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Post-pandemic workplace: the new look of work

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For some employees enforced working from home has been a big hit, allowing them to experience a greater work-life balance.

By AMANDA WOODARD

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The coronavirus has changed the way global workers think, move and operate. Here are the changes we expect to stick post-pandemic.

One thing everyone seems to agree on as we surf the pandemic wave is that life will not be the same once the worst of COVID-19 is over. The experience of being forced to step back from jobs as workplaces shut down, or work remotely at home, has had a seismic impact, sending tremors of **anxiety (/articles/2020/03/23/mental-health-in-a-roving-workforce)** and uncertainty into people's lives.

What is apparent is how the pandemic has brought into sharper focus people's relationships with their employers, as they have had time to examine their roles and their feelings about the meaning or value of their work.

In times such as these, the ability of leaders to reassure, motivate, build resilience and recreate a sense that we're all in this together is more important than ever.

Goodbye to the work status quo

Susan Crawford, consultant in organisational psychology, sees the pandemic as "**an opportunity disguised as a threat (/articles/2020/04/15/turning-crisis-into-opportunity)**", and says companies that recognise the status quo as flawed will see this as a chance to recreate more egalitarian, less hierarchical work environments in which people can be trusted to do their job and assessed on outcomes.

Utopian perhaps, but change is required, and an upheaval has the potential to effect it. Employee engagement statistics support the view that something is wrong at the heart of Australian workplaces.

Gallup (https://www.kochiesbusinessbuilders.com.au/gallup-report-finds-australian-employees-stressed-and-disengaged/) research is not alone in painting Australia as one of the worst places in the world to work, reporting that only a mere 14 per cent of people felt engaged at work.

"Good companies will re-engage their staff around purpose after COVID-19," says Ross Judd, organisational culture expert and author of *Cultural Insanity and the Roadmap to Great Organisational Culture*.

"People will worry less if they know where they are headed, and that what they are doing has meaning and purpose."

What should those goals be in a post-pandemic world, where people are questioning established values and former priorities?

Judd agrees this is a time for organisations and individuals to reflect. It is an opportunity for companies to redefine themselves and **reset strategy (/topics/strategy)** – and involve as many employees as possible in that process, he says.

"Managers have been taught to educate; now, they need to learn, and really listen. Get people's thoughts. Openly talk about your purpose, strategy and the culture you need to deliver that strategy, and make those conversations ongoing and open-ended. Are we all still aligned? Is this still relevant? Is this where we want to go?"

Being open to fresh ideas, figuring out how those ideas fit in with the company vision and connecting that to individuals' motivation, Judd says, is a formula for a new way of working. Crawford agrees that the clamour for greater flexibility and autonomy at work may be sped up in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Phased return to the physical workplace

Going back to a shared physical workplace will be strange and unnerving for many people. There are many questions that need to be addressed: What will work look like? How many people will be allowed back, and how will that be assessed? How will we maintain hygiene, and will distancing still be necessary?

Choosing who will be in the first wave to return should be carefully considered, as they will have a large role to play in establishing a new culture, says Fiona Robertson, former head of culture at National Australia Bank and author of *Rules of Belonging*.

"Select people who exhibit behaviours that you want to encourage more of, and leave until later folk who exhibit behaviours you want to avoid."

The return to physical workspaces also creates opportunities for better collaboration, says Robertson.

"From a practical point of view, it's tempting to bring back entire teams but, where possible, choose one or two from different teams; this offers an opportunity to create links across the organisation rather than reinforce existing silos. When people are in their tribes, they think more about Us and Them; when you are all mixed together, you become a new Us."

Work flexibility as a fixture

For some employees, however, enforced working from home has been a big hit, allowing them to experience a greater work-life balance.

Experts are divided on whether there will be a spike in requests for flexible or remote working when people return, and it is also unclear how organisations will react.

"Most companies have a policy around flexibility, but have resisted it in practice, often because of poor management who operate by line of sight rather than trust," notes Crawford.

While a lot of discussion around remote working has centred on collaborative technology – such as Zoom or Webex – Andrew Seinor FCPA, CPA Australia's divisional president for Western Australia, argues that **technology (https://www.cpaaustralia.com.au/public-practice/managing-your-practice/people-management/technology)** is simply an enabler, with a tendency to accentuate communication weaknesses. He says there isn't enough attention being paid to the quality of interaction.

"If we want to have workable [remote] teams, then we need to be focusing on business systems that guide managers to quality of interaction."

Showing care through goal-setting

In this state of flux, it will be a time for **leaders to show what they are made of (/articles/2020/03/26/leading-in-the-age-of-covid19)**. Robertson suggests leaders should try to reduce the amount of technical work they have on their plate to focus on their employees.

"People are looking for strong leadership more than ever. Those who step up will be followed, and those who don't will be very exposed."

Not everyone will return to work in the same frame of mind, and trying to understand where everyone's emotional temperature sits will be an important leadership skill.

Seinor says that, while it is not a leader or manager's job to make everyone happy, "it is their job to ensure employees have everything they need to find fulfilment in their work.

If you do that, you are genuinely caring for that person. If you only focus on the caring part without the outcome part, there is no productivity."

Setting individual goals or talking about **career progression (/articles/2020/04/06/5-ways-to-keep-your-career-on-track-in-covid-19-era)** are ways to make people feel reintegrated, suggests Judd.

"Demonstrate commitment by giving someone a project that has a six-month timeline, or arrange training that reinforces for them that they are here for the long term. The more you do that, the more people will relax and feel comfortable."

It may be a while before we all feel truly comfortable, but as we cautiously return to work to **rebuild our businesses (https://www.cpaaustralia.com.au/professional-resources/business-management/business-recovery)**, there seems to be a recognition that the pandemic has also brought with it opportunities for change. The question in the air is whether or not we will grasp them.

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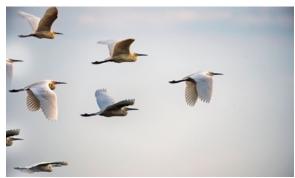
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