

Employee Advantage: With job market remaining tight, many workers continue to resist a return to the office

Half who returned to office after COVID-19 hiatus say it was employers' decision, one-third their own

April 17, 2023 – Canada's federal government recently joined corporate behemoths Amazon and Disney in announcing a mandatory return (at least part-time) to the office. While these public servants work through this transition, employers in Canada continue to face an uphill battle in getting their own employees to do the same.

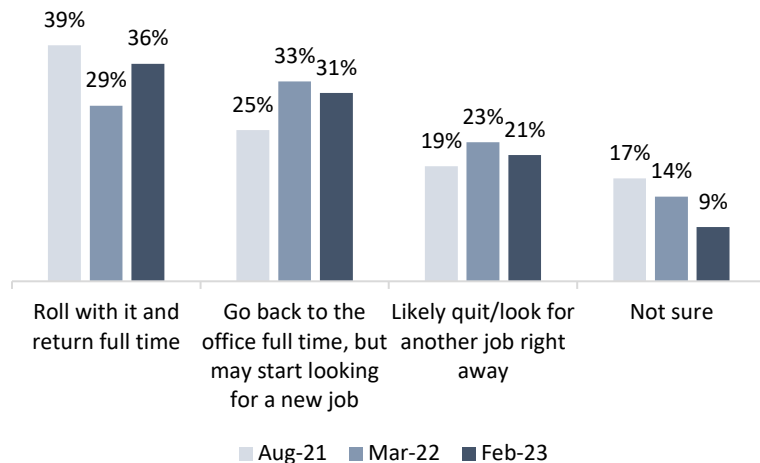
A new study from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds that as employers grapple with a tight labour market – which tends to favour employees – decisions about forcing a return to the office now represent a risky proposition.

For those who currently work from home at least some of the time, one-in-three (36%) say they would return to the office full-time with no qualms if the request were made. That said, a significant group would either return but *consider* switching jobs (31%) or likely hand in their notice (21%) shortly after being ordered to come back to the office.

Many Canadian workers are [adjusting](#) to a new reality as the forecasted short-term trend of working from home has become a long-term reality. With this comes different experiences. Four-in-five (84%) who work on site say their connection to colleagues is either good or great. This, compared to half of those who set up their office at home (50%). On the other end of the benefit spectrum, four-in-five who work from home (81%) give a positive appraisal of their work-life balance, compared to 54 per cent whose job requires them to be on site.

Notably, while there are positive and negative aspects to both work arrangements, productivity does not appear to be overtly impacted. Nearly the same number of workers say they are productive both on-site (77%) and at home (81%).

Suppose your employer demands you return to the office full time, what would you do in this case? (Among those who prefer to work from home)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from Feb. 9-12, 2023 among a representative randomized sample of 1,622 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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More Key Findings:

- Women are more likely than men to prefer to work from home some or all of the time (58% women, 45% men) while those under the age of 35 are less likely than older Canadians to say they want to work from the office all of the time (20%).
- Among those who worked from home over the past three years, one-in-five (21%) are back on-site full time or still at home (19%) full time. Similar sized groups are at home more than the office (14%) and vice versa (15%). Fewer than one-in-five (17%) say they split their working hours at home and at the office.
- Among those who have returned to the office after working from home at least some of the time over the past three years, half say it was their employer's decision (52%), while one-in-three say it was their choice to make (36%). A smaller group (13%) came to the decision another way.

About ARI

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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Part One: The pull back to the office

The demand for remote workers to return to the office has grown louder in recent months. In Canada, the Royal Bank of Canada, [one of the largest employers of office workers in the country](#), has told its employees that the company expects them in the office [three or four days a week by May 1](#). It joins the chorus of calls back to the office from American corporate behemoths like [Amazon](#) and [Disney](#).

RBC also is not alone in Canada. Federal government employees, too, have been told they must return to the office two or three times per week. This has been met with resistance from federal workers, who [demonstrated against the call back](#) to the office. The hybrid work arrangement figures to play into ongoing

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negotiations between workers and the federal government, as [a potential strike looms](#) with employees demanding higher wages as well.

Meanwhile, the shift to hybrid or completely remote work has caused office vacancy rates to hit [an all-time high](#) in Canada. That could portend a long-term problem for [many pensions](#), which often hold office buildings as part of their asset portfolio. Notably, many have started [divesting themselves of office towers](#) as demand for them decreases in both Canada and the U.S.

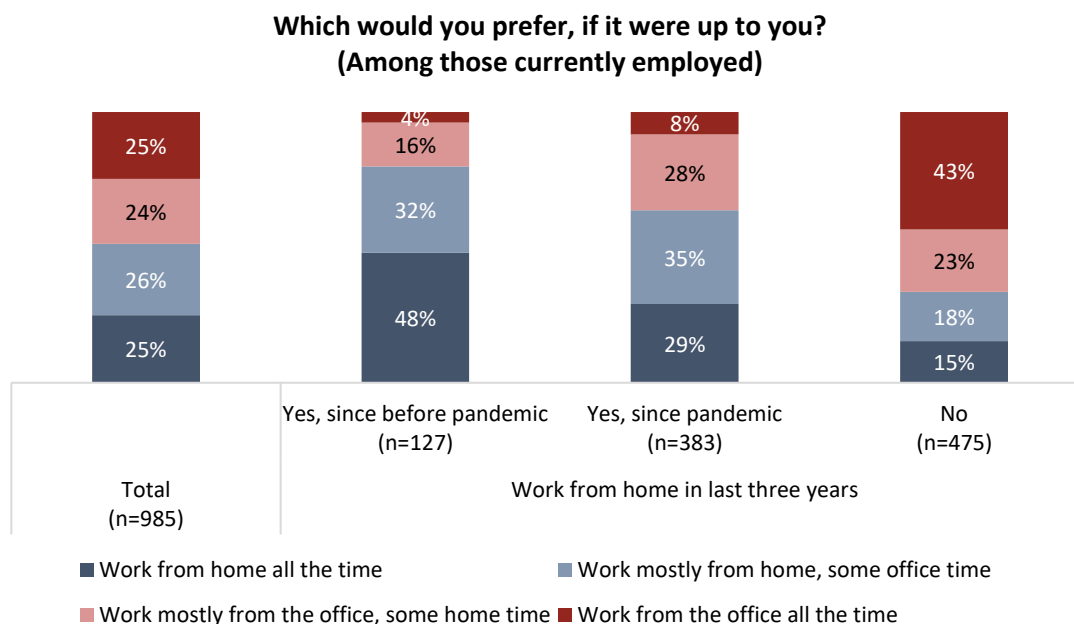
All the while businesses are trying to draw workers back into their common spaces, would-be workers or current employees continue to benefit from a [tight job market](#), which in many cases has workers holding the better cards. There are many Canadians who are willing to play their hand if it means moving elsewhere and maintaining their newfound flexibility.

One-quarter prefer working at office all the time, most prefer some home time

When it comes to their working venue, Canadians currently employed are evenly split in their preferences. Half (49%) say they would prefer to be in the office more than at home and half (51%) would like to be working from home more than working on site.

One-quarter (25%) of Canadians prefer the traditional model of five days in the office. Few of those who have been working from home since before the pandemic (4%) or have had a taste of it since 2020 (8%) agree. Instead, majorities in both cases would prefer spending most of their time “on the job” at home.

For those who didn’t work at home over the course of the last three years, a plurality (43%) prefer to be on-site full time. Still, more in that group would like to work some of the time from home:

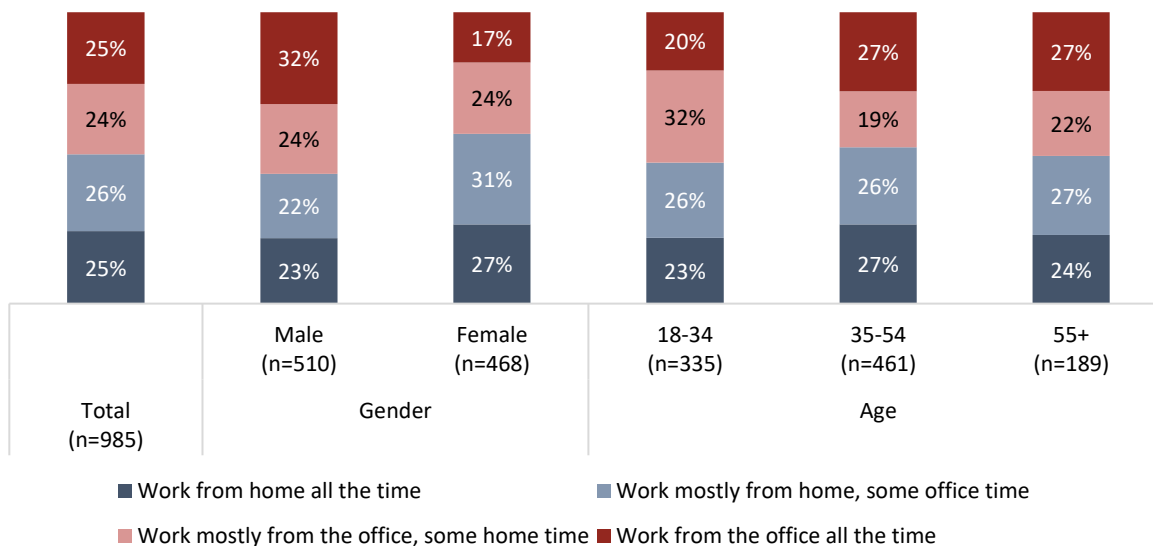


Women are more likely than men to prefer working from home – despite the tendency for them to be [burdened with more household chores](#) than men when working in this arrangement. Canadians under the age of 35 are the least likely to want to be in the office all the time, though the most likely to prefer working there more often than not:

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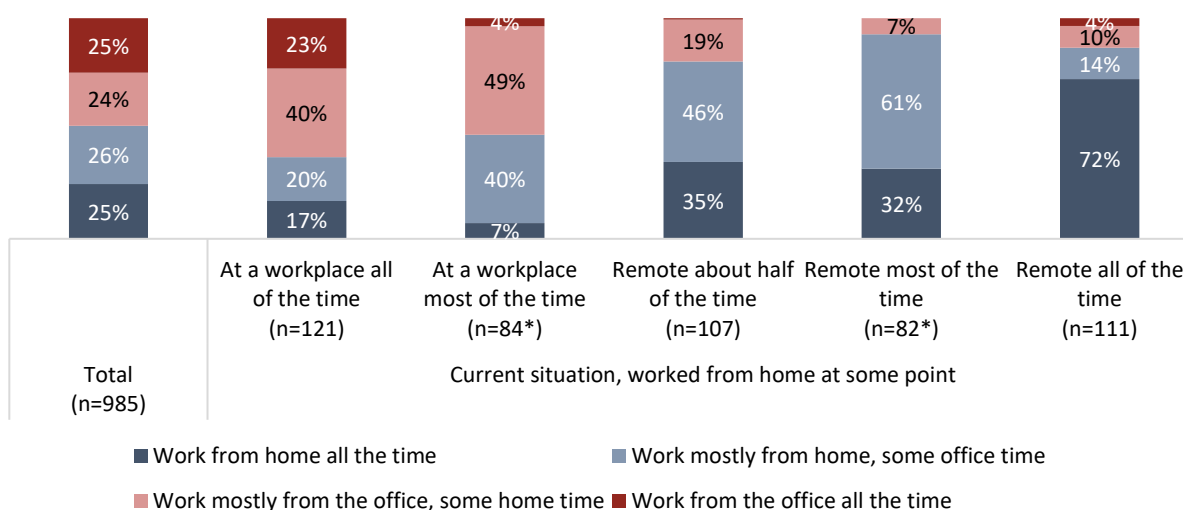
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**Which would you prefer, if it were up to you?
(Among those currently employed)**



There is a clear trend depending on where the respondent works most of the time. Those who work from home more often are more likely to prefer working from home and those who work from the office more often are more likely to prefer in-office time. However, just one-quarter (23%) of those who work from the office full-time prefer that arrangement; two-in-five (40%) would prefer some home time and a similar number (37%) would prefer to be remote working more often than not:

**Which would you prefer, if it were up to you?
(Among those currently employed)**



**Smaller sample sizes, interpret with caution*

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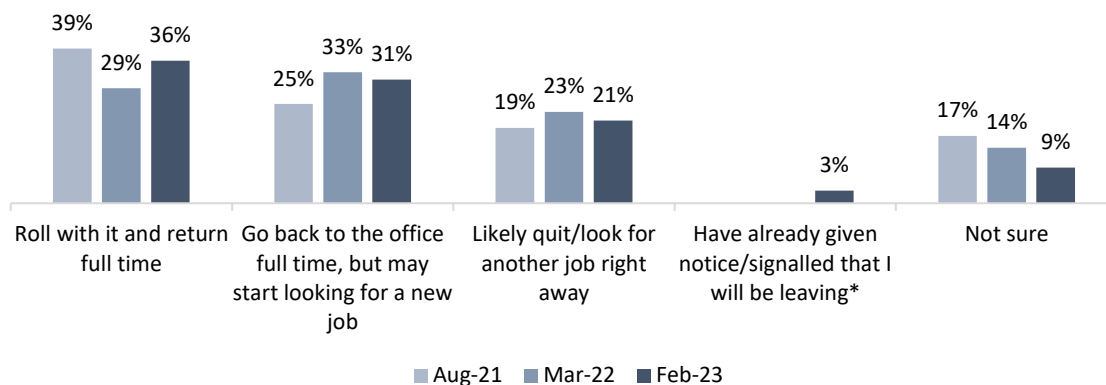
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Half of those who work from home say they'd look for new job if office wanted them back full time

As more companies ask employees to work more regularly in the office, Canadians in the midst of [a tight job market that works to employees' favour](#) face a decision point: return or try to find a remote job elsewhere.

Among the group of Canadians who prefer to work from home, resistance to returning to the office has remained relatively constant over the past three years. Approximately one-in-five said they would quit right away in each year, while the number who would return but look for another up from 2021 but stable compared to 2022:

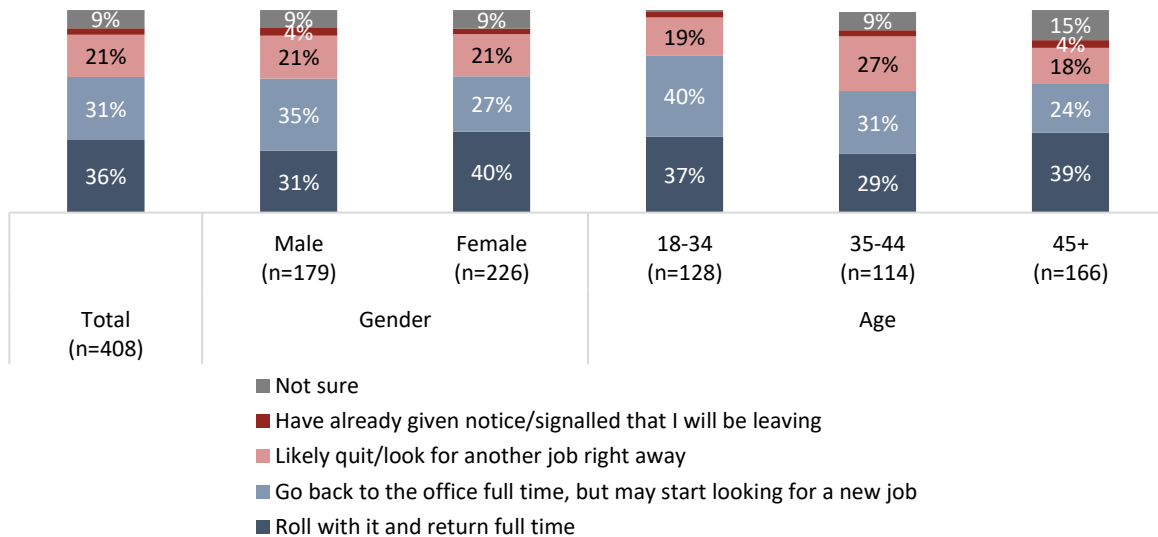
**Suppose your employer demands that you return to the office full time, what would you do in this case?
(Among those who prefer to work from home)**



*New response option added in 2023

One-third (36%) who currently work from home some of the time say they would accede to a potential demand from their employer to return to the office. However, more would consider finding a new job (31%) or beginning a new job search immediately (21%) if this were demanded of them. Canadians in the middle of their career are the least amenable (29%) to a potential full-time return to the office:

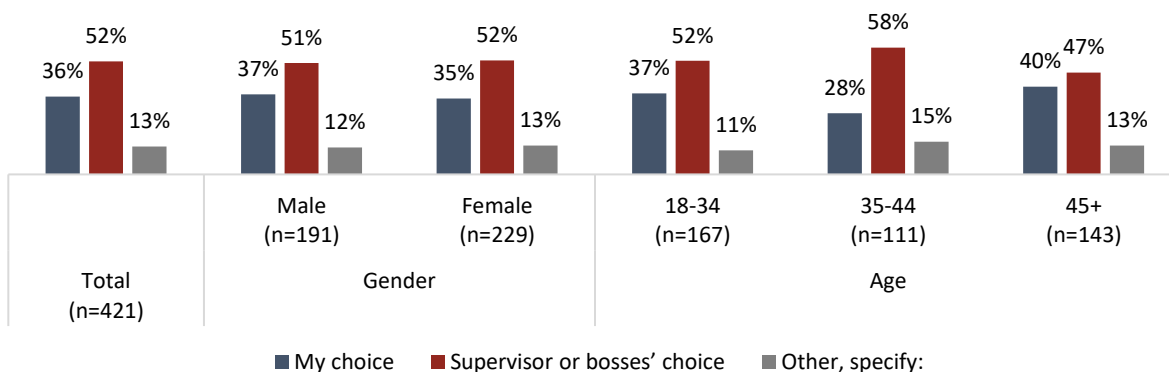
**Suppose your employer demands that you return to the office full time, what would you do in this case?
(Among those who WFH at least some of the time)**



Those who work from home more are less agreeable to a full-time return to the office than those who are already in the office more often. Still, there are one-quarter of those who work more than half of their time remotely who say they would roll with it and return to the office full-time without complaint ([see detailed tables](#)).

For Canadians who worked from home and have returned to the office, half (52%) say it was management’s decision to bring them back. However, one-third (36%) say they decided to return to the job site:

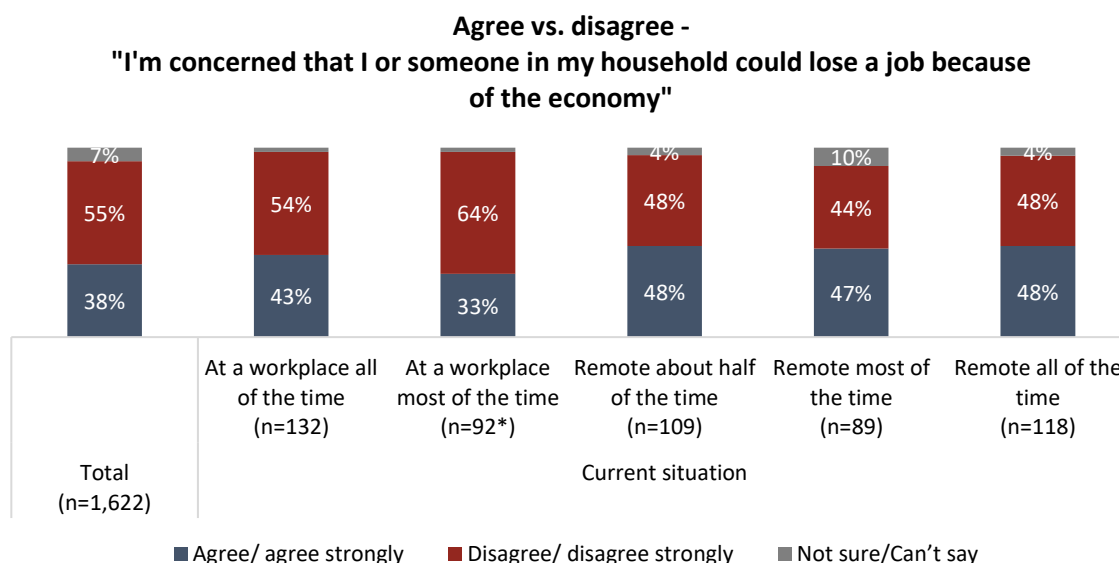
**You mentioned you’re working from an office/workplace now at least sometimes. Was this your choice or a supervisor's/boss' decision?
(Among those who worked from home at some point and now work from the office some or all of the time)**



Those who work from home express elevated concern with potential job loss

Though it is a [sunny job market](#) for employees currently, there are [storms brewing in the distance](#). The expectation of many economists is that [a recession is coming](#). That could mean layoffs, and some experts believe companies could use an employee’s rejection of a call to return to the office as a [potential excuse to cut their position](#).

Indeed, Canadians working from home regularly are more likely to worry about job loss in their household than those who are back in the office frequently:



**Smaller sample size, interpret with caution*

Part Two: The work from home landscape

Canada’s working age population, those over the age of 15 as defined by Statistics Canada, numbered more than 32 million in the most recently available numbers. Of those millions, two-thirds are considered by the government to be “participating” in the labour force, nearly all (95%) are currently employed. In January 2023, the unemployment rate across the country was five per cent.

The sample in this survey by the Angus Reid Institute, which only surveys those aged 18 years and older, lines up neatly with the above outlined characteristics of Canada’s working age population. Within the sample, there are noted differences along gender – men are more likely to participate in the labour force than women – and age – older Canadians are much more likely to be out of the labour force due to retirement – that also align with the [most recently available data from Statistics Canada](#) ([see detailed tables](#)).

Who has worked from home in recent years?

The early uncertainty of COVID-19 moved a mountain of workers from their desks at offices across the country to their home offices, kitchen tables and living rooms. But the catalyst that brought about that sea change is a secondary consideration these days. The call back to the office for [many major employers](#)

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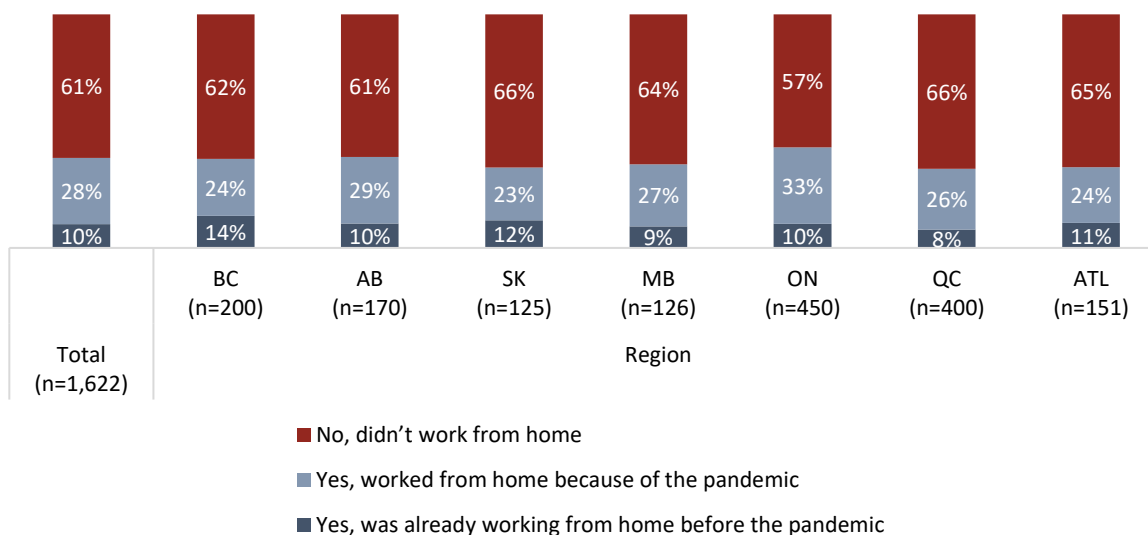
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began even before most of the remaining COVID-19 restrictions were lifted across the country a year ago.

Three-in-ten (28%) Canadians say they worked at home at some point in the last three years because of the pandemic. A further one-in-ten (10%) were already working at home before COVID-19 changed the labour landscape. Three-in-five (61%) Canadians have no experience working from home. Examining only those Canadians who are currently employed, two-in-five (39%) say they worked at home at some point over the last three years due to the pandemic ([see detailed tables](#)).

There is some regional variation on this experience. Those in Ontario (33%) are most likely to report working at home at some point because of the pandemic in recent years. Those in Atlantic Canada (24%) and B.C. (24%) are the least likely to say COVID-19 moved them from the worksite to their home office. However, residents in B.C. are more likely (14%) than those living in other provinces to say they were already working from home prior to COVID-19's arrival:

At any point over the past three years did you work from home?

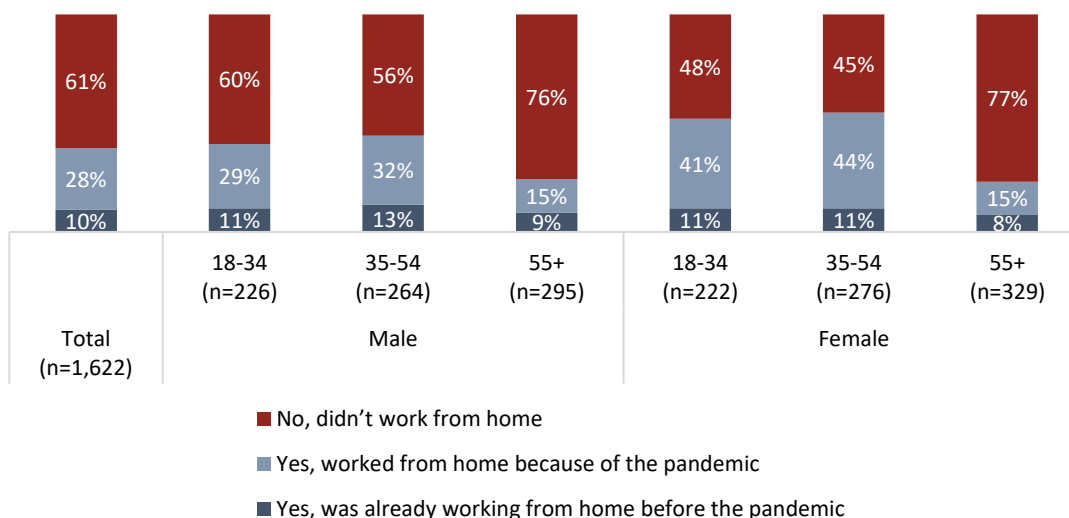


Women are more likely than men to say they worked from home because of the pandemic. Perhaps this is due to differences in education – women on average are more likely to have achieved a higher level of education than men, and this is especially true for younger women compared to men the same age. Half (53%) of Canadians who have at least graduated from university say they worked at home at some point because of the pandemic. One-in-eight (14%) who stopped their education at high school say the same ([see detailed tables](#)).

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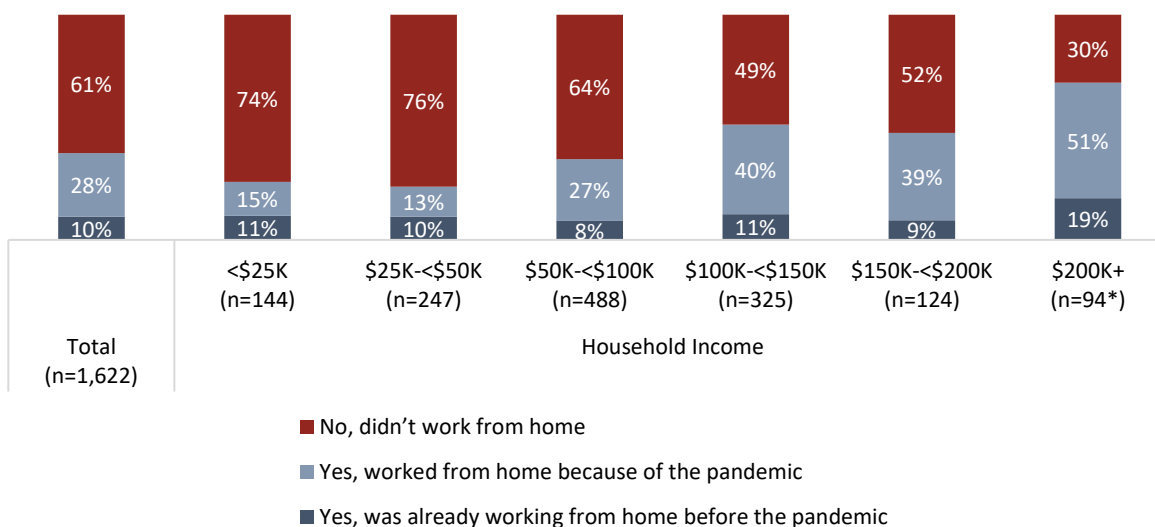
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At any point over the past three years did you work from home?



There does seem to be a correlation between income and whether or not a respondent worked from home at some point in recent years because of the pandemic. Working from home is not an option for jobs in many industries. As one example, retail and restaurant workers, major employment sectors whose workers are some of [the lowest compensated by industry](#) in Canada, must be on site to do their job.

At any point over the past three years did you work from home?



**Smaller sample size, interpret with caution*

Who is still working from home?

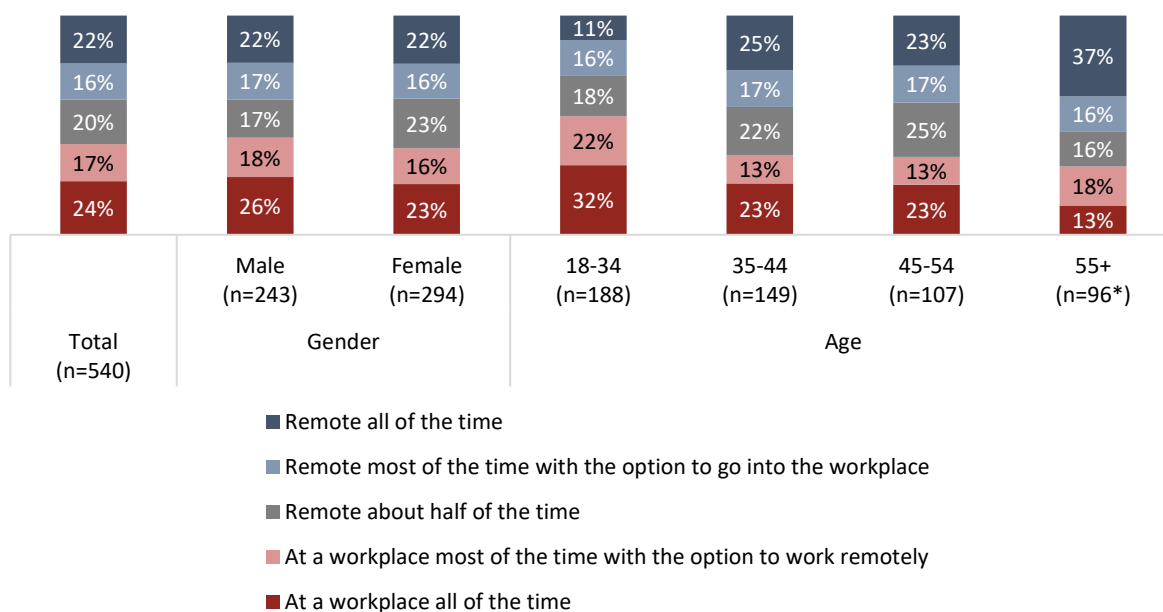
For Canadians currently employed, nearly all (76%) who worked at home in recent years are still working at home some of the time. However, a majority (62%) are at the office half or most of the time. The rest (38%) say they work more from home than in the office, or never do work outside of the home.

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Older Canadians are more likely than younger ones to report spending more time working from home than the office:

And what about now are you...
(Among the currently employed who worked from home at some point in the last few years)



**Smaller sample size, interpret with caution*

Experiences at home vs. the office

As working from home has persisted past the early portions of the pandemic, there has been criticism of its potential effect on company culture. The CEO of JPMorgan Chase & Co. Jamie Dimon [decried the loss](#) of spontaneity when employees work from home, while [other companies](#) have blamed empty offices for a lack of employee collaboration. RBC, too, in its call back to the office, fretted [that a lack of in-person collaboration could put its long-term competitiveness at risk](#).

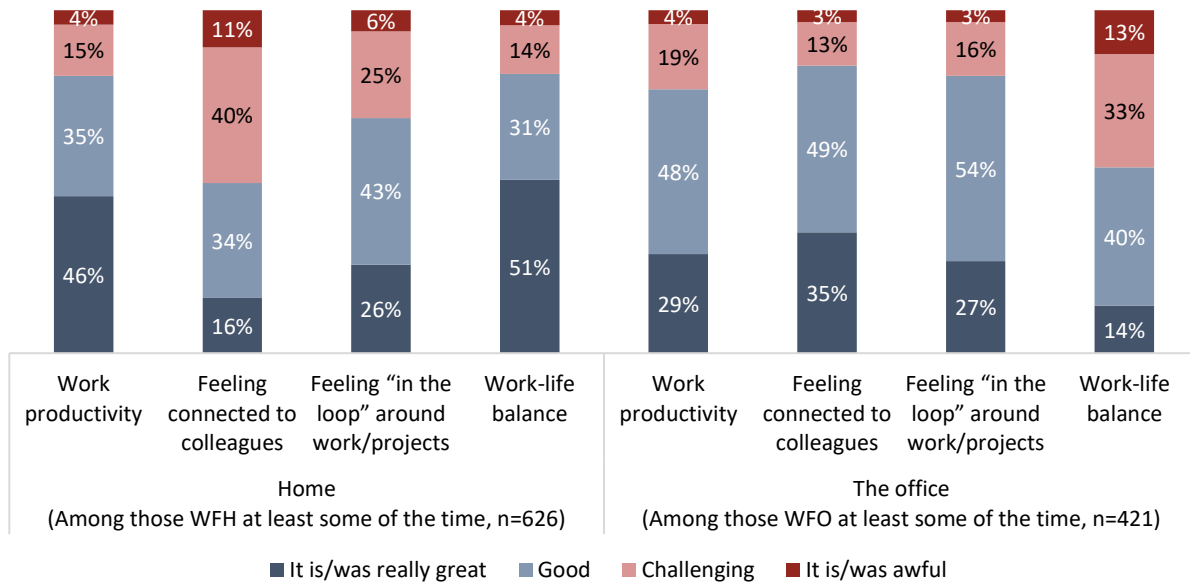
Still, many acknowledge the potential benefits for employees' work-life balance with the [increased flexibility of working from home](#). For some, however, that flexibility may be a blessing and a curse. Dimon said working from home can "[help women](#)" due to their [disproportionate burden of caregiving and home chores](#).

Canadians were asked to assess several factors of their experiences either working from home or the office, where applicable. Those who work from home at least some of the time offered lower appraisals on connectivity to their fellow employees and work projects when they're working from home than regular office workers say of their time in the office. However, those who work from home offer higher assessments of their home productivity and work-life balance than office workers say of their time on the worksite:

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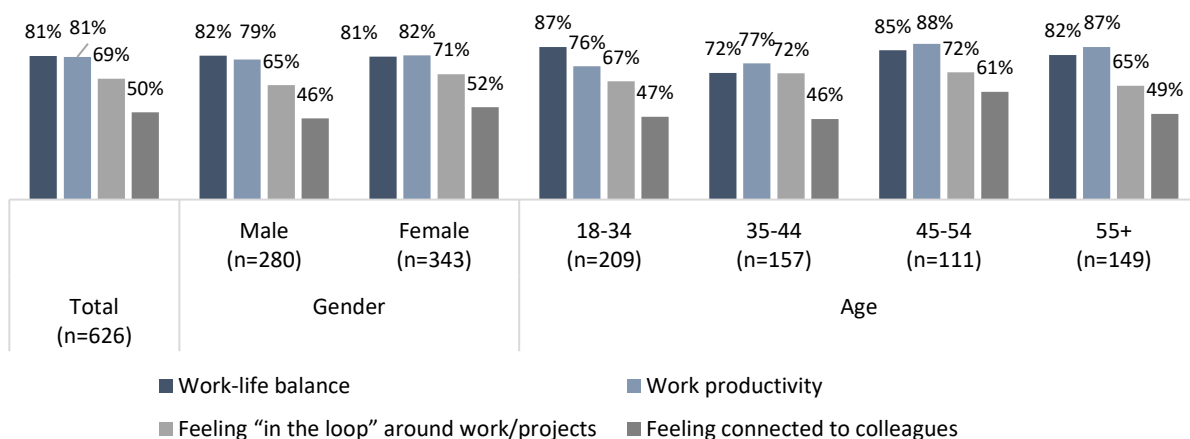
And, thinking about the following factors, how would you describe the experience of working from...



Among those working from home, women are more likely to report they felt connected to their colleagues and "in the loop" with their projects than men. Men and women, however, offer similar assessments of their work-life balance and work productivity.

Canadians aged 35 to 44, who are more likely to have children at home, offer the lowest assessment of their work-life balance. Meanwhile, Canadians over the age of 45 offer higher assessments of their own productivity than those younger than that:

**And, thinking about the following factors, how would you describe the experience of working from home?
(Percentage who describe it as 'good' or 'great' shown)**

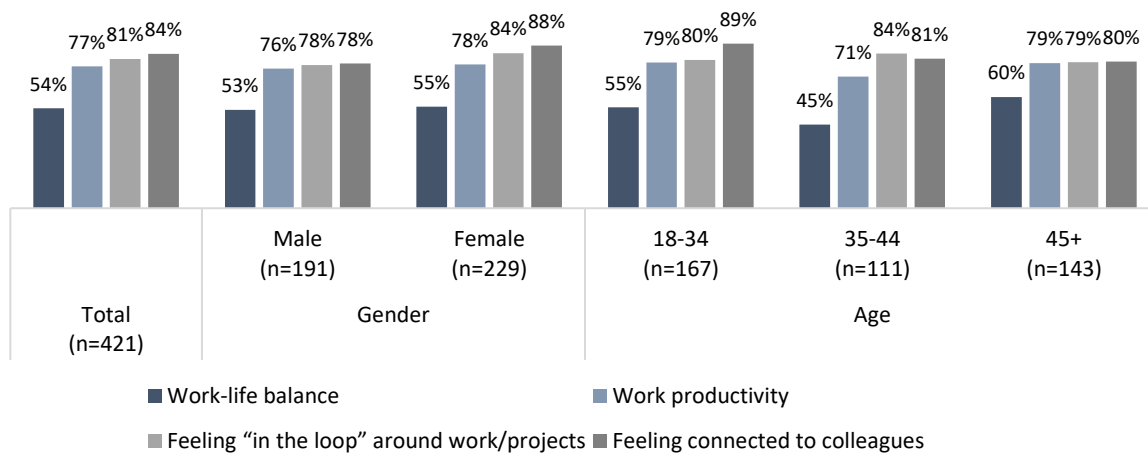


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A similar picture emerges when it comes to working out of the office. Canadians aged 35- to 44-years-old offer a lower assessment of their work-life balance than Canadians older and younger than that. As well, women are more likely than men to report being more connected to their colleagues and projects:

And, thinking about the following factors, how would you describe the experience of working out of your office space?



For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For detailed results by employment and work from home status, [click here](#).

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