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## Article

# Togetherness and (work)Place: Insights from Workers and Managers during Australian COVID-Induced Lockdowns

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**Abstract:** (1) Background: Pandemic-imposed lockdowns have heightened our awareness of the value of (work)place and made apparent the role it plays in establishing our sense of belonging and professional identity. The opportunity to work remotely during the pandemic has given us an appreciation of the benefits from access to increased flexibility, but there is consistent evidence emerging showing how much workers miss in-office social and learning interactions. This paper focuses on results about (i) reported perceived effectiveness and performance, (ii) sense of adjustment to remote working, and (iii) sense of belonging during the first two COVID-19-induced lockdowns, as reported by managers and workers in Australia in 2020. Findings shed light onto (i) how remote working experience affected our connection to, and the importance of, (work)place and (ii) how to harness insights towards creating spaces responsive to the activities we prefer to undertake in the workplace, permitting employees to choose the workstyle and pattern that suits their professional role and personal circumstances. (2) Methods: Correlational and thematic analyses were conducted on findings from 1579 online surveys focusing on remote working experiences during the first and second rounds of COVID-19-imposed lockdowns. A total of 668 managers and 911 workers from 12 different industry sectors participated in two rounds of the Bates Smart remote work survey (BSRWS). Surveys targeted knowledge workers of all career stages, age, and experience. (3) Results: Employees felt (i) technologically supported and productive whilst working from home, but (ii) aspects of connection, collaboration, and sense of belonging suffered; (iii) collaboration and togetherness are main motivators for returning to the office. Managers' experiences were significantly different with (i) perceived productivity, collaboration, knowledge sharing, sense of belonging, and performance dropping; (ii) face-to-face interaction and business development were key priorities for returning to the office with (iii) challenges of mentoring and managing emotional wellbeing of teams evident. (4) Conclusions: From these surveys we conclude space is an enabler of organisational culture and professional identity, playing a critical role in establishing psychologically safe and equitable workplaces. This paper reports snapshot data showing knowledge workers' experiences and effects of WFH under strict lockdown circumstances on wellbeing, productivity, and culture over time. It proposes two lenses (togetherness and place), through which the future workplace should be considered by industry and researchers alike.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; workplace; working from home (WFH); place attachment; open-plan office; corporate real estate



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. COVID-19 Lockdowns in Australia

In response to COVID-19, the Australian government mandated strict lockdowns across the country from March 2020, which forced all non-essential workers to work from home, and closed schools, day-cares, and all non-essential services [1]. A plan to ease Australia out of lockdown was released in May 2020 along with stringent guidelines for

physical distancing requirements for a safe return to the workplace [2]. During this time, an outbreak linked to a state-run quarantine hotel in Melbourne triggered a second wave of lockdown for the state of Victoria on 8 July. Metropolitan Melbourne was placed under heavily policed Stage 4 restrictions from 2 August [3]. Stage 4 restrictions mandated a curfew (8 p.m.–5 a.m.), during which people could only leave their homes for work (essential workers only), medical care, and caregiving. Exercise was limited to a maximum group size of two people for one hour per day, within a five-kilometre radius of home. Shopping for essential items was limited to one person per household per day. Supermarkets, grocery stores, petrol stations, banks, and post offices were the only businesses allowed to remain open, with all other office work, retail, manufacturing, administration, education, and training closed. University studies had to be conducted remotely. Day care centres closed, and all schooling was to be conducted at home with exceptions only for essential workers and vulnerable children without safe home learning environments [4]. Initially mandated for six weeks, the second Victorian lockdown lasted for a total of 112 days (16 weeks) to 26 October 2020 [5] (Australians also faced shorter subsequent lockdowns in Victoria (total of four; 109 days), NSW (total of two; 136 days), and 14 snap lockdowns elsewhere across the country in 2021 [6]. Australian state governments finally lifted the recommendation for people to work from home in September 2022 in alignment with public health recommendations, prompting a push for employees to return to the office. From 14 October, it is also not mandatory to isolate if workers test positive to COVID-19). During this time, despite the relaxation of restrictions elsewhere in the country, there was significant hesitance of the workforce to return to offices with the reported occupancy around 35% in NSW and 7% in VIC [7].

This study considers experiences during COVID-19 lockdowns in Australia, using data collected from the first two lockdowns in 2020, and illustrates several factors that have shifted during the working from home (WFH) experiment. By focusing on 1579 questionnaires collected as part of the Bates Smart remote work survey (BSRWS) with managers and workers from different industry sectors (Design, Construction, and Property industries, Consulting and Professional Services, Legal, Hospitality and Retail, Health, Technology, Banking, Education, and Media), the study investigates (i) reported perceived effectiveness and performance, (ii) sense of adjustment to remote working, and (iii) sense of belonging. The role of (work)place is discussed, along with key learnings from managers and workers, and the experiences they had that lead to possible opportunities for “hybrid” ways of working post-2020. The study sample represents office-based employees where flexibility in occasional remote work arrangements was possible before the pandemic, but not the norm. Through this sample and timeframe of the surveys, our research captures important data from a moment in time where the country’s knowledge workforce able to work remotely had to work from home as a result of 2020 COVID-19-induced lockdowns.

The literature on the experiences, impacts, and learnings from enforced WFH during lockdowns is still emerging, with the majority reporting from Europe [8–11], Asia [12–14], and the Middle East [15]. This paper is one of few that tracks the early experiences of workers and managers during the forced WFH period in Australia, in unique localised lockdown and environmental conditions. This paper fills an important gap by capturing data on the Australian experience, from managers’ and workers’ perspectives, of a population-level experiment during two critical lockdowns at national and state levels.

## 1.2. Literature Review

### 1.2.1. Place

Humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan suggests physical settings lead to an understanding of ourselves, claiming that “space” evolves into “place” as we come to know it better and endow it with value. Environmental psychologists take a different approach, having developed the notion of ‘place identity’ as a dimension of the self that relates to patterns of belief, preferences, feelings, values, and goals, and, at its core, is a sense of belonging [16,17]. Other authors have also described emotional connections in the context of different people,

social relationships, and places [18] and have developed theories on how place becomes significant by a collective or group being [19]. This knowledge makes clear the strong and symbiotic relationship that exists between place identity and place attachment and the identity and emotions of the self (people) within environments [20].

We look to the (work)place as both a geographical construct/location of work and an intangible psychological construct pertaining to social aspects, community, and an enabler of organisational culture. Our attachment to environments includes both spatial and social elements [21]. Within the descriptions of place identity and place attachment, we find the foundations for why the pandemic led to feelings of disconnection. The concept of place identity has a long history that is generally associated with urban contexts, but, since it implicates the self, identity has consequences for cognition, affect, and behaviour [20]. Identities affect information processing, and they are responsible for motivational biases, suggesting we have more positive views of entities that we share and with which we identify [22]. Due to its connection to the self, we draw an alignment between place identity and belonging. Being unable to access places that define our social identity, we are left feeling disconnected from our sense of self, and being detached from the workplace poses additional challenges related to professional identity [23]. The notion of place attachment is somewhat different and generally agreed to be the emotional bonds to places of varying scales that are tangible, as well as symbolic, and that change over time [24].

By severing the link we have to the workplace, the pandemic has made spontaneous connection with colleagues a lot harder and sometimes impossible. Few could have imagined a successful detachment from the places they work prior to the pandemic, citing the need for physical proximity to support teamwork, mistrust, or lack of adequate technology, and leadership preferences as barriers. Several studies support this [23,25–27]. Detachment from place not only impacts our sense of belonging, it also represents a risk of disruption to the person–environment fit that is well established as a core to employee performance and satisfaction [28–30].

### 1.2.2. Effectiveness and Performance

The uniqueness of the COVID-19 induced “work-from-home experiment” is that it forced employees in work with the ability to be remote to WFH at a scale never seen before around the globe. In Australia, this represented 64% of the working population [31]. Adjustment to WFH was surprisingly quick and seamless for workers [32,33]. While organisations’ main concerns pertained to productivity losses, maintaining culture, and workplace health and safety [34], consistent evidence shows that productivity levels remained the same or increased as a result of WFH and ensuing remote working [27,35–37].

Key benefits of WFH during forced lockdowns for employees were increased work–life balance, improved work efficiency, and greater work control [8,11] supporting existing teleworking, home, and remote working research prior to the pandemic [38,39]. Key challenges faced by employees were also globally related to social interactions, communication and knowledge sharing, internet connectivity and infrastructure, virtual fatigue, increased workload [9,40], isolation/ mental health, work–life separation [41], and balancing childcare and home schooling with work [32,34,42]; however, neither care or schooling responsibilities have been found to have impact on long-term preferences for working from home post-pandemic [43]. Millennials have been hardest hit, representing the largest proportion of the workforce, most being at the peak of their careers in senior roles and most likely to have children at home. Managerial pressures of their roles have been recently exacerbated by the Great Resignation with 83% globally having to take on more tasks due to their co-workers resigning [44]. Gen Z has been impacted financially and in career advancement opportunities by COVID-19 restrictions [45,46].

### 1.2.3. Adjustment in Ways of Working, Changing Expectations

Australian organisations have been early adopters of new ways of working, with the majority of corporate offices being open-plan at minimum and activity-based working

(ABW) being adopted at a fast pace. Pre-pandemic, only 24% of Australian employees worked from home at least once a week; this increased to 41% in February 2021 [47]. Organisational responses and support through lockdown-induced WFH have played a critical role in perceived satisfaction with work–life balance, influencing both performance and wellbeing [42]. Management strategies for mitigating the known challenges of remote working include abilities to listen, create and show trust and give authority to employees [9,48]. Recommendations from the OECD also note that trust-based working time arrangements, flexible working arrangements, and output-based performance assessment are known to have significant positive correlations with teleworking from home and organisational productivity [49].

Yet, a global disparity has emerged between a worker’s expectations of flexibility in remote working arrangements and their manager’s [50,51]. Australian studies show that 40% of workers want to work from home more than their employer permits [52]. A study of 1421 Australian knowledge workers in March 2022 shows that employees with the greatest flexibility and control over where and when they worked in a hybrid working arrangement were the happiest. They also reported improvements in their work–life balance compared to 2020 [53].

#### 1.2.4. Belonging

Australian workers and organisations reported technology, human connection, and flexibility of choosing where to work as the top enablers of productivity in 2020 [34]; in 2022 this remains, with ever-increasing importance placed on flexibility, choice, and connection [54]. Findings show that workers’ motivation in remote working is intrinsically linked to belongingness, [48] needs fulfilment, and a sense of fully supported autonomy over when and how they work [12,43].

With technology-mediated communications advancing [55,56], the value of the office for face-to-face interaction and spatial proximity permeates current industry and academic discussions [37,57,58]. Colocation and spatial proximity enable aspects of face-to-face interaction and spontaneity not replicable by technology [59], which highlight differences and benefits of in-person collaboration, knowledge sharing, and creative work [51]. Access to social support through connectedness and professional networks is also critical to increased employee engagement and wellbeing [9,60,61].

Whilst work–life conflict negatively impacts long-term preferences for WFH post-pandemic, needs fulfilment whilst WFH during the pandemic has been shown to be positively correlated regardless of dependents or partners at home [43]. Inequalities of experiences of female and male employees during the COVID-19-induced lockdown periods across many industry sectors is well documented [8,62–64] and continues to be a factor in women’s preferences post-2020 [43].

In this study, the notion of togetherness is tantamount to a sameness or belonging. Belonging is argued to be more important in social settings such as the workplace [65] and comprises three aspects—companionship, affiliation, and connectedness [66]. A fundamental feature of belonging is a person’s feeling of being valued, needed, important to other people, groups, objects, organisations, and environments, or spiritual dimensions. To belong, a person’s experiences should fit with others in the group, through shared or complementary characteristics [67]. COVID-19-related restrictions exacerbated feelings of isolation and loneliness previously understood to be problematic for homeworkers [68]. Being cut off from the places that connect us has severed at least one of the following critical components of human well-being, namely psychological, physical, or social [69]. One could argue the impact of COVID-19 was more profound than for typically defined teleworkers [70] because employees did not choose to work from home. Mental health was the leading cause of struggle for workers during the lockdown period [51,71]. Given we spend most of our waking hours at work, it plays a significant part in our life and affects our overall impressions of life. We want to belong to workgroups and have relationships in those environments; this is important to us [58,60,65].

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Surveys

Findings from surveys completed by 1579 knowledge workers across two rounds of the Bates Smart remote work survey (BSRWS) conducted in March–April (Round 1) and September–October (Round 2) 2020 are reported in the paper. The BSRWS is an ongoing study led by Bates Smart in Australia. Details about each round of the survey are highlighted below and in Appendix A. The online survey questionnaire consists of a total of 32 questions, multiple choice and free text, focussing on the challenges, benefits, and expectations (or learnings) from the WFH experience that will be taken forward into work scenarios post-2020. The survey takes 15 min to be completed. Types of questions include:

- Comparative experience ratings on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree–strongly disagree) of experiences between working in the office and WFH with regards to collaboration, autonomy, team management, productivity, motivation, working hours, meetings, and sense of belonging.
- Branching structure questions were included in Round 2 to drill deeper into perceived impacts of:
  - Managers: respondents self-reporting as managers were asked about their perceptions on impacts of extended WFH on their teams, specifically regarding (i) Productivity—ability of staff to work as effectively at home as in the office, (ii) Performance—quality of work of staff, (iii) Culture/Connection—connection between colleagues and their sense of belonging to the organisation, (iv) Wellbeing—staff mental health and positive mindset.
  - Adjustment: respondents who self-reported having returned to the office in some capacity after the first nationwide lockdowns (March–May 2020) were asked about their (i) top 3 barriers experienced to working effectively following their return and (ii) description of their workspace in the office prior to COVID-19/on return to work.
- Multiple choice questions focusing on the challenges, benefits, and preferences for remote work moving forward.
- A free text question about what participants have missed most about the office.
- Background demographic questions included age, gender, location, role, employment type (full-time/part-time/self-employed/casual/contractor), industry sector, living situation (dependents/no dependents/partner/alone), and prior remote working experience.

Participants were contacted to take part in the survey through the Bates Smart database and social media advertisements. Collected data have been shared with the researchers and ethics approval for reporting provided by the University of New South Wales (Ethics number HC200738).

### 2.2. Participants

BSRWS Round 1: 1017 questionnaires were collected with participants predominantly from the design, construction, and property industries (67%). Other sectors represented were legal (7%), hospitality and retail (4%), health (3%), technology (3%), banking (3%), education (2%), media (2%), and other (9%). There was an equal mix of gender (49.5% male, 50% female, 0.5% other) and generations, with the majority Gen Y (48%, 20–39 years), followed by Gen X (46%, 40–59 years), and baby boomers (6%, 60–79 years). Participants were predominantly located in Australia with 54% in Victoria, 33% NSW, and 9% in other states. Results from overseas participants (3%) have been excluded from this paper.

BSRWS Round 2: 562 questionnaires were collected with participants similarly dominating the design, construction, and property industries (66%). Other sectors represented were consulting or professional services (8%), media and advertising (4%), banking (4%), education (3%), legal (3%), technology (2%), and other (8%). An equal mix of gender (49% male, 50% female, 1% other) and generations were represented—Gen Y (39%,

20–39 years); Gen X (53%, 40–59 years); and baby boomers (8%, 60–79 years). Location, again, was predominantly from Australia (56% Victoria, 35% NSW, 6% other states) and 4% overseas (excluded).

For the purpose of this paper, we consider all participants as ‘employees’ of an organization. The distinction of ‘Manager’ is applied to those with explicit management responsibilities as part of their role, and ‘Workers’ are those without explicit management responsibilities. Managers and Workers were differentiated in the sample based on their self-reported role (Table 1). There was a total of 668 Managers (Round 1 41%,  $n = 412$ ; Round 2 46%,  $n = 256$ ) and 911 Workers (Round 1 59%,  $n = 605$ , Round 2 54%,  $n = 306$ ) in the sample.

**Table 1.** Managers and Workers—Breakdown of sample by self-reported role type.

Role	Manager	Worker
Facilities/Property Management	✓	
Senior Management	✓	
Management	✓	
Professional (<3 years experience)		✓
Professional (3–10 years experience)		✓
Senior Professional (10+ years experience)		✓
Sole Trader/Individual Worker		✓

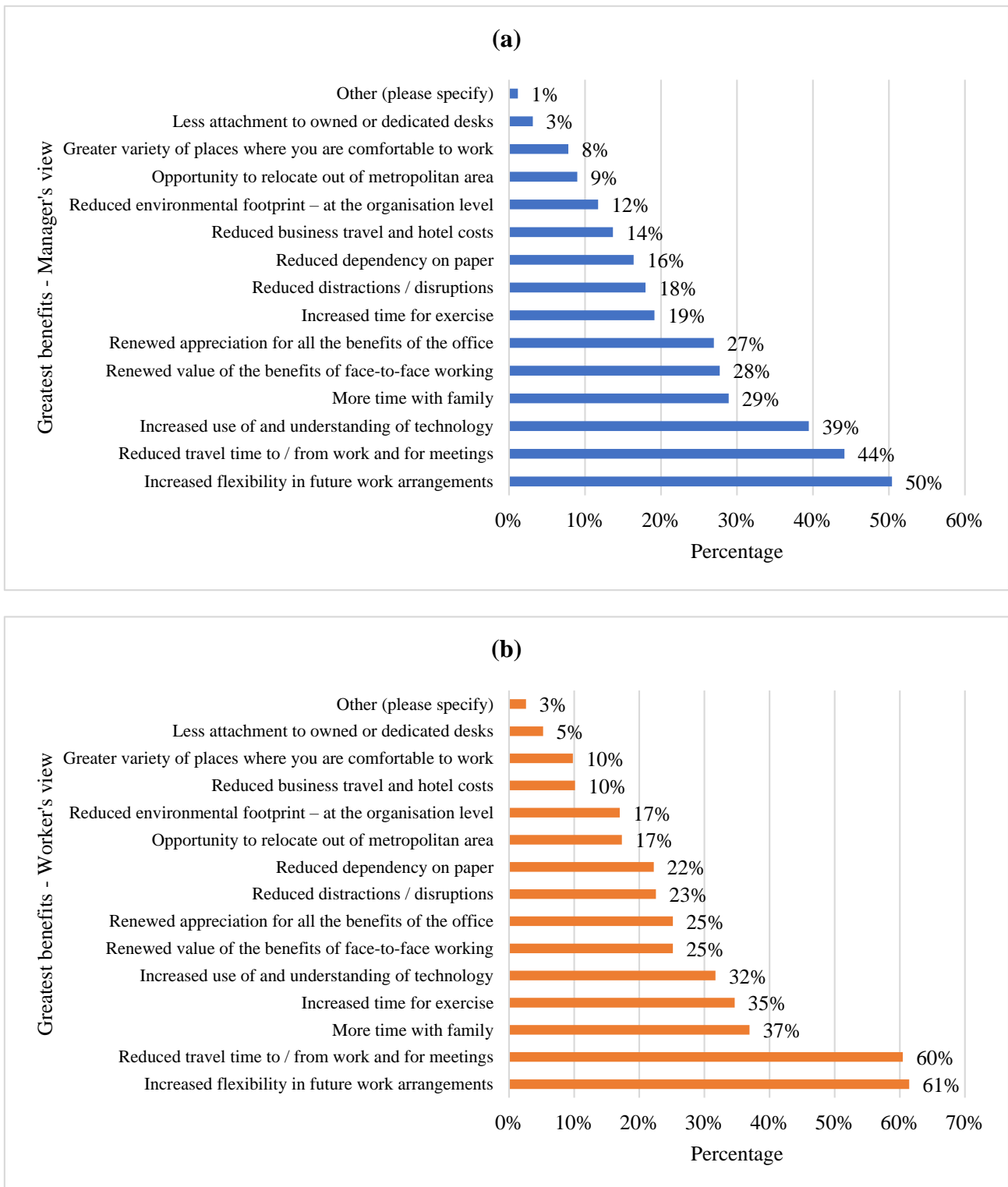
### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Perceived Effectiveness and Performance

As seen in Figure 1, the WFH experience created a shared awareness of the benefits of remote working, though these were more pronounced for Workers (1b) compared to Managers (1a). Opportunities for flexibility (in time and/or location) in working arrangements (50% Managers, 61% Workers) and the value of time (44% Managers, 60% Workers) were recognised as the top two benefits by both groups. However, important nuances are seen in subsequent priorities with Managers’ third-most appreciated benefit being the role technology plays in enabling these benefits to continue in the future (39%), whereas Workers seemed more focussed on the increased family time (37%) and personal health benefits (35%) as a result of WFH. A total of 28% of Managers and 25% of Workers felt the time away had renewed their appreciation of face-to-face working and benefits that the workplace offered (27% Managers, 25% Workers), whilst also acknowledging benefits of control over distractions when WFH (18% Managers, 23% Workers). A total of 10% of Workers and 8% of Managers saw an increase in the variety of places they felt comfortable working, and a small portion (5% Workers, 3% Managers) felt their attachment to desk ownership had reduced. Potential for environmental and lifestyle benefits were noted with WFH prompting reduced dependency on paper (16% Managers, 22% Workers), ability to reduce environmental footprint at organisational levels (12% Managers, 17% Workers), opportunities to relocate out of cities (9% Managers, 17% Workers), and reduced business travel (14% Managers, 10% Workers).

Figure 2 illustrates the shift in Managers’ and Workers’ perceptions over time. Round 1 (April–May 2020), coinciding with the first nation-wide lockdown, reflects higher initial enthusiasm for possibilities of spatiotemporal variety in future ways of working and environmental benefits. A significant reduction is seen in Round 2 (September–October 2020) as some states were experimenting with safe returns to the office and snap lockdowns, whilst Victoria endured its second brutal lockdown. These findings may likely reflect the adjustments to WFH happening over time, whereby workers’ sudden disconnection from the workplace through Round 1 raised renewed appreciation of the benefits of face-to-face working (52% Managers, 43% Workers), which settled somewhat as industry and popular discourse confirmed this as a key new purpose to offices post-pandemic [37,51,61]. Similarly, the complexities, practicalities, and limitations in organisational readiness for

teleworking emerged [27,34,72], bumping technology, flexibility, and operational concerns to the fore.



**Figure 1.** BSRWS Round 2—Perceptions on the greatest benefits to emerge from the WFH period during lockdowns from (a) Managers’ and (b) Workers’ perspectives.





**Figure 2.** BSRWS Round 1 and 2 comparison shift in perceptions of greatest benefits to emerge from the WFH period during lockdowns from (a) Managers' and (b) Workers' perspectives.

Results from Figure 3 indicate that perceived individual productivity remained consistently high despite the rapid shift to WFH and sustained timeframe of the first two Australian lockdowns. From Workers’ perspectives (Figure 3b), 71% of participants agreed they can work productively in their roles compared to working in the office prior to WFH; this increased to 80% in Round 2. From Managers’ perspectives (Figure 3a), agreement was initially high at 72%, but this dropped significantly to 55% for participants in Round 2. On average, across the two groups, 76% felt able to receive appropriate direction and feedback, and 86% felt adequately supported by technology and in administrative matters. Differences again emerged in Round 2 regarding agreement whether participants’ performance, defined as the quality of work, equalled performance in the office; only 50% of Managers agreed compared with 76% of Workers.

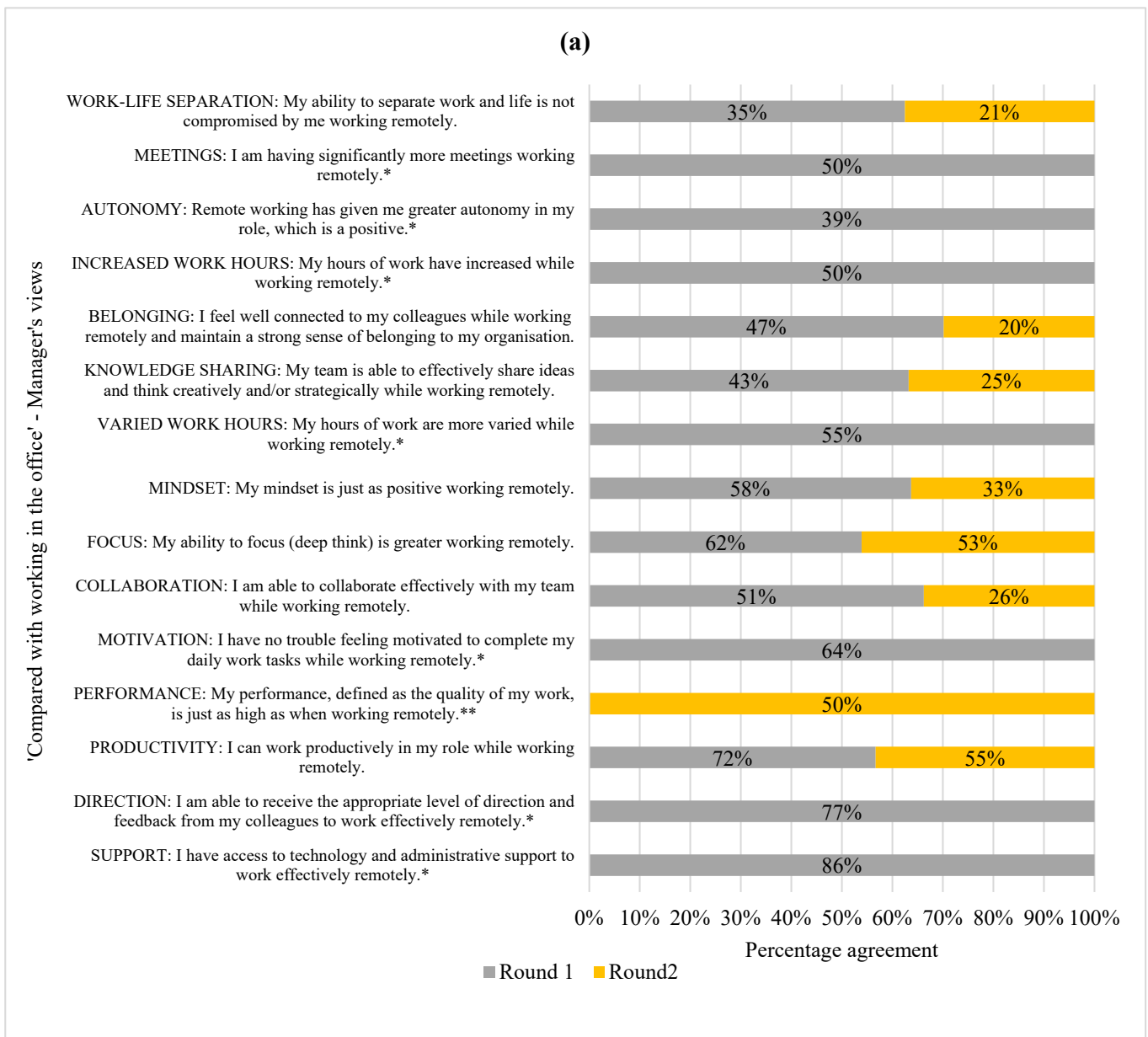
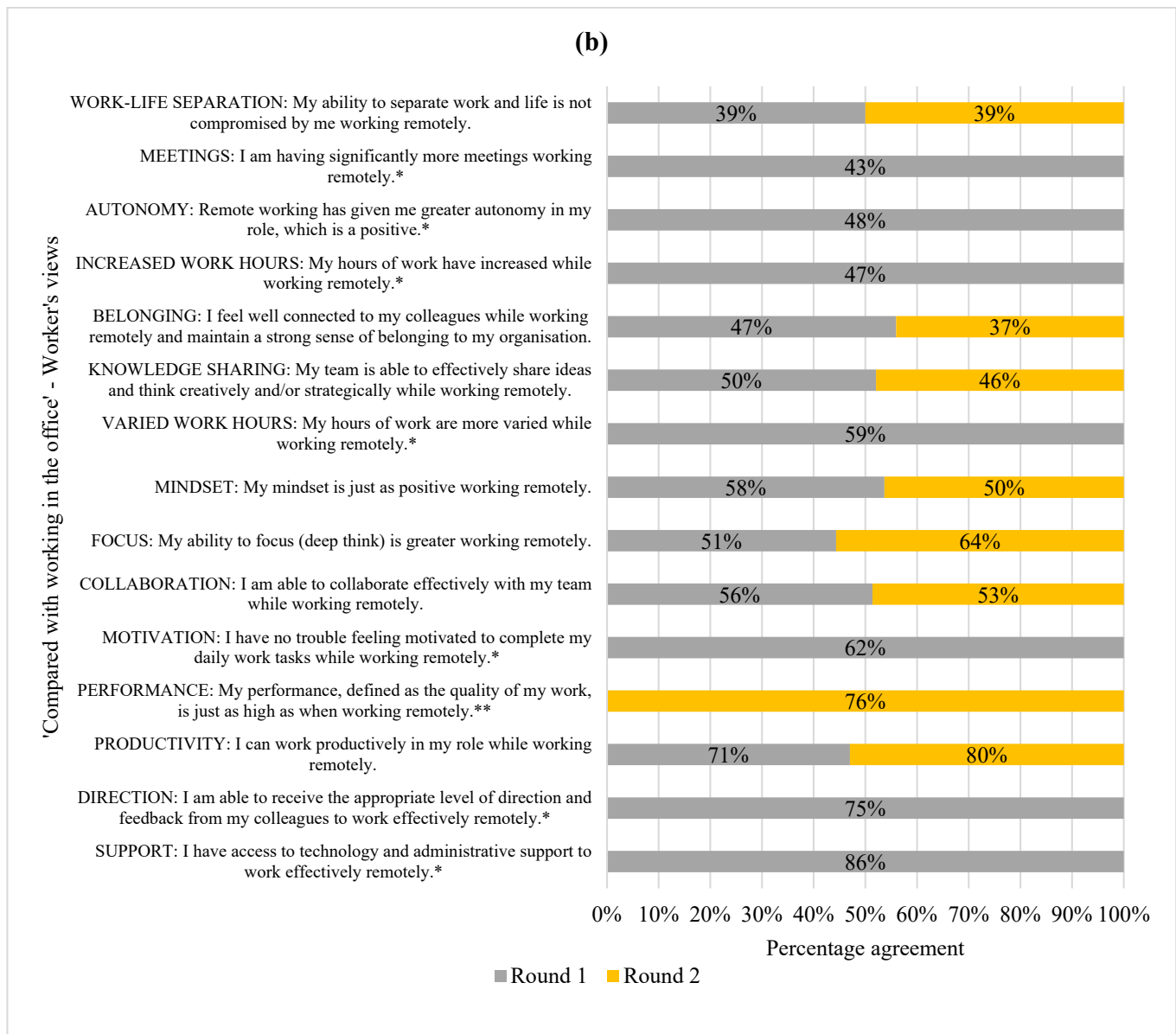


Figure 3. Cont.



**Figure 3.** BSRWS Round 1 and 2 comparison—WFH experiences from (a) Managers' and (b) Workers' perspectives. Percentages represent respondents that either agreed or strongly agreed. \* Indicates questions only asked in Round 1. \*\* Indicates questions only asked in Round 2.

Overall, employee sentiments show a consistent decline in aspects of work requiring interaction (Figure 3). A statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) is evident between the experiences of those in management roles compared to workers. Initially (Round 1), this occurred in relation to collaboration, knowledge sharing, and ability to focus, later expanding to include perceived productivity, sense of belonging, mindset, and ability to separate work and life in Round 2 (Table 2). Branching questions for participants who self-reported being in Manager roles revealed 68% of Managers felt their peoples' connection and sense of belonging was negatively impacted, or very negatively impacted, by WFH, and 67% saw a decline in their team's mental health and mindset.

**Table 2.** BSRWS Round 1 and 2—mean difference and *p*-values for comparative experience questions based on role as independent variables.

Question Compared with Working in the Office:	Round 1	Round 2	Round 1	Round 2	Round 1	Round 2	Round 1	Round 2	Managers	Non-Managers
I am able to collaborate effectively with my team while working remotely.	3.333	2.703	3.481	3.324	0.148	0.620 *	0.017 **	0.0000 **	0.0000 **	0.0254 **
My team is able to effectively share ideas and think creatively and/or strategically while working remotely.	3.223	2.711	3.405	3.258	0.182	0.547 *	0.002 **	0.0000 **	0.0000 **	0.0256 **
I can work productively in my role while working remotely.	3.854	3.523	3.858	4.059	0.003	0.535 *	0.954	0.0000 **	0.0000 **	0.0027 **
I feel well connected to my colleagues while working remotely and maintain a strong sense of belonging to my organisation.	3.231	2.555	3.284	2.974	0.054	0.419	0.416	0.0000 **	0.0000 **	0.0000 **
My mindset is just as positive working remotely.	3.532	3.023	3.554	3.392	0.022	0.369	0.732	0.0002 **	0.0000 **	0.0308 **
My ability to separate work and life is not compromised by me working remotely.	2.874	2.578	2.988	2.931	0.115	0.353	0.125	0.0004 **	0.0014 **	0.4920
My ability to focus (deep think) is greater working remotely.	3.733	3.535	3.567	3.807	-0.166	0.272	0.013 **	0.0037 **	0.0179 **	0.0016 **

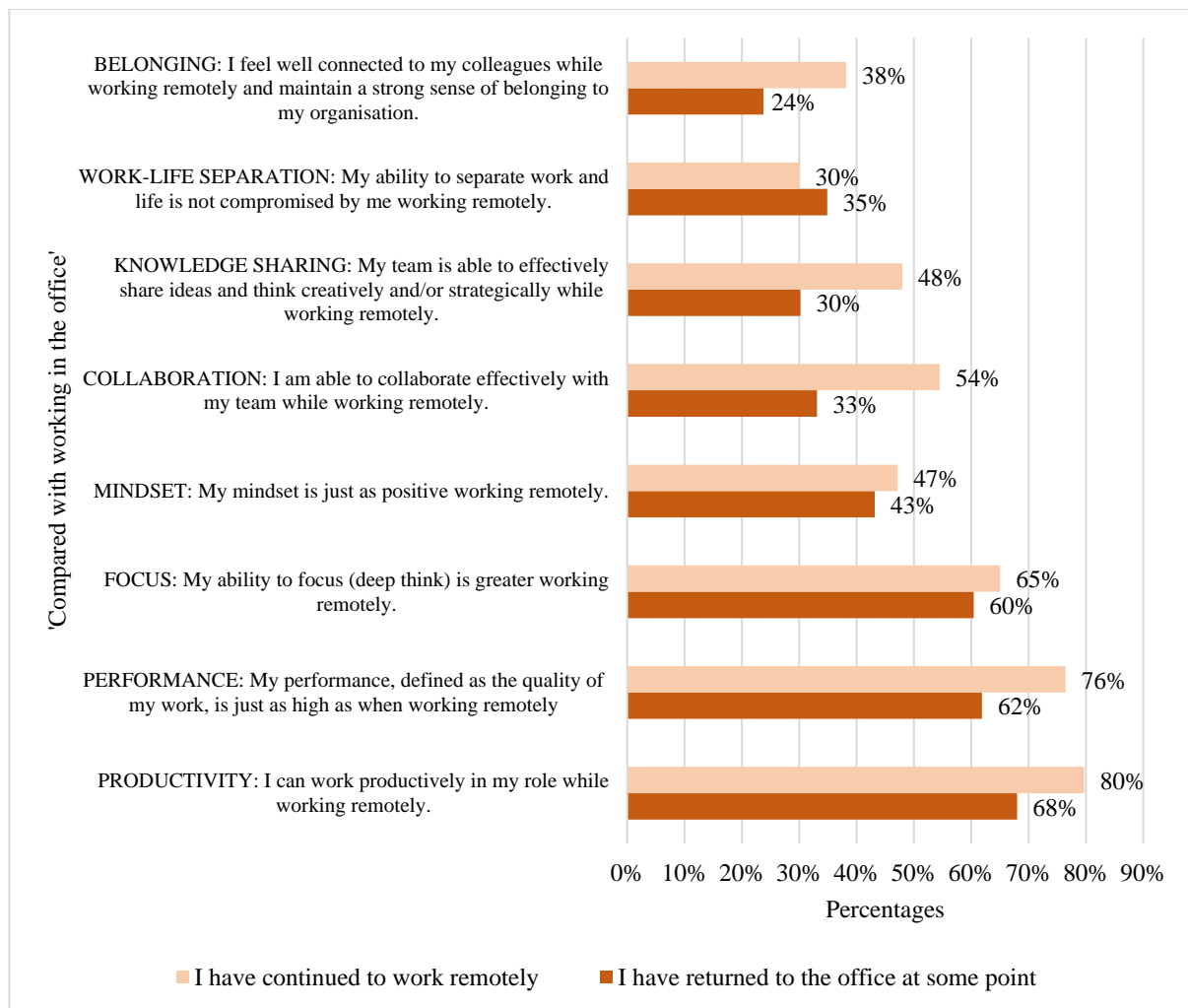
\* mean difference is >0.5; \*\* *p*-value is significant at <0.05; strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neutral = 3, disagree = 2 and strongly disagree = 1.

Appendix B shows a thematic breakdown of Manager's free-text responses to branched questions rating the overall impact of WFH on their teams' productivity, performance, connection, and wellbeing. Coding revealed a dominance of concerns and issues relating to the effects of isolation, disconnection, importance of strong organisational culture, and difficulties in mentorship of junior colleagues. Findings also emphasise how the disconnection illuminated for Managers (Appendix B) the deficiency of remote working and current technologies in effectively supporting tacit knowledge exchanges [73,74] and culture building through mentorship [37,51]. An Australian study [75] similarly reported a lack in workers' ability to participate in coaching/ mentoring activities during WFH and disparity between those in management roles compared to other employees.

### 3.2. Sense of Adjustment to Remote Working

Prior to the lockdown, most employees had limited experience with remote working, with 48% reporting occasional remote work (1 day per fortnight or less) in their roles and 35% always working from the office. Only 15% had access to regular remote work arrangements (1 day per fortnight or more) and 1% worked in roles requiring full-time remote work. Throughout the survey period, an almost equal split of participants continued to WFH the entire time (47%) or returned to the office in some capacity (53%) post-nationwide lockdowns (March–May 2020). Figure 4 illustrates participants' experiences of WFH compared to the office through these variables. Most notably, those continuing to work remotely felt more able to effectively collaborate (+21%) and share knowledge (+18%) than their colleagues returning to the office. Their sense of belonging (+14%), performance (+14%), and perceived productivity (+12%) were also higher. Marginal differences were seen in 'mindset' (−4%) and 'ability to focus' (−5%), but the only area where returning to the office had positive impact on experiences was 'ability to separate work and life'. Interestingly, survey results show employees want to return to the workplace for a certain amount of time to undertake specific tasks. The majority (49%) stated a preference to work in the office 1.5–3 days per week and to continue working remotely for the remainder of the week. This shifted from 60% stating a preference to return to the office 0.5–2 days per week in Round 1 of the survey.

Analysis of Round 1 survey results revealed statistically significant differences in participants' experiences across all comparative questions depending on their remote working experience prior to lockdown. Table 3(a) indicates perceptions of those with regular remote working experience are consistently higher than those with none, and *p*-values show significance is strongest in perceptions of productivity, collaboration, focus (*p*-values 0.0000), ability to receive direction and feedback (*p*-value 0.0001), knowledge sharing (*p*-value 0.0003), and mindset (*p*-value 0.0004). Collectively, these findings suggest remote working is a skill set individuals can and will learn or adapt to over time. The degree to which a particular role can be performed remotely, [33] as well as the technology available to support tasks, are critical factors [72]. Whilst this was not the focus of our survey, Round 1 asked participants to identify the top challenges of working from home—66% related to technology infrastructure or equipment, similar to findings of other global studies at this time [8,34]. Participants returning to the office following the initial lockdown were asked to identify top barriers they faced to working effectively in Round 2, and 50% attributed team co-location ("my team is split between working in the office and working from home") as the cause. Results also show significant differences (Table 3(b)) in participants' experiences of effectiveness in ability to collaborate, share ideas, and think creatively (*p*-values 0.0000), work productively in their role, and maintain a strong sense of connection and belonging (*p*-values 0.0001), depending on whether they returned to the office or remained WFH. These findings may suggest returning to the office highlighted inadequacies in technologies to bridge the divide between virtual and in-person work and the ability to work face-to-face with colleagues in the (work)place following the imposed period of WFH [9,59]; greater awareness of loneliness and disconnection is well documented in the literature [34,68,76,77].



**Figure 4.** BSRWS Round 2—Rating of WFH experiences showing differences across employees that continued to work remotely and those that had returned to the office at some stage. Percentages represent respondents that either agreed or strongly agreed.

### 3.3. Sense of Belonging

Strong positive correlations (co-efficient ( $r$ ) 0.5–1) were found between sense of belonging and knowledge sharing, collaboration, mindset, direction and feedback, and productivity. Similarly, there were medium positive correlations (co-efficient ( $r$ ) 0.3–0.49) between collaboration, knowledge sharing, and direction and feedback (Table 4), suggesting that productive interactions and social connections of a workplace are core to sustaining overall performance [9,13,59].

We draw on Hagerty et al.’s definition: ‘sense of belongingness is an experience of personal involvement in a system or environment, making people feel to be an integral part of that system or environment’ [65] (p. 451). An overall word frequency analysis of Managers’ (a) and Workers’ (b) free-text responses to “What do you miss most about the office?” (Round 1) is depicted in Figure 5. A total of 84% of all responses pertained to missing the social connection and the face-to-face interactions employees had in the office, highlighting the magnitude of disconnection lockdown-induced WFH caused.

**Table 3.** *p*-Values for comparative experience questions in Round 1 (a) and Round 2 (b) based on remote work exposure as independent variables.

(a)—BSRWS Round 1—Analysis of impact on perceptions of participants' remote working experience prior to lockdown on comparative questions						
Question Compared with working in the office:	Remote working experience prior to lockdown			Difference in mean		Significance
	No experience (mean)	Only occasionally (mean)	Yes, regularly (mean)	Regular–No prior experience	Regular–Occasional prior experience	<i>p</i> -value
I can work productively in my role while working remotely.	3.741	3.840	4.146	0.405 *	0.306	0.0000 **
I am able to collaborate effectively with my team while working remotely.	3.267	3.417	3.754	0.487 *	0.338	0.0000 **
My team is able to effectively share ideas and think creatively and/or strategically while working remotely.	3.212	3.341	3.556	0.344	0.215	0.0003 **
My ability to focus (deep think) is greater working remotely.	3.471	3.630	3.988	0.518 *	0.358	0.0000 **
Remote working has given me greater autonomy in my role, which is a positive.	3.396	3.413	3.678	0.283	0.266	0.0027 **
I am able to receive the appropriate level of direction and feedback from my colleagues to work effectively remotely.	3.822	3.908	4.158	0.336	0.250	0.0001 **
My mindset is just as positive working remotely.	3.426	3.544	3.795	0.369	0.251	0.0004 **
I have no trouble feeling motivated to complete my daily work tasks while working remotely.	3.518	3.575	3.825	0.306	0.250	0.0058 **
I feel well connected to my colleagues while working remotely and maintain a strong sense of belonging to my organisation.	3.117	3.324	3.392	0.275	0.067	0.0030 **
I have access to technology and administrative support to work effectively remotely.	4.056	4.146	4.269	0.213	0.123	0.0180 **
My ability to separate work and life is not compromised by me working remotely.	2.861	2.903	3.222	0.361	0.319	0.0023 **
(b)—BSRWS Round 2—Analysis of impact on perceptions of participants' who returned to the office after lockdown against those who continued WFH on comparative questions.						
Question Compared with working in the office:	Return to office post lockdown		Significance			
	No return (mean)	Yes, returned (mean)	Difference (Yes–No)	<i>p</i> -value (No–Yes, 2 tail)		
I am able to collaborate effectively with my team while working remotely.	3.297	2.813	0.484 *	0.0000 **		
My team is able to effectively share ideas and think creatively and/or strategically while working remotely.	3.215	2.820	0.395	0.0000 **		

Table 3. Cont.

I can work productively in my role while working remotely.	4.057	3.709	0.348	0.0001 **
I feel well connected to my colleagues while working remotely and maintain a strong sense of belonging to my organisation.	2.976	2.583	0.393	0.0001 **
My mindset is just as positive working remotely.	3.272	3.216	0.057	0.5912
My ability to separate work and life is not compromised by me working remotely.	2.728	2.799	−0.071	0.5092
My ability to focus (deep think) is greater working remotely.	3.805	3.662	0.143	0.1471

\* mean difference is >0.4; \*\* *p*-value is significant at <0.05; strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neutral = 3, disagree =2 and strongly disagree = 1.

(a)

(b)



Figure 5. BSRWS Round 1—Word clouds representing frequency of terms used in free-text responses from (a) Managers (n = 344) and (b) Workers (n = 508).

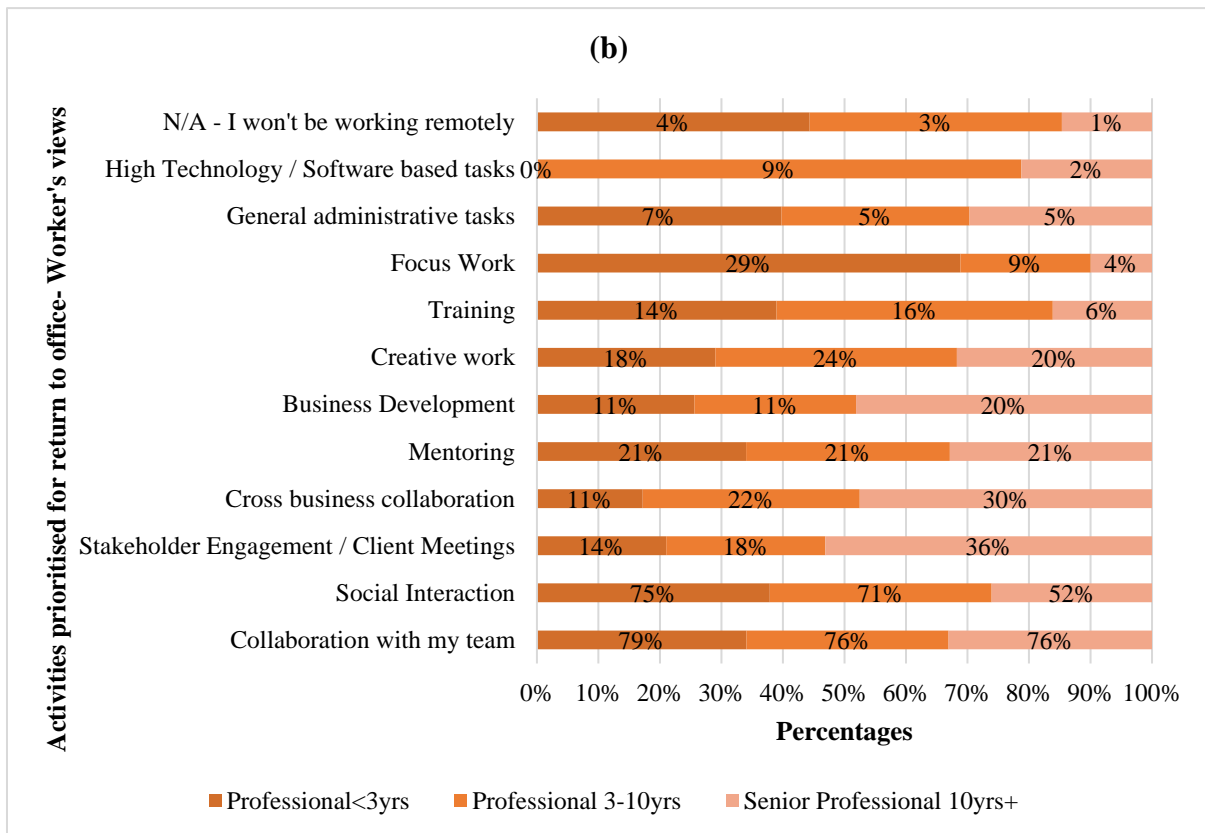
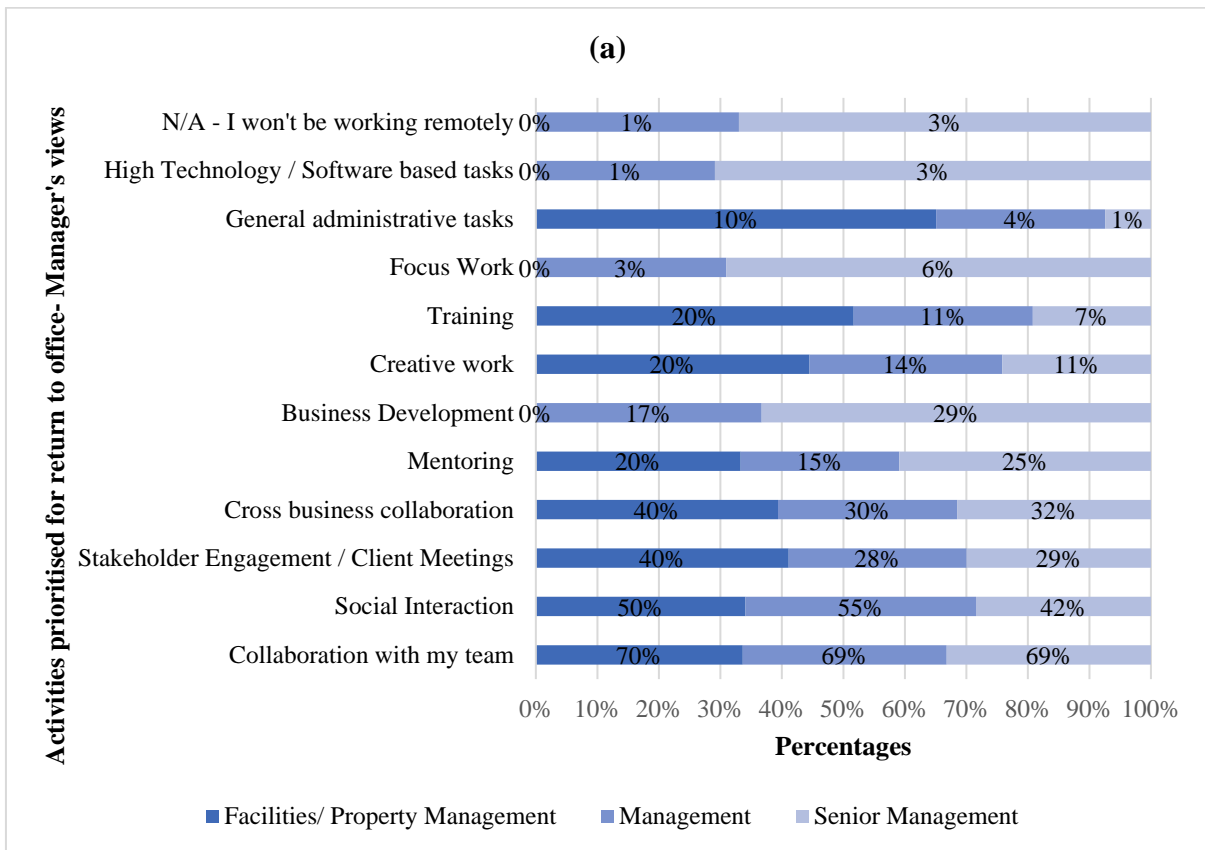
Given the sustained timeframe of COVID-19-enforced WFH, we would expect an increase in employees' appreciation for being together. Survey data consistently shows the number one priority for workers when they return to their workplaces (Figure 6) is to collaborate with their team (69% Managers, 73% Workers), followed by social interaction (46% Managers, 62% Workers). A breakdown of priorities by the self-reported role of participants in Round 2 shows notable differences in types of activities future workplace environments need to support for these sub-groups. While Workers overall placed mentoring (20%) and creativity (20%) above business development (16%), training (9%), or focus work (8%), younger professionals <3 years stated focus work (29%) as their third-top priority in the office (Figure 6b). Professionals with 3–10 years of experience in their industries placed creative work (24%) third, followed by cross-business (intra-organisational) collaboration (22%), mentoring (21%), and training (16%). They were also most likely to need the office for high technology/ software-based tasks (9%). Managers (Figure 6a) were more aligned with sub-groups, agreeing the office is most valuable for cross-business collaboration, client engagement, and mentorship activities. The emotive connections and functional support of the physical workplace are evident, clearly suggesting the impact the environment has on employees over the time they have worked in the office. Responses pertaining to the tangible physical environment of the workplace were coded and word clouds generated under sub-themes depicted in Figure 7. The word clouds show clear emphasis towards either functional/spatial or emotive/social elements of the environment.



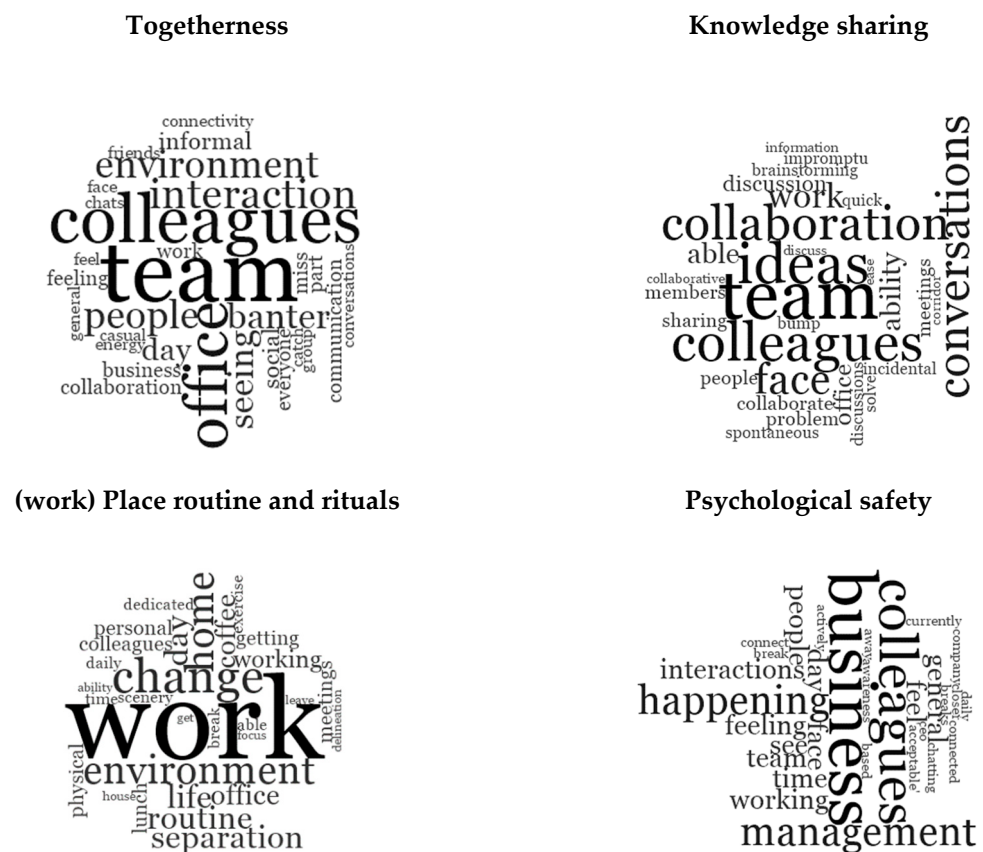
**Table 4.** BSRWS Round 1 and 2—Correlation matrix for all comparative experience questions.

Pearson Correlation Results Matrix—Coefficient (r):																				
Variable	Belonging		Mindset		Productivity		Focus		Collaboration		Knowledge Sharing		Autonomy		Motivation		Direction + Feedback		Technology + Administrative Support	
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2
Autonomy	0.330		0.443 **		0.472 **		0.436 **		0.421 **		0.353									
Motivation	0.358		0.560 *		0.450 **		0.363		0.358		0.309		0.340							
Direction + Feedback	0.450 **		0.376		0.461 **		0.401 **		0.560 *		0.470 **		0.390		0.335					
Technology + administrative support	0.286		0.262		0.343		0.229		0.351		0.302		0.284		0.218		0.501 *			
Separation of Work/Life	0.333	0.401 **	0.460 **	0.598 *	0.382	0.391	0.343	0.392	0.340	0.408 **	0.323	0.392	0.315	0.332		0.307		0.230		
Knowledge Sharing	0.540 *	0.641 *	0.349	0.533 *	0.389	0.536 *	0.373	0.330	0.643 *	0.764 *										
Collaboration	0.515 *	0.598 *	0.417 **	0.537 *	0.494 **	0.589 *	0.380	0.395												
Belonging							0.277	0.374												
Mindset	0.441 **	0.597 *					0.382	0.527 *												
Productivity	0.360	0.472 **	0.489 **	0.559 *			0.556 *	0.549 *												

\* Strong positive correlation at >0.5 level; \*\* Medium positive correlation at >0.4 level.



**Figure 6.** BSRWS Round 2- Breakdown of activities prioritised for return to the office based on role from (a) Managers' perspectives and (b) Workers' perspectives.



**Figure 7.** Word clouds based on 30 most frequent words under sub-themes of physical workplace.

Togetherness was expressed through yearning for interaction and companionship—“banter”, “chats”, “team”, “Seeing friends & colleagues on a daily basis in the office brings a feeling of belonging to work-life”—whereas responses coded under knowledge sharing show distinct emphasis toward productive connections and the spatial elements that enable “quick”, “impromptu”, and “incidental” problem solving and collaboration. Employees not only commented on the loss of delineation between work and life but more nuanced transitions, such as mindset shifts in “preparing for business”; efficiency of clear structure and “routine of working in the office”; incidental exercise embedded in “informal breaks and physical movement between meetings” or “variety of work environments”; and serendipitous connection rituals married to locations such as “morning coffee runs”, “going for walks/lunch with my colleagues”, or “the lunch choices”.

Using Robert Guttman’s (undated) properties as additional lenses, we consider ambient and symbolic properties. Ambient properties are features of the physical environment that support physiological and psychological functions [78]. Participants noted the sense of security and psychological safety that resulted from the ability to see and hear colleagues:

*“The understanding of what is happening within the business, just by being surrounded. Currently feel very detached from people and what issues may be occurring (positive and negative)”*

Symbolic properties are the social values and cultural norms expressed by the environment [78]. Several references to the role a workplace’s location and identity plays were noted:

*“... I miss going to the office with its sense of place, where I feel part of an organisation and a community in a more tangible sense e.g., social interactions, presentations, sharing ideas, collaboration.”*

*“Old rituals, social interaction with the wider office. The ability to learn across the senior peer group will be missed in time . . . . Also in time sense of [our organisation’s] identity may feel impacted—there is a pride of association felt stepping through the front door of the office. I would advocate for the option to work remote but not as a complete alternative to office-based work”*

Participants who felt their sense of belonging had been most negatively impacted were analysed. Figure 8 shows a distinct variation in the meaning and nature of self-environment relationships with the workplace. For Managers, the emphasis is on face-to-face contact and proximity to support efficient work communication, collaboration, and reading their team’s body language (all factors impacting the Manager’s sense of professional identity and efficacy) [51,58]. Whilst for Workers, this shifts towards social and emotive connections with their teams and organisations (factors impacting their attachment and sense of belonging) [74,79]. Recent reporting suggests Millennials have been hardest hit by COVID-19, finding it more difficult to adjust to working from home, despite their digital literacy, “work-anywhere lifestyle” [80] (p. 3), and innate capabilities on social media platforms. Plausible reasons are sub-optimal work from home environments [8], position level, and need for more direct mentorship to understand what is expected of them [51,79,80].



**Figure 8.** Managers’ and Workers’ free-text responses to “What do you miss most about working in the office” and “Compared to working in the office: I feel well connected to my colleagues while working remotely and maintain a strong sense of belonging to my organisation”.

Further thematic coding of the responses revealed relationships between macro themes of belonging, the physical workplace environment, connection, and motivation based on Scannell and Gifford’s tripartite model of place attachment [21]. At a high level, belonging represents the person dimension, motivation and connection/social interactions span various aspects of the process dimension, and the physical workplace relates to the place dimension. Place attachment is multidimensional and interconnected to enable emotive attachments to form, function, and the ability to continually develop [21]. What our relationship diagram (Appendix C) shows is not every sub-theme is necessarily connected to each other, but there are strong relationships between all sub-themes of the physical (work)place and those of belonging, motivation, and connection/social interaction. This supports our position that the office is both a tangible expression and critical conduit of emotional glue (social capital) within an organisation [37,74]. An additional theme of spontaneity is evident, with strong relationships to togetherness, proximity + knowledge sharing (physical workplace), loyalty + culture, community (belonging), energy, speed + efficiency (motivation), relationship building + trust, and connection (connection/social interaction) illustrating the irreplaceable role of the physical environment as functional support and prompt for face-to-face interaction, which motivates, connects, and ultimately supports performance.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. The Role of work (Place)

Place is important to our social and professional identity [23]; our results reinforce this by indicating the areas most impacted by WFH were belonging and connection. Findings from the comparative questions reinforce our interpretation of (work)place identity as a professional identity, whilst participants' free-text responses reinforce the strong presence of place attachment.

WFH demonstrated we prefer to be together for tasks that involve collaboration, ideation, and communication (Figure 6). As a result, there is better awareness of activities that are effectively performed away from the office and understanding of additional benefits of WFH such as reduced travel time and increased flexibility (Figure 1). This leads to an important question—what is an office really for? Our findings suggest offices address our human desire to belong and support our professional identities. They also aid in completing tasks, though developments in technology and leadership are needed to support this in a hybrid work reality [12,81,82].

Nuances have been drawn between place attachment and place identity; both apply to our findings. The authors argue that through mechanisms of self-identity/identity work/place and place attachment the office is a moniker of an individual's professional identity [29,37,79]. The same office creates emotional glue, binding employees to one another; the attachment to place is the result of the human connection it facilitates [9,74]. Our results show we are more effective when together in physical proximity for tasks involving idea generation, collaboration, and exchange of knowledge (Figure 6); this aligns with existing research [83,84]. Participants repeatedly referred to the "ease of communication" and "opportunities for spontaneous interaction and incidental conversations" leading to knowledge exchange. This is not new, the potential of well-designed open-plan workplaces to foster stronger innovation through increased opportunity for encounters and strengthening of organisational culture is well documented [29,58,85]. This study shows a correlated depiction of how much the physical workplace contributes to enabling our subconscious workflows in this regard (Table 3(b), Figure 7, Appendix C).

Space provides a chronological framework that streamlines users' goals and supports activities they must complete, creating a series of mental transition rituals or habits [86]. Our behaviours are linked to places [20], and the rituals we develop within a workplace are core to our work processes and mindsets [74,87]. Responses of participants highlight this, both with regard to their ability to maintain focus and motivation (Appendix C), as well as the social interactions (Figures 5 and 6) that are key to building and maintaining organisational glue (social capital). Many people question whether we are still riding the wave of social capital built up over years of workplace change [88]. Our findings highlight how these types of interactions work to build an organisation's culture and connectedness with clear correlations found between an ability to connect (collaboration, knowledge sharing, direction, and feedback), sense of belonging, mindset, and ultimately performance (Table 4). However, without further longitudinal studies, under free circumstances post-pandemic, we cannot know the extent to which hybrid working is continuing to impact these factors.

Indoctrinating employees into company vision, history, processes, and culture is notoriously challenging in remote work contexts [89,90]—by the end of the study only 37% of Managers and 20% of Workers felt well connected to colleagues and able to maintain a sense of belonging to their organisation (Figure 3). Another deficiency comes in the ability to establish what researchers call 'weak ties' or peripheral relationships with other employees outside of direct teammates [58,60,91]. Until this pandemic, remote work was limited to those who either chose to self-employ or were granted permission; in the case of the population of our survey, this was the exception rather than the norm, with only 15% having access to regular remote working arrangements pre-pandemic. This research offers a snapshot from a level playing field where everyone was forced to WFH to the existing research that uncovered and documented the benefits (autonomy and control) and risks (iso-

lation and diminished sense of belonging and purpose) of teleworking [8,9,11,32,34,90,92]. Collectively, the research suggests the workplace cannot disappear, because its core purpose is to provide place where attachments, connections, and professional identities are formed; it is critical for sustaining human motivation, performance, and productivity. How individuals evolve in their professional self-environment relations as new hybrid realities continue to develop, is an area researchers should continue to track. This study provides an important time stamp for a unique context (Australia) and moment in history (2020), particularly for industries that rely heavily on team-based collaboration.

#### 4.2. Insights from Managers and Workers

Over sustained WFH, only 55% of Managers felt able to work productively compared to 80% of Workers; this trend continued across all comparative experiences (Figure 3). Findings also reveal a distinct difference in the nature of connections to the office, suggesting stronger professional identity and efficacy for those at a managerial or leadership level (Figure 8). It stands to reason, if an individual's role involves supervision, they would face greater challenges being detached from people they oversee. Another area of weakness comes from an inability for leaders to observe employees and form relationships that benefit both the organisation and employee [12,23,60]. The data note a decline in the ability to share knowledge, connect, and conduct face-to-face meetings (Figure 3) where leaders can scan employees for signs of stress, disengagement, or lack of understanding [32]. Robbed of the opportunity for small talk and the personal proximity required to absorb nonverbal cues that improve communication, performance suffers [93].

Government-mandated WFH took away any immediate choice of employees in where, how, and under what conditions they worked; on average, 45% of respondents were forced to juggle homeschooling and caring duties due to the forced closure. Impacts on motivation, mindsets, and mental health, alongside a lack of control for how long the situation would last, are evidenced in the responses (Appendix B). Australians were already navigating a significant social issue of loneliness [94], and the additional isolation caused by disconnection from the workplace during lockdown exacerbated risks for poor mental health. This is reported globally [45,46,95], but our data reveal a silver lining in how the common experience of isolation strengthened connections and cultural bonds amongst workers. Given the timeframe of the Round 2 survey, these findings could reflect the continuing wave of camaraderie anecdotally reported within industry that sustained people through the extended lockdowns in Victoria in July–October 2020 and the parallel desire and fear of returning to the office in NSW as they watched what happened to their neighbours.

Younger workers demonstrated a stronger sense of place attachment in that they longed to return to the workplace to socially interact with colleagues (Figure 8). The data suggests performance improved over the time that individuals worked remotely, and they gained confidence in technology (Figure 3); therefore, they would be less reliant on supervisors, an outcome that further erodes leadership's professional identity. Workers, and particularly younger professionals (>3 years), indicated a distinct difference in their motivations to return to the office (Figure 6), notably focus work (+21%), social interactions (+13%), collaboration (+6%), and training (+5%). This emphasises that the workplace holds different values to employees at different stages of their career, prompting a need to carefully assess future workplace design responses.

#### 4.3. Opportunities for Hybrid Ways of Working Post-2020

Survey results make clear WFH is a skill that can be improved over time (Figure 3), and, with practice, productivity, efficiency, and performance can sustain, as noted in several Australian studies [27,36,51]. Skills built over the lockdown gave employees greater confidence and new habits formed, with most employees now expressing a preference to continue working remotely for at least a portion of the work week. Results indicate people feel 1.5–3 days in the office is optimal, which signifies an opportunity to evolve successful

new hybrid work models [34,37,53,61]. As we focus on this one area, we must pay attention to creating experiences for remote workers that are equal to that of their counterparts in the office. Rather than simply trying to replicate the practices of face-to-face, new forms of synchronous hybrid interaction must evolve to bridge the gap between those who are remote and those in the room [27,58]. This pertains to idea generation, collaboration, and exchange of knowledge, and also addresses the challenges “boundaryless workers” have with isolation, inability to build trust and relationships [96] (p. 113). Our data shows increased awareness of the benefits of face-to-face interactions, where body language enables an interpretation of nuances in behaviour critical in building trust, authentic connections, and social capital (Figures 5, 6 and 8). Whether technology can successfully fulfil this role is unknown [13,59,97]. A hybrid workplace implies a paradigm shift for leaders who will need to adopt new management styles that this research indicates many are prepared to accommodate. Leadership and management have a huge role to fill [12,50,98] to avoid the risk of regressing back into what we know to be the detriment of positive aspects of WFH. Now is the time for organisations to break from the past, both in the design of their workplace and working to erase suboptimal habits and systems. By reimagining processes and practices, we can leverage the best aspects of both in-person and WFH [88,99].

Much research exists on remote/tele/home working during times of social and economic stability [32], but the literature is still emerging on psychological effects, productivity, and sustainable wellbeing through crisis and into less stable landscapes such as the post-pandemic context we find ourselves in [27,100], particularly from Australia. Since the lockdowns eased, employees globally have been experiencing an experimental stepping-stone of hybrid working, which is yet to crystalise, and, as such, it is important to understand the nuances in knowledge workers’ needs and experiences, as they have become highly demanded customers of post-pandemic organisations and workplaces [11,99,101].

Radical real estate decisions have not been as prevalent in Australia as elsewhere in the world [58,102,103], but leading early adopters are investing in experimentation [27,57], while others are holding to a wait-and-see approach. These early instinctive experiences can act as a catalyst to buck the trend and take advantage of this unique opportunity to reimagine workplaces and practices.

#### 4.4. Limitations and Future Research

Authors acknowledge the dominance of the design, construction, and property industry in the sample; this is an opportunity for future studies to compare other industry sectors less reliant on teamwork. Both rounds of the survey were conducted during a time of great uncertainty; businesses and individuals were motivated to make remote work succeed with additional complexities of carers responsibilities and forced isolation, which may have affected the relationships in outcomes reported. As such, the data provides a unique comparison for ongoing investigations into remote and hybrid working experiences under freer, more stable circumstances. Australian employees are at an important crossroad: there is great opportunity to embrace the hybrid work models this data shows people want, posing a challenge to management styles and requiring new technologies, behaviours, and processes. Researchers and practitioners should continue to track the situation as it evolves, examining employees’ perceived effectiveness, adjustment to remote working, impacts and experiences of belonging and professional community from a range of disciplinary perspectives including the human sciences, interior design, management, and built environment.

Since these two survey rounds were conducted, Australian cities have experienced a punctuated return to the office with snap lockdowns in most major cities throughout 2021. Omicron and B variant outbreaks in 2022 have also significantly hindered employees’ confidence and appetite in returning to the office, impacting many organisations’ hybrid work strategies, pilots, and policy developments [104]. CBD office occupancy in October 2022 remains at 58% in NSW and 45% in VIC.

## 5. Conclusions

Place is a powerful tool. Findings from the research confirms the importance of the workplace as a physical and psychosocial construct, enabling connection to professional purpose, meaning, and self and in addressing our innate human desire to belong. The distinction between place identity and attachment, and the motivations to return to the office for employees at different stages of their career, as seen in our findings, reinforces the necessity to reconsider future workplace designs. Many posit the focus of the post COVID-19 workplace should be teamwork and togetherness, with individual work being performed remotely. It is clear from this data that workplaces should be reimagined to better support togetherness. However, we cannot ignore the need to undertake individual focused work too. Many workers, particularly younger ones, will still prefer to come to the office for the social connections or due to unsuitable home setups. Consequently, future workplace designs will most likely resemble well-designed contemporary work environments prior to the pandemic that support high levels of collaboration and casualisation typical in contemporary work practices. Moving forward, reimagining places that support togetherness and providing technology that creates equitable experiences for all workers, regardless of location, is imperative.

The workplace is an ecosystem. Parallels can be drawn from Ratten's [105] work on entrepreneurial ecosystems, which suggests a variety of entities are required for the ecosystem to function properly, including community culture, sustaining networks, and infrastructure. A workplace is no different; interaction among entities that encourages collaboration and information sharing is necessary, as are networking activities and events. Ratten [106] also talks about the necessity for strong leadership to anticipate changes necessary during times of uncertainty. To create an effective hybrid workplace post-pandemic, an evolution and upskilling of leadership and management practices will be required. This research shows the distinctions in value managers gain from physical presence in the workplace, namely efficacy in managing their teams, workflows, and professional purpose—their role is to manage people. The significance of our data is that it captures instinctive first experiences under forced lockdown conditions, which should not be ignored. As the dust has settled, both managers and workers have likely adjusted to the evolving hybrid ways of working, but the longer-term impacts of disconnection from the (work)place on mental health, inequality, learning, and growth are evident. Management should be turning their focus to supporting the emotional wellbeing of their workforce rather than workflows. This requires empathic leadership and changes in performance management, from line-of-sight to product focused, 'earning the commute', and development of genuine flexible work policies that satisfy both organizational and employee drivers. To aid this, an understanding of the important role that place plays as a vehicle for supporting work communities and engendering a sense of belonging for the people who occupy them is critical. While Australians are in the process of returning to the office, most employees are still working from home/elsewhere and/or working from the office a few days a week (2–3 days), and, as such, longer-term effects on organisations and workers, especially in management styles, are still unknown.

Our research offers insights into why we missed (work)places during the imposed COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020. The data demonstrate workers' clear appetite for flexibility and autonomy. It also reveals key demographic nuances in younger workers for learning, development, and focused work, prioritising proximity to absorb tacit knowledge and gain motivation from the professional environment of the office and their teams. Whilst context specific to Australia at a unique point in time, these findings constitute important evidence for industry and researchers towards informing future workplace designs, the mix of spaces required, and their evaluation.



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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Reporting of this study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of The University of New South Wales (HC200738, 30 September 2020).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable. Ethics was granted for use of secondary data provided by the Data Custodians (Bates Smart).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

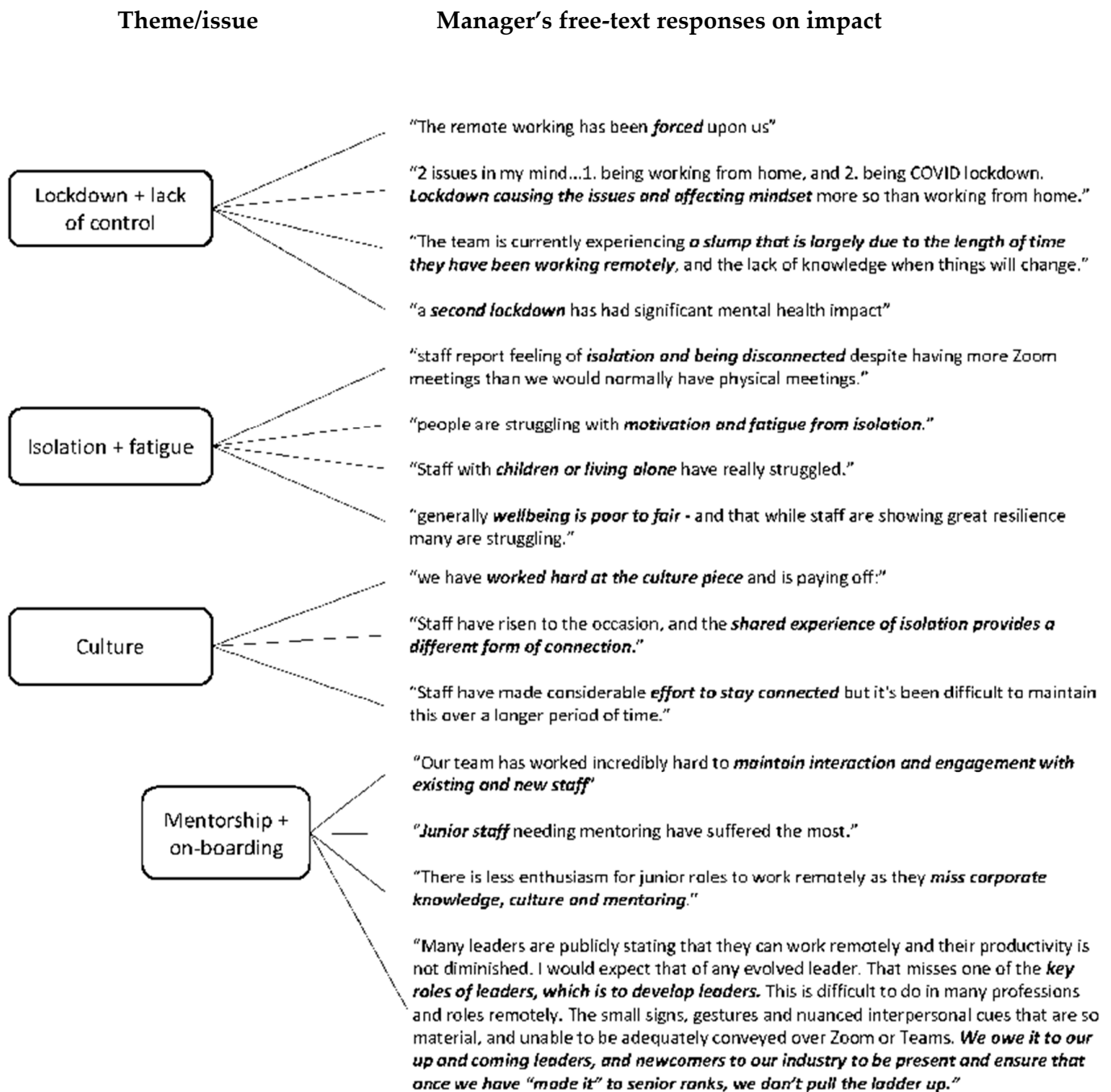
## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Comparative Overview of BSRWS Round 1 and Round 2 Questionnaires.

Round 1	Questions	Round 2
	Comparative experience ratings, 5-point Likert scale Compared with working in the office:	
✓	Access to technology and administrative support for effective WFH *	-
✓	Adequate direction and feedback for effective WFH *	-
✓	Perceived autonomy over work while WFH *	-
✓	Perceived productivity while WFH	✓
-	Perceived performance (quality of work) while WFH *	✓
✓	Ability to focus (deep think) while WFH	✓
✓	Ability to collaborate, share ideas and think strategically/creatively while WFH	✓
✓	Meetings and work hours while WFH *	-
✓	Connection and sense of belonging to organisation	✓
✓	Ability to separate work and life while WFH	✓
✓	Motivation and mental health while WFH	✓
	Multiple choice questions	
✓	Challenges to effective work (WFH and office)	✓
✓	Benefits of WFH	✓
✓	Future preferences for remote working and days in the office	✓
✓	Priorities for returning to the office	✓
✓	Priorities for residential design, hotels and cities following COVID-19	✓
-	Changes your organisation has made or is considering in response to WFH *	✓
	Open-ended questions	
✓	What do you miss most about working in the office **	-

Notes: \* In response to the developing COVID-19 lockdowns, restrictions, and occupancy patterns of Australian knowledge workers at the time of the Round 2 survey, the questionnaire was amended to allow individual and branching questions to be added that drilled down into specifics of work quality (as a comparison to productivity), organisational changes, and managers' perceptions of the impacts of extended WFH on their staff. \*\* The wording of this question was altered in Round 2 to ask 'If we have missed anything in our statements above or if there is anything else you would like to share, please let us know', as it followed a series of multiple choice and open-ended questions about key priorities for offices, CBDs, and the return to office with answer choices developed based on key topics that emerged from the question in Round 1. Respondents were also provided an open-ended response option in addition to the choices. Free-text answers from Round 1 for this question have been used in reporting for this paper.

## Appendix B



**Figure A1.** Thematic breakdown of BSRWS round 2 text responses from managers to branching questions on impacts of WFH on their teams.

Appendix C

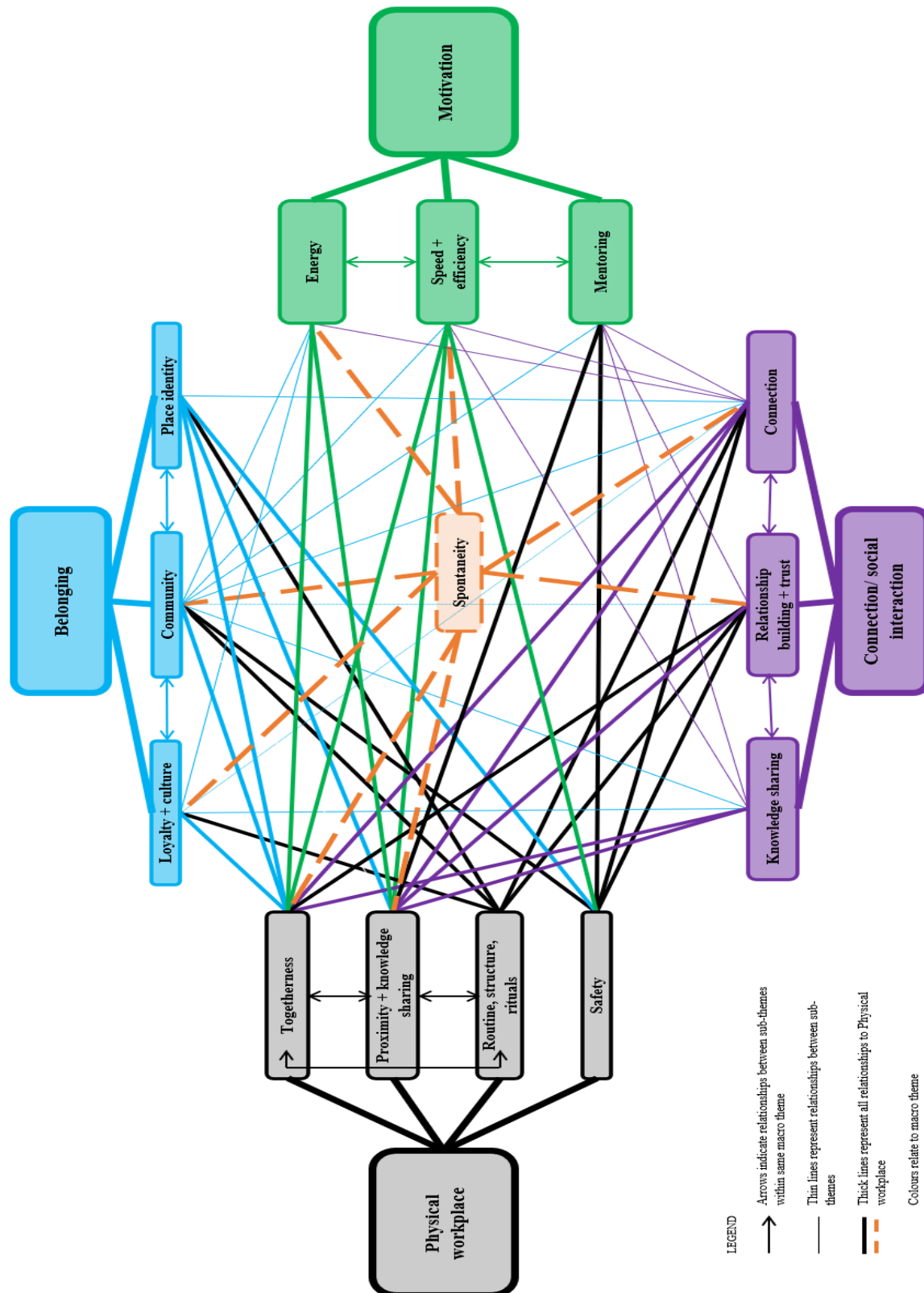


Figure A2. Relationship diagram—macro themes and sub-themes showing dimensions of place attachment in participants’ experiences.

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