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Embedding new ways of working

How organisations have made the most of working differently during COVID-19 and the considerations for mitigating the risks.

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Much has been learned about the ways we can work differently since COVID-19, and now is the time to identify the positives and embed those capabilities into our working lives.

The restrictions imposed to combat COVID-19 quickly forced much of the workforce into new ways of working, ways that have offered both positive and negative aspects. The benefits of avoiding commutes and balancing home and work life more seamlessly are have been great for some, however the downsides of reduced socialising, juggling home schooling with work, and the challenges of separating work and home life has been challenging for others.

During this period, much has been learnt about the ways we can all work differently, and now is the time to identify the positives and embed those capabilities into our working lives. At this point there is a chance to not only recognise the employee and organisational benefits that can be gained, but the economic benefits as well.

The best approach for economic recovery for Australia is to achieve higher productivity growth. The 9 to 5 in the office routine will not return to the way it was pre COVID-19, however it's also doubtful that entire workforces will continue to work remotely all the time. The new reality of working can be better than both if business leaders can get it right.

The business case for flexible working

The key reasons why organisations should consider institutionalising aspects of flexible and remote working include:

1 The continued need for social distancing means employers cannot have the pre-COVID number of people in the office.
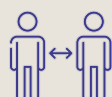
2 Enabled by technology it's been demonstrated that many jobs can be done from any location. Work is a thing that's done, not a place to go to. Microsoft Teams now has 75 million daily active users, adding 31 million in just over a month.[1]

3 The dated concept that presence in an office is somehow a proxy for productivity is simply not true. Employees adopt different ways of working flexibly. Evaluation of 100 million data points from 30,000 Prodoscore users during March and April 2020 showed that telephone calls are up 230%, CRM activity is up 176%, email is up 57% and chat is up 9%.[2]

4 Flexible working is quickly becoming a key element of the employee value proposition and will contribute to an organisation's ability to attract and retain talent. 2020 remote work research revealed that more than 40% of workers would prefer to work at home full time in the future.[3]

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> **It is so important for Australian businesses to lock in the innovation gains and different ways of working many have experienced during the shutdown.**
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> **Dr Brendan Rynne**
> Chief Economist
> KPMG Australia

In a KPMG survey of personnel and clients 'ways of working' was found to be the most important theme, with 55% of respondents placing it first. According to the survey, the top three company offerings as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic were: increased flexibility (41%), option to work remotely (39%), and more frequent communication (34%).[4]

As a result of workforces working from home, it is evident that there is an opportunity for some companies to find cost savings in the reduction of the need of office space.

Mitigating the risks

The positives of flexible working are clear, but there are risks that need to be managed.

Embedding innovation and adaptation

A key strategy for many organisations in dealing with disruption and complexity in the business environment is implementing strategies to embed innovation and adaptability. Innovation requires effective collaboration and engagement with diverse participation – traditionally achieved through face-to-face workshops and meetings. It will be essential for organisations to schedule opportunities for (socially distanced) face-to-face collaboration or through online collaboration tools.

Ensuring productivity

For some, there is a perceived risk that productivity isn't as high when not in the office yet anecdotal and emerging evidence brings this into doubt. In fact, the way we measure productivity needs to be reconsidered.

What needs to be understood is whether people are able to be effective working remotely and in mixed teams of remote and in-person working. Key to this is executive leadership discussions on purpose and progress. When people understand the purpose of what they're doing, have autonomy to get on with it and have the opportunity to check in when they don't know what to do they often produce their best work. The way employees are measured and managed needs to change to reflect the changing definitions of productivity.

Employee health and wellbeing

Employee health and wellbeing has been at the forefront of all considerations during the pandemic. As workforces continue to work flexibly, leaders will need to focus on creating a safe environment where employees feel supported, with a particular attention paid to mental health. Equally, it is important to encourage employees to take ownership of their own wellbeing, and know that they can proactively speak up when they require additional support to meet wellbeing needs.

Culture

Many people have ingrained behaviours, habits and beliefs about how they work, for example, expecting people to be present to be productive. While many of these beliefs have been unconsciously disrupted by COVID-19, it will be easy for some to 'snap back' to the old ways of operating to the detriment of newly discovered innovations. What may have developed organically around the water cooler, now needs to be consciously created and strengthened. The development of a culture that embeds the flexibility and positive aspects of the learnings from working through COVID-19 will take a conscious effort. Trust will be central to this.

Leader capability

Underpinning the effective management of the risks to sustaining new ways of working is the skills of leaders to support their people to continue to connect, perform and thrive while working in new ways. Leaders need to regularly and actively connect with direct reports and manage and support their engagement and progression or risk losing them.

Making the most of our new ways of working

Embedding the following key considerations will help your organisation take advantage of the new ways of working.

Organisations need the right **space** for flexible working. This will require paying attention to the quantity and shapes of spaces a workforce will need to be productive and to stay safe and healthy, as well as the space to deliver services safely to customers. Some spaces will need to be scheduled for specific uses and some may be able to be repurposed or even disposed of.

The quality of the information technology **systems** to allow for working from anywhere at any time, support established processes, support collaboration, engage employees and connect with customers also needs to be considered.

Security of information and people also needs attention and is closely related to safety considerations for staff, particularly those most vulnerable to the virus.

Finally, the infrastructure around **staff** relations needs to be considered – do we have the right workplace relations and occupational health and safety policies in place to adequately cater for a flexible workforce. Have we updated our staff policies to align with our new ways of working?

In addition to infrastructure related issues, the importance of consciously addressing the culture and leadership dimension of these new ways of working cannot be over-emphasised. COVID-19 created rapid change, however, sustaining the change and maximising the benefits of flexible working will require conscious attention. In particular the need to embed different ways to **support** employees as they juggle work and life and build sustainable ways to engage with their colleagues.

An important element of this support is ensuring that attention to **self** – encouraging accountability for wellness and connectedness is on the agenda at team meetings and leadership planning discussions aimed at helping people to find sustainable ways of managing their own working day and finding ways to connect purposefully with the work they are doing.

Underpinning all of this is building the **skills** of our leaders and managers – different capabilities are required to lead and manage workforces that you can't physically see as often and who are working at different times and different places.

The employee experience

What do we need to think about differently to ensure the flexible working experience is positive and productive?

The fundamental infrastructure

Space
- Quantity and types of spaces for your workforce to be productive and thrive
- Spaces to deliver to customers
- Scheduling use of space
- Social distancing practices
- Reinvesting in space

Systems and Security
- Improved use of systems to connect, align and empower employees
- Connecting with customers
- Analytics to understand ways of working
- Security and cyber to keep info / data secure off-site (integrity / physical security / etc

Staff structures
- Supporting legislative / IR structures to enable flexible working
- End to end employee processes and policies
- Align performance, recognition and reward structures

Leadership & culture

Self
- Wellness / motivation / connectedness are critical for productivity
- Better ways of managing own working day, productivity
- Building own mastery, autonomy and purpose

Support
- Leader and manager engagement with employees
- Team engagement, activities, behaviours
- Outcomes focussed support
- Supporting diversity, inclusion and vulnerable populations

Skills
- Capabilities required to lead hybrid virtual teams
- Capabilities to be productive, collaborate and engage effectively
- Modern ways of learning
- Talent acquisition and retention

References

1. Business Insider Australia, *Microsoft Teams Now Has 75 Million Active Users*, April 2020
2. Business Wire, *Productivity Has Increased, Led By Remote Workers*, May 2020
3. Valoir, *Working at Home is Working*, May 2020
4. KPMG Survey, *Shifts in Market Signals Due to COVID-19*, July 2020

Contact us

Jane Gunn
Partner
Management Consulting
T: +61 2 6248 1338
E: janegunn@kpmg.com.au

Rachel Garcia
Director
Management Consulting
T: +61 2 9455 9572
E: rgarcia3@kpmg.com.au

KPMG.com.au