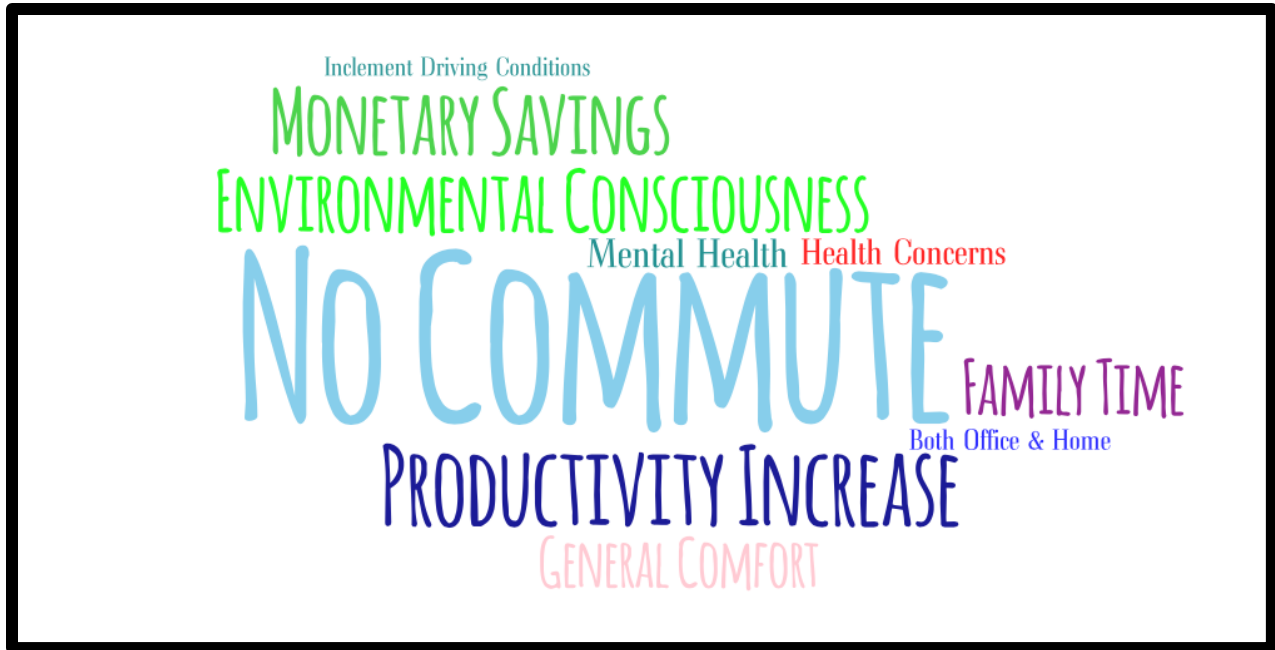# Telecommuting -- Is it here to stay?

A Vermont Research Survey

Draft: June 5, 2020

Word cloud of responses to survey question on why respondents like to telecommute

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https://www.uvm.edu/cas/vermontresearch

TELECOMMUTING -- IS IT HERE TO STAY?

BACKGROUND

Between May 7 and May 25 the Center for Research on Vermont surveyed 662 Vermonters on their attitudes towards telecommuting and working from home (WFH). The survey had three goals: capture the present lived experience of Vermonters telecommuting, identify opportunities and obstacles to increasing WFH and identify themes that could form the basis of further WFH research. The heart of the survey is a series of open-ended questions that invite respondents to discuss how WFH is working for them and the obstacles and opportunities to continuing in the future. These questions produced more than 150 pages of responses and are available at the Center for Research on Vermont (with identifying information removed) on-line here. (https://www.uvm.edu/cas/vermontresearch/transportation-planning).

The survey was distributed to about 10,000 people from lists that the Center maintains, and to Regional Planning Commissions, Regional Development Corporations, the Vermont Chamber of Commerce, state government staff, UVM faculty and staff and through public media and stakeholder organizations. The survey was open to all via a web platform and was not a representative sampling of the underlying population. Future surveys are expected to be conducted, using information obtained from this preliminary snapshot.
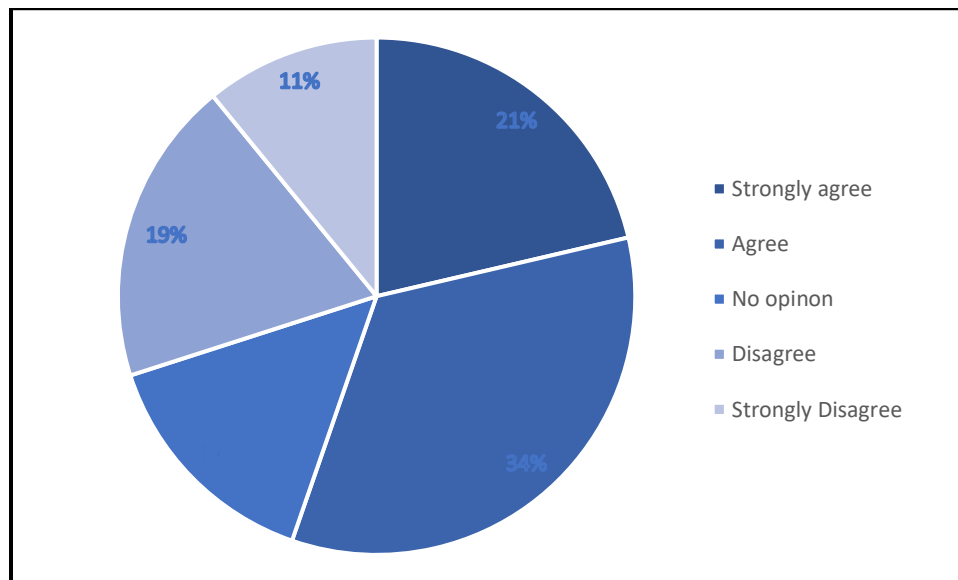
In this report we highlight some of the findings but invite those interested to read through the comments and draw your own conclusions.

FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics

More than half (55%) said they expect to work more from home after things return to something more like normal.
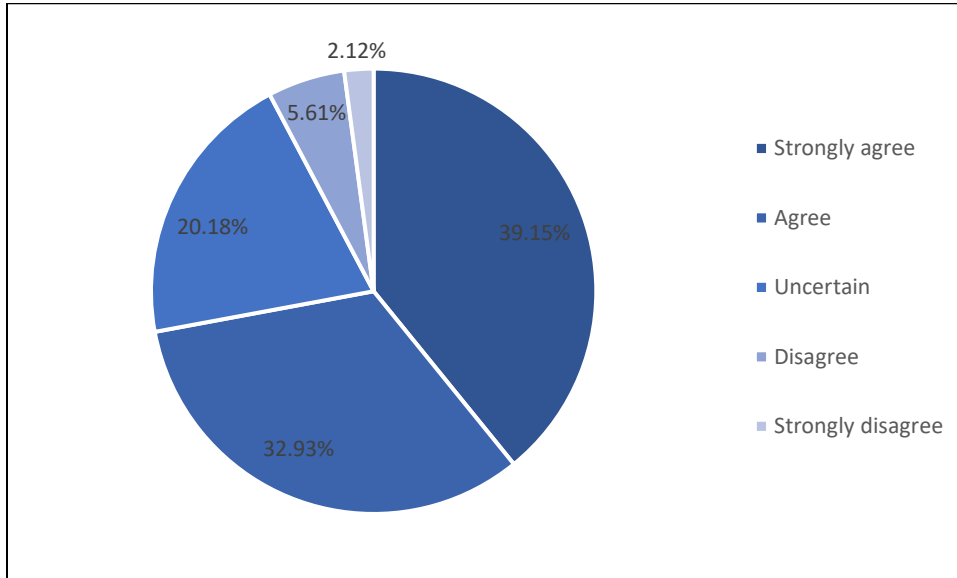
Table 1. When things are relatively normal again, I expect to telecommute more often.

Source: Telecommuting survey, N=659

More than two-thirds said there was more their employers could do to enable them to work from home more often.
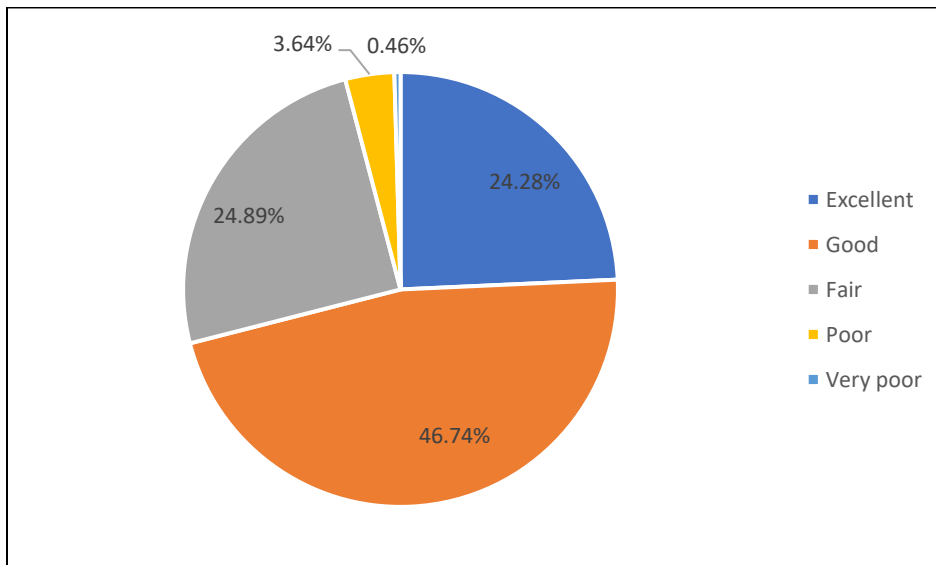
Table 2. Do you think your organization should take steps to enable more employees to work from home more than they did before March 2020?

Source: Telecommuting survey, N=651

More than two-thirds (70%) said their work place at home was either good or excellent.

Table 3. How is your work space at home?

Source: Telecommuting survey, N=659

Most (86%) felt their internet access was either good or excellent.

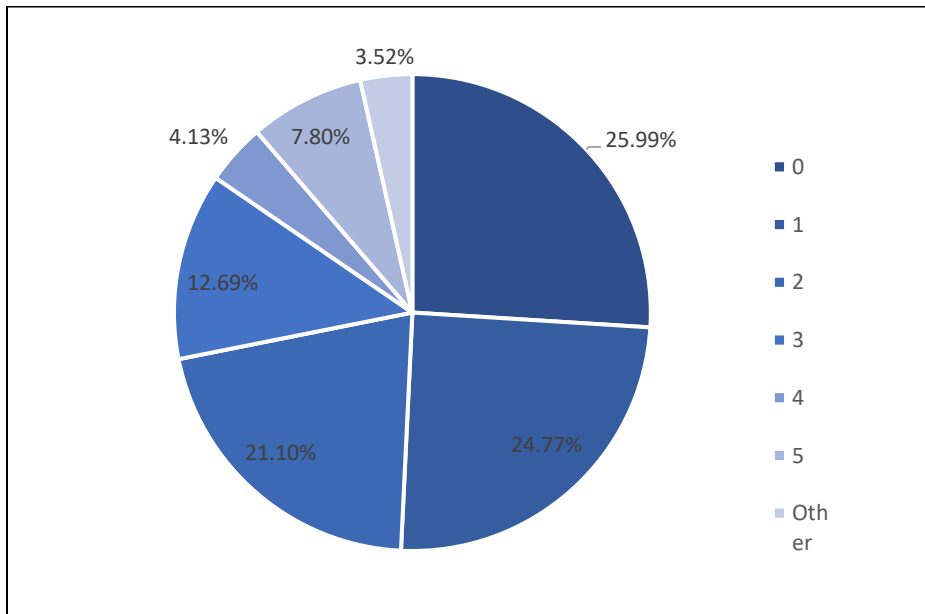**Table 4.** How is your access to the internet?
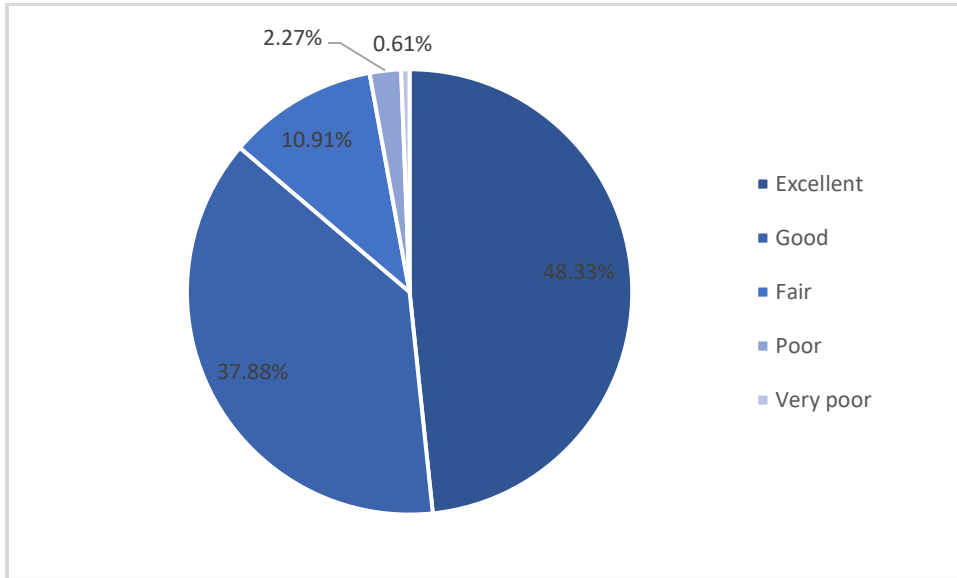
Respondents said they expect to increase the frequency of how many days a week they WFH when things return to normal. About half (46%) were either one or two days a week.

Table 5. Days expecting to work from home when things return to something like normal.

When it comes to age, the largest group of respondents (39%) fell in the 46 to 60 category, followed by 31 to 45 (26%).

Table 6. Age
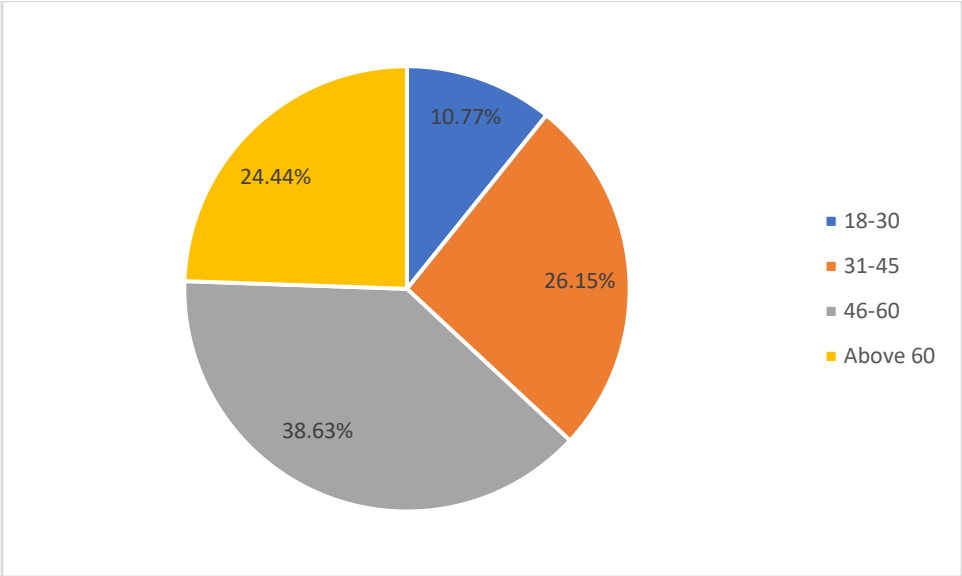
Source: Telecommuting survey, N=585

When it comes to the length of the commute, the largest group (41%) commutes less than 6 miles. At the other end of the spectrum, about one-quarter (24%) commute more than 25 miles.

Table 6. Length of Commute

Source: Telecommuting survey, N=585

Before they started working from home, most respondents (70%) drove alone to work.

Table 6. Before March 2020, how did you most regularly commute to work?

Source: Telecommuting survey, N=585

QUALITATIVE RESPONSES

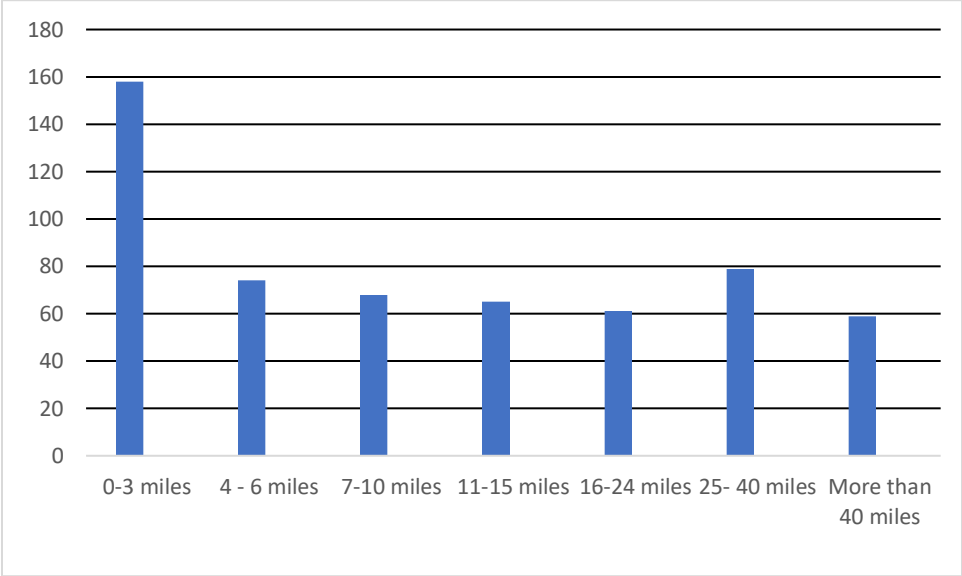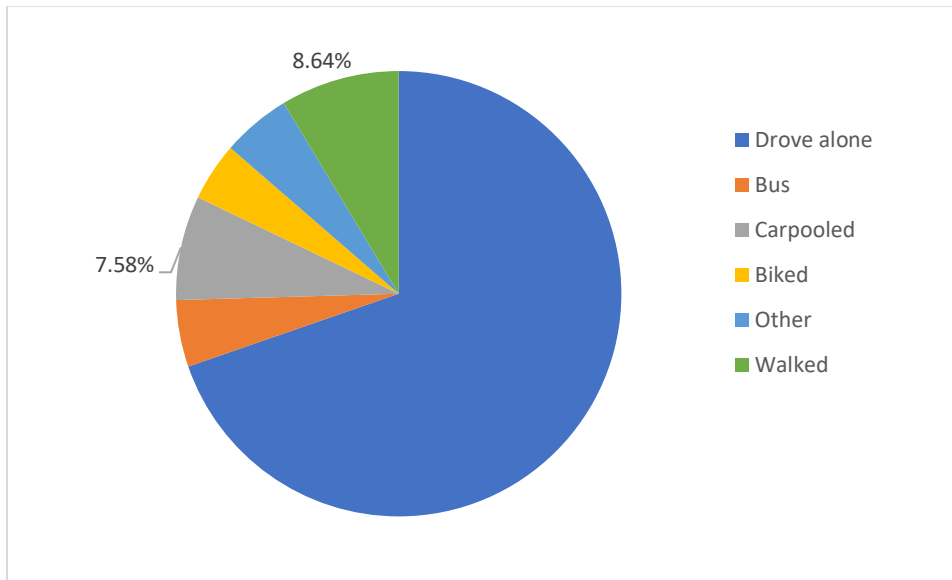Here we summarize the responses to six open-ended questions that produced more than 150 pages of content. We invite those interested to read the original responses (with identifying information removed), which are on-line here. (https://www.uvm.edu/cas/vermontresearch/transportation-planning)

Question 1: When things are relatively normal again, would you like to increase the proportion of your work that you do from home? Why or why not?

About two-thirds of the respondents said they would like to increase the amount of WFH they do.

Positive responses grouped into five thematic areas:

- working at home is more productive
- dislike the commute (driving)
- concerned about the environmental impacts of commuting
- more family time
- better for their mental and physical health

I am far more productive at home than I am in the office. There is too much interruption and not enough awareness or respect for scheduled time vs. random pop-ins.

Increased ability to focus, no need to travel to office to complete administrative tasks (meetings, calls, email, etc.), more time with family and home without added travel time at beginning/end of day.

It allows me to concentrate, keeps me the required social distance from people (I encounter a lot of visitors and have a desk in an open, cross-through space), and saves me nearly 3 hours of commuting by bus every day. Being able to telecommute even one or two days a week would simplify my life dramatically.

In not having a commute by car, it reduces my carbon output, reduces vehicle costs (fuel and maintenance), and increases my free time by approximately 1.25 hours for each day that I work from home when appropriate.

I think that 1 or 2 days a week of my job can be completed from home. This is useful for family life, my general mental health, and, in the future, childcare.

I have a small child and it has been good to enjoy these flexible hours to care for him during the day. My home work setup is still not perfect, but with a few improvements it will be as comfortable as working at the office, but with less interruptions from coworkers.

On the negative side, respondents said

- they miss people
- their broadband is not adequate
- their job does not allow it
- their home workspace is not a productive place
- their existing commute is not a burden

No, because my job involves a significant amount of coordination with my colleagues within the organization and doing this job via telework is much more labor intensive, time consuming and not as productive aka: you don't always get the responses you need without the opportunity to see them/catch colleagues in person. In addition, my home space is not well suited to being adapted to telework.

It is lonely working in an office alone. It is important to just have others around.

I would prefer home to be a place of respite. I miss my colleagues.

I miss the conversation with co-workers, and the chance for collaborative efforts, exchange of ideas, and just being elsewhere than my home office. I also like having all my files, wall maps, books etc kept at work office

I prefer the human interaction of being with coworkers. In addition the technology is adequate at home but not as good as at the office.

Question 2: When things are relatively normal again, do you think other employees at your organization's location will prefer to work from home more or less than they did before March 2020? Why or why not?

Most of the respondents expect their fellow employees to telecommute more. Many different reasons were expressed, but one major theme is that there is now an understanding that this can be done and that there are multiple benefits as described above.

Absolutely. Being in the office 100% of the time for all of us is useless. Also, we spend so much money on office space when two people could share an office and work from home half the time.

I believe many will seek to work from home more often because a new level of trust among workers, supervisory and contracted workers has been established.

I think many of the employees in my organization who have transitioned to working from home during the Stay Home period would prefer to work from home. There are many advantages to working from home:

better ability to concentrate and focus, don't have to commute, don't have to prepare food for lunch, don't need to spend as much money on work clothes, don't have to be annoyed by that certain co-worker.

Yes I think it will vary on some but I think generally I think many people will want to continue to work from home at least a couple days a week. I think people may have been scared of it but now that it was mandated I think people realize how beneficial it could be. Better productivity, more work getting done, less distractions, calmer and soothing office space, not stressing or worried about germs or what you could catch, Less carbon footprint, less gas, less wear and tear on the car

Question 3: Please describe some of the most useful steps your organization might take to enable more people (including yourself) to work from home.

<u>Here we identified four central themes.</u>

- development of workplace telecommuting policies
- workplace flexibility that allows WFH
- technical support and IT issues

Because I work for a state agency, it will require a policy change within my Agency and at a higher level in state government. There is no consistency between agencies, departments, and even sections in state government regarding working at home. It would be helpful to have it the same, have it flexible and permissible to work from home at least two days each week--which is the state government standard. In my agency we can get permission to telecommute one day each week, but I know folks in other divisions that already worked at home three days a week. This is a tangent but I think the state overall should move to telework three days a week for those positions that are able to do so.

Encouraging it, making less hurdles for employees. Training supervisors in how to give clear expectations of work-at-home employees and encouraging things that can be done at home to be done at home and avoid commute - reduce carbon emissions!

Ensuring all employees have the technology they need to do their jobs at home, and that they know how to use it. Consider using hubs of some kind to allow workers access to things like special printers and other equipment they might need sometimes, but not every day. Allow employees more flexibility to work from home if they want.

First, allow it, with policy. Second, allow it across positions, as determined by their descriptions. Third, provide technologies - software and hardware- that augment the person's resources at home.

I think the flexibility is what's most important and useful. In the type of work we do, having the option to go back and forth from home office to official office is important. There are times when it makes sense to work from home, and having the flexibility to do so is critical, - without numerous forms and paperwork. If the work is done, it shouldn't matter where it is performed.

I think that the most useful thing my organization can do is to normalize working from home, and to create a culture where it is understood that you can get all of your work done just as well as you can in the office. I think that it should be an option for both people with and without kids.

I think simple recognition that working remotely can be just as, if not more, successful than having your body in your chair in the office. If leadership were to see that people are just as dedicated to their work when they are away from the office as when they are present, I think that speaks for itself. Leadership just needs to trust that no matter where someone is sitting, they want to do a good job.

Question 4: If you telecommute from home more frequently, do you think you will be shopping and doing recreation activities more frequently in your local community. If yes or no please explain.

This question is meant to tease out themes connecting less telecommuting to more time spent in local communities. Could there be bigger changes in travel behavior underway if people spend less time driving to an office that is away from where they live?

In general respondents thought that they might spend more time and money locally than they had before, although some pointed out that being at home more may mean less other types of trips.

Potentially- yes. On my regular telecommute days (pre-stay a home order) I would organize shopping and exercise/recreation around my more flexible work schedule (essentially off-setting the lack of commute time with errands/recreation).

Yes. I enjoy walking and riding my bike in my neighborhood and the area where I live. I enjoy shopping locally, and would prefer to do it more often.

Yes. Money is being saved both from gas saving as well as not buying as many lunches out as I normally would in Williston. I'd have more money to spend in my local community where I live and do recreational activities.

Yes. I live about 20 miles north of Burlington and while working from home I have certainly done more of my shopping in my local community as well as getting takeout food from local restaurants. Previously the shopping and eating at restaurants may have b

Yes. Commute takes me closer to a different commercial area than home community. Would use that office-centric commercial area less and home commercial area more.

Not really. I already shop and eat out and do other recreational activities in the town where I live as well as in the city in which I work. If I'm commuting to an office less, that does mean that I will do less shopping, etc., in the city where I work.

I will likely work out from home more days a week rather than making a trip to the club. In addition, I'll limit my shopping trips to one or fewer days a week versus numerous stops to the market. Will order more basic foods, like milk and cheese from the service.

Question 5: Aside from telecommuting, when things return to relatively normal, do you see yourself using technology to avoid some trips, (e.g. telemedicine, professional service teleconferencing, grocery delivery, other?) Please explain.

The top category by far here was telemedicine – more than 150 people took the time to write that they could/will see themselves doing more telemedicine in the future. Following that came grocery delivery services with some people experimenting with this and planning to continue and a few professional services, activities presently conducted by ZOOM, that might continue.

Absolutely. I have to drive 45 minutes to 2 hours to medical providers; now with telemedicine, I have had several meetings online and they were just as beneficial; in fact more so because my doctor and I have more time available to spend in conference instead of sitting in waiting rooms, or driving, or having to prepare meals to take to work (doctor) or spend money on lunch because we don't have the time to prepare it wisely. We will eat better!!!! We will be healthier and won't need the doctors as much!!!

Yes, I am hoping that public meetings will continue to be streamed online. I will probably also use some telemedicine.

Yes, I can absolutely see myself using tech for mental health counseling, telemedicine, and meetings with partner agencies, clients and other providers for case coordination

Yes, I will use technology for telemedicine. I really like that. And I plan to use video teleconferencing more, I see it as an opportunity to reach more people with the trainings I offer and used to do in person only.

Yes, telemedicine seems like a great thing and I anticipate using teleconferencing much more for community activity planning and other social activities that would otherwise require people driving substantial distances.

Yes. I can foresee more professional service teleconferencing instead of statewide in-person meetings that are short. I would love to do more telemedicine if that is available.

Question 5: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Several respondents noted that there are social benefits of people getting together and we should be careful to not lose those.

And some expressed caution about the digital divide, how telecommuting can only further separate those who have from those who do not, accelerating social/economic disparities as certain types of jobs and certain places in the state may benefit more than others.

And some also raised cautions that employers who embrace WFH policies may also be moving expenses from central office locations to personal homes.

Please do a study on one's mental health and working from home. my entire team is now teleworking (20ish) and we all speak to the isolation. especially on rainy days!! teleworking has its ups and downs. it was much harder at the beginning, but it is better. however, some younger (newer) employees are faring much worse than older ones, and are likely less productive due to slight depressive symptoms. those without animals or a partner are doing worse also. thanks!!

As a sociologist, I would like to point out that the tradeoff between sociability and impact on the climate is not a simple one. I would choose sociability almost all the time, especially because it has a long-term impact on the ability of people or organize and engage in activism against the incredible power of those whose only concerns are driven by the requirements of capitalism.

How do we set up equitable telework policies? Not all jobs can easily be done remotely. If shifting to a more remote workplace, how do new employees become integrated and get to know staff? So many valuable connections occur during casual workplace conversations - how can that be replicated virtually?

In addition to the potential benefits and preferences regarding telecommuting, it is essential that we consider the potential drawbacks -- including increased social isolation, elimination of jobs/positions, increased workload on some employees, disruption of work/life balance or routine, etc....

It's a good thing for businesses to be flexible about allowing employees to telecommute when there's a good reason for them to do so. At the same time - as someone who already worked from home - I think it's important to acknowledge that telecommuting can be deeply isolating. It also often puts the burden on the employee to provide a suitable workspace and work station. I've looked into co-working spaces and, if finances allowed, would have been making use of one, because I find it's important to interact with other individuals in a professional setting, and to have a change of place (which makes it easier to leave work at work). Connections are important, both socially and professionally, and other humans are inspiring. To have a vital, innovative professional culture, I believe we must work face-to-face with other humans on a regular basis.

I think that there is a stigma associated with those who work remotely. People think that you aren't working, that you are multi-tasking or somehow taking advantage of the situation. For the most part, I feel that employees have to be trusted to be putting out good work. If your level of work, involvement and participation is not affected by where you are sitting, then I think the option should be given.

DISCUSSSION & NEXT STEPS

At the time we started this survey, as many as half of Vermonters were experimenting with telecommuting and working from home. The survey attempted to capture Vermonter's impressions of telecommuting in the midst of the pandemic – the crisis presenting an enormous controlled experiment in Vermonters' experiences and perception of working from home. At the time of the survey, Google mobility reported a 42 percent drop in workplace travel and a 58 percent decline in retail shopping (https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-05-15_US_Vermont_Mobility_Report_en.pdf).

Survey respondents overwhelming support telework, and strongly support being able to continue to WFH in the future. Clearly, this population may have been more inclined to telework and their experience at this moment has only further emphasized their interest in doing so.

More than half (55%) said they expect to work more from home after things return to something more like normal. And large pluralities said their workplace (70%) and internet service (86%) was good to excellent – enabling them to do so. The biggest challenge identified by most respondents was the lack of workplace policies and support to allow them to telecommute more in the future. More than two-thirds said there was more their employers could do to enable them to work from home more often.

The clearest recommendation that emerges is that there should be support and resources for small and large employers developing telework policies and programs. That support could be as simple as developing a series of off-the shelf best WFH practices and policies available to organizations. These should be designed for small, medium, large and different types of organizations so employers could pick and choose.

Further Research

This survey was aimed at the individual experiences of commuters. Research also indicates that employers are also finding that employees can work from home and be productive. Further research should survey employers.

Clearly there are environmental savings if less commuters drove to work. We did not quantify those savings here, only to measure that most of the respondents, (70%) drove alone to work prior to pandemic and most of the respondents indicated they would telework more in the future. Further research could look at the environmental benefits.

And lastly, respondents should be surveyed again in three to six months to see if their perceptions have changed and/or if some of the obstacles such as workplace policies, have changed.

APPENDICES

Qualitative responses can be found on-line here.
(https://www.uvm.edu/cas/vermontresearch/transportation-planning).

Telecommuting Survey Questions

Name

Email

Name of Organization

Position at Organization

Type of Organization

County

Roughly how many people work at your organization's location?

Before March 2020, roughly how many days a week did you regularly work the whole day from home?

How is your work space at home?

How is your access to the internet?

When things are relatively normal again, would you like to increase the proportion of your work that you do from home? Why or why not?

When things are relatively normal again, do you think other employees at your organization's location will prefer to work from home more or less than they did before March 2020? Why or why not?

Do you think your organization should take steps to enable more employees to work from home more than they did before March 2020?

Please describe some of the most useful steps your organization might take to enable more people (including yourself) to work from home.

When things are relatively normal again, how many days a week do you think you will regularly work from home?

When things are relatively normal again, I expect to telecommute more often.

Before March 2020, how did you most regularly commute to work?

Are there any current programs in place at your workplace to encourage employees who commute to work to commute in ways other than driving alone. Please check all that apply.

If you telecommute from home more frequently, do you think you will be shopping and doing recreation activities more frequently in your local community. If yes or no please explain.

Aside from telecommuting, when things return to relatively normal, do you see yourself using technology to avoid some trips, (e.g. telemedicine, professional service teleconferencing, grocery delivery, other?) Please explain.

Phone Number

My regular commute to work is...

Age

Is there anything else you would like to add?