Formal Report:

Formal Report Regarding Alternate Work-From-Home Policy

Prepared for:

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Abstract

Introduction: As one of the primary government agencies responsible for coordinating provincial public health efforts related to COVID-19, the BCCDC must both oblige to COVID-19 measures while ensuring the workflow and outputs are unaffected. In early April, the BCCDC sent all non-frontline staff (those not working in a clinical setting) to work from home. In August, they introduced a restricted return-to-work policy to allow some employees to work from the office when necessary, but requiring one week notice before

Statement of Problem: Current return-to-work policy at the BCCDC requires employees to request office time two weeks in advance of when they plan to come into the office space. Due to this policy, many employees are still not properly set up to work from home and the current return-to-work policy may be too restrictive, affecting employees' ability to do their work.

Methods: A survey was conducted with employees at the BCCDC for opinions and preferences related to work-home-policies. Survey questions for this report were designed and implemented between October and November 2020.

Solution: There are several possible alternatives to the current return-to-work policy which are favourable to current BCCDC employees. These include allowing smaller, decentralized teams to evaluate space and create work-from-home arrangements, and expanding available office capacity in neighbouring buildings.

Letter of Transmission

Noorjean Hassam

Chief Operating Officer

BC Centre for Disease Control, 655 W 12th Ave, Vancouver, BC

December 17 2020

Dear Ms Hassam,

I am writing to submit my formal report pertaining to alternate work-from-home policies at the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC).

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges in all domains of life, and affected work in healthcare and beyond. As first line respondents in the fight against COVID-19 in British Columbia, it is vital that employees at the BC Centre for Disease Control have optimal and sustainable work conditions, which balances the need for physical distancing as well as the need to respond quickly and effectively to issues of public health.

As a fairly new intervention, and one whose duration was not known at the time of conception, current work-from-home policies could be optimised to balance employer and employee needs, as well as health and safety requirements in the time of COVID-19. The current report uses literature search and participant interviews conducted in November 2020 to understand the effect of work-from-home policies on employee work and home life and make recommendations to improve productivity and work-life balance.

I have saved this report and survey results in the BCCDC secure drive. As always, no identifiable information from survey participants was collected, and required ethics approval was obtained. I am available to address any questions or clarifications you may have at the phone number and email provided below and look forward to hearing your feedback.

Sincerely,

Amina Moustaqim-Barrette

Epidemiologist

BC Centre for Disease Control, 655 W 12th Ave, Vancouver, BC

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I. Introduction

A. Background

On March 17, 2020, a public health emergency related to the ongoing pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (World Health Organisation) was declared. The strict physical distancing measures imposed as a result have impacted work, movement, social interactions, and access to essential goods and services (Andrea Woo). Preliminary evidence from Statistics Canada suggests that almost five million people are currently working from home due to COVID-19 (Statistics Canada).

The sudden shift to work-from-home means that workers could notprepare for, or assess, their home working environment to ensure that these were optimal or conducive to their work duties (Bouziri et al.). On top of that, closures across society have meant that many parents are forced to work their full-time paid jobs, while also taking care of children at home (Bouziri et al.). Indeed, about 4 in 10 (39.6%) surveyed Canadian workers reported living with a child under the age of 18, likely experiencing challenges in balancing work and family life (Statistics Canada). Nevertheless, working from home may have benefits over strict work-in-office options, adding flexibility in individuals' days as well as eliminating commuting times (Wessels et al.).

At the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC), like in many workplaces, individuals who do not provide direct patient or clinical services were asked to work from home in early March 2020. As the public health arm of British Columbia's Provincial Health Services Authority, the BCCDC is uniquely placed given that it must both lead by example and continue to work effectively in order to coordinate the pandemic response.

B. Problem statement

Work-from-home presents a number of potential barriers and advantages. Work-from-home policies have been some of the most effective interventions to stop the spread of COVID-19 disease, as fewer people must take public transit and be in close contact with individuals outside of those they live with. Nevertheless, as employees working to track and stop the spread of COVID-19 disease, strict work-from-home policies may also impact individuals' abilities to do their work in a timely and efficient way. Current work-from-home policy at the BCCDC requires employees to request office time two weeks in advance of when they plan to come into their office space. Given that many of these employees are reacting to situations that require them to work on new and emerging issues in a timely manner, the current work-from-home policy may be hampering their ability to do their work.

C. Purpose of the report

The purpose of the current report is to evaluate the impact of the BCCDC's current work-from-home policy and summarise employees' experience working from home over the last several months. The report also seeks to offer alternatives or adjustments to current policies in order to improve worker health and safety as well as the sustainability of such arrangements.

D. Research plan and data sources

Survey questions for this report were designed and implemented between October and November 2020. A convenience sampling method (Elfil and Negida) was used and 15 employees were contacted by email and given one week to complete a five-minute survey (Appendix A). Of the employees contacted, 12 of 15 (80%) filled and returned the survey in the time allotted. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to analyse survey responses in an Excel workbook. No identifiable information was collected or reported.

E. Scope and limitations of the report

Research for this report was conducted in November 2020 and represents the first formal report conducted at the BCCDC regarding work-from-home policies implemented in response to COVID-19. As such, data and analyses are preliminary and, as the context around COVID-19 changes, so too will the need to be flexible with workplace and work-from-home considerations and needs.

II. Results

A. Current workplace context

Of all survey respondents, 83.3% reported currently working from home (Figure 1). Most respondents worked in policy, knowledge translation, administration, or epidemiology work, which are heavily reliant on technology and do not require for face-to-face interactions amongst one another or with patients or customers. Two respondents continued to work on site during the pandemic due to meetings or privacy requirements that could not be accommodated through work-from-home.

When asked whether the time since the emergence of COVID-19 had been more or less stressful than prior, more than 50% of respondents reported their days to be 'somewhat stressful' or 'quite stressful'. When asked whether the employees preferred work-from-home to work-in-office, 50.0% (n = 6) responded that they preferred working from home, one (8.0%) reported preferring work from the office, while 5 (41.7%) reported that they would prefer a mixed work-from-home and work-from-office schedule.

Since COVID, have you been primarily working from home?
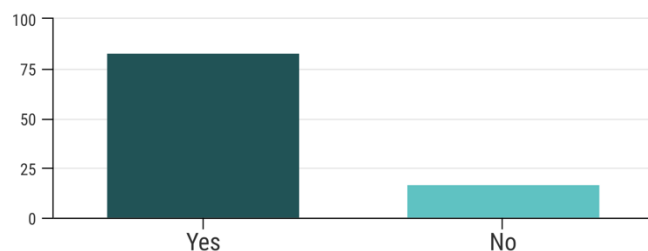
Do you prefer work from or work from office?

■ Bit of both   ■ Office   ■ Work from home

Since COVID, are most days more stressful?

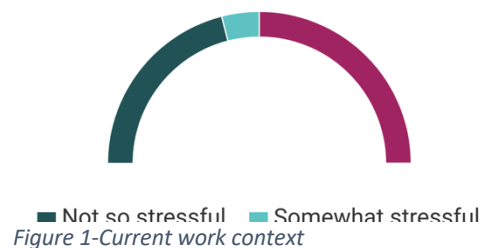■ Not so stressful   ■ Somewhat stressful

Figure 1-Current work context

B. Impacts of COVID-19 and current policies

Respondents were subsequently asked whether work-from-home policies had impacted their work and whether these policies had made their work or home life more stressful (Figure 2). 67% of respondents reported that their work had been 'somewhat', 'quite' or 'heavily' impacted, while 33% said that their work had been 'not so impacted' or 'not at all impacted'. When asked whether work-from-home policies had made work or home life more stressful, 83.0% respondents said that their lives were either somewhat, quite, or much more stressful due to these policies. Indeed, while most employees preferred work from home, they also found that current policies were impacting their work and elevating stress levels.

Have work-from-home policy impacted your work?

- Not at all impacted
- Not so impacted
- Somewhat impacted
- Quite Impacted
- Heavily impacted

Have work-from-home policies made your work or home life more stressful?

- Not at all stressful
- Not so stressful
- Somewhat stressful
- Quite stressful
- Much more stressful
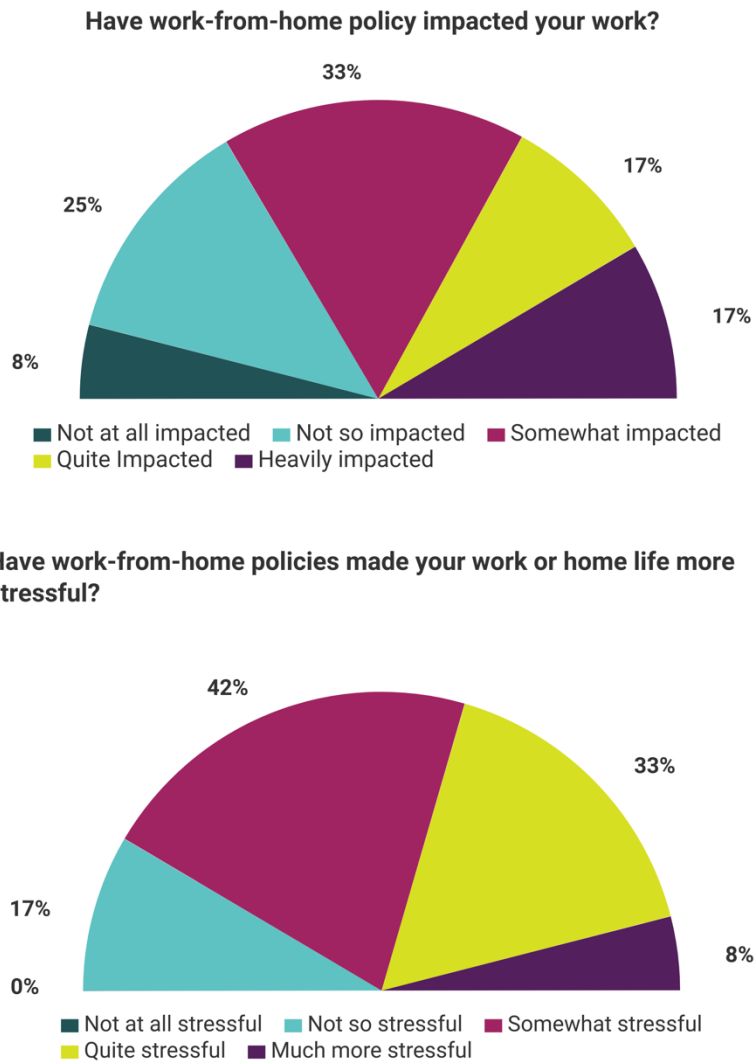
C. Alternatives to current policies

When asked about potential alternatives to current work-from-home policies, 75% of respondents said that they would support the BCCDC looking into alternative return-to-work policy configurations (Figure 3). 66.7% of respondents supported the option of the BCCDC allowing a de-centralized work-from-home policy, wherein teams organize their own space to abide by physical distancing measures, while 91.7% supported the option of expanding space in order to allow for more flexible office time.

Looking into alternative return-to-work policy configurations?
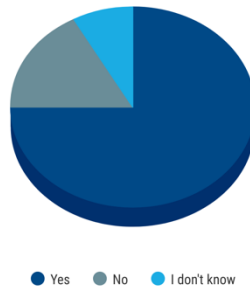
Yes ● No ● I don't know

Expanding space in order to allow for more flexible office time?

Yes ● No ● I don't know
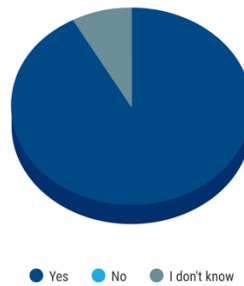
Adopting a decentralized policy for return-to-work policies (smaller teams choose their own policies and
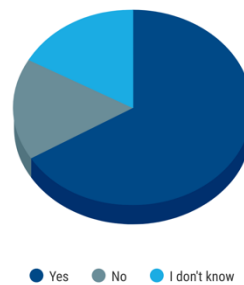

Yes ● No ● I don't know

Figure 3-Alternatives to work-from-home policies

III. Conclusion

A. Summary of findings and overall interpretations

A work environment which facilitates essential tasks is necessary; not only for the employees of the BCCDC, but also for the employers and employees across the province that depend on the BCCDC's work in order to maintain a sense of normalcy and productivity in their own lives. Workers report that their work has been impacted, and that they are more stressed since the pandemic has started. While most employees preferred work from home, they also found that current policies were impacting their work and elevating stress levels. Current BCCDC work-from-home policies may not be best suited to offer the flexibility needed to work in the highly stressful context of COVID-19, but feasible options exist that are acceptable and indeed, preferable, to current employees.

B. Recommendations

1. Create a BCCDC-wide policy which allows increased flexibility for employees across all teams. Where employees are not part of frontline services (non-clinical and non-direct patient services), allow for individual work teams to organise their space and schedules in regard to time spent in office.
2. As a long-term solution, space limitations at the BC Centre for Disease Control should be addressed. Renting additional space would allow labs, pharmacy, and clinical services, which require special security systems, to continue to operate in the main building, while other public health teams primarily reliant on technology can be moved into offices next door.
3. In the interim, workers should be supported to work from home. Many individuals do not have proper chairs, desks, monitors, or phones to do their work productively. These could be borrowed from work offices, which are mostly not in use, until such a time that most of the workforce returns to the office.

IV. Works Cited

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V. Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Survey related to BCCDC work-from-home policy

I am currently engaged in an undergraduate UBC **course** involving a technical writing project. This survey is being conducted to collect primary data to analyse and understand the impact of current work-from-home policies and explore alternative work configurations. The final formal report will be addressed to Noorjean Hassam, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Professional Practice Officer at the BCCDC. The survey contains 11 questions, and it should not take more than 5 minutes of your time. Your responses are voluntary and no identifiable information will be collected or shared. Feel free to contact aminamoustaqim377@gmail.com with any questions. Thank you in advance for your participation!

1. Since March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, have you been primarily working from home?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I don't know

☐ Prefer not to answer

2. Thinking about the amount of stress in your life, would you say that most days since the coronavirus pandemic are:

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5

Not at all stressful   Very stressful

3. Do you prefer work-from-home or work in the office?

☐ Work-from-home

☐ Work-in-office

☐ A bit of both

☐ I don't know

☐ Prefer not to answer

Additional comments?

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4. Current work-from-home policy currently requires that you give 2-week advance notice before coming into the office. Has this impacted your work?

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5

Not at all impacted work   Heavily impacted work

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5. Work-from-home policy currently requires that you give 2-week advance notice before coming into the office. Has this made your work or home life more stressful?

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5

Not at all stressful   Much more stressful

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6. Would you support the BCCDC looking into alternative work-from-home policy configurations?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I don't know

☐ Prefer not to answer

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7. What needs do you have in order to work efficiently from home? From the office?

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8. Would you support the BCCDC adopting a decentralized policy for work-from-home policies (smaller teams choose their own policies and organize their own space to abide by physical distancing measures?)

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I don't know

☐ Prefer not to answer

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9. Would you support the BCCDC expanding space in order to allow for more flexible office time?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I don't know

☐ Prefer not to answer

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10. Are there technical solutions that could be implemented to facilitate work-from-home and current work-from-home policies?

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11. Do you have any other comments about preferences related to work-from-home and your current work environment?

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