

Richard Glover: 25 to six, Richard Glover with you on Drive. Hey, you've probably heard a lot about workplaces needing to become adaptable and allow employees to work from home if possible. We spoke earlier this week with Sally McManus, the secretary of the ACTU, and we talked about the fact that many jobs can't be performed remotely. It's no good telling a nurse or a schoolteacher or a plumber or a builder that they can work from home. Well, not most of the time. But what about those industries where working from home is possible? I wonder if you're someone who regularly works from home. How do you find it? Do you have some really great advice for someone who might be thinking about attempting it for the first time? What are the pitfalls, and what are the tricks of the trade? 1300 222 702. We'd love to know your experiences of working from home. If you've got children in the house, does that make it impossible, or are there ways to cope with that as well? 1300 222 702.

Richard Glover: And if you are an employer, how do you find it when some or all of your team work from home? Is it actually better? You can have access to something different from if they're all together, or is it a hassle? And if you're a parent, how difficult is it to work from home when you have small children with you? Again, I'd love you to ring me. 1300 222 702. Emma Walsh is the founder and CEO of Parents at Work, an organization which provides work and family education, policy advisory services to workplace and individuals. She's all about family-friendly, flexible work for parents and carers, so she knows a thing or two about working from home, and she joins us. Good afternoon.

Emma Walsh: Thank you.

Richard Glover: How do you think people are going to find this if they've never done it before and suddenly their employer is saying, "Off you go?"

Emma Walsh: Oh, look, it's a good question. Well actually, the irony is that for many people, they've been looking for more flexible work arrangements. We know this because we did a National Working Families Survey last year, and we surveyed over 6000 families and asked them, "How's the flexibility working for you? Do you need more, less?" And without fail, we had over 50% say, "No, we need more flexibility. If we're going to juggle work and family commitments, flexibility is the answer." So we know that it's popular, and we know people want more of it, and the irony is they've been asking for it for many years, and here suddenly it is, potentially thrust on them.

Richard Glover: Yeah, yeah. Do you think the employers believe that they get their money's worth, or is the employer thinking, "When he or she is at home, I bet they're not working the way they do when I can see them?"

Emma Walsh: It's a good question, and one I'm faced with as well. I'm a small business owner, and most of our team work from home. So yes, there has to be a high level of trust between you and your employees, that they're doing the work. But the reality is we are all connected, 24/7 pretty much, whether we like it or not,

through our smartphone devices, and obviously laptops and so on. So, I think the ability to have a lot more transparency between office environments, work from home offices, that's just a lot more available now. Look, I think that a lot of evidence suggests that people that work from home can actually be a lot more efficient. It's harder, if you like, the lines are blurred between clocking on and clocking off. So, it's highly likely that people potentially do more work from home.

Richard Glover: Okay. There's not all that chatting around the coffee machine about last night's episode of... Dot, dot, dot. Yeah, look, in practice, how does it work? If you've been doing it a lot, do you think you are as efficient as somebody who goes into the workplace? Are there things you miss out on? Are there tough sides of this? Are there great sides of it? My wife has been working from home. She's a writer, she's been doing it since she was 18 years old. I rang her up and I said, "Deb, what are the bad things and what are the good things?" These are what she said to me.

Richard Glover: She said the good things are not having to wear shoes, you can wear your ugg boots, being home when deliveries come, and the highlight of the day is the mail person coming to the door. She said the bad things are it's hard to control your eating because the kitchen's just there, and you've got to make up these ridiculous structures to avoid the yawning chasm of the day. I think she means, "Okay, I'm going to complete this by 11 o'clock and I'm not going to leave this desk until I do so." So, you create that structure for yourself. You've got no boss to do it.

Emma Walsh: You have to be really highly disciplined I think. Look, I think it does deliver more efficiencies because, as you say, you don't have as many interruptions, except maybe the household chores, as you were just talking about. But yeah, the ability to be focused, have less distraction and get done what you need to get done, there's no doubt that we know flexible working from home allows that to be much more easy than a busy office, for example.

Richard Glover: Okay. Emma Walsh is here. Our topic is working from home, there's going to be a lot more of it in the next few months by the sound of things. It won't suit every job, but it suits some. So, what are the tricks of making it work and what are the downsides of it? And if you're an employer, do you really believe that you're getting your money's worth? Maybe you've got some experience and you can say, "Well actually, the people who work from home are doing more than the people in the office," or vice versa. Tell us what you reckon. 1300 222 702. John's here from Kellyville. Hi John.

John (1): Hello. How you going, Richard?

Richard Glover: Yeah. Now, you've been doing it for a while.

John (1): Yeah, I've been doing it on and off, a week at a time or a few days for the last 18 years.

Richard Glover: How do you find it?

John (1): Look, it's a mixed bag. As you said, there's positives and negatives. On a positive side, you don't have to commute, and in that way I tend to find I do work a little bit longer.

Richard Glover: So you've saved yourself, I don't know, two hours and, depending on how you do it, 20 bucks?

John (1): Yeah, exactly, exactly. You've also got to be very structured. It's great to be able to do the chores, but you don't want to spend all day doing the washing, but you can spare 10 minutes here and there, so that's good.

Richard Glover: The other thing I didn't mention, Debra said she actually looks forward, when there's washing to put out, she saves that up as a special treat because she can get away from the desk.

John (1): Ah yeah, that's true. From my side, I did miss the socialization. So, I don't work from home for extended periods. One of the fun points you need to look out for, I found when my kids were about three or four I was working from home a lot, and I realized that because one day I started to sing along with Hot Potato, Hot Potato while I was typing away on the keyboard.

Richard Glover: Can you make up for that socialization problem by, you know, ring them up at work, sending an email at work?

John (1): Most certainly you can, but if you want to go out and have a coffee or have a lunch, so, you miss those little things, but you can make it up, yes.

Richard Glover: Okay, that's so interesting. John, thank you so much. And Emma, I suppose, if I can play the devil's advocate, some bosses would say it's actually in those casual conversations at the office around the water cooler, as the Americans say, that useful discussions can occur, and you can come up with a great idea for this thing that you're going to do as a company. And if you're all disparate, working from home, that's not going to happen.

Emma Walsh: Oh look, there's no doubt that having the inspiration, if you like, of colleagues around you, is valuable. If it wasn't, we'd have all been working from home decades ago on a really regular basis. So, we can't underestimate the value of having others around us to stimulate us, to keep us motivated and keep us engaged, for sure. Look, the other side to that is that largely, those kind of conversations can have a downside too. They can be really distractors, they can send us down a route to focus on something we weren't planning to do that day. Most people turn up to work with a rough plan of what they want to do.

They get to the office and that whole thing gets uprooted because five or six people have hit their desk within an hour or two, or some emails, and they go, "Right, that's that out the window." I think that's less likely to happen at home. So, you start a day usually as you mean to continue, and you've probably got a lot more likely chance of that happening from home.

Richard Glover: Isn't that interesting? Yeah, and you don't get waylaid by that meeting that should go on for five minutes and actually goes on for an hour. I love this little tip. "I run a small business and regularly work from home. My one tip, get dressed for the day. Don't lounge around in your PJ's," maybe that's right. Hayley's here from Bellevue Hill. Hi, Hayley.

Hayley: Hi, I'm nodding my head as I'm listening. That's my top tip as well. I always get dressed in the morning like I'm going out, whether I'm going to be sitting at home or going out to see clients.

Richard Glover: And how do you find it more generally? Do you think it is useful and productive and all of that?

Hayley: Can I tell you, the job that I'm doing now I've been doing for three years. I [inaudible] three years prior to this for another company working in the office, and then this job I've had three years working from home. I am 100% more productive working from home. 100%.

Richard Glover: Okay, this might actually help the economy, rather than hinder it. Hayley, thank you. Tony's from Menai. Hi, Tony.

Tony: Hi Richard, how are you?

Richard Glover: Yeah, how do you find this?

Tony: Yeah, pretty good. I'm a mostly retired person, but I've been doing a project for the one of the major banks with several other managers for seven months now, and I've been in the office twice in those seven months, and just fine with working from home. It's all online, everything's paperless files these days, and I find it quite good. I've established a bit of a routine, works pretty well for me. Wednesdays I normally don't work, but I'm working this afternoon, I played a bit of golf this morning, and take the kids to school of a morning, the grandkids, and pick them up, that sort of thing. Then I work the hours around that.

Richard Glover: It sounds blissful, actually. Much better than the day commuting, struggling into the office, working hard and then struggling back home. Tony, thank you very much. 1300 222 702. Emma Walsh is here from Parents at Work. This is interesting from Phil on the text. "It took me a long time to get used to working at home, now I love it. I'll often log on at 7 AM, work until 10 and then commute when there's no traffic. Also, I can take the boy to soccer training and make up the time later." So, that's the flexibility you were talking about, Emma.

Emma Walsh: For sure. Look, I think if we can create more jobs that have more agility to them, exactly what Phil's just described, I do think we'd have a better economic outcome, actually. I do think we'd be much more productive as a nation. And it does certainly allow for multiple things to be achieved. He was just saying being able to log on, go and do the soccer drop-off.

Richard Glover: Yeah, and I also wonder with Tony's story, where he's been working hard, he's been focused on this. He drives to the soccer, he stands by the sideline, and actually half of the brain is still thinking about the business thing, and actually the solution comes there. And there's something about the new setting, down by the soccer field, that actually helps that process, that he wouldn't have if he was locked in a suburban office from 10 in the morning until six at night.

Emma Walsh: That's so true. You know, that ability when you're trying to fix a problem or you're really close to it and you're feeling really stressed, and if you can get out, have a walk, how suddenly the answer comes to you. Definitely, that ability to do that in a work from home environment, that's going to increase, and the ability between, as you say, juggle between different tasks. It's definitely got those upsides.

Richard Glover: Emma Walsh is here. So is David from Gladesville. Hi David.

David: Hi.

Richard Glover: What are the pros and cons and how do you make the most of it?

David: Pros are good. I'm more productive. But the cons, definitely the fridge. You need a time lock. Someone needs to invent a fridge that you can shut between this hour and that hour.

Richard Glover: Ah, isn't that great. See, because in some ways it's one of the advantages of home, is that you don't have to buy a \$10 sandwich, you can make your own for virtually nothing.

David: Yeah. Well, the fridge can open between 12:30 and 1:30, fine.

Richard Glover: What about the television? Does that need a time lock on it as well?

David: No, not really. Not so much. Everything's on cable and Netflix now so you can watch it whenever. So, the old days when, "Oh, it's four o'clock," something was on and you had to watch it at four o'clock, well, you can watch it any time you want now.

Richard Glover: Okay. So, we'll just develop the time lock for the fridge. Thank you very much. Steve's in Wedderburn. Hi Steve.

Steve: Hi Richard and Emma. I'm pretty much along with all the other people, really. I work from home 90% of the time. It saves me 15 hours a week in commuting time.

Richard Glover: Wow, yeah.

Steve: I'm an early riser so I like to get up, I'll have a couple hours in the office doing reports and spreadsheets and invoices, all that rubbish. And for me, I've drifted into being an office guy. I'm an outside guy by nature. And that's one of the things I love, is that when I get sick of looking at the computer I get up, and actually mowing the lawns is a pleasure, because it gets me away from the computer.

Richard Glover: And the brain's, [inaudible 00:13:08], the brain's still going then, and you might come up with a solution, oddly, when you're mowing the lawn.

Steve: Absolutely. And the privilege of being able to take my kids, go to my grandkids' things and then come back to work. Some of the traps in it are that you can tend to work more than you really think. I know a lot of these employers think that employees working from home, they're going to goof off. I tend to find it's the other way around. My wife often calls me at dinner time because I'm still... I'm in the office right now, literally writing emails.

Richard Glover: At 12 to six. And look, other than that as a con, that you're working too hard, as a negative, are there any other negatives? Because it's sounding pretty blissful, the no commuting and the lawn mowing and all of that.

Steve: Well look, I'm not a particular sociable person so I don't miss the society part of it, the socialization, so there's that. You've got to teach... My wife works three days a week, and the other two days when she's at home, it took a while for me to educate her to the fact that I'm not really here. I'm working. I can't go and run off and do this and do an errand. Or I can, I can, but there's a limit.

Richard Glover: And certainly I think friends sometimes have to understand that you're at work. Just because you're at home doesn't mean that someone can come and have afternoon tea with you as they might on a Sunday afternoon.

Steve: Exactly, and that goes for family as well. Sometimes my adult kids think that I'm semi-retired because I'm working from the office. Or they come over and I'm mowing the lawn. They don't realize that often I've been up since six and I'll still be here at six. As long as you learn to discipline yourself to do it, but the thing is, get the work done. Then there'll be no negative reaction from the employer. You've just got to get the job done.

Richard Glover: Yeah, yeah. All right, good on you Steve, that sounds pretty good. Jeff is one of those employers. What does he reckon, in Waterloo? Hi Jeff.

Jeff: Yeah, g'day Richard and Emma.

Richard Glover: Are these home workers pulling a wool over the employers' eyes, or are they actually getting a lot done?

Jeff: They are getting a lot done, and look, we're a small business, Richard. We only employ five people. We're an industry association, so we need to be a little bit flexible. We can't necessarily always offer those employment conditions of big corporates, but you do need to be flexible. I think it's the nature of where the future of work is heading. And that trust issue is important. If you can't trust someone at home to be performing well, then you probably also can't trust them in an office sitting behind a computer.

Richard Glover: Yeah, you can read Facebook for an hour at work too, can't you?

Jeff: Absolutely. And I guess it gets down to that work ethic of individual employees, but also, too, the culture of the organization I think is important. A couple of other things I consider is around accessibility of people at home. So, they should be as accessible, more or less, within reason, as if they were sitting in the office. And then also, too, a really important consideration for all businesses is workplace health and safety. Making sure that their home environment, their work setup at home, their desk, their office, all that type of stuff is the same as if it would be in the workplace.

Richard Glover: Okay, so you can't be typing on an upturned orange crate at home.

Jeff: They might be, but they need to tell me they're not.

Richard Glover: Good on you, Jeff. This is so interesting, isn't it? We're talking about the work from home thing, particularly because it's come up as a possibility during the coronavirus that lots of people will have to do it. Indeed, I'm already being told that quite a few companies have already done this. One of the big banks, apparently, has got two teams, I think it's a red team and a blue team and they're taking turns. The red team's at home for two days whilst the blue team are in the office, then they swap, and it means they've got a bit more personal distance in the office which is a good thing, but also they've got two teams, and if they get an infection spike, it's only going to be in one of those teams and the whole company won't fall apart.

Richard Glover: But does it work, this working from home? What are the challenges? How can you make sure that you can do it? It sounded like you need a bit more self-motivation maybe than you do in an office, where you've got other people around and the atmosphere. Well, when you're at home you've got to create some of this yourself. So, what are your tips for it? That lovely tip before, get dressed in the morning. Melanie is on the line. Hi Melanie.

Melanie: Hi, how are you?

Richard Glover: Yeah, good. You do a bit of this.

Melanie: I do. I work remote from Byron Bay, I've done that for the last four years.

Richard Glover: For a big Sydney company, yeah?

Melanie: The company I work for is actually in Melbourne. Yep. And there's four of us in our team of eight that work remote across New South Wales.

Richard Glover: And how hard is that from, presumably there's somebody in Melbourne who's directing you, is that hard for them?

Melanie: No, except it's funny, because our team lead is actually working remote from Manly. So, we're kind of all helping each other. But yeah, we believe it's about trusting your teammates and we're very productive and a high-performing team.

Richard Glover: Okay. Now, some people listening to this would say, "How can they have that little incidental discussion that you have over coffee," in which some person says one thing, another person adds a speck of an idea to it, and then the third says, "Put that all together, and we've got a new product that we could sell to, you know..." Do you know what I mean?

Melanie: Of course.

Richard Glover: Does that happen when you're working remotely?

Melanie: Yeah, so we've shared a few of our tips, and we actually just did a video that we launched on LinkedIn a couple of days ago. And our team, what we do for that sort of thing, we have what's called working meetings. So, we use technology called Zoom, so we're all actually on an online video conference, and we're all in there, and we actually schedule a time where we're all sitting in the room working away. So, there is a time where you're actually doing your admin or your tasks and then you can bounce ideas off of people. So, just exactly like that office environment that you mentioned.

Richard Glover: So, technology can help it happen if you use it properly. Melanie, thank you. Jenny's here from Crows Nest as well. Hi Jenny.

Jenny: Hi, how are you?

Richard Glover: Yeah, good. You wanted to talk about how tech can help as well.

Jenny: Yeah, I just wanted to follow up on that previous call. I've been working from home all day today and so have my team. We live in various spots around Sydney and we do it regularly. So, if we want to talk to each other, we just ping each other, Melanie mentioned Zoom, we use Microsoft Teams. There's heaps

of other products out there. You just ping each other and up comes the person's face on the screen and you can chat to them, have a few laughs, have a quick meeting. You can include other people, you can share screens, if you're both working on the same Excel spreadsheet you can pull up the spreadsheet. You can use instant messaging to just flick each other a quick message.

Jenny: So, you don't need to feel isolated. I think the technology is great, and if I'm working from home and other people are in the office, I can just jump onto one of those video things and I'll immediately be in the meeting room with everybody else and we can all chat, and it's so much easier than dialing in because when people are chatting on a phone, it's a bit wobbly and you can't really understand what people are saying. So, yeah, I think working from home with the technology, it's really present and instant, and makes you feel like you're still part of the team.

Richard Glover: Is motivation sometimes harder when you're just there on your own and if you wanted to stare out the window, you kind of could? So, you've got to self-motivate yourself rather than that coming externally. Does that make it harder?

Jenny: I've never experienced that. It's a great question. Yeah, no, I've never been demotivated. I think to what some of your other callers were saying about saving that traveling time, that kind of motivates me in staying longer, and you can get in the zone as well, much better than having all that exterior clatter around from people chatting behind you. You can just get right into it and just really focus, yeah.

Richard Glover: I mean to say nothing about my workmates, but that would be bliss, not to have everyone talking around you when you're trying to type. Hey Jenny, thanks so much, thanks so much for your call.

Jenny: Thank you.

Richard Glover: And here's John, who's calling us from a surf ski at North Head. Hi John.

John (2): G'day Richard, how you going?

Richard Glover: Describe the scene where you are.

John (2): It's kind of a nice nor'easter, no other people out here, except [inaudible] ferries going past, and it's very pleasant. So, I can do that quite often because I work from home and just take off the time when I want to, and I don't know how people actually go to work. I couldn't imagine something so terrible.

Richard Glover: Okay, but if I was your boss, John, and I heard this call.

John (2): I'm the boss, that's the difference.

Richard Glover: Oh, I get it, okay.

John (2): I work for myself [inaudible 00:22:08]. Yeah, so I do this quite often. I get out and go for a surf or go for a ski paddle or whatever, and then might work an hour or two longer to get the work done at the end of the day.

Richard Glover: And as a lot of people are saying, you've already saved two hours a day or something on your commute, so that's a lot of surf ski time, isn't it?

John (2): It is. And imagine having to get dressed up in proper clothes and have a shower and things like that.

Richard Glover: Some people are recommending that actually, but anyway. Well, enjoy the nor'easter or whatever it was.

John (2): Yeah. East breeze.

Richard Glover: Good on you, thank you John. What do you think of that, Emma?

Emma Walsh: Oh, John makes a great point. Look, so much of this is about wellbeing too. We know that if you're able to work from home more often, you're more likely to be able to fit in more exercise, and that's a great thing. And lots of employers are spending lots of money on wellbeing programs, and really encouraging people to fit exercise more regularly, obviously look after their physical and mental health, and yet something as simple as allowing more flexibility around when people come into work and leave work can be fantastic. And yeah, so, wellbeing I think's a huge part of it.

Emma Walsh: I just want to come back to the connectivity piece around having the right technology. I think that it is critical, and most of us are able to quickly, if not go onto one of those Google Hangouts and Zooms and so on, we've all got FaceTime. So, our ability to really pick up our phone and quickly visually connect with people that we need to is pretty much at all of our fingertips. I must say, though, there certainly are people that work in workplaces, regular jobs where you'd expect them to have a laptop, and they don't. And so, this is going to be particularly challenging for workplaces that have been a bit recalcitrant at organizing flexible work arrangements as they scramble to get a setup of laptops and so on into homes. But I am also concerned about NBN technology, and are we going to have the speeds necessary...

Richard Glover: That we need to...

Emma Walsh: To be productive at home.

Richard Glover: Exactly, especially if half of us are sent home. Look, one positive and one negative to end. "Working from home helps you avoid office politics and they can be very toxic," so that's a plus for it. "But on the other hand, I'm a full-time

mum and when my husband works from home it's horrible. The young kids know dad is home, they get really stressed when he is on the other side of the door, I have to keep them quiet. He expects to join us for lunch, and the worst part is that during nap time, instead of getting peace and quiet, he comes out and talks to me. No thanks. I want work to stay there and keep home for the family," and that is signed Anonymous.

Emma Walsh: Fair point.

Richard Glover: Fair point. Good on you, Emma, thank you so much for talking to us.

Emma Walsh: Thanks for having me.

Richard Glover: That's Emma Walsh from Parents at Work, and thanks to everyone who shared their wisdom about working from home, as it seems that a fair few more people might be doing it in the months ahead.