TELEWORK IS HERE TO STAY

Results from May 2021 Vermont Survey

Justin and Elise telecommute from their home in Orange County Vermont. Photo Courtesy of Anna Watts

Submitted by:

Richard Watts, Director CRVT
Emily Anderson, Research Coordinator, CRVT
Rowan Hawthorne, UVM 2021
Alborz Seyyedi, UVM 2022

Center for Research on Vermont
https://www.uvm.edu/cas/vermontresearch

INTRODUCTION

Between May 7 and May 20th, 428 Vermonters responded to a Center for Research on Vermont survey about telework. Researchers conducted the survey to see whether individuals would plan on increasing the proportion of their work done from home compared to pre-March 2020.

This survey builds on one completed one year ago. See the 2020 report and results here.

The heart of the survey (See Appendix A) is a series of open-ended questions that invite respondents to discuss working from home (WFH) and the obstacles and opportunities to continuing in the future.

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. It represents a snapshot of a certain slice of the Vermont population..

In this report we highlight some of the findings but invite those interested to read through the comments and draw your own conclusions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Before March 2020, about 70% said they did not work from home at all. Looking forward, now 75% agree or strongly agree that they expect to work from home more in the future
- 88% agree or strongly agree that their employers should do more to allow them to work from home
- 86% agree or strongly agree that more people in their organization will WFH from home more in the future
- 83% agree or strongly agree that their workplace is more accepting of working from home
- 16% agree or strongly agree that their employer is reducing office space in the future as less people come into the office
- 75% said their workplace at home was good or excellent
- 87% said their internet service was good or excellent
- 11% said they would continue to telecommute five days a week . While 29% said they would go back to the workplace for two days a week; 21% for three days; 15% for one and 9% for four days a week.
- 32% said their employer has done nothing to support telecommuting employees

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Perhaps most striking is the growing support for telecommuting among this population. In the study one year ago, about half of the respondents **(55%) said they expected to work from home more** when things returned to something more "normal" – here that number has climbed to 75%.

Before March 2020, about 70% said they did not work from home at all. During the pandemic about 70% of the respondents worked from home five days a week. Based on that experience, about three quarters (75%) now agree or strongly agree that they expect to work from home more in the future.

Figure 1. When things are relatively normal again, I expect to work from home more often than I did prior to March 2020.
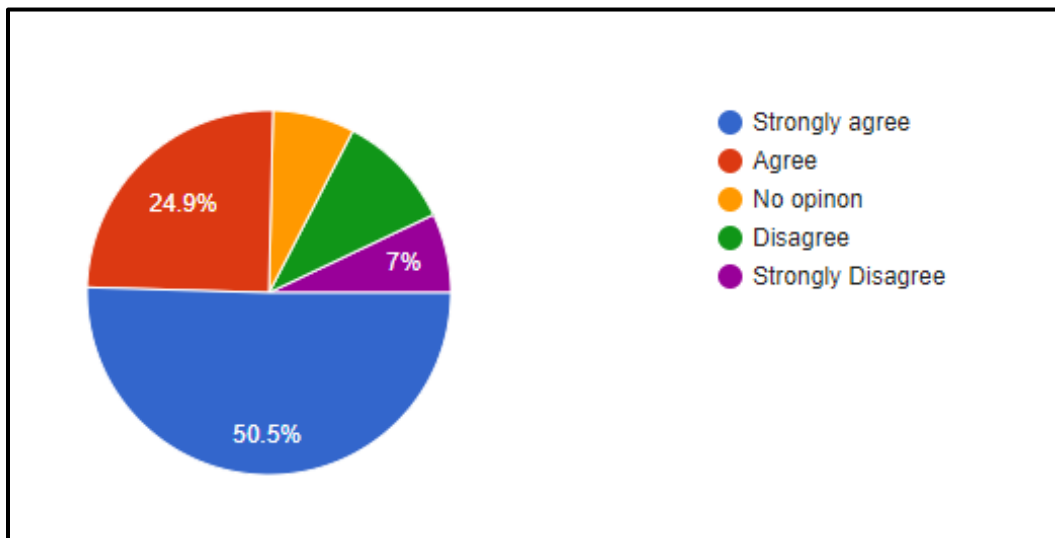
Source: Telecommuting survey, N=426

And to match their own individual interest in telework, almost 88% said their employers should support their employees to work from home more than they did before the pandemic started.

Figure 2. Do you think your organization should take steps to enable more employees to work from home more than they did before March 2020?
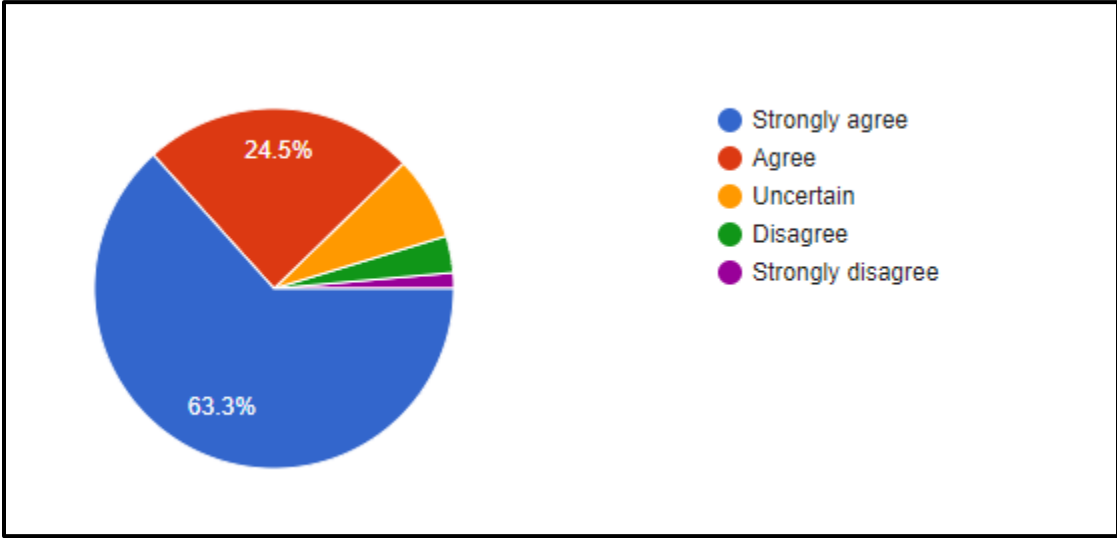
Prior to March 2020, almost 70% of respondents said they did not work at home at all. During the pandemic about 70% said they spent the whole work week working from home. And now, although most expect to continue to telecommute, almost half (49.8%) see themselves in a central office two or three days a week.
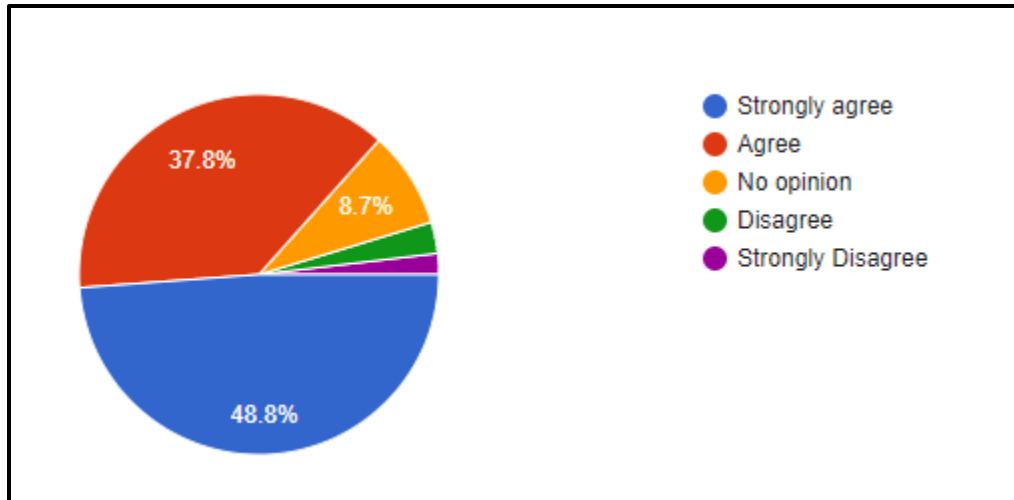
Figure 3. When things are relatively normal again, how many days a week do you think you will regularly work from home? 0=zero days a week, 1 – 1 day a week and so on.
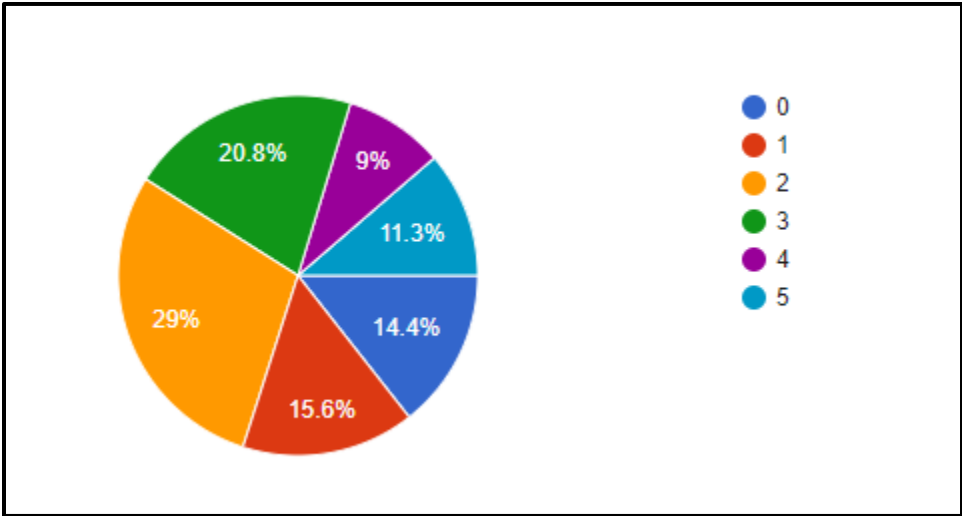
Most (83%) felt that the culture of telework had become more acceptable at their organization and a similar percent (86%) said more people in their organization would telecommute in the future.

Table 4. When things are relatively normal again, I expect more people in my organization will work from home more frequently than they did prior to March 2020.

Source: Telecommuting survey, N=426

QUALITATIVE RESPONSES

Here we summarize and organize the responses to three open-ended questions.

Question 1: When things are relatively normal again, do you plan to increase the proportion of your work that you do from home (as compared to pre-March 2020). Why or why not?

Most respondents wanted to continue working from home for a multitude of reasons. For the most part, people who responded saying they were going to return to the office were doing so because of a lack of choice, rather than a desire to return to the office. In addition, respondents noted that many would partially return to the office and partially WFH. Many noted that a change of status quo and acceptance of WHF has helped them transition into WFH part time or full-time.

The most common, positive responses were grouped into 5 thematic areas:

- Improved productivity at home
- No commute, saving emissions, time, money, and not driving in bad weather
- Health concerns, both general and mental
- General comfort staying home and being with family
- Improved work/life balance

Yes, I'm more productive, I don't waste time commuting, I don't waste resources driving to work, I can accomplish small things throughout the day (laundry, wait for repairman or delivery, start dinner), I eat better.

Yes--three days in office, 2 days at home. I get a lot more work done at home than I do at the office. I can concentrate, I have a better work-life balance (i.e. prep dinner while listening to a meeting that I don't really have to participate in fully)--throw in a load of laundry between meetings, take a walk mid-day between meetings. I end up working MORE since it's not 9-5 anymore, but I have a much better work-life balance.

Yes, it allows for a quieter work environment when I need to focus on a particular task. Also, allows me to be home with my middle school child and keep working.

Yes, because I think the balance of a few days at work and a few days at home could be really healthy for me and the planet. I do miss collaborating with people in person, but we now know what is possible and I don't know how I will go back to hauling my life back and forth 5 days a week. I can be more mindful working from home and reduce my use of single use plastics and eating food that I don't want out of convenience.

Yes. I like working from home. My older child also started kindergarten in fall 2020, and working from home means that he and I can bike to and from school together instead of dropping him off in a car on the way to work!

Yes, working from home is less stressful, I save more money, I never caught a cold or other virus-type disease that typically circulates in winter, and because of the type of work I do (all at a computer), I don't see a real need to be in an office setting every day.

Yes. I plan to continue working from home for a minimum of 50% of the work week, but probably closer to 80%. I find that my work/life balance has improved as a result of working remotely. It is easier to work in focused intervals with more frequent breaks throughout the day. It also allows me to stretch the typical office-based "9-5" schedule and work hours that make more sense for my lifestyle. That said, being in the physical presence of coworkers does have its advantages, but I am confident that being in the office for only 8 - 12 hours per week is sufficient to harness that advantage.

Yes. 1. We waste less paper working online, and it's just as easy to do from home as at the office. 2. I want to keep letting my cat out as much as possible. 3. I like the quiet and environment better at my house. 4. I like gardening, cooking, listening to music etc. during lulls in the work cycle. 5. It reduces my carbon footprint to eschew commuting by car, even my plug-in car. 6. It reduces my risk of catching COVID-19; I'm vaccinated, but vaccines aren't 100% effective.

Yes. My employer has realized that people can work effectively from home (shocker!)

Definitely. Clients are finally open to engaging via video conference when they were nervous about the idea before. And...I can stop paying rent for an office that I didn't really use since I was at client sites all of the time.

On the negative side, respondents said:
- They missed people and the social aspect of the office, plus face-to-face communication
- internet connection is not good enough and the office space at home is inadequate
- They're required to be on-site
- They were able to separate work and home life better
- They were able to work better at the office - more efficient/productive

No, I plan to return to the office full time next month. While I appreciate the increased flexibility, I prefer to separate my home and work environments. I also prefer the social aspects of being in the office and I do not have a commute (I can walk to work). I am also tired of Zoom meetings and although I understand that online participation makes meetings more accessible to some folks, I am looking forward to meeting with folks in person.

Generally I do not expect to increase work from home. I find it less efficient in numerous ways. I miss the collegiality of the team being together in one please and miss the easy brainstorming and problem-solving that enables. The exception is that when I have a major project that requires focused concentration, I may work from home to have less distraction.

I would be okay with some meetings being WFH, but my field requires in person observations and conversations. Also, my Internet is AWFUL.

No. I can't wait to get back to working in the company of other people. I may actually work at the office, away from home, MORE than before COVID

No, mine is a kitchen-based job, feeding preschoolers in care

No. Working from home, while convenient, is not what I want long term. I miss the social aspect of talking with others and the work/home separation REALLY helps preserve my sanity.

No. Working from home is hard on my mental health

Absolutely Not.. My interactions with legislators and colleagues inside the VT Statehouse are very important. Cannot be replaced by Zoom

No. Job doesn't lend itself to remote work. Physical connection with employees facilitates personnel management and team interactions. Organization expects to allow employees to move from 1 day/week telecommute pre-pandemic to 2 days/week post-pandemic.

Question 2: Are there steps your organization could take to enable more WFH?

Respondents needed permission and flexibility the most to enable more WFH, with help covering the cost of internet and home office supplies mentioned frequently. In addition, several respondents noted that improved trust from employers that WFH produces the same amount and quality of work would benefit them.

In this category we identified four themes:

- Developing or adjusting WFH policies to allow more flexibility
- Supporting employees with technology and technical support
- Providing financial compensation for home office supplies
- Trust from employers, knowing that employees can get work done at home

Support high-speed internet (either full or partial), home office stipend or budget line for a comfortable chair and laptop stand, etc. Meetings held over Slack.

Support supervisors in developing a plan to allow for hybrid work. Acknowledge that students (both online and residential) have become accustomed to accessing services differently as a result of the pandemic. It has become easier for certain student-facing departments to engage with students more often as a result of using video conferencing.

Understanding that the drive to eke the most out of its workers leads to burnout and disillusionment. A kinder, more flexible workplace that encourages work-life balance will lead to happier workers (which, to incentivize them, may in turn reduce turnover and lead to more productive workers, though I don't necessarily think that should be the point).

Shift in explicit workplace language and culture to voice respect and space for employees working at home vs. the "so you're "working" from home" mentality; all meetings held in the office having a dial-in/video-conferencing option; all teams having the option for hybrid schedules to decrease stigma and promote equality.

Officially endorse snow day teaching from home. Give parking discounts to those who regularly work from home. Allow faculty to continue using PDF funds on supplies for home teaching (lights, mics, cameras, desk chairs etc.)

Allow us to continue using online tools to do our work. 2. Let people choose when to be in the office, assuming their choices don't negatively impact coworkers or productivity. 3. Take surveys of staff to ask for ideas re: efficient, eco-friendly practices. 4. Provide duplicate equipment so we don't have to transport large computer screens between home and office, for example.

Encourage video conference meetings whenever possible. Stipend for increased internet speed. Provide an adequate computer with built-in camera and microphone. Pay for a portion of the Internet bill to allow employees to contract for a high speed connection.

Creating consistent policies for expected business hours and availability; provide ergonomic office equipment, such as office chairs (within reason); create equity by providing benefits such as slightly higher pay or additional time off to those employees who cannot work from home due to their position responsibilities. Introduce more online communication and sharing technologies beyond Microsoft Teams, which isn't always consistent or user-friendly—for example, Slack and Zoom are easier for non-campus affiliates to navigate.

Right now we have to fill out "tracking forms" where we indicate what we worked on every day at home, which feels overbearing and like they don't trust us to get our own work done. If they would take this requirement away, it would make our lives a lot easier and wouldn't impact the work we actually do.

Providing an internet and utility stipend. Trusting that people can get things done at home.

Investment in team building and culture so that there's still a strong sense of cohesion despite working remotely - for example monthly gatherings (outdoor in person or virtual) explicitly focused on relationship building.

Question 3: Is there anything else you would like to add?

The respondents generated a wide variety of responses that covered multiple perspectives of the overall research question. Many expressed their content with continuing with telecommuting and others spoke about hardships and other difficulties that would arise if their employers ultimately decided that they would be working from home on a long-term basis post pandemic.

<u>Positive comments were grouped in the following categories:</u>

- Flexibility, individuals liking the option of working at home
- More family time
- Telecommuting is more environmentally friendly
- Mental health and personal care
- People enjoying working from home, believe that working from home can be productive

FLEXIBILITY has been key to the good work and impact my organization and community have been able to do during a pandemic. Let's retain that mentality and keep taking care of each other. The success and health of our neighbors is our success and well-being.

I am happy that the demands and restrictions of the past year have created new norms and options for working from home. And I am grateful to have the type of job and employer where that is possible.

I have liked being able to work from home to be able to assist my family as they needed someone home for remote schooling of our grandchildren. I have also liked that being at home my breaks often included some chore that I would otherwise have to do in the evening or on the weekends.   easy things like putting dinner in the oven, or putting on a load of laundry ....or bread making .

Working from home full time is wearing on family life. Part time can reduce commute time, and allow for better family relationships.

Considering all the reports of the benefits to the environment, why would employers require us to return if we don't need to do so to do our jobs? While I save money from not driving (gas) those funds are more than used each month with expensive internet (which is unreliable at times).

I cannot underscore how much better working from home is for me. I get to work earlier and work later because I am not commuting. I can spend the commute time towards work. I also find the office so uninspiring, distracting, and unhealthy. At home, I can incorporate better sleep, eating, and exercise habits while decreasing my carbon footprint. Again, I look forward to returning to meaningful field work but to just sit in an arbitrary location to do email and paperwork is crazy to me. I do hope my employer will allow me to balance work from home in the future with "returning to normal".

<u>Negative comments grouped in the following categories:</u>

- Technology can be an obstacle
- Employers remain hesitant
- Not everyone is capable of working from home
- Negative psychological effects of working from home

Lack of broadband access in VT is deplorable. EC Fiber has been promising me connection for months with no movement. There has to be another solution.

If employers tout the value of "work/life balance," they should strongly support the flexibility of working from home. I can eat better (more time to prepare food, bake bread), see neighbors, be with my aged dog, and preserve the weekends for activities that re-invigorate me. Also, I can participate more in the civic life of my community.

My work situation is complicated because I usually spend my days in the Statehouse as a lobbyist. When the building reopens, I will be there.

The dark side of remote work is isolation. I note you have not gone there. I think employers/managers have to learn to navigate and support the mental health needs of staff in new and different ways as we figure out the new normal.

DISCUSSION & NEXT STEPS

Across the county survey after survey shows the same results, for those with the choice, more want to telework. The last 16 months have been a giant case study underscoring that WFH works for many and many plan to continue. What this means for employers and employees and society in general remains to be seen. But these results are clear, many employees in certain kinds of organizations will expect to continue to have WFH options. Many of the respondents here will continue to work from home, especially those who stated that telecommuting had positive side effects on their personal life-- such as mental health and family time.

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Telecommute Survey

May 7-May 20

Name

Email

Name of Employer

Title at Organization

Type of Organization

County You Live in

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?

And after March 2020, roughly how many days a week have you been regularly working 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, do you plan to increase the proportion of your work that you do from home (as compared to pre-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 employer 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 work from home more often than I did prior to March 2020.

When things are relatively normal again, I expect more people in my organization will work from home more frequently than they did prior to March 2020.

Working from home has become more acceptable and supported by my employer in the last year.

My employer has reduced office space or plans to reduce office space in the future because people are working from home more.

Are there any current programs or policies in place at your workplace to encourage or support employees who work from home. Please check all that apply.

Please describe some changes that your employer could make to support employees (including yourself) working from home.

Are there some changes that your employer could make to your work place that would make you want to return on a more regular basis? Please describe.

Can we contact you to discuss other incentive programs offered by state, federal and local organizations related to working from home?

If you work 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.

My regular commute to work is...

Age

Phone Number

Is there anything else you would like to add?