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The Demand and Drivers for Teleworking Among Back-Office Personnel After the COVID-19 Pandemic in New Zealand

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Abstract: Telework enables employees to work from any location other than their designated work environment with the integration of computing and telecommunication technologies. The advantages of teleworking include improved productivity and job satisfaction for employees, reduced overhead costs for employers, and decreased carbon footprint for the environment. However, the benefits and challenges of telework, especially on back-office employees in their organizations, are still not fully investigated. This project researched the demand for telework from New Zealand back-office personnel after the COVID-19 pandemic and the drivers for this need. The research used a mixed-methods approach with qualitative and quantitative approaches to achieve the research objective. A questionnaire consisting of the Likert scale, open-ended, and multiple-choice questions was used to collect quantitative data. In order to get insightful qualitative information about the research question, semi-structured structured interviews were used. The findings of the research revealed that there is a significant demand for telework among the back-office employees in New Zealand, and predominantly, they prefer a hybrid telework model.

Keywords: telework, COVID-19, back-office personnel, drivers, well-being, work-life balance

1. Introduction

The landscape of work has experienced substantial transformations in recent years, driven by rapid technological advancements, digital communication tools, and evolving employee expectations [1]. One significant development is the growing adoption of telework, also known as remote work or telecommuting [2]. Telework involves working from a location other than the traditional office setting, typically from home or a coworking space, utilizing digital tools for communication and collaboration [3]. Telework has become a popular choice for employees seeking a better work-life balance, as it enables them to work from any location with an Internet connection, thus avoiding long commutes and providing greater flexibility in their schedules [4]. Moreover, telework has been shown to improve employee productivity [5] and job satisfaction [6], reduce overhead costs for employers [7], and decrease the carbon footprint associated with commuting to and from the office [8]. As organizations increasingly seek flexible, efficient, and sustainable approaches to conducting business, telework has gained significant attention and has emerged as an essential element of the modern work environment [9].

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has served as a catalyst for the widespread implementation of telework on a global scale [10]. To mitigate the spread of COVID-19, governments worldwide introduced lockdown measures and social distancing guidelines, which forced organizations across various industries to adopt remote working policies [10]. New Zealand, like other countries, underwent multiple lockdowns and restrictions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic [11]. As a result, back-office personnel across various sectors, such as finance, administration, human resources, and information technology (IT), were compelled to adapt to telework rapidly [12]. Back-office personnel refer to employees responsible for the internal functions and support services within an organization and represent a well-suited group for telework [13].

The accelerated shift to telework during the pandemic has created several challenges for both employees as well as organizations. Hopkins and Bardoel [14] stated that maintaining effective communication while working and collaborating with colleagues is a major challenge. Additionally, social isolation due to teleworking creates limited physical discussion between employees which may have negative impacts on their mental health, well-being, and work-life balance [15]. Sometimes, the greater flexibility associated with teleworking may blur the boundaries between work and personal life causing extended working hours, increased workloads and burnout [16]. Moreover, telework can exacerbate inequalities, as employees who lack access to reliable information communication technologies (ICT) or a suitable work environment may be at a disadvantage [17]. Acquiring knowledge about the benefits and challenges of telework can facilitate informed decisions by organizations and employees in adopting this mode of work, tackling its associated challenges, and optimizing its benefits while diminishing the likelihood of potential adverse effects.

This research aimed to understand the views and experiences of New Zealand back-office personnel regarding telework before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of this research is to identify if New Zealand back-office personnel have a demand for telework after the COVID-19 pandemic and what are the drivers for it. To reach this goal, it is crucial to answer the questions

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"is there a demand for telework among New Zealand's back-office personnel after the COVID-19 pandemic, and what are the drivers for this need?".

2. Literature Review

Wibowo et al. [3] reported that the word telework originated in the 1970s to denote the integration of technologies in computing and telecommunication to shift the work location. In modern day, the above definition of teleworking has extended into a spectrum of words that includes working from home, flexible working, smart work, e-work, remote working, distance working, satellite office working, virtual work, and offsite work [18]. However, the main idea of teleworking is that an employee can achieve their job goals in full or partially somewhere other than the employers' premises with the aid of ICT [1]. According to Hopkins and Bardoel [14], hybrid telework is a relatively novel concept that has gained prominence during the recent global COVID-19 pandemic and refers to an employment arrangement where the employees divide their working time between the traditional workplace and remote locations, such as home or a coworking space, cafe, or library. Overall, considering that there are various interpretations and definitions of telework, scholars and practitioners must establish clear boundaries and dimensions to ensure consistency and comparability across different studies and contexts.

2.1. Evolution of telework

The origins of teleworking can be traced to the 1950s when technology allowed telecommuting by linking subsidiary locations with headquarters using so-called dumb terminals connected via telephone lines as a network channel [2]. However, the historical records suggest that the term "telecommuting" was coined by Jack Nilles, an engineer at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, in 1972 [18]. In modern times, it can be described as a virtual or Cloud-based office accessible from anywhere with a gadget and Internet connection [19]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a vast impact on the landscape of work, catalyzing the extensive adoption of teleworking [20]. Governments worldwide introduced the omnipresent implementation of COVID-19 lockdowns and health mandates that limited in-person interaction and organizations were forced to take measures to ensure business continuity [10]. Several studies suggest that at the current time, organizations have realized that telework could be a permanent or long-term alteration to the traditional working arrangements that will persist even after the resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic [21, 22].

2.2. Telework in New Zealand before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

The data available on telework in New Zealand are relatively limited. The 2012 Survey of Working Life indicated that approximately one-third of New Zealand employees had worked from home for at least a few hours each week [23]. According to more recent data from 2018, only around 3% of New Zealand employees primarily worked from home, with one-third of employees reporting some form of telework with an even distribution between males and females [24]. The capacity to work from home varies by industry, with the education sector reporting the highest percentage of employees' teleworking to some extent (70%), while the retail, trade, accommodation, and food services sectors reported the lowest rate (10%) [24]. Comparing the 2012 and 2018 data

shows that the proportion of the New Zealand workforce engaged in some form of telework had remained stable at around 30%.

However, following the COVID-19 pandemic, New Zealand underwent a significant shift toward telework due to the implementation of lockdown measures [25]. The lockdowns resulted in an estimated 40% of New Zealanders engaging in telework, a substantial increase from the rate before the COVID-19 pandemic [26]. As reported by Auckland Council [27], approximately 770,000 employees who typically worked in urban offices transitioned to full-time telework to help control the spread of the COVID-19 virus. According to O'Kane et al. [11], a survey of 2,560 employees found that 22% of the participants prefer to telework full-time, and 67% desired a hybrid telework option. Another survey with over 1,000 New Zealanders participating revealed that 48% of participants would consider quitting their job if their employers forced them back into the office full-time [28]. While the studies do not directly provide information on the current telework in New Zealand, their findings suggest that the percentage of employee teleworking remains high following the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3. Benefits and challenges of telework

This section discusses the potential benefits and challenges associated with telework that can influence the decision-making of both employees and employers when it comes for choosing to telework as a mode of working.

2.3.1. Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is defined as a pleasant or positive emotional state that results from the general evaluation of the job or labor that employees are experiencing [29]. Telework is often associated with job satisfaction, but the actual impact of telework on job satisfaction is inconclusive [30]. Vega et al. [31] reported introverted employees may find teleworking more satisfying due to reduced social interaction, whereas extroverted employees might perceive it as a disadvantage.

2.3.2. Work-life balance

Mazur-Wierzbicka [32] stated that besides work time, employees need free time to foster personal relationships, self-development, and recovery. However, the work-life balance concept does not imply the complete separation of personal life from the working one but rather merges both lives to embrace job, family, and leisure in one synergy with the easy shift between them [33]. One of the telework extensively researched outcomes is its ability to facilitate the management between professional and personal roles and decrease work-to-life conflict [16, 18].

2.3.3. Telework and commuting

Numerous studies have demonstrated that telework can save employees significant time by reducing or eliminating commuting, particularly in densely populated urban areas with traffic congestion and limited public transportation options, and the rural regions where commuting to offices located in downtown districts can be time-consuming and expensive [18, 34]. Therefore, the ability of telework to reduce commuting has an overall positive potential to improve work-life balance by saving employees time and decreasing stress.

2.3.4. Job flexibility

According to Caillier [35], flexible work schedules are a modern employment practice that allows employees to have more control over the time, location, and regime of work. Beauregard et al. [16] argued that teleworkers can accomplish more work by utilizing flexible

scheduling and simultaneously balancing work and family responsibilities. Overall, telework flexible job scheduling provides employees with greater control over their work and personal lives, allowing them to balance their responsibilities more effectively, resulting in increased job satisfaction, lower work-to-life conflict, and reduced job-related stress, ultimately benefiting both employees and employers.

2.3.5. Telework and work-life boundaries

Beauregard et al. [16] claimed that when work is conducted in the same physical space that an employee uses for their personal life, it can pose challenges in creating and sustaining distinct boundaries between work and non-work domains. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a wealth of new research on telework, examining its impact on work-life balance. For instance, a scoping literature review of 131 publications revealed that while telework may facilitate participation in parenting, it can also lead to work-family conflicts [36]. Hence, the findings, specifically those obtained amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, propose that the employees' practices in managing boundaries can serve as a crucial measure to mitigate the unfavorable consequences of teleworking.

2.3.6. Productivity

Golden and Eddleston [37] reported that teleworking could lead to increased job performance and productivity due to reduced distractions, increased autonomy, and better work-life balance. However, it is essential to note that the impact of telework on productivity is not universal and may depend on various factors such as job type, task complexity, and telework arrangement [38]. Therefore, telework has the potential to enhance productivity, but its impact is contingent on various factors.

2.3.7. Employee autonomy

One of the fundamental factors in the association between telework and job satisfaction is the extent to which employees have autonomy over their work arrangements, represented by discretion over the timing, location, and work mode [39]. Therefore, the evidence suggests that autonomy over work arrangements is a crucial factor in the relationship between telework and job satisfaction. However, it is important to acknowledge that other factors, such as the nature of the work and employee preferences, may also influence the relationship between telework and job satisfaction.

2.3.8. Social isolation

According to Schall [15], extensive telework increases the reliance on ICT to communicate with colleagues and managers which can augment isolation and frustration. Similarly, Adamovic [40] suggests that telework can be also destructive to an employee's well-being due to so-called Zoom fatigue. Therefore, organizational social support can be an essential tool in enhancing the telework environment and mediating the feeling of isolation for employees.

While telework has been found to have the potential to impact employee work-life balance and job satisfaction positively, it also presents challenges, such as social isolation and establishing clear boundaries between work and non-work domains. A summary of potential benefits and challenges associated with telework is given in Table 1. It was discovered the COVID-19 pandemic had induced the widespread adoption of telework, which led to an increased discussion in the academic literature on telework and its outcomes with a highlight on aspects such as health and safety,

job satisfaction, and work-life balance. Furthermore, it was found that the employees' demand for telework has grown and will persist in the long term. However, the data on the current demand for telework among specific groups in New Zealand, such as back-office personnel, are limited. Therefore, this research aims to address this gap by investigating the attitudes of New Zealand back-office personnel toward telework, with a specific focus on exploring the demand and drivers for telework.

3. Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach. The questionnaire was administered to New Zealand back-office personnel who had teleworking experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employed a convenience sampling approach to recruit participants for the research, while the interviews were conducted with a subset of the respondents who completed the survey. For the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire, descriptive statistics calculations were used to summarize the data and identify relationships between variables. For the qualitative data gathered from the interviews, a thematic analysis approach was employed. The inclusion criteria for participants included being at least 18 years old and having worked remotely in their current position during periods of COVID-19 lockdowns in New Zealand. Another criterion was that participants have continued to telework, either full-time or on a hybrid telework schedule combining remote and office-based work.

The questionnaire used in this research consisted of open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions on a five-point Likert scale. During the data collection period, a total of 125 responses to the questionnaire were received. Out of these responses, 101 were fully completed, while the participants left the rest with varying levels of completion. The number of interviews conducted was 10, with each participant from the pool of survey respondents, offering a rich, in-depth perspective on the research questions. The questions used for the survey and the semi-structured interviews are presented in Appendix 1 of this paper. Descriptive analysis was used to summarize quantitative data and describe the main features of the collected data, such as central tendency and dispersion, providing an overview of the general trends and patterns within the data [41]. A thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data obtained from the interviews.

To reduce bias in the research methodology, several measures were taken. First, the questionnaire included both open-ended and multiple-choice questions on a five-point Likert scale, allowing for diverse and comprehensive data collection. Second, the inclusion criteria were carefully selected to ensure a representative sample of the population of interest, reducing bias and increasing relevance and meaning of the data collected. Third, a mixed-methods approach was employed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, further reducing bias. On the other hand, the sample size was determined based on availability and accessibility, which may have introduced some bias but was necessary given the research constraints. While a convenience sampling approach was used, the carefully selected inclusion criteria helped ensure a representative sample and relevant data collected.

4. Results

This research utilized two datasets, namely questionnaire responses and interview responses, as primary sources of data for analysis.
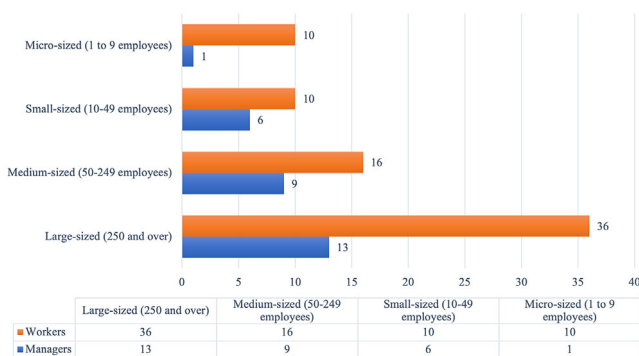
Table 1
Benefits and challenges of telework CSR

Criteria	Description	Benefits and challenges of telework
Job Satisfaction	Positive emotional state of employees	Positive job satisfaction
Work-life Balance	Employees need free time to foster personal relationships, self-development, and recovery	Effective management between professional and personal roles and decrease work-to-life conflicts
Telework and Commuting	Saving employees time by reducing or eliminating commuting	Overall positive potential to improve work-life balance by saving employees time and decreasing stress
Job Flexibility	Allows employees to have more control over the time, location, and regime of work	Provides employees with greater control over their work and personal lives, allowing them to balance their responsibilities more effectively
Telework and Work-life Boundaries	Can pose challenges in creating and sustaining distinct boundaries between work and non-work domains	Employees' practices in managing boundaries can serve as a crucial measure to mitigate the unfavorable consequences of teleworking
Productivity	Increased productivity due to reduced distractions, increased autonomy, and better work-life balance	Potential to enhance productivity
Employee Autonomy	Represented by discretion over the timing, location, and work mode	Improved job satisfaction
Social Isolation	Increases the reliance on ICT to communicate with colleagues and managers which can augment isolation and frustration	Can be destructive to an employee's well-being due to so-called Zoom fatigue

4.1. Questionnaire results

The age distribution of the participants by gender, comprising two-thirds of females, accounted for 65.3% ($n = 66$) of the sample, while males accounted for 34.7% ($n = 35$). The most prevalent age group among the participants was 38–47 years, accounting for 46.5% ($n = 47$) of the sample, followed by 28–37 years at 40.6% ($n = 41$). The participants were asked about their job positions, with a division between manager/supervisor and worker roles, and the size of the organizations they were employed by. The distribution of participants based on their job roles and the size of the organizations is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 2 illustrates the availability of telework before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, telework was accessible to 61.4% of participants ($n = 62$), while after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of participants with access to telework increased significantly to 93.1% ($n = 94$). This represents a significant growth of 51.6% in the availability of telework after the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase in access to telework can be attributed to the widespread adoption of telework as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for organizations to continue their operations while keeping their employees safe. It is likely that this trend toward teleworking will continue in the future, as many organizations and employees have found it to be a viable alternative to traditional office-based work.

Figure 1
Participant job positions and size of the organization they are employed by

	Large-sized (250 and over)	Medium-sized (50-249 employees)	Small-sized (10-49 employees)	Micro-sized (1 to 9 employees)
Workers	36	16	10	10
Managers	13	9	6	1

Figure 2
Availability of telework before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

4.1.1. Telework availability and intensity rate before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

The questionnaire on the above statement inquired about various aspects of telework, including its availability both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of days per week spent teleworking before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ideal number of telework days preferred by the participants.
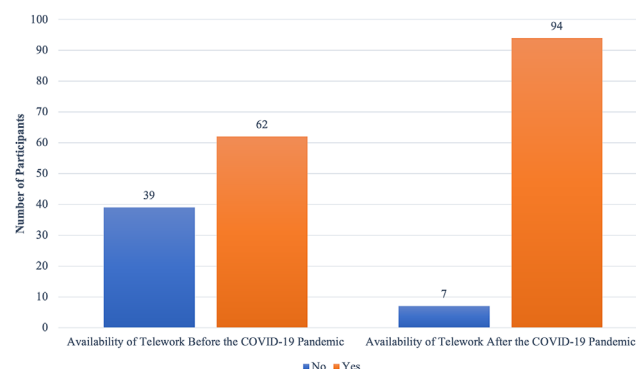
Figure 3 illustrates the telework rate before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, categorized into four groups: "1–2 days per week," "3–4 days per week," "Full-time," and "Not teleworking." Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 65.3% ($n = 66$) of participants did not telework, while only 9.9% ($n = 10$) of participants worked full-time, 6.9% ($n = 7$) of participants worked 3–4 days per week, and

1–2 days per week worked 17.8% ($n = 18$) of participants. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation changed significantly. At the time of collecting data, when the implementation of telework became voluntary compared to the compulsory application during the COVID-19 pandemic, only 10.9% ($n = 11$) of participants did not telework, while 21.8% ($n = 22$) participants worked full-time, 37.6% ($n = 38$) participants worked 3–4 days per week, and 29.7% ($n = 30$) participants worked 1–2 days per week. The initial shift toward telework during the COVID-19 pandemic can be attributed to the social distancing measures and lockdowns that governments mandated to cope with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the rate of telework remains high even after the easing of these COVID-19 mandates, indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic has likely had a lasting impact on work arrangements and attitudes toward telework. This is likely since many organizations and their employees have found that telework can be effective. As employees and employers became more accustomed to teleworking, it became a viable option even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3
**Telework rate before and after the COVID-19 pandemic**
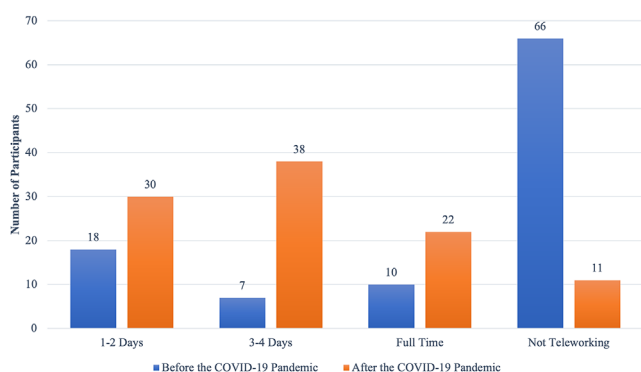
The growth in the percentage of teleworkers in each category is remarkable. The percentage of participants teleworking full-time increased more than twice, from 9.9% before the COVID-19 pandemic to 21.8% after the COVID-19 pandemic (a growth of 119%; $n = 10$ to $n = 22$). The rate of participants teleworking 3–4 days per week also increased significantly from 6.9% before to 37.6% after the COVID-19 pandemic (a growth of 442.9%; $n = 7$ to $n = 38$). Furthermore, the percentage of participants teleworking 1–2 days per week increased from 17.8% before the COVID-19 pandemic to 29.7% after the COVID-19 pandemic (a growth of 67.4%; $n = 18$ to $n = 30$). Finally, the percentage of non-teleworking participants reduced significantly from 17.8% before the COVID-19 pandemic to 29.7% after the COVID-19 pandemic (a decrease of 83.3%; $n = 66$ to $n = 11$). Overall, the data show a significant shift toward telework due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with more participants choosing to telework even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1.2. Attitudes and desire to telework

The questionnaire included two of the following questions to gain insights into participants' attitudes toward teleworking. The question, "Do you enjoy teleworking now?" aimed to measure participants' level of job satisfaction with teleworking and to identify whether participants who telework do not like it, do not feel the difference, or enjoy the experience. Figure 4 illustrates the

rate of job satisfaction with telework at the time when the COVID-19 pandemic measures were no longer mandatory.

Figure 4
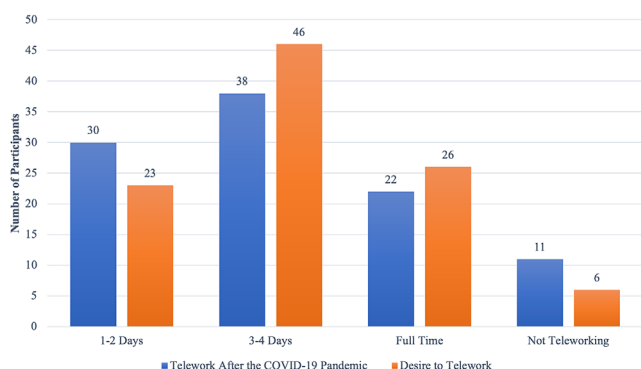**The rate of participant job satisfaction with telework after the COVID-19 pandemic**
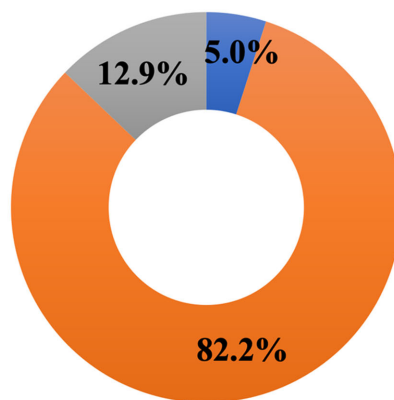
According to the results, 82.2% of the participants ($n = 83$) reported that they enjoy teleworking. A smaller group of participants, 12.9% ($n = 13$), indicated that they did not feel any difference between teleworking and working in a traditional office. Only 5 of the participants ($n = 5$) reported that they do not like teleworking. The group who reported that they do not like teleworking indicates that telework may not be the best fit for everyone. The group of participants who do not feel a difference between teleworking and working in a traditional office indicated that teleworking is becoming more normalized and that participants are adapting well to this new mode of work. Overall, these data suggest that telework is generally well-received by employees, which may have important implications for the future of work and workplace flexibility.

The next question, "How many days a week do you prefer to telework?" aimed to measure the extent to which participants preferred teleworking as an alternative to traditional office work arrangements. The responses significantly contribute to answering the initial component of the first research question regarding the current demand for telework among New Zealand's back-office personnel. Figure 5 illustrates the comparison between the participants' current rate of telework and their desired number of days per week of telework.

Despite the significant growth in telework following the COVID-19 pandemic, the data presented in Figure 5 suggest that participants had a higher preference for teleworking than the current rate available to them. According to the findings, the most preferred number of days per week for teleworking among participants was 3–4 days, with 45.5% ($n = 46$) of participants indicating this preference. The following preference was "Full-time," 25.7% ($n = 26$) of participants. Slightly fewer participants, 22.8% ($n = 23$), preferred to telework "1–2 days per week." The least preferred was "Not teleworking," with only 5.9% ($n = 6$) of participants.

The data reveal gaps in each telework category when comparing the current telework rate to participants' preferences. In the "3–4 days per week" category, the data indicate that 21.1% more participants would prefer to telework ($n = 38$ current compared to
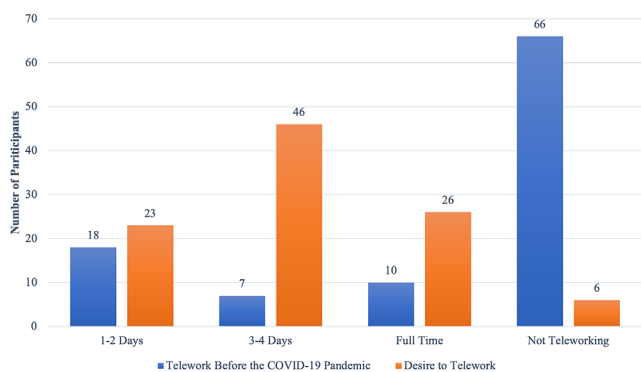
Figure 5
Comparison of the participant's current and desired telework rate

"Full-time" category shows a significant difference, with the desired rate being 2.6 times higher than the previous rate ($n = 10$ previously compared to $n = 26$ desired). However, the most dramatic difference is observed in the "Not teleworking" category, where the desired rate is 11 times lower than the pre-COVID-29 pandemic rate ($n = 66$ previously compared to $n = 6$ desired). These findings suggest that participants are showing a strong preference for telework, particularly for the "3–4 days per week" and "Full-time" categories, while the traditional office-based work is becoming increasingly less desirable. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many organizations and employees to adopt telework, significantly increasing telework rates. Given this development, it is difficult to picture a scenario where the telework rate reverts to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic level. Moreover, it seems that a considerable portion of the workforce has become accustomed to this way of working. Therefore, it is probable that the telework rate will remain higher than the pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels.

4.1.3. Benefits and challenges of telework

The questionnaire subsequently asked participants to identify the positive and negative aspects they encountered while teleworking. Two lists of features were prepared by the researcher, and participants also had the option to provide their own variants. Although a few participants submitted their variants, the researcher carefully reviewed and analyzed them. It was found that these self-written variants were related to the existing categories. Consequently, the researcher reassigned the participants' self-written variants to the appropriate listed features.

The responses to the questions about the positive and negative aspects of telework can provide valuable insights into answering the second aspect of the first research question regarding the factors driving the demand for telework among New Zealand's back-office personnel. An illustration of the positive features of telework and the frequency of their selection by participants is presented in Figure 7, while the negative feature distribution is illustrated in Figure 7.

$n = 46$ desired). Similarly, in the "Full-time" category, the data show that 18.2% more participants would select this preference ($n = 22$ current compared to $n = 26$ desired). Additionally, the data reveal that 45.5% fewer participants want to work full-time in a traditional office and want to have the telework option ($n = 11$ current compared to $n = 6$ desired). Moreover, the data suggest that 23.3% fewer participants want to telework "1–2 days per week" ($n = 30$ current compared to $n = 23$ desired). These gaps indicate that not only an additional number of participants want to have a telework option but participants would prefer higher intensity in telework with a decrease in the "1–2 days per week" and "Not teleworking" categories and growth in the "3–4 days per week" and "Full-time" categories.

While the difference in desired and current telework preference rates may seem insignificant at around 20%, it is worth noting that such a figure can have important implications. However, the situation becomes more pronounced when the desired and pre-COVID-19 rates are compared, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6
Comparison of the participants before the COVID-19 pandemic and desired telework rate

Figure 7
Benefits of telework selected by participants

The findings illustrated in Figure 6 reveal a substantial difference in the three telework categories. Notably, there is a significant disparity between the number of participants who previously worked "3–4 days per week" and those who preferred to telework this number of days, with the desired rate exceeding the rate by approximately 6.6 times ($n = 7$ previously compared to $n = 46$ desired). Similarly, the
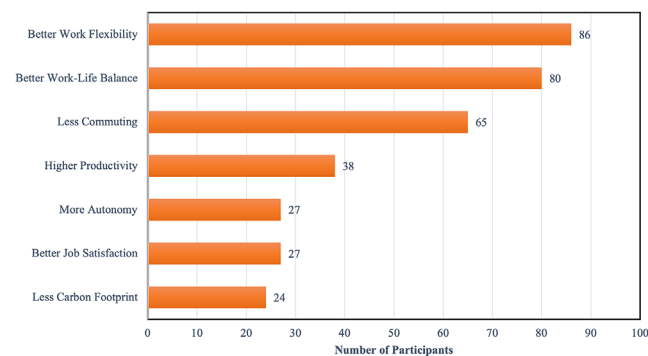
The data in Figure 7 reveal that the most frequently reported positive feature of teleworking is "Better work flexibility," selected by 85.1% of participants ($n = 86$). This is followed by "Better work-life balance," which was selected by 79.2% of participants ($n = 80$). "Less commuting" was the third most frequent positive feature, with 64.4% of participants ($n = 65$) selecting this. Other positive features selected by participants

included "Higher productivity" (37.6%; $n = 38$), "More autonomy" (26.7%; $n = 27$), "Better job satisfaction" (26.7%; $n = 27$), and "Less carbon footprint" (23.8%; $n = 24$). These findings suggest that the flexibility and improved work-life balance offered by teleworking are highly valued by New Zealand's back-office personnel. The reduced need to commute and associated time savings were also commonly selected as a positive aspect.

In addition to the positive features, respondents also reported challenges of telework, as illustrated in Figure 8. The most frequently selected negative aspect was the "Lack of social interaction," selected by 65.3% ($n = 66$) of participants. "Distractions at home" were also a significant negative feature, with 44.6% ($n = 45$) of participants selecting this feature. "Difficulty in staying motivated" was also selected by a notable percentage of participants, with 28.7% ($n = 29$) selecting this as a negative feature. Other negative features included an "Increased need for meetings" (24.8%, $n = 25$), "Loss of work-life balance" (9.9%, $n = 10$), and "Cybersecurity concerns" (5.0%, $n = 5$). The data show that while teleworking offers benefits, it also presents significant challenges, including a lack of social interaction, home distractions, and difficulty staying motivated.

Figure 8
Challenges of telework selected by participants
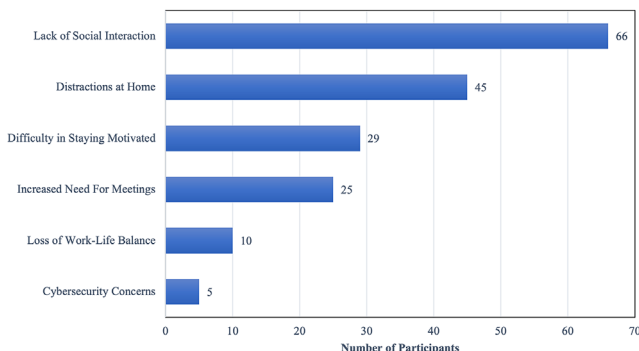
Overall, the data indicated that telework offers several benefits for employees, such as better work flexibility, improved work-life balance, and increased productivity. These positive features can have significant implications for employees and organizations, including reduced commuting time, increased job satisfaction, and cost savings. However, the data also highlight several challenges associated with telework, including the lack of social interaction, distractions at home, and difficulty staying motivated. Organizations and policymakers should consider these aspects when implementing and managing telework.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants generally have positive attitudes toward the impact of telework on their work-life balance and job satisfaction. They perceive telework as providing flexibility, reducing stress, and allowing more time for personal and family life. However, the findings also highlight potential challenges, such as isolation and varying experiences of stress reduction.

4.2. Interviews results

This section presents the findings obtained through analysis of data interviews collected. Interviews data collected and analyzed were designed to provide a more in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the participants regarding telework

in order to answer the first and second research questions. Precise questions were related to the demand for telework among New Zealand's back-office personnel following the COVID-19 pandemic and the factors driving this demand, as well as the attitudes toward telework impact on their work-life balance and job satisfaction.

4.2.1. Telework experience

The participants' telework experiences varied across different stages, including before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. While participants ($n = 5$) had limited or no experience with teleworking prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, others had occasional telework experience ($n = 3$). Remote work arrangements were uncommon and often revolved around personal appointments or commitments.

> "Before COVID-19, I had limited experience with telecommuting, primarily working remotely when I had personal appointments or commitments . . ." (M2)

However, for two participants ($n = 2$), the COVID-19 pandemic was their first experience with remote work, and they had to adopt a new working approach.

> "I had never worked remotely before the pandemic. It was a big change to have to set up a workspace at home and learn how to use new tools . . . " (F6)

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a widespread shift toward remote work telework, with organizations implementing telework to comply with public health mandates and guidelines. This transition required participants ($n = 10$) to adapt quickly to new tools and processes, transforming their homes into primary workspaces.

> "When the pandemic started, our company had to switch to full-time remote work. It was a big adjustment for me. I had to learn how to collaborate with my team virtually. It was quite different from being in the office every day." (F2)

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants' organizations ($n = 10$) adopted telework policies, with the prevalence of a hybrid telework model, allowing employees to choose how often they wanted to telework based on their preferences and job responsibilities. Participants telework experiences during this period varied, with participants ($n = 8$) teleworking for a few days per week, while others ($n = 2$) maintained a fully telework schedule.

> "After the pandemic, my company started a new way of working where we could choose how often we wanted to work remotely or in the office depending on our job. For me, I work from home about three days a week now, which helps me balance working with my team in person and from home." (M2)

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the acceptance of telework, with a widespread shift toward telework across participants' organizations. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, telework arrangements were mainly limited and often revolved around personal appointments or commitments. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations had to adopt telework policies to comply with public health mandates and guidelines, resulting in employees adapting quickly to telework. As a result, most of the participants' organizations adopted a hybrid telework model after the COVID-19 pandemic. This indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the acceptance and normalization of telework, highlighting the employees' existing demand to have an option for telework in the working environment.

4.2.2. Attitudes toward telework

Examination of participants' attitudes toward telework revealed diverse perspectives. While most of the participants expressed positivity toward telework, there were still some variations in opinion. The common view shared by all ($n = 10$) participants was that telework offered a considerable degree of flexibility and convenience to traditional office-based work. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, participants ($n = 5$) were open to the idea of teleworking, while participants ($n = 3$) had no strong feelings about it.

> "I always dreamed about it, to be able to work from home, and not all employees are happy with it. So, my initial attitude is very positive." (F3)

However, participants ($n = 2$) had concerns that telework may affect productivity and lead to social isolation.

> "... I would probably say about my first feeling that I really didn't want to work from home. I didn't even imagine how we can stay alone at home and do that, and I was thinking that it will drop down my efficiency." (M1)

The COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role in influencing participants' attitudes toward telework. For participants ($n = 5$), the COVID-19 pandemic formulated a positive outlook, as they witnessed the potential for telework to be effective for various job roles.

> "COVID-19 has made remote work more normal for me... now, because of COVID-19, more people are working from home, and it's not seen as strange or unusual anymore. In fact, it has become a more normal part of work for many people." (F4)

> "... then I started liking it very quickly probably because the company was quite ready for remote working, and gave us all the tools necessary, so we can set up the working place at home... I really started liking it. And I'm still enjoying working from home." (M1)

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, participants' attitudes toward telework have changed. The hybrid telework model became more prevalent, and participants appreciated the balance between in-person and telework collaborations.

> "I like to work from home sometimes, but I also like to work with my colleagues in person. So, I think it's best to have a mix of both. That way, I can enjoy the advantages of both ways of working." (F4)

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant change in participants' attitudes toward telework, with many acknowledging its potential effectiveness and appreciating the benefits of flexibility and convenience. The hybrid telework model that emerged after the COVID-19 pandemic has been positively received by participants as it allowed for a balance between in-person and telework collaborations.

4.2.3. Preference for traditional office or telework

Participants were asked about their preferences regarding working in a traditional office or teleworking. Most participants ($n = 9$) preferred a hybrid telework model that combines telework and in-person collaboration in the office. Participants also highlighted the benefits of choosing when and where to work based on their personal preferences and job responsibilities.

> "I prefer a hybrid work model because it allows me to enjoy the best of both worlds. I can work from home when I need to focus on individual tasks, and I can go to the office when I need to collaborate with my team or participate in meetings." (F4)

> "The hybrid model works best for me. I can work remotely when I need quiet time to concentrate on my tasks, and I can go to the office to have face-to-face interactions." (M2)

Moreover, participants ($n = 4$) indicated that they would never want to return to full-time office work, citing the flexibility and autonomy of telework as the main reasons for their preference.

> "I can't imagine going back to the office full-time after experiencing remote work... the flexibility it provides over my work schedule is too valuable." (F3)

In summary, participants predominantly favored a hybrid telework model that combines the benefits of both teleworking and in-person collaboration in the office. This preference not only underscores the significance of organizations adopting flexible telework arrangements but also reflects the evident demand for telework among participants. By acknowledging and addressing these preferences, organizations can create a more accommodating work environment that fosters employee job satisfaction and retention.

5. Discussion

The demand for telework among New Zealand back-office personnel has been evident through the findings of this research. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered through questionnaires and interviews have revealed a significant preference for telework, specifically the hybrid telework model, which combines telework and in-person collaboration. The quantitative findings of this research indicated that 82.2% of the respondents enjoyed teleworking, with a significant shift in telework availability and intensity rates after the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings showed that teleworking availability significantly increased, indicating a growth of more than 50%. Moreover, although the availability of telework has grown significantly, the desire to telework, reported by participants, is even higher. When participants were surveyed about their telework preferences, a considerable proportion of them favored a hybrid telework model, with almost 70% indicating a preference for teleworking for 1–2 days or 3–4 days per week. Similarly, the qualitative findings also support this, with nine of ten of the interview's participants expressing a preference for a hybrid telework model. These findings are consistent with the research of Smite et al. [42], which underscores that hybrid telework models have become a prevalent trend across industries and countries as employers strive to cater to the flexibility needs of their workforce. Similarly, the studies by Kwok et al. [43] identified a significant growth in telework due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the prevalence of the hybrid telework model. In addition, four interview participants expressed that they would never return to the traditional office for a full-time schedule. This is similar to previous studies that found that many employees exhibit a preference for the flexibility and independence offered by telework and expressed reluctance to reject such benefits by reverting to the traditional office [25, 28].

Therefore, it can be inferred that there is a significant demand for telework, particularly the hybrid telework model, among New Zealand back-office personnel. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a substantial increase in the availability of telework, but the desire to telework is even higher among participants. Most participants preferred a hybrid telework model, indicating a preference for the flexibility offered by telework while also valuing in-person collaboration. The preference for telework is consistent with previous studies that found a growing trend toward telework due to its benefits [25, 42, 43]. Moreover, participants also expressed a reluctance to return to the traditional office for a full-time schedule, indicating a potential shift from the traditional office toward more flexible telework arrangements.

Several drivers contributed to the demand for telework among New Zealand back-office personnel, as identified by both

quantitative and qualitative findings. These drivers include improved work-life balance, better work flexibility, reduced commuting time and costs, and higher productivity.

Firstly, the desire for better work flexibility emerged as one of the most significant drivers for telework demand among New Zealand's back-office personnel. The quantitative findings revealed that more than 85% of respondents identified flexibility as a significant benefit of telework. Similarly, the qualitative findings revealed that increased flexibility and control over their schedules were advantages and benefits for all interview participants. These findings align with previous research by Thompson et al. [44] and Caillier [35], which underscored the importance of flexible telework schedules in employment practices, allowing employees to have more control over their time, location, and regime of work. Moreover, the findings are in line with the research of Thompson et al. [44], which found that telework allows employees to take advantage of unscheduled time during the workday to attend to non-work tasks without having to sacrifice work time. In addition, the research findings also corroborate the notion that telework enables employees to demonstrate greater adaptability in meeting the demands of employers [16]. This adaptability allows employees to plan online appointments with international colleagues and customers in different time zones, further emphasizing the importance of telework flexibility. Thus, the findings of this research among New Zealand's back-office personnel highlight the significant role of work flexibility in driving telework demand, aligning with prior research that emphasizes the benefits of flexible work schedules for both employees and employers.

6. Conclusions

This research has provided valuable insights into the attitudes of New Zealand back-office personnel toward telework. The findings demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased the availability of telework, reflecting global trends [25, 42, 43]. However, the desire for telework among participants in this research is even higher than current availability, with most participants preferring a hybrid telework model, highlighting the importance of flexibility and in-person collaboration. This preference is consistent with previous studies that have noted the benefits of telework, including improved work-life balance, better work flexibility, reduced commuting time and costs, and increased productivity [21].

This research has some limitations that should be acknowledged. The first limitation is the relatively small sample size. A larger sample size could have potentially provided a more diverse range of experiences and perspectives, thus enhancing the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation was the potential for self-selection bias among the participants. As the recruitment process relied on social media and personal networking, those who had strong opinions or experiences with teleworking may have been more likely to participate. Future research could explore the demand and drivers for telework across different industries and countries to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the global telework landscape. Also, cross-cultural studies could provide insights into how cultural factors influence telework preferences and experiences.

Additionally, the cross-sectional design of this research, which collected data at a single point in time, may not have captured the dynamic nature of telework experiences and attitudes. Moreover, this research focused on the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for the increase in telework opportunities in New Zealand. Future longitudinal research would be valuable in understanding how telework attitudes evolve over time in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such research could help to identify trends

and shifts in preferences for telework, as well as uncover any potential long-term consequences of telework on work-life balance and job satisfaction.

Ethical Statement

This research adhered to the ethical principles and guidelines to ensure that it was carried out with the respect for the rights, dignity, and welfare of the participants and followed the guidelines of the Ethics Committee at the Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus, for which ethics approval was granted (Application Number – AIC113).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support this work are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire Questions
Demographic questions
1. What is your position role?
2. What is your organization's size?
3. Your age group?
4. Your gender?

Is there a demand for telework among New Zealand's back-office personnel after the COVID-19 pandemic, and what are the drivers for this need? (Multiple-choice)
1. Was telework available in your organization prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Is telework available in your organization now?
3. On average, how many days a week are you teleworking prior to COVID-19?
4. How many days a week do you prefer to telework?
5. On average, how many days a week are you teleworking now?
6. Do you enjoy teleworking now?
7. What positive telework features match your attitudes?
8. What negative telework features match your attitudes?

What are the New Zealand back-office personnel attitudes toward telework as an internal CSR practice during COVID-19 and in the future? (Likert Scale)
1. My organization was prepared for the shift from office-based work to telework at COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Telework was effective in my organization during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. I believe that providing telework during the COVID-19 pandemic helped my organization to maintain health and safety security of employees.
4. I believe that by providing telework, my organization positively affects the work-family relationships of employees.
5. I believe that by providing telework, my organization positively affects the work-life balance of employees.
6. I believe that by providing telework, my organization increases the job satisfaction of employees.
7. I believe that telework is important for health and safety in normal times.
8. I believe that providing telework helps my organization to provide a more flexible teleworking arrangement.

9. I believe that providing telework helps my organization to provide a more favorable working environment.

What attitudes do New Zealand back-office personnel possess due to the impact of telework on their work-life balance and job satisfaction? (Likert Scale)
1. I feel more satisfied with my job when I'm working from home.
2. I feel that I have more time for my private life when working from home.
3. I feel that my private life and work end up in the conflict when working from home.
4. I feel isolated when working from home.
5. I feel that working from home allows me to create a more flexible working arrangement.
6. I feel that working from home gives me an opportunity to spend less time every day getting ready for work.
7. I feel that working from home gives me an opportunity to spend more time with family and/or pets.
8. I feel less stressed when I am working from home.
9. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to my view on working from home becoming more positive.
10. Collaboration with my colleagues becomes increasingly difficult when working from home.
11. The technical and digital tools that I have are enough to enable me to work from home without hindrance.

Interview questions:
1. Describe your timeline of telecommuting. Have you used it before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What was your initial attitude toward telework, and how did the COVID-19 pandemic influence it?
3. What are the main benefits of your experience with telework?
4. Describe any challenges you have experienced with telework.
5. Describe what challenges your team experienced with telework.
6. Can you discuss or elaborate on the effect of telework on work-life balance?
7. Can you discuss or elaborate on the effect of telework on job satisfaction?
8. Do you think that organization that provide telework may be more attractive for employees and why?
9. If you had the option to choose to work from the traditional office or telework, what would you select? Please explain the reason for your answer.