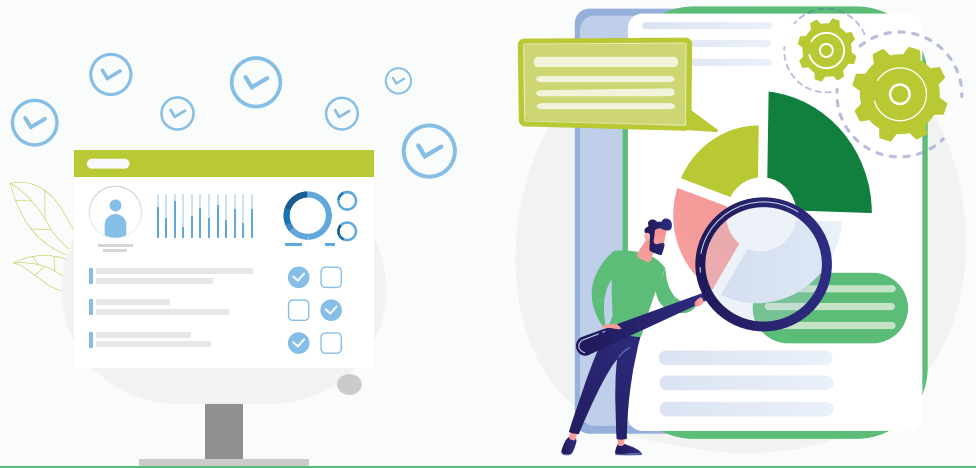




Permission, Not Power Why Pakistan's Work- From-Home Experiment Was Constrained by Administration, Not Infrastructure



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Summary

This Policy Viewpoint evaluates Pakistan's March–June 2026 work-from-home experiment using a survey of 541 federal employees across 21 departments. It asks a simple question: if WFH is used again, what must change for it to work better?

The main constraint was institutional readiness, not household readiness. Most employees had the basic technology and power needed to work from home, but fewer than half had remote access to official systems or clear guidance, and only two in five could reliably access required files. Output was broadly maintained, but working hours fell. Supervisors often reported weaker team performance, and official work shifted heavily to WhatsApp. Fuel savings were real, but frequent recalls to the office reduced them.

For any future WFH arrangement, the government should:

- ✓ provide secure remote access to official systems and files;
- ✓ set clear work, reporting, and performance rules;
- ✓ move official communication to secure, auditable platforms;
- ✓ protect designated WFH days from routine office recalls; and
- ✓ apply WFH selectively to functions that can be performed remotely.

The central lesson is simple: treat WFH as an administrative reform, not just a change in work location.

1. The policy, and why it is worth evaluating

On 9 March 2026, the federal government notified a four-day working week and directed that up to half of official staff work from home, as part of a fuel-conservation and austerity package prompted by the regional energy shock. The federal week was compressed to Monday–Thursday, banking, industry and agriculture were exempted, and departmental oil allowances were halved, among other measures (Aslam and Hussein, 2026; Zulfiqar, 2026). The measure ended in June.

The episode is analytically valuable for three reasons. First, almost all credible evidence on remote work comes from voluntary arrangements in private firms in high-income countries (Bloom et al., 2015; Barrero, Bloom and Davis, 2023; Bloom et al., 2024). This was compulsory, government-wide, and it took place in a lower-middle-income bureaucracy. Second, the developing-country evidence that does exist is drawn from firms with quantifiable output and finds real losses; i.e., an Indian data-entry trial found that workers randomly assigned to home were 18% less productive (Atkin et al., 2023), and an Indian IT firm recorded longer hours with lower output (Gibbs et al., 2023). Neither speaks to a bureaucracy, where the product is a decision on a file rather than a keystroke. Third, the policy was justified on fuel savings, a claim the energy literature treats with caution because rebound effects routinely erode headline reductions (Hook et al., 2020; O'Brien and Aliabadi, 2020).

What was missing was evidence on whether a state that runs on physical files, biometric attendance and face-to-face approval can disperse and still function. This study was commissioned to answer that question.

2. Data and approach

The survey, fielded after offices fully reopened, covers 541 consenting federal employees from 21 ministries, divisions, attached departments, and autonomous bodies in Islamabad. Of these, 56.9% personally worked from home during the policy, and 46.6% supervise staff, allowing every productivity claim an employee makes about themselves to be set against a supervisor's judgement of a team. Respondents span the grade structure: 42.5% at BPS 11–16, 41.2% at BPS 17–18, 12.0% at BPS 19 and above. Some 20.1% of respondents are women.

Because the policy had ended, the instrument was retrospective by design; respondents recalled the period when the rotation was in force and compared it with how they normally worked in the office. Indices summarise the survey's structural findings, each built from binary items scored 0 or 1 and averaged onto a 0–100 scale, so that the components can be read directly and audited. Throughout, the analysis separates what the employee already had in place from what the department supplied, a distinction that drives the paper's main result.

3. Implementation broadly held, and coordination did not break

The first result is that implementation held. Some 60.8% of respondents were in offices running the notified four-day week with a rotation, and only 6.8% remained on a five-day week with full attendance. Where a rotation operated, some offices (82.8%) ran it by splitting staff into two fixed groups on fixed weekdays, 68.6% by setting days through a written roster issued by the administration, and 72.6% by assigning two days at home.

That design choice mattered. Fixed, synchronised cohorts are precisely what the coordination literature recommends, as they preserve overlapping hours and prevent the asynchronous

dispersion that degrades team performance (van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2020). The results support this: 75.8% of home workers found it easy or very easy to coordinate with colleagues; 73.0% reported that the colleagues they needed were usually or always available during the same hours; and only 4.3% cited colleague scheduling as an obstacle. This is the study's clearest positive finding, and it disposes of the most common administrative objection to rotation, namely that the office would simply stop functioning. It did not.

4. A quarter of staff have no remotable work at all

Feasibility is not uniform, yet the policy was applied as though it were. Asked what share of their tasks could be done from home, 23.0% of federal respondents said none, and 43.6% said a fifth or less; only 26.4% said more than 16%. This is broadly consistent with national estimates of Pakistan's remotable job share (Hasan et al., 2021) and with Dingel and Neiman's (2020) occupational approach.

Table 1 Take-up and reported relative output, by task remotability

	None	1–20%	21–40%	41–60%	61–80%	81–100%
<i>Panel A. Worked from home</i>						
Yes	12.8	48.6	71.8	76.9	80.6	83.3
No – attended every day	87.2	51.4	28.2	23.1	19.4	16.7
Share of all respondents	23.0	20.4	13.1	16.8	12.3	14.4
<i>Panel B. Amount of work at home vs the office</i>						
Much less or somewhat less at home	56.2	50	51	50	22.3	25
About the same	37.5	40.7	45.1	40.0	63.0	51.6
Somewhat or much more at home	6.2	9.3	3.9	10.0	14.8	23.5

Source: Authors, Work from Home Survey, 2026

Take-up¹ tracked remotability, rising from 12.8% among those who say none of their work can be done at home to 83.3% at the top of the scale, suggesting supervisors exercised some judgement. But the residual is the problem, as staff with no remotable work were still sent home, and a quarter reported doing much less, compared with 1.9% among the most remotable. Take-up also rose with seniority 50.0% at BPS 11–16, 60.3% at BPS 17–18 and 72.6% at BPS 19 and above, a gradient with no obvious basis in task content, which points to allocation by discretion rather than by rule.

5. Output held on average; hours did not, and supervisors dissented

For the measure with an explicit pre-policy reference, weekly output was largely unchanged: 15.9% produced more and 14.8% produced less. Quality and timeliness were similarly stable, with 75.0% reporting quality as good as before and 69.5% finding deadlines no harder to meet. Pending workload changed little, with 74.0% reporting no change in backlog.

1. Take-up refers to the share of respondents in each remotability band who report having personally worked from home at some point under the rotation, as distinct from attending the office every working day.

Table 2 Output and supervisor reports

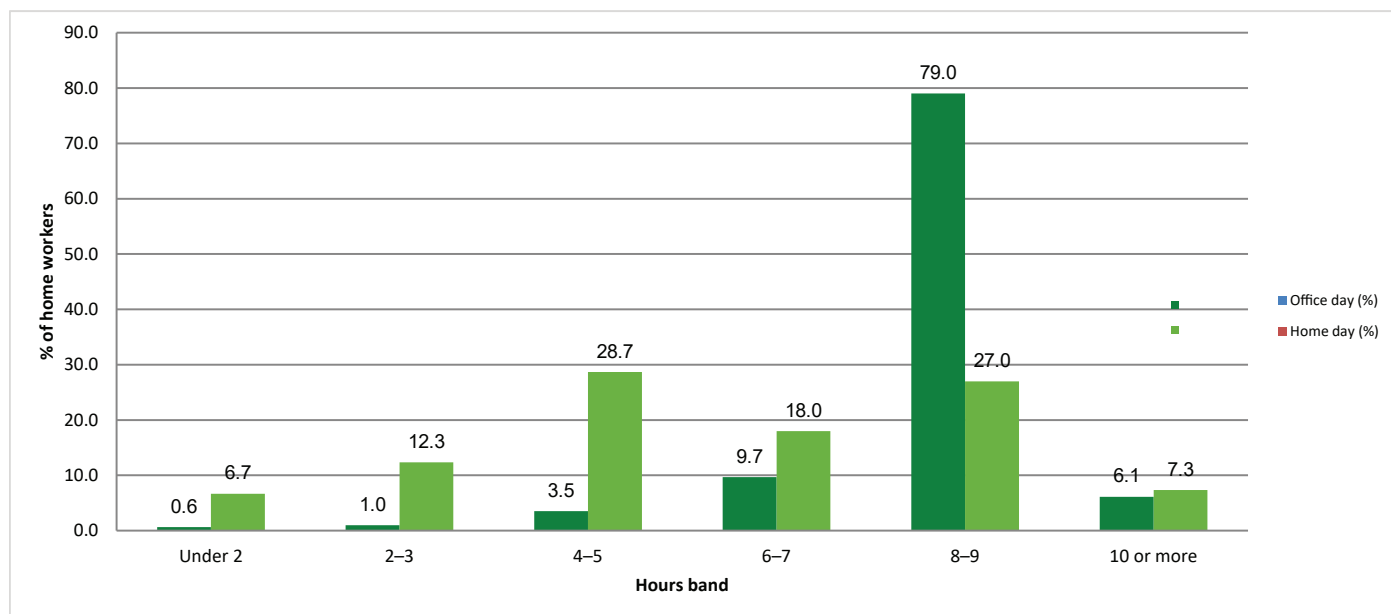
Output and Supervisor reports			
Measure	All	Worked from home	Attended every day
<i>Panel A. Weekly output during the policy vs before it</i>			
More or a lot more	15.9	19.8	10.7
About the same	69.4	65.0	75.1
Less or a lot less	14.8	15.2	14.2
<i>Panel B. Supervisor reports on their own team (supervisors whose team worked from home)</i>			
Team weekly output lower than before	39.0	—	—
Team weekly output about the same	47.1	—	—
Team weekly output higher	14.0	—	—

Source: Authors, Work from Home Survey, 2026

Two qualifications cut against a benign reading. The first is that supervisors judging their own teams are markedly more negative: 39.0% said team output fell, compared with 14.0% who said it rose. Self-assessment and supervisory assessment diverge, and international evidence suggests the supervisory view deserves weight, since self-reported effort under remote work is systematically flattering (Gibbs et al., 2023).

The second is hours, which shows the sharpest result in the survey. Home workers recorded a mean of 8.2 hours on an office day versus 5.9 on a home day, a 27.8% decline. On an office day, 85.4% worked eight hours or more; on a home day, only 33.1% did, and 18.2% worked three hours or less.

Figure 1 Hours of official work by day type



Source: Authors, Work from Home Survey, 2026

Reconciling stable output with a quarter less time (working hours) admits three interpretations, and the policy implications differ sharply. One is that office days contain substantial slack, i.e. visitors, meetings, corridor time, so that a shorter, denser home day produces the same work; on this reading, the finding is an indictment of office-day productivity, not of home working. Second, the home days are not suitable for carrying out work at full office hours. Third, respondents report the same output because they cannot observe their own shortfall, as the supervisory dissent suggests.

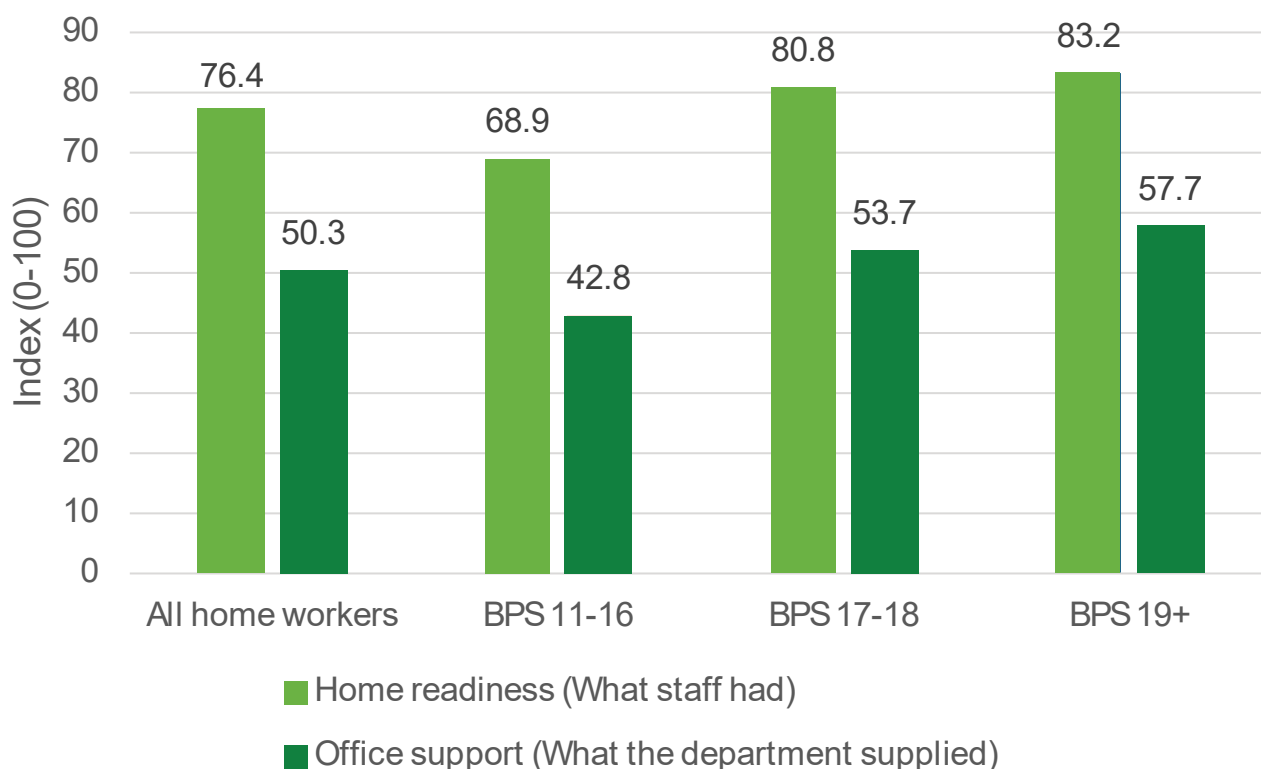
6. The binding constraint was the employer, not the household

This is the study's central finding, and it inverts the standard diagnosis for developing countries. The received view, well founded nationally, is that electricity, connectivity, devices, and space determine whether remote work is feasible, and that policy must address these (Hasan et al., 2021). For federal employees in Islamabad, this does not hold.

Staff arrived equipped. Some 89.7% used a computer rather than a phone alone; 82.6% did not share the device; 66.1% had backup electricity; 67.1% lost no working hours to power or internet failures; and 69.2% said their home connection was usually or always adequate for official work. The home-readiness index stands at 76.4.

Their departments did not reciprocate. Only 42.6% were granted remote access to office systems, 44.2% received any instruction or training, and 44.2% were issued a device. The office-support index stands at 50.3, and its weakest components are the cheapest to fix. The one thing most offices did have was an electronic filing system, present in 70.3% of offices, which makes the access failure harder to justify, as the system existed and permission to use it was simply not extended.

Figure 2: The gap is the employer's, and it widens down the grades



Source: Authors, Work from Home Survey, 2026

The gap also widens down the grade scale; the shortfall is proportionally larger for those least able to offset it. Office support is 42.8 at BPS 11–16, compared with 57.7 at BPS 19 and above, a gap of 14.9 points. Home readiness is 68.9, compared with 83.2, a gap of 14.3 points. Junior staff had fewer facilities and received less, so the two disadvantages compounded rather than offsetting each other. Since take-up also rose with grade, the arrangement distributed both its benefits and its support upward.

Table 3 The two indices and their constituent items

Index and constituent items	Point
<i>Office Support Index – what the department supplied.</i>	
Remote access to office systems granted	42.6
Instructions or training given	44.2
Office moves most files electronically	70.3
Office issued the device used at home	44.2
<i>Home Readiness Index – equipment and power at home</i>	
A computer rather than a phone only	89.7
Device not shared with the household	82.6
Backup electricity available	66.1
No working hours lost to power or internet failure	67.1

Note: Each item scored 0 or 1 and was averaged, $\times 100$

Source: Authors, Work from Home Survey, 2026

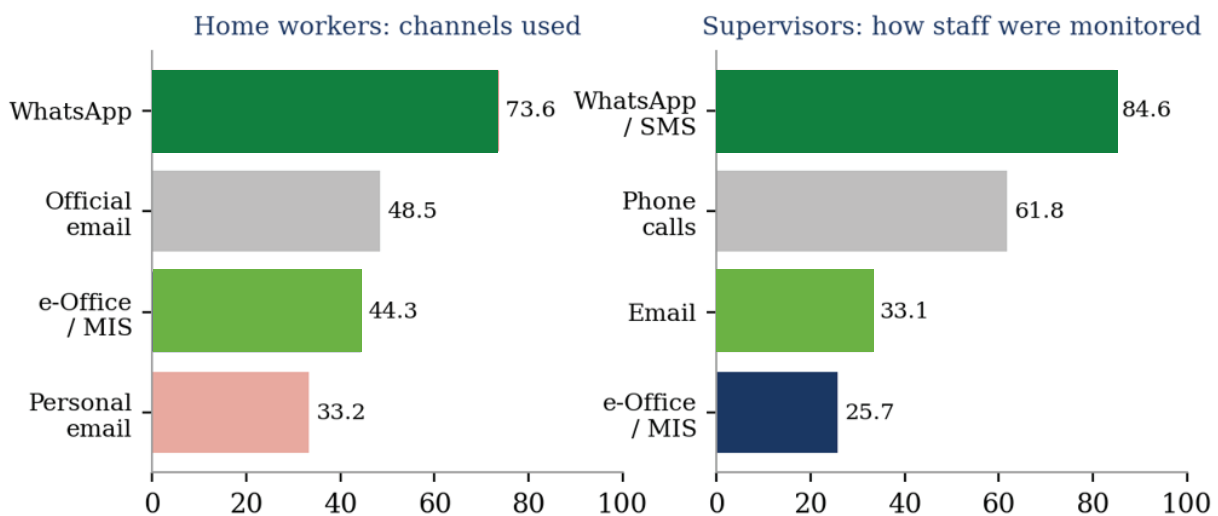
Crucially, the provision gap is evident in output, not merely in principle. Among home workers who could usually or always access their files, 68.6% held or increased their output. Among those who could not, only 53.7% did. A fifteen-point difference aligns with the one input the employer controlled, and it is the closest this survey comes to a causal statement, i.e., the department's own decision, not the employee's circumstances, moved the outcome.

7. Denied official systems, the state ran on WhatsApp

Institutions under constraint improvise, and the improvisation is the most consequential outcome here. Some 35.5% of home workers needed remote access but were not given it, and only 38.8% could usually or always access the official files they needed. A civil servant who cannot open a file cannot process it, no matter where they are sitting. Meanwhile, a rotation covering most of the federal government was introduced with almost no written guidance, as 54.4% of respondents received nothing at all, and only 11.0% received written instructions.

Work didn't stop; it migrated. WhatsApp carried more official business than official email and far more than the government's own e-Office. Supervision followed the same path, with 84.6% of supervisors managing staff over WhatsApp versus 25.7% over e-Office.

Figure 3: Official business migrated to consumer messaging (% using each channel)



Source: Authors, Work from Home Survey, 2026.

Table 4 Provision to home workers, and how official work moved

Provisions and how official work moved	
Item	%
Remote access to office systems	
Yes – the office gave me access	42.6
No – I needed it but was not given access	35.5
My work did not need it / don't know	18.4 / 3.5
Could reach official files from home	
Never or rarely / sometimes / usually or always	34.2
Sometimes	27.0
Usually or always	38.8
Instructions or training	
Written instructions or briefing	11.0
Verbal only	33.3
Nothing	54.4

Source: Authors, Work from Home Survey, 2026

The cost here is not productivity but accountability, and it does not appear in any of the outcome measures used in the high-income literature. Records created outside the system of record do not enter it later, and decisions about consumer messaging are neither auditable, nor archivable, nor discoverable. This is a recognised governance problem internationally, not a Pakistani peculiarity. The United Kingdom now explicitly regulates “non-corporate communication channels” after its information regulator found that ministerial messaging was placing decisions beyond the public record, and Scotland moved to end the practice altogether. The difference is that in Pakistan the migration was not a matter of ministerial convenience but the predictable consequence of withholding access to the official alternative. Underlying all of it, 20.9% of respondents work in offices where files still move on paper only, and where a home day cannot involve any file work at all.

8. The fuel saving was real, private, and partly eroded

Commuting costs are substantial, as 64.2% of all home workers spend between PKR 201 and 1,000 on a round trip, and a further 25.1% spend more than PKR 1,000. In addition, 73.4% of all home workers travel by car or motorcycle, exactly the fuel a conservation measure targets. In monetary terms, a home day removed a real private cost. Home workers avoided an estimated PKR 7,100 a month in commuting costs on average, and after netting off roughly PKR 1,300 in additional electricity and internet, retained about PKR 5,700 a month, near PKR 3,200 at the median, with two in three left clearly better off.

Public savings are a distinct quantity and cannot be inferred from private savings. Two mechanisms erode them. First, the home day was often not a day off the road, as 74.7% of home workers were called into the office at least occasionally on a scheduled home day, and 24.4% were usually or always, which undermines both the fuel rationale and the working arrangement. Second, the rebound effect the energy literature consistently documents are visible here: 27.6% of home workers made fewer non-work trips, but 20.5% made more. This is consistent with commuting time freed up on a home day being redirected into other trips, such as errands, school pickups, and personal appointments, rather than going unused. The net is a reduction, but a fifth substituted personal travel for the commute. Neither effect overturns the private savings; together they mean the fiscal and energy savings claimed for the policy cannot be asserted without metered data on departmental fuel and vehicle use (Hook et al., 2020).

9. What employees want is moderate, and experience shapes it

Table 5 Preferred future working arrangement, by exposure

Future work arrangement			
Preferred arrangement	All	Worked from home	Did not
Five days in the office	35.0	24.0	49.6
One day at home, four in the office	23.3	24.4	22.0
Two days at home, three in the office	26.3	32.1	18.5
Three days at home, two in the office	10.2	13.3	6.0
Four or five days at home	5.2	6.2	3.9
At least one day at home	65.0	76.0	50.4

Source: Authors, Work from Home Survey, 2026

Demand is for a modest arrangement, not an expansive one: 49.6% want one or two days at home, and only 15.4% want three or more. Exposure changes the answer sharply: half of those who never worked from home want a full five-day return, compared with a quarter of those who did. This admits two readings, and honesty requires stating both. Experience may inform preference, or those already inclined towards home working may have been more likely to be sent home in the first place. The Indian trial evidence cautions here, as it finds negative selection: workers who prefer home-based work were the ones who lost the most productivity at home (Atkin et al., 2023). Opposition is concentrated among those who never tried the arrangement, which argues for a controlled, evaluated continuation rather than reversal or expansion by decree.

10. What it means

Three implications follow, in ascending order of importance.

- First, the feasibility question has been answered more favourably than expected. A compulsory, government-wide rotation was implemented on short notice in a paper-based bureaucracy. Coordination held, output did not visibly collapse, and employees banked real private savings. The administrative machinery proved more capable of dispersing than its own reputation suggested.
- The second point is that the diagnosis embedded in most Pakistani policy thinking about remote work is misdirected. The constraint was not household infrastructure but organisational provision, permission, instruction and issuance. This reframes the problem from investment to administration, which is why the recommendations that follow contain no household-side spending at all. It also suggests that the international literature's framing, which treats connectivity as the binding developing-country constraint, needs qualification for state employees in capital cities, who are systematically better equipped than the national workforce.
- The third should trouble the government most, because it appears in no productivity statistic. Denied access to official systems, three-quarters of home workers and five-sixths of supervisors moved state business onto consumer messaging. Whatever the rotation did to output, it moved a large volume of government decision-making outside the official record for four months. That is a cost to administrative accountability; it was entirely foreseeable, and it stemmed from an administrative omission that would have cost almost nothing to avoid.

11. The Way Forward

The evidence points to a single conclusion: the arrangement failed on the cheap margins, not the expensive ones. None of the measures below requires household-side spending; all concern permission, instruction, and the channel of record. They are deliberately sequenced: preconditions that must hold before any reinstatement, then operating rules for how a rotation should run, then the evaluation architecture this episode lacked.

Recommendation

Evidence anchor

PRECONDITIONS: to be satisfied before any reinstatement

- Publish a task-based remotability schedule classifying every federal post as office-only, rotatable or fully remotable.
- Make provisioned remote access a precondition of assignment: no employee rostered to a home day without access granted in advance.
- Set a digitisation threshold for eligibility: offices moving files on paper only are excluded until file flow is electronic.
- Allocation was delegated without a rule. 23.0% of staff say none of their work is remotable, yet 12.8% of them were sent home and a quarter of those did much less work.
- 35.5% needed access and were not given it; only 38.8% could usually or always reach official files — while 70.3% were in offices that already run electronic filing .
- 21.0% of respondents are in paper-only offices, where a home day cannot involve file work at all .

OPERATING RULES: how a rotation should be run

- Issue a written SOP and supervisor briefing before any rotation begins, covering file handling, availability hours, approvals and escalation.
- Protect the home day: attendance on a scheduled home day only by written exception, recorded and reported.
- Close the unofficial-channel gap: require official business on official systems and provide a sanctioned messaging channel of record.
- Correct the grade gradient by prioritising BPS 11–16 staff for access, devices and instruction.
- 54.4% of home workers were given nothing at all; only 11.0% received written instructions . Comparable four-day-week trials spent about eight weeks reorganising work first (Fan et al., 2025).
- 75.1% of home workers were called in on a scheduled home day and 24.2% usually or always were , which defeats both the fuel rationale and the working arrangement.
- 73.5% of home workers used WhatsApp and 33.3% personal email, against 44.0% using e-Office. 84.6% of supervisors monitored staff over WhatsApp, 25.7% over e-Office .
- Office Support is 42.8 at BPS 11–16 against 57.7 at BPS 19+; Home Readiness 68.9 against 83.2. Take-up also rises with grade, 50.0% to 72.6% .



1) Sequencing: what must happen first

Provisioned remote access, a task-based remotability schedule, and a digitisation threshold are jointly necessary, because each defeats the others if absent: access without a remotability rule sends the wrong people home, a remotability rule without access sends the right people home unable to work, and neither helps in an office where files move on paper. The Establishment Division should treat them as gating conditions and verify them before any department is authorised to rotate.

2) Close the accountability gap explicitly

The channel question warrants separate treatment because it will not resolve itself. The government should designate a sanctioned system of record for official business, prohibit substantive decisions on consumer messaging, and, recognising that informal channels persist wherever they are convenient, require that any decision reached informally be transcribed into the official file within a fixed period. International practice offers a template: the United Kingdom's regulation of non-corporate communication channels accepts that fast informal communication has operational value while insisting that the substance be recorded in a government system. Prohibition alone has failed wherever it has been tried without a usable alternative.

3) Build the evaluation in before the next rotation, not after

This study exists because the policy was introduced and withdrawn without any evaluation architecture. Three things would change that at negligible cost. Departments should be required to log weekly output in their existing registers by day type, so that the hours-versus-output puzzle in Section 5 can be settled with administrative data rather than recall. Fuel and vehicle use should be metered at the departmental level, so public savings can be measured rather than assumed. Any reinstatement should be phased, with a staggered rollout across comparable departments, to allow a genuine treatment-control comparison rather than the retrospective design this study was forced to adopt.

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