

Business in the Post Pandemic World

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Abstract

The experiences faced by businesses and workers during the current Covid pandemic have and will alter many of the business practices we have employed till now. These involve where we work, how we work and do business, and participation in the workforce.

Key words: pandemic, Central Business Districts, business, workforce participation

Introduction

Coronavirus 2019 disease (COVID-19) is a contagious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The first known case was identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. It has since spread worldwide, leading to an ongoing pandemic and at the time of publication has caused almost 5 million deaths and economic damage, and business collapse globally.

Direct economic and business damage includes lack of, or interrupted supply chains for manufacturers, workers unable to work in crowded conditions, due to fear of mass contagion, temporary or permanent closure of businesses due to fear of contagion especially those that deal directly with the public, or forced governmental lockdowns and over-stretched hospitals and health systems.

It has also created chronic health conditions and disability, orphans, abandoned elderly, and the rise of crime and opportunism.

The development of vaccines and their mass administration to populations – those willing to take them - in those countries that can afford or access them has seen some easing of restrictions in the vaccinated world though current medical opinion suggests ongoing immunity now requires a third booster or ongoing annual vaccine (1).

Central Business Districts (CBD) and centralised working environments

Central Business Districts or City Centres have been particularly affected as they usually consist of high rise corporate towers of offices with retail premises at street level. The huge influx of workers to the CBDs in normal times also supports a myriad of smaller businesses that cater to the needs of office workers, office supplies and food outlets being prime examples, as well as the lunchtime shopping of office workers.

The CBDs or City Centres are also usually the cultural, sporting and historical architecture hubs of cities and have noteworthy parks and gardens and therefore attract tourists, either local or international. This population is generally medium to high density but transient.

If companies cease using central city office spaces in favour of home workers and decentralised working areas closer to where people live, this will result in some emptying of the CBDs, and many businesses have already decentralised, and allowed employees to work from home on a permanent basis. This will see the need to convert some of the existing high rise building to other purposes with the obvious being city apartments. This will also help maintain cities and the businesses that are supported by the transport of daily workforces. City buildings can be readily converted to habitation precincts with for example, the use of rooftop and vertical gardens, and the retail sector could extend to include more domestic facilities like supermarkets. Theatres, Art Galleries and Museums also attract out of city and inner city users and tourists, and will likely remain viable, although the entertainment industry globally has seen huge loss of income and a change in the way it operates.

Hospitals (especially teaching hospitals attached to universities) and universities are also a feature of inner cities and the public transport systems currently in place can keep these temporary residents commuting into and out of the City centres.

The "Committee for Sydney" — a 'think tank' that represents organisations including universities, hospitality, construction and entertainment has reflected on pandemic lockdowns and talked to bosses of 130 organisations that employ 640,000 workers (1).

It found that 51 per cent of bosses expect their workers will commute to the office for just three days a week, and 36 per cent expect their staff will cluster their office days from Tuesday to Thursday. They anticipated workers having a three-day cluster of days in the office.

The research conducted by the Committee showed governments should review public transport pricing — as pandemic activity showed a huge drop in the amount of movement around Sydney from pre-pandemic levels (1),

"Experience in other cities around the world has shown the key to building public support for public transport pricing reforms is to make it clear the public is gaining something," they said in the report (1).

"London used the proceeds from the congestion charge to significantly increase public transport service. San Francisco used the proceeds from demand-driven parking pricing to give fewer parking tickets and to fund increases to services.

"Very often, pricing reforms have eventually proven popular, after initial public opposition."

Using Australia as an example approximately 40% of office workers worked from home during the pandemic but only about 35% of currently available jobs are able to be done from home. Additionally the pandemic showed workers to be more productive working from home. Of course the pandemic scenario when people have tried to hold onto their employment and weekly wages and the consequent privilege of working from home to keep them safe from Covid, may change when the pandemic is over and employment becomes more secure.

Data, compiled by research firm Roy Morgan (Australia) and based on the movement of mobile devices in Sydney's CBD, found that in the week beginning 24 May, 2021 Monday movement was down 66% compared with pre-pandemic levels of January and February 2020, down 63% on Tuesday and Wednesday, and 62% on Thursday.

The reduction was also just 62% on Friday, but a spokesperson for Roy Morgan said the figures did not differentiate between people moving through the city for work and for recreation, including those travelling to entertainment venues, restaurants and bars in the evenings, noting that was traditionally more common on Fridays after work.

The chief executive of the Committee for Sydney, believes that the NSW state government must now consider an expected change in commuting behaviour as it plans for Sydney's future.

Local Civic Councils and state and federal government and similar governmental planning bodies worldwide will need to review the way cities work in light of the pandemic to keep jobs and businesses viable but more importantly to protect the health of working people. This will require reassessment of office environments and public transport.

Extending opening hours and making working hours more flexible over a wider period of time (flexitime) can also assist in keeping workplaces safe but will likely incur some greater costs.

Businesses should support their staff choosing to work from home when they want to and where it is viable, and such a model can have a "genuine upside for workers and businesses" because a better work life balance can make workers more productive.

Any level of working from home will need safeguards to protect workers from risks including overwork, long hours, stress, isolation and a sense of “never being able to disconnect from work”. Conversely in some employees it may lead to abuse of the privilege, and absenteeism from the desk so managed weekly minimum work requirements, based on what needs to be achieved each week can help focus both employers and workers and maintain a viable workload.

“For those who will continue to work from home, it’s essential that those arrangements meet the same health and safety standards that would be expected in the workplace, including Covid protections.”

As an example of moving to work at home an Australian organisation, NIB (Health Fund) is paying employees \$1,200 a year to effectively rent a space in their homes as they ask workers to only come into the office one day a week. It is being enacted now by NIB and has shown productivity improvement.

Working from home of course is only now a viable option due to available technology (ICT) making the physical location of the home office irrelevant in terms of communicability.

There are also reasons for workers to come together not just for social and mental health issues: but to give them a clear sense of purpose, mentoring, coaching, feedback, training etc and a substitute for the feedback an employee may get in the traditional office situation may be overcome by a daily chat between bosses and staff. It would provide continuity of association and appreciation of employee’s efforts and reassurance to employers. Group meetings online can also provide the same benefits.

Participation in the workforce

The Pandemic has shown a massive switch to online retail/online shopping which has provided its own increase in work opportunities for ICT workers and for distribution workers (parcel delivery).

The pandemic has also changed the way people do business and has opened up the workforce to some groups of people who had restrictions on where they could work. The obvious example is people with disabilities who have limited mobility and who often already had their own home based communication hub with the world. This puts them on an even playing field with other workers.

In some countries there are cultural restrictions on women in the workforce and in most countries pregnant women and those with young family commitments are often unable to work outside the home, but with home offices and flexitime they will be able to work a full or part time job. Currently many talented women fall out of the work force due to pregnancy and the demands of a young family. Flexible home work allows employers to hold onto such valuable workers

Of course many jobs can only be performed in a specific workspace, such as hospitals, schools/universities etc. While online learning has now become ‘de riger’ for Secondary and University students during the pandemic, younger children particularly need interaction with peers (time to play) and also healthy activities to get them healthy and school playtime and school sports provide this. During the worst of the pandemic however most schools have adapted all levels of students to covering basic coursework online

So while the pandemic has caused great human suffering, it may have opened up business and employees to a better world of work that is more suitable to our current living environment,

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