INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020 created havoc across the world, closing state, national, and international borders, shutting businesses, and suspending how we usually live and work. The messaging from the Prime Minister around working from home changed quickly, with the mid-March messaging 'to go about... regular life and business as much as possible' (Morrison, 2020a, 2020b) being abruptly replaced 2 weeks later with a request for people to stay at home and inferring that they should work from home (Morrison, 2020c). State leaders generally mirrored these instructions. Millions of office-based workers were then directed by their employers to begin working from home, in what has been dubbed the world's 'largest work-from-home experiment' (Banjo, Yap, Murphy, & Chan, 2020).
Many news, practitioner, and academic commentators speculated whether large-scale working from home would become the ‘new normal’ post-pandemic (e.g. see Hilton, 2020; Towers-Clark, 2020). This article assesses the prediction of a ‘new normal’ in relation to Australian public services, which employ 1.2 million staff (Burton, 2020). The article draws on previous research that identified resistance to working from home in the public sector, and examines the responses of various jurisdictions to the national working from home directive. It questions the likelihood that widespread working from home will remain a reality for public servants into the future, and considers what this might mean for future working arrangements.

2 WORKING FROM HOME BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Working from home can be beneficial for both employees and organisations due to the integration of work and caring responsibilities (Hyman, Scholarios, & Baldry, 2005), increased productivity (Collins, 2005), and increased employee engagement (Lee & Kim, 2018). Although some flexible working practices such as part-time work have been widely adopted over the last several decades (Cassidy & Parsons, 2017), employers have been more reluctant to facilitate working from home due to uncertain benefits, and pre-pandemic uptake was limited (ABS, 2019). Studies differ on the extent of increases to organisational performance and productivity (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Collins, 2005; Martin & McDonnell, 2012), and some question whether the gains outweigh losses due to difficulties in supervision and communication, employee isolation, and decreased commitment (Callier, 2012; Choi, 2018; de Vries, Tummers, & Bekkers, 2019).

Australian public services were early pioneers of working from home, evidenced by the creation of the 1994 Australian Public Service Interim Home-Based Work Award (Dixon, 2003). Despite this initial commitment, acceptance and uptake has been patchy. In 2013, only 10% of Australian Public Service (APS) employees teleworked to some degree (APSC, undated). By 2019, over a third of executive level (i.e. more senior employees) and very senior managers worked from home to some extent (APSC, 2019). Fewer than 15% of lower level employees worked from home, highlighting that this was not standard practice for these employees (APSC, 2019). Throughout the pandemic, 57% of APS employees were reportedly working from home (Dingwall, 2020).

Research has found continued widespread resistance of managers to enable lower level employees to work from home (Williamson, Colley, Foley, & Cooper, 2018). Interviews with almost 300 managers across four state jurisdictions found that uptake of working from home was constrained by unsupportive work cultures and attitudes, particularly managerial concerns about trust, productivity, and underperformance. Managers also cited inadequate technology and concerns about compliance with industrial instruments and work, health, and safety policies as reasons for not facilitating these arrangements. Before the pandemic, working from home in the public sector was not a standard working arrangement for most employees.

The next section analyses how government employers responded to the sudden need for employees to work from home, finding evidence of continued resistance. It also considers the messaging emerging during the development of transitional arrangements as employees began to return to their usual workplace, in order to assess whether working from home will become ‘the new normal’.
3 | TRANSITION TO WORKING FROM HOME DURING THE PANDEMIC

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared coronavirus to be a pandemic. Public service jurisdictions began issuing advice to their agencies on how to enable employees to work from home. The timing across jurisdictions varied, with two jurisdictions moving quickly by mid-March (NSW Government, 2020; Queensland Government, 2020) but others not having policies until the end of March (ACT Government 2020, APSC, 2020a; Government of WA, 2020; NT Government, 2020; Tasmanian Government, 2020; Victorian Government, 2020) or early April (Government of South Australia).

Several jurisdictions adopted a soft human resource management approach that both supported employee health and wellbeing and recognised that this was not the usual working from home – rather, employees had been forced home and were trying to work amidst other constraints such as home schooling. Some jurisdictions ensured staff had enough leave, whether pandemic leave or uncapped carer’s leave (Government of South Australia, 2020a; Queensland Government, 2020; Victorian Government, 2020), whereas others such as the Australian Capital Territory Government (2020) stipulated that employees who could not undertake their whole job from home would not be required to take leave. Several jurisdictions showed particular attention to health and safety, with Victoria encouraging managers to manage fatigue levels (Eccles, 2020; Victorian Government, 2020), and the Queensland government (2020) providing extensive online resources for managers and employees. The Victorian Government (2020) even provided some funding for home office consumables and utilities.

Other jurisdictions were less generous. The NSW Government (2020) suggested that if employees who were working from home were caring for a family member and could not be fully productive, they should take leave. The Northern Territory Government (2020) was quite prescriptive, initially implementing working from home on a ‘trial basis’. The Western Australian Government adopted a harder line and stipulated that employees with young children could not work from home, but could work ‘less than full-time work hours’ (Government of Western Australia, 2020). This range of responses seemed less related to rates of COVID-19 infection across jurisdictions at the time, but rather indicated varying levels of acceptance or resistance to the practice of working from home.

4 | TRANSITIONING OUT OF THE PANDEMIC

The timing and messaging of the transition out of the pandemic also indicated resistance. The Australian Government (2020) was first off the mark; however, advice appeared to be contradictory. On 8 May 2020, it released a ‘roadmap’ encouraging employees to continue to work from home, but on the same day also released advice to its own agency heads to plan to transition employees back into their usual workplaces (APSC, 2020b; Australian Government, 2020). Although decisions were to be made at agency level and subject to health and safety considerations, the clear intent was that APS employees should begin to return to their regular place of work.

At the end of May, 3 weeks later, most other jurisdictions had not begun this return transition. Only South Australia had a clear policy on transitioning back, although adopted a different approach. This government focused on a staged return according to a ‘hierarchy of need’, based on factors including whether the employee was essential to service delivery, whether they wanted to
return to the workplace, or were a vulnerable person. It also recognised that some employees may wish to continue working from home ‘for the foreseeable future’ (Government of South Australia, 2020b). Other jurisdictions did not begin the transition until June 2020.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

So is working from home likely to become the ‘new normal’ in the public sector? Prior to the pandemic, there was evidence of considerable resistance to working from home from some managers who had concerns about technology, compliance with employment regulation, and employees’ productivity and performance (Williamson et al., 2018). Many of the technical barriers were swept away by the pandemic, leaving resistance based on institutional cultures and managerial attitudes.

Researchers have stated that to mitigate resistance to change, organisations should plan for the change, create a climate of trust, and encourage employee participation (Bailey & Raelin, 2015). The rapidity of the pandemic meant that few of these factors to counter resistance were in place, magnifying the crisis for both managers and employees. Once the immediate crisis has passed, factors contributing to resistance may re-emerge, based on past behaviour and norms. The public sector is path dependent, and researchers have found that flexible working arrangements have been gained incrementally. They suggest a ‘radical’ approach is needed to enshrine flexible working arrangements (Lewis & Campbell, 2007). Because the pandemic is endogenous to the public sector, it may not be the catalyst that will deliver long-term changes in working arrangements.

The continued take-up and normalisation of working from home will vary across and within jurisdictions, due to the institutional arrangements for public sector human resource management. New public management reforms have changed the role of central personnel institutions, as public service boards seeking standardisation were replaced with more facilitative institutions, such as public service commissions, that provide a central policy framework for agencies to operationalise (Colley, 2016; Hood, 2000; O’Donnell, O’Brien, & Junor, 2011). This decentralisation and agency discretion leads to policy differences between agencies, as well as considerable difference on implementation within each agency, although 2018 research identified a common theme or culture of resistance regardless of the type of policy. The recent history of managerial discretion and the resulting resistance and patchy take-up rates for flexible working arrangements (Williamson et al., 2018; Williamson, Colley, & Foley, 2019), together with the reluctance exhibited during the pandemic, makes continued reluctance likely.

A great deal of excitement is being generated that the pandemic is fundamentally changing how we live and work, with predictions that working from home will become ‘the new normal’. Based on past practice, however, we question the extent to which large numbers of public sector employees will continue to work from home. For the APS, which was slower to implement working from home during the pandemic and the first to plan the return transition, resistance may continue. Other jurisdictions may be more likely to continue to enable employees to work from home post-pandemic. Although many public servants have client-facing roles, the pandemic provided opportunities to be creative about other forms of service delivery, from online teaching to call centre work undertaken from home. Our future research will review the working from home experience across jurisdictions during the pandemic, at the end of 2020 (hopefully post-pandemic) and in 2 years to identify the extent to which practice has changed.

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