to develop strategies to address these unintended negative consequences.

Impact of changes made due to COVID on wellbeing of remote workers



30%

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REMOTE WORKERS NEED SUPPORT

COVID-19 has had an impact on the lifestyle and wellbeing of nearly all Canadians. But for remote workers, this impact is more likely to have been an inconvenience. Nearly 6 in 10 remote workers say the impact has been an inconvenience.

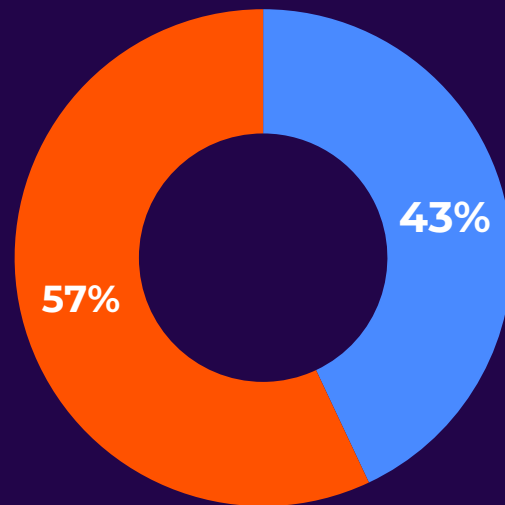
However, nearly 4 in 10 Canadians say that the changes driven by the pandemic have had a negative impact on their well-being. The negative impact has been felt most strongly among women 37% (compared to only 23% of men), younger workers (42% among workers aged 18-24 and 33% among workers aged 25-34) and those living in urban areas (35%).

This increased stress and the negative impacts caused by the pandemic create a desire for normalcy, leading those negatively impacted by the pandemic to be the most keen to return to working in the office.

NET negative impact on wellbeing on the Canadian population

What does the future hold for remote working arrangements?

Q: Thinking about the behaviours below, which do you predict will become your new normal and which are only temporary?



Working remotely is the new normal

Working remotely is a temporary change

FLEXIBLE WORK: A PERMANENT SOLUTION

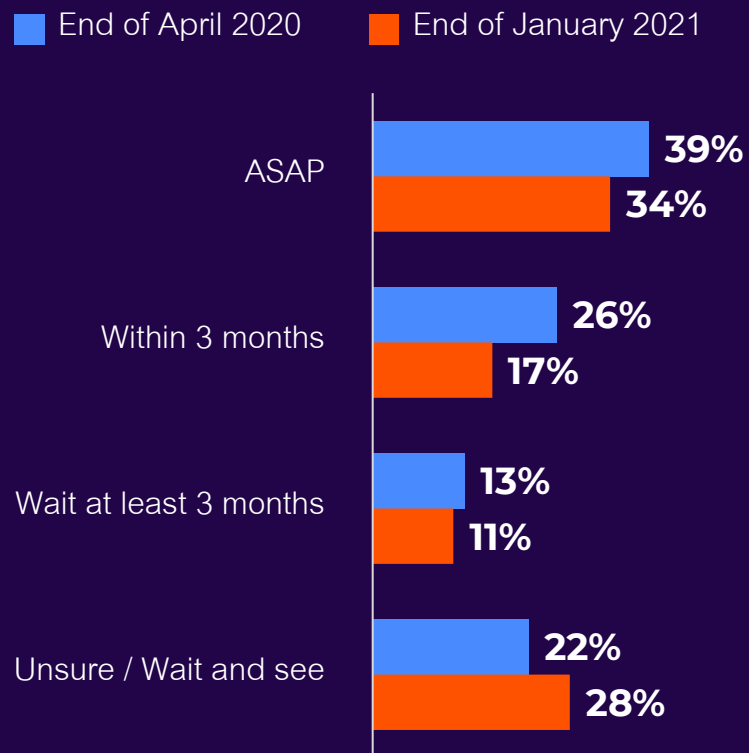
The permanency of flexible work arrangements continues to divide Canadians. Nearly 6 in 10 remote workers believe the remote arrangements adopted under pressure from COVID-19 will become the new normal; slightly higher than in April 2020, when Canadians were evenly split.

The permanency of flexible work arrangements suggests employers will need to prepare for the needs of both those anticipating a return to the office as well as those planning to continue to work from home.

For those anticipating a return to the office, a sense of urgency exists.

How soon do you plan on returning to the office?

Q: Once the current restrictions are lifted, how soon do you expect you'll do the following...



11%

Prefer not to return to the office at all going forward

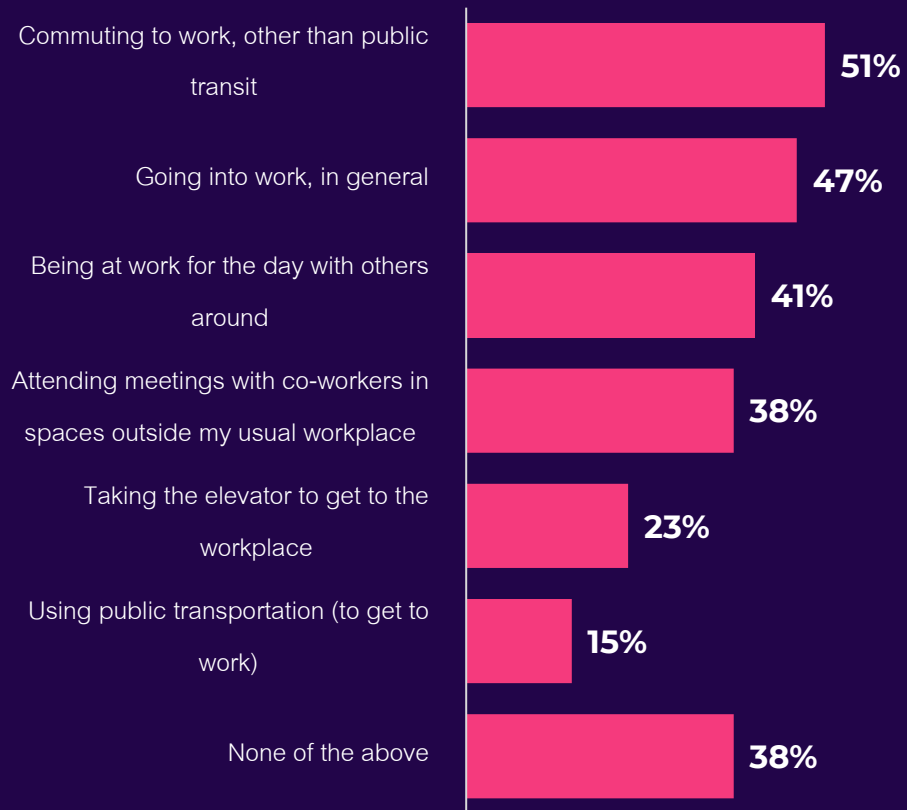
URGENCY TO RETURN IS HIGH, BUT HAS REDUCED

If in April 2020, most workers were anticipating a fast return to the office, a year into the pandemic, workers are not feeling the same urgency. In fact, 4 in 10 workers now say they are unsure of when they will return to the office or that they prefer not to do so at all.

Comfort returning to the office depends on their mindset and tolerance for risk. Half of Canadians are expecting a quick return while 4 in 10 are planning to wait and see. Some Canadians (11%) would prefer not returning at all.

Comfort with work related activities

Q: When thinking about work, how comfortable are you with the following:



COMFORT WITH EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES RELATED TO WORK IS STILL LIMITED, EMPHASIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF FLEXIBILITY

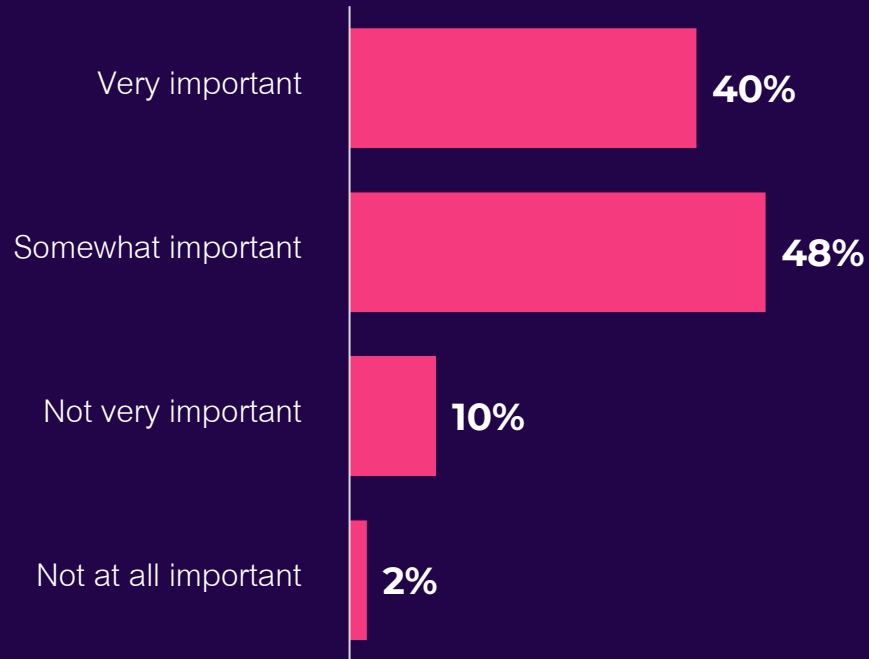
Around half of Canadians are comfortable with commuting to work without using public transit and going to work in general. Canadians who are the most comfortable with these and other work related activities are the same ones anxious to return to the office as soon as possible.

However, comfort with other common situations related to out-of-home work such as taking the elevator or using public transit is much lower, signaling the importance of employers to be flexible about asking employees to return to the office.

Additionally, nearly 4 in 10 Canadians are not comfortable with any of the most common activities related to going to the office, and will be hesitant to return.

Importance of getting back to normal routine

Q: How important are each of the following for you personally in the coming months, when it is possible? Getting back to my normal routine



CANADIANS ARE LOOKING TO GET BACK TO THEIR NORMAL ROUTINE, BUT NOT ALL WANT TO RETURN TO THE OFFICE

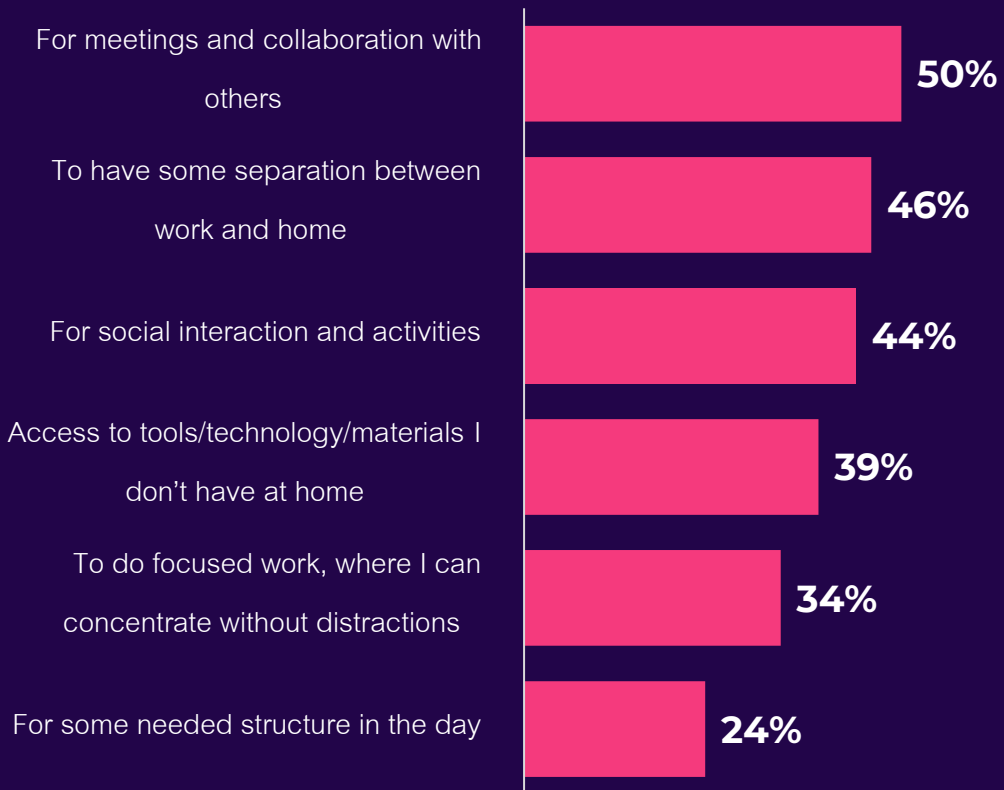
While Canadians appreciate the sacrifices necessary to contain the spread of COVID-19, they are looking forward to getting back to their normal routine.

Yet, in contrast with the nearly 9 in 10 Canadians who believe it is important to get back to their normal routine, only 45% of Canadians say returning to their previous work environment is important to them.

Balancing these conflicting needs must be a priority for employers who are looking to retain qualified talent. Returning to their previous work environment is more important to younger workers, who were more likely to have suffered negative impacts on their wellbeing and may realize increased benefit from personal interactions. In fact, 70% of Canadians aged 18-24 and 58% of Canadians 25-34 consider it important to return to their previous work environment, and employers planning to continue to provide for remote work will need to plan for accommodating these in-person interactions.

Benefits to returning to the office

Q: If you anticipate going into the workplace, what would be the main benefits or reason to go in?



SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND A PLACE TO FOCUS ARE BEHIND A DESIRE TO RETURN

Despite having adapted to working remotely, it's clear that many valuable activities and interactions cannot be replicated virtually, no matter how smart we get with using technology and new tools.

The social element is first and foremost in driving remote employees back into the office to facilitate and experience the benefits of organic collaborations and spontaneous social interactions.

Additionally, having a place to focus and escape distractions in the home is driving 59% of remote workers back into the office. This need is particularly relatable to those with children at home or who are surrounded by other family members also working from home. The separation between work and home can also benefit those working longer hours and whose wellbeing has been impacted by the inability to disconnect while working from home.

The office is not going away

The ability to work from home has changed expectations and introduced a level of flexibility to work, commute, schedule (and even live) from anywhere, but the office will not go away:

45%

Believe it's important to return to their previous work environment

35%

Expect to work from home more / go in from time to time

7%

Migrated from the downtown core towards suburban/rural areas



IMAGE CREDIT:
UNSPLASH

ADAPTING TO NEW EMPLOYEE EXPECTATIONS

One year into the pandemic, employees have adapted to their new work environments and evolved their expectations about returning to the office. While some are looking forward to returning to the office and the social and productivity benefits it offers, others are resistant to going back and will face many barriers when tasked to return.

The physical and mental wellbeing of employees, both those returning to the office and those continuing to work remotely is being challenged and organizations will need to focus on health and wellness to ensure staff can enjoy a healthy and safe work environment.

Employers should consider not only cleanliness and sanitation, but also allowing flexibility for employees to avoid peak elevator and public transit hours, as well as accommodate parking needs (for cars and bikes).

Additionally, employers need to consider the possibility that employees will decide to look for new places to work if forced to return to the office when they are not comfortable or have adapted well to the work-from-home routine.



IMAGE CREDIT:
GETTYIMAGES

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Many employees working from home are struggling with isolation and anxiety, but a return to the office will not improve the mental wellbeing of everyone. Many will experience increased stress from having to return to the workplace, taking public transit or having long commutes. Employers will need to address the mental health of both groups, and all those in between.

—Susan Seto, Vice President
Market Strategy

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CREATING ALTERNATIVES TO TRADITIONAL WORK INTERACTIONS

While employees working from home recognize the advantages of remote working, there are invaluable activities that rely on organic interactions and spontaneous synergies to foster creative ideas and collaboration that cannot be replicated virtually.

This is most strongly recognized by younger employees who crave the social interactions that happen in the office and may lose the learning and mentoring opportunities that come from working closely with more experienced employees.

Employers should consider how the office space is utilized, and advance workplace policies, workflows and design that accommodate the needs and expectations related to why people want to return to the office environment. Spaces that foster collaboration and social activities while still allowing some distancing will contribute positively to supporting the health and wellbeing of employees onsite, as well as offsite.



IMAGE CREDIT:
UNSPLASH

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Focusing on learning and career growth of a workforce that may be both in the office and working from home will involve new strategies to create opportunities to collaborate and learn.

—Michele Cunningham, Director, Strategic Insight
Market Strategy

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ABOUT OUR FUTURE OF WORK RESEARCH

Environics believes employees are people first and professionals second. Through Social Values research and analysis, we help organizations find alignment between staff values and organizational values, to better engage with employees and create a productive and positive work culture.

Our research can help you understand your employees and how to effectively communicate and engage with them. We can support your organization's workplace culture and employee engagement initiatives by helping you:

- Build a values-based organizational culture and a brand that attracts talent
- Reconcile differences in staff values, motivations and needs to build alignment and create a cohesive culture
- Craft an engagement strategy to meet evolving needs across the attraction, retention and development stages of the employee lifecycle



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