Cost of the commute to work adds up

ANALYSIS
Nina Hendy

By the time Jess Whatman counted extended day-care costs on top of petrol, tolls and lunches, she was forking out $400 a week just to get to work.

"I was commuting from the Central Coast to Sydney five days a week. That's a 2.5-hour round trip every day, just to sit at a desk to do work I could have done from anywhere," Whatman says.

Burnt-out and increasingly frustrated at the office mandates, she began exploring a more sustainable career option closer to home.

"It wasn't just the time, it was the cost. Petrol, tolls, parking, lunches, extended day care – it all added up. I was leaving home in the dark, getting back late, missing time with my two young girls. It started to feel completely unsustainable," Whatman says.

The tipping point came two years ago when she realised she was spending more time in transit than with her family. "That's when I knew something had to change."

She finally quit her job and struck out on her own, launching an outsourcing business. Now, she works from home five days a week.

Avoiding the commute

In today's cost-of-living crisis, the decision to avoid the commute into the office isn't just a logistical one, it's increasingly a financial choice as workers contemplate whether it would be cheaper if they could work from home.

Working from home began as a crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic but has evolved into a lasting shift in workplace norms, with hybrid work putting cash back into household budgets.

But not all employers are keen. Some are taking a hard line on workplace flexibility, forcing some workers to decide whether their job is really worth it.

So far, Amazon, Tabcorp and Dell are among large employers to issue strict return-to-office mandates, requiring staff this year to be in the office five days a week.

But it's not cheap to get to work. The fluctuating cost of petrol, train and tram fares, tolls, parking costs, coffee and lunch adds up. Train fares in Sydney vary based on distance and the time of day. A single trip can range from $4.20 to $10.33. The daily cap for full-fare rides on Melbourne's public transport network is $11 a day.

The average person spends about $99 a week on commuting costs – equivalent to $4367 a year, according to Finder. This includes $42 for fuel, while toll roads, parking and other costs such as car insurance are excluded. Public transport costs are about $39 a week on average.

Not adding up

Workers are feeling the pinch because their wages aren't keeping up with rising costs, leaving them worse off than they were a year ago.

Wages increased 3.2 per cent over the past year, but it might not be enough to outpace the cost of living. The Consumer Price Index rose 2.4 per cent in the 12 months to February 2025, with everyday essentials like groceries, utilities, rent and fuel outstripping wage gains in many regions.

A worker earning $80,000 a year receiving a 3.2 per cent raise will gain about $2560 a year. However, they are likely to be about $3000 worse off when you account for rising costs across groceries, rent, fuel and other essentials.

Working from home also allows workers to save money by having more time to handle household tasks, gardening, errands and childcare, and preparing meals at home rather than relying on takeaways. If you're commuting to the office, here are some ways to cut costs.

Concessions: Check to see if you're eligible for any public transport concessions.

Carpool: Find someone in your local area travelling at the same time each day and take it in turns to do the driving, halving your petrol costs.

Carshare: If you don't use your car much beyond commuting, it could be worth considering carsharing. You can book a car by the day and let the owner pay maintenance and registration costs.

Travel another way: Add it up. If it's cheaper to take public transport, walk or cycle to work, commit to travelling a cheaper way at least one or two days a week.

Try a co-working space: Check if there is a co-working space in your suburb and ask your employer if you can work from there instead, which could halve the cost of your commute.

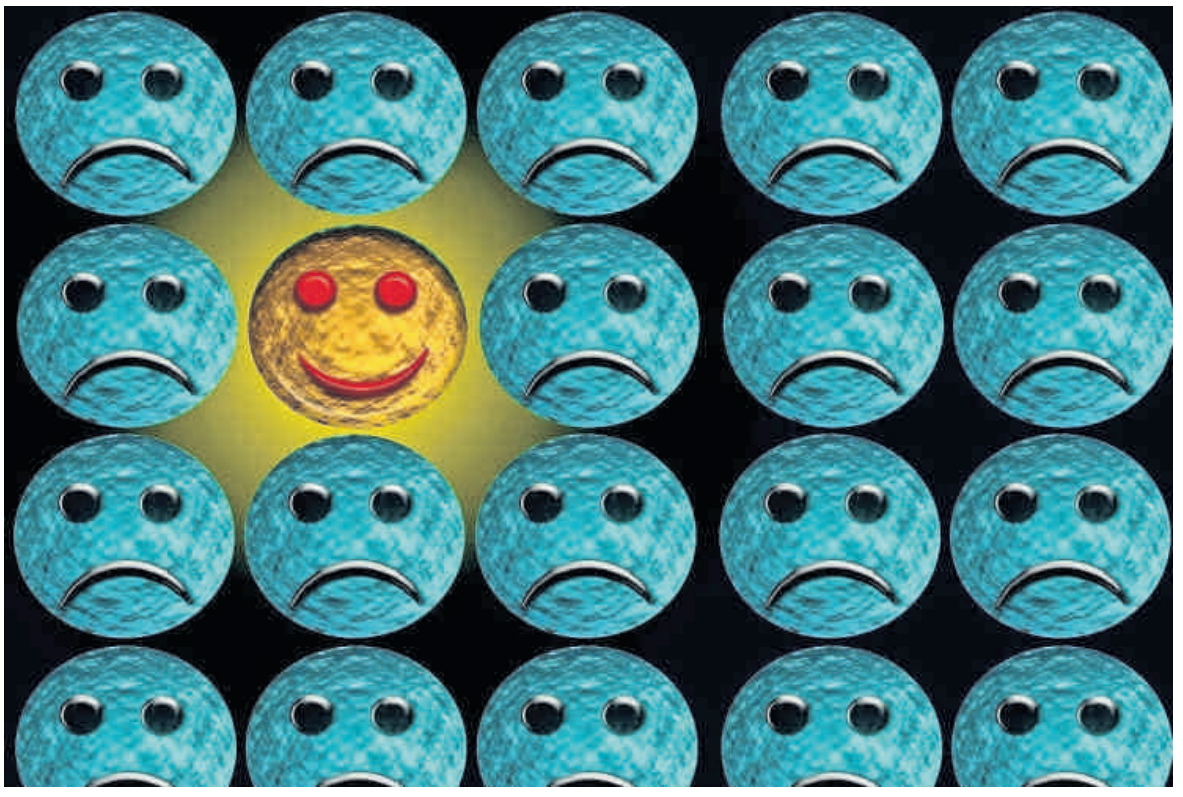
Find cheaper parking: It might be convenient to park in the multi-storey carpark but look for cheaper or free parking spots further away and walk to the office from there.

Pack your lunch: It's an obvious one, but packing your lunch can save you $100 a week or more in purchasing sandwiches and salads from the deli across the road. Make the time.

Work from home: Ask your employer if you can work from home a day or two a week to save costs. Given the rise in the cost of living, it's possible they will agree.

The damaging impact of 'fake positivity'

Amy Jacobson



Sure, we know that emotions are highly contagious, and being positive and optimistic also helps others around us to feel the same. But let's be honest for a moment – sometimes life isn't all rainbows and lollipops.

Some days aren't great, and sometimes positivity isn't the appropriate emotion. To put on a fake positive exterior is not helping us or the people around us. A 10-year study into avoidance-coping was linked to an increase in chronic, acute life stressors and long-term depressive symptoms. This isn't healthy for anyone to avoid realistic emotions and paint everything with the "positivity brush".

In my experience as an emotional intelligence and human behaviour specialist, our workplaces are becoming more focused on "employee wellbeing", but it's an easy facade to create fake positivity to tick the box on wellness and wave the flag that everything is awesome regardless of the reality of the situation. "Everything is great" (even though 200 people have just been made redundant).

Toxic positivity is a frequently pushed element of workplace cultures with a *Science of People* survey showing that almost 68 per cent of people had experienced toxic positivity in the last week.

For me, it is a weekly occurrence that I speak to people within organisations exposed to this same toxic-positivity environment, especially when it comes to implementing change. Employers encouraging a constant "this is going to be amazing" positive response and approach to every situation while we know that change is never perfect, and just below the surface, the culture is disintegrating with a lack of authenticity as people lose the ability to trust and be genuinely happy.

The fundamental basics of relationships between people is based on the ability to trust. Trust is created through being honest and transparent, being accountable and creditable, being empathetic and vulnerable. It takes being "real", and fake positivity isn't "real". It questions every area of trust, therefore, creating distrust, dislike and frustration. If I can see that the positivity is fake, how can I trust the other things you say or do? Do I feel safe to be me, to be "real" or do I too need to be fake positive?

When this occurs, it impacts every part of our workplace from our culture to our performance, to our engagement, effort and mental health. Ultimately, it impacts the overall success of each person and in turn, the organisation.

Here are five steps to decrease the toxic positivity in a workplace and instead grow an emotionally intelligent culture.

Own the reality of the situation

The world is not perfect; we are not perfect. Things will go wrong, and we will get it wrong at times. We won't always agree with everyone or everything that is happening around us but the only thing we have control over in this world is how we choose to respond. This response should be authentic and genuine. It should be appropriate to the situation and be at the right intensity without the need for forced toxic positivity.

Face the emotions

There is no such thing as a "good" or "bad" emotion, and while we tend to think positivity is a "good" emotion, that isn't the case. We should be focusing on whether the emotion is appropriate for the situation and whether the intensity or severity level at which we are feeling the emotion is appropriate. We feel emotions for a reason. Acknowledge and understand what is driving the emotion so that it can be processed before we move on. There is no need to fake or force any emotion as the emotional mind will feel how it feels, regardless of whether we are portraying fake positivity.

Understand how the people around us are feeling

Our emotions are highly contagious to the people around us, but people can spot a fake emotion a mile away. So, faking an emotion is setting a standard in workplace environments of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. When people interact, success is achieved when there is trust and respect. Trust and respect won't be created when people are not being authentic or genuine.

Ask the right questions, answer questions asked

Communication is always key to the workplace environment, and the ability to communicate effectively directly influences our culture. When we are feeling any form of intensive emotion, we have something to say. Ask the right questions to better understand what is driving the other person's emotions. Answer the questions they have and provide the information they require to be able to move forward.

Drive emotional intelligence

Realistically, we know that a great culture in a workplace is when all emotions are being displayed appropriately. Some situations it will be positivity and other times it might be sadness, anger, disappointment, fear, frustration. Let's not judge or fake the emotion, assess the appropriateness and severity and do what it takes to ensure they are felt and processed before moving forward.

One of my favourite quotes is from Lieutenant General David Morrison: "The standard you walk past is the standard you accept". Every person contributes to the culture of a workplace. A toxic-positivity culture will continue for as long as the people within the culture continue to be "fake positive" and it is seen as being acceptable. It is the start of a path that will impact every person, their performance and the overall success of the business.

Amy Jacobson is an EI and human behaviour specialist, delivering emotional intelligence programs, keynotes & workshops across Australia internationally.