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THE NCP BUSINESS NEWSLETTER

The Network of Consulting Professionals

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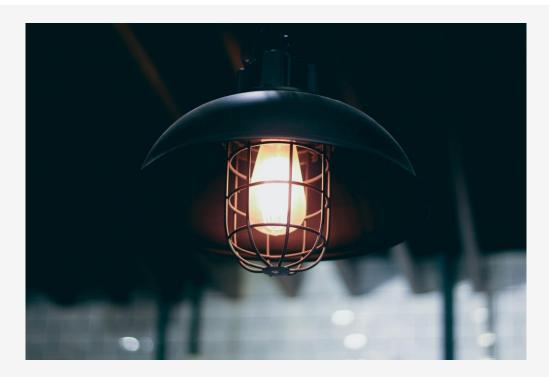
WILL THE LAST ONE TO LEAVE PLEASE TURN OFF THE LIGHTS?

Work, business and life in the 'aftertime': a round table discussion with seven expert business advisors

Recently The Network of Consulting Professionals convened a group of seven members to discuss their experiences with clients over these first 18 months, particularly with regard to new ways of working remotely.

Is what we're seeing a short-term blip, or is it a permanent upheaval? What are the challenges and opportunities it presents? How do you manage a workforce that is not in the office every day? Do we need staff back in the office – and if so, why? What follows is an edited version of that discussion. The views expressed are of course those of the individual consultants and have been edited for the purposes of brevity.

First, let's meet our experts:

[Ian Ash](#) is an experienced Business Advisor, accredited professional Business Coach (ACC) and a certified Prosci Change Management Practitioner. He has run his business advisory practice (OrgMent Business Solutions) since 2009 focusing on Business Strategy and company culture and established a recruitment agency (OrgMent Talent Solutions) founded on the understanding of the importance of cultural fit. He currently writes weekly business articles for a local newspaper group and has just completed his first book. [OrgMent Business Solutions Pty Ltd](#) ianash@ombs.com.au 0418 366418

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Pam Macdonald is Director of Broadspring Consulting Pty Ltd, a boutique consultancy helping leaders achieve the best performance and results from them and their teams. Delivering professional and profound strategic HR consulting, and performance coaching and training in Australia and internationally. Pam's experience includes change management consulting - especially engaging and leading people and companies through HR related changes. **Broadspring Consulting Pty Ltd** pam@broadspring.com.au **0438 843970**

David McPherson is founder, Accountant and Senior Business Advisor of Embark Business Advisory, which works closely with SME's helping them "unlock their business potential." Embark supports business owners to set clear business and personal goals for the future, then provides hands-on support to ensure they stay on track. Provides experience in financial systems and reporting, including driving efficiencies from cloud-based accounting and related add-on solutions, and analysing what the reports are "saying." **Embark Business Advisory Pty Ltd** david@embarkba.com.au **0438 789167**

[Hugh O'Donnell](#) is a Change Agent, Facilitator, Director and Advisor who challenges and supports progressive businesses to develop and implement their Strategic Plans to unlock the potential within their business and people. Hugh is an accomplished business leader with an impressive track record as both an executive, facilitator and management consultant. **[High Performance Consortium](#) hugh.odonnell@hpc.org.au 0410689815**

Introduction: Short Term Blip – or Permanent Shift?

We are slap bang in the middle of the world's biggest upheaval of business practice. Over the long term it is arguable that the introduction of the personal computer and other technological advances had, and continue to have, bigger effects – but those changes took a much longer time to appear, and were less uniform globally in their arrival. Furthermore, we're still only eighteen months in – yes really, check the calendar – so as yet we have little idea of the long-term impact of COVID on how work happens.

It is obvious that the landscape has shifted: what is as yet far from clear is whether the impact is like climate change – massive and apparently impossible to avoid – or like an earthquake, which causes local damage but from which we can rebuild the city, with modifications and improvements but not so very different from before. Will the 'New Normal' in the Aftertime look much like the old normal of the Beforetime, or will it be radically different?

While it is undeniable that there has been a seismic shift in work practices in the past eighteen months, what is as yet uncertain is whether that change is temporary or permanent. Most of our commentators believe it is the latter: 'Yes, there will be a real long-lasting shift for many businesses in Australia,' says David McPherson.

As he points out, the obvious shift is towards greater on-line based purchasing by consumers, which has had a big and positive impact for sellers, both from a retail and wholesale perspective. The result has been many businesses having a greater on-line presence, and competition for creativity to attract customers,

which has opened up opportunities to broaden the traditional customer base. And, he adds, 'the use of Apps for food and related deliveries – Uber Eats and Menulog, to name but two – looks very likely to be an ongoing consumer choice that will continue at an increased level for more users.'

Meanwhile, office-based businesses are seeing the opportunity to reduce rental- and premises-related costs as more employees perform part, and in some cases all, of their roles remotely. From the employee point of view, the benefits are obvious: better work-home life balance, reduced travel time and costs, increased flexibility in working hours. 'This increasingly remote and flexible workforce has then changed the structure around many aspects of how a business is now run, reducing wasted time for face-to-face meeting, and replacing them with shorter and more focused video team meetings.'

Peter Borg agrees: 'Employers will be very reluctant to give up their facilities savings. A dollar saved here is much easier to find than a dollar of profit – which requires ten or indeed many more dollars of sales to earn.'

Certain parts of the business may be affected much more than others, Ian Ash points out: 'Australia's policy on international travel means that international business needs to be conducted online for at least the foreseeable future. While face-to-face meeting is always preferred to online connection, the prevalence and ease of use of these networking technologies mean that conducting international business and associated areas such as training and coaching has become more appealing especially since the incumbent heavy travel costs can be eliminated. Expect to see more worldwide communication, exchange of ideas and business opportunities arise as a result.'

Pam Macdonald agrees that the change is permanent, pointing out that the balance has now shifted. Previously, an employee would typically need to make the case for working from home, and explain why the benefits outweighed the (real or perceived) disadvantages. 'Now, employers will need to justify why they want staff back in the office, especially if it is a full-time request.' And through this forced experiment, both employers and employees are discovering that increases in productivity can and indeed often does occur while working remotely. 'And,' she points out, 'it's become obvious just how much time was spent socialising.' On the other hand, many employers are reporting a drop in productivity – not helped, as Macdonald observes, by the 'insane concept' of expecting workers to be productive while supervising home schooling. 'It is simply impossible to do two jobs at once,' she says.

Craig Nenke reminds us that many larger organisations already had flexible working arrangements in place, and that has now filtered down to SMEs. And in fact, many of the worst aspects of flexible working, such as the dreaded hotdesking, have now been all but eliminated by COVID. 'Who would agree to work in an open office at someone else's desk now?' Wherever all those partitions ended up, they're now being fetched back out again. Everything old is new again.

Of course, such considerations loom larger for knowledge workers than for some other industries. 'I was in a manufacturing plant the other day,' says Nenke, 'where not one single worker was able to work from home. It is hard to make stuff using heavy machinery from home! Bear in mind that as many as 60% of American jobs, as an example, cannot be performed remotely.'

A Change for Good?

While some of our commentators accept that the change is permanent, there is a sense of having to face the inevitable. However, Hugh O'Donnell sees the shift as largely positive and one to be embraced: 'The technology has been put in place and largely proven to work so I think it is here to stay. Some employers have reported to me that they have not had a drop in productivity from remote working and in fact it may have increased and that they also would like to accommodate increased flexibility. In addition, I have seen evidence of increasing levels of innovation and collaboration. If you think about it, virtually everyone has had to adapt in a significant way. I believe as a consequence people may just be more open to and willing to try new ideas.' It's the older style managers, he observes, who tend to be reluctant and sceptical that people will deliver without the same level of in-person supervision.

Mike Lescai shares that scepticism, arguing that humans are a social species with a deep need for interaction: 'the best work interaction is face-to-face: ideas and brainstorming flourish.' When it comes time that the business needs to promote, who will be best placed? 'Those that are visible with their interaction, ideas, sharing and productivity are front of mind – the promoted person is most likely to be the most visible.' Ambitious people, he argues, will make a point of being in the office where the action is. And when there's a crisis, it's all hands on deck, and being on the other end of a Zoom or Teams link doesn't cut it. The obvious analogy Lescai draws is with the old head office/regional offices divide: 'Businesses have spent vast amounts of money and energy attempting to foster a single culture and eliminating factions,' he says. 'Are they really just going to allow all that to reappear in the shape of office-based versus home-based workers?' Again, as Lescai observes, many companies with sales teams still require those out in the field to report to the office daily, knowing that interaction is crucial for sustained success.

Nenke recognises the risk, but believes that with care and planning the 'two streams' challenge can be met. 'Of course, it's only natural that you favour the people around you. So yes, you do need to make sure you treat the remote workers with the same importance as those in the office. When having your meetings, always be asking for feedback from remote participants first, rather than concentrating only on those present. Don't use whiteboards, notes and so on that those on Zoom can't see. All of this sounds obvious and easy, but it is a difficult habit that leaders and managers must learn – and learn it fast!'

Ash is also more optimistic about people's ability to be productive out of the office. 'Prior to COVID-19, working from home was typically not undertaken due to concerns about the potential for distraction and/or trust in the employee's ability to focus on work commitments. Our experience with lockdowns has shown that, if anything, the opposite is likely to be true: people can really focus on their work free from periodic interruptions from other workers, and at least a good part of the lost travel time can instead be dedicated to achieving work objectives and not just personal relaxation.'

Of course, much of this is still an experiment, a forced experiment but an experiment nonetheless. Nenke is sceptical of much of what is called 'research' in this area, since it still all so new. But something of a consensus does appear to be emerging, he suggests, with *The Harvard Business Review* and McKinsey among those advising that employers should have a structured approach to hybrid working: everyone comes to the office on certain set days and works from home on others. It shouldn't just be up to everyone to decide themselves. 'One organisation I am working with makes it compulsory for everyone to come to the office on a Tuesday. On that day they have an all-in staff meeting and have a modest lunch ordered in. This helps with the human contact that we miss when working from home, as well as keeping abreast of what everyone is doing work-wise.' And O'Donnell says that his clients seem to be settling on a 3/2 split between office and home as a good balance.

Implications of a Changed World

The implications of this disruption have only just started to emerge, and they bring a host of difficult and largely unprecedented questions. If your business is large, how do you monitor and control numbers onsite to ensure you are complying with regulations? (**Here'**s one solution.) Whether your business is big or small, do you require your staff to be vaccinated before allowing them back onsite? (Morgan Stanley have **set this condition** for their employees; and Goldman Sachs **have required** that employees inform them of their vaccination status.)

And if you *don't* set that condition, are you exposing your employees to potential risk – and therefore your enterprise to **potential litigation**? If an employee refuses to be vaccinated, which reasons are acceptable, and which are not? If an employee tells you that they have sincerely held a religious belief, severe anxiety around vaccines or have had previous reactions to ingredients of the vaccines, how do you evaluate or verify those objections? If an employee asks whether her colleagues will all be vaccinated and you know that one or more will not, for one of the above reasons, how do you communicate that fact without potentially breaching confidence?

If you embrace remote working, even if only for a number of days per week, you are still going to have to deal with workcover and legal liability. Macdonald: 'Is the employee's home office ergonomically set up and safe?

What about security of office equipment? How do you manage software licencing fees if you are setting people up at home *and* in the office? Client data security is a potential risk, too. (Hint: this may be a valid reason for declining requests for remote working.)' She also reminds employers to check workcover insurance, which may not cover employees in a different state for extended periods.

Technology is Not a Panacea

McPherson suggests that there are opportunities from the greater use of technology, such as cloud-based systems to make remote access easier. Yet this too brings challenges, such as increased investment in technology, higher stock levels to enable fast response times, staff upskilling and so on.

Nenke, however, warns against an easy assumption that technology solves all the problems. 'I'm seeing huge demand for CRM systems, proposal management systems and collaboration/communication systems such as JIRA and Basecamp,' he says. 'This is not always a good thing! Businesses must understand the purpose of technology prior to implementing it – just because it's all the rage doesn't mean it's right for your business. Be highly sceptical of grand claims.'

Who will Thrive Best?

It is likely, too, that the skills required of the workforce, both those leading and those being managed, will need to shift. Working remotely arguably requires a higher degree of self-discipline and self-management, with significant implications for recruitment and training. Are you actively seeking out candidates with the resilience and discipline to respond well to working from home? Equally, are you offering remote and family-friendly, flexible working as valuable benefits of working for your business? (And if so, are you actually in a position to deliver those benefits?)

There are implications for staff with disabilities, too, and for those who would be great for your business but can't afford to live close enough to work at the office. You may be missing out on **a new opportunity** to attract the best people, who could never have been part of your business before.

Those who get it right will attract good people, and those who attract the right people for these arrangements will benefit much more than others. In this sense, just as with technology, it's not the case that remote/blended working is intrinsically either good or bad – it's as good or as bad as the planning and thinking that goes into it and supports it.

As Nenke observes: 'I was in a legal practice the other day, and the owner of

the business now requires their lawyers to get on the phones and cross-sell services as well as supply articles for the monthly newsletter. Skills in managing change, being flexible to different ways of working and always being aware of the customer experience will be important to many professions that didn't need to worry about those things before.'

Now You Need to Change, too

But leaders and managers cannot for a moment imagine that it's business as usual for them, either. 'You must be very clear on setting objectives when empowering people,' says O'Donnell: 'It is also not a one approach fits all, so there needs to be flexibility. Some people need to work in the office, for example, due to poor facilities at home, and some people need more human contact, while others are quite happy with less.' This is an important balance to get right, and employers must be sensitive to individual needs and circumstances.

O'Donnell believes that a model with designated days in the office seems to work best: 'The importance of teams connecting over lunch or informally over a coffee is now more important and must be encouraged.' Managers have been forced to revisit how they have traditionally managed people, he says, often for the better: 'I am aware of a manager, responsible for an overseas operation, who regularly visited this operation. He last visited 18 months ago and so he has been forced to adapt, moving from a directive style to providing support remotely by being more consultative, preparing thoroughly for Zoom meetings, listening more effectively and consistently following up. He confided that he is now more organised, less frustrated, and has confidence in the overseas leadership team who have delivered record results over the past year.'

For McPherson, it's about negotiating and being clear about expectations: 'Set agreed rules around when work can be done versus personal duties. Link these to clear accountabilities of expectations of the employee for what is relevant to them. This could be around deadlines, KPIs, daily check in times and so on. Then you as leader need to have a process in place to check in regularly with the individual, both from a broader team environment to keep the engagement both ways strong, but also one on one to check in in a more personal way that everything is working OK, ideally in such a way that the employee feels comfortable raising concerns.' Be explicit with your workers that you absolutely want them to have a fair say in how their working from home is best structured to suit their needs, not just yours. If the arrangement doesn't work for them, it'll end up not working for you.

To this, Macdonald adds three more points. 'Firstly, make explicit what the non-negotiables and non-variables are. If you have processes that need to be followed, make that abundantly clear. Secondly, you need to know how long processes ideally take, and factor those calculations into your assessment of productivity. Someone may say or feel that they are working really hard, but if

their productivity is not up to scratch, best you know about it and address it fast. And thirdly, discuss with your team how you're going to manage and encourage innovation. If there's no traditional watercooler to have those chats around, how are you going to replace it?'

She also poses a question: 'How will you manage fatigue and monitor the signs? If someone's rushed off their feet in the office, you'll spot it soon enough. But now, if all you can see if that someone's offline, how do you know what's happening at the other end? Who will bear the liability for overwork?'

Another challenge is boundaries around working hours. Remote working may cut down on commuting, but it also serves to bring work into the home 24/7. 'I know a senior Manager working for an overseas employer,' says O'Donnell, 'who was getting up at 3.00am to clear emails because he was woken by message receipt alerts at night on his smart watch. Not surprisingly, it was really impacting his sleep and mental health. He now shuts down all tech from 7.00am to 6.00pm. This may seem an obvious solution, but many people have been gradually drawn into being "permanently on" due to the convenience of the technology.' As that person's employer, there is the clear potential for accusations of creating or allowing an unsafe work environment. And if you yourself are guilty of firing off emails and even making calls way outside office hours, what message are you sending?

Previously, if an employee was struggling, perhaps in distress or losing engagement, a good manager would be able to spot the signs, because she'd be in the same room, and in person they are harder to disguise. On the other side of a screen, you can't be so confident you're picking up the whole story. 'Mental health will be a massive factor and difficult to manage for employers,' comments Macdonald. 'One of my clients had an employee refusing to turn the camera on. Luckily, we found out, only because he had a random chat with a co-worker, that he was really struggling.' It's all too easy, she says, for people to hide their problems behind a screen. And they may be more reluctant to admit that they're not doing well, if they suspect that one solution may be to stop working remotely.

Macdonald predicts a rise in Fair Work cases as employees explore their rights in the new normal: 'We're going to have to revisit all our assumptions and traditional practices.' Current leave arrangements, for example, are an issue, in two evolving ways: staff leave is accumulating (with a consequent increased financial liability), as people remain reluctant to commit to travel; and at the same time, sick leave is being raced through: 'I know one company with about a third of their staff who have exhausted all their leave, through having to stay home waiting for test results or isolate/quarantine after interstate travel.'

Making Your Culture Fit for Purpose

The world, both at work and outside of it, has changed. Have you? What are you doing differently? Nenke reminisces about the old days, and considers the new normal: 'A person's environment is a massive influence on how well they can do their job. Before, people came to the office each day and we really didn't need to worry that much about their home life. But you can't just assume that everyone in your team has a nice middle-class house with a wood panel desk that can fit computers and monitors.' Some may have very poor internet connectivity, cultural sensitivities, teenagers that want to sleep all day, abusive partners, elderly relatives struggling with dementia and so on. 'This all now falls into the lap of you, whether you're a business owner, a manager, a leader or any combination of those. It's your issue, not to solve, but to factor in to your leadership technique. A woman in an executive position in a software company that I was dealing with in Bangalore, India, told me that working from home is like a living hell for her, as she now has to cook and clean for her husband and in-laws all day, and try to fit work in as best she can.'

Nenke goes on to point out that old habits of constantly monitoring activity need to change, in favour of actually putting in place indicators of the real output of people's work. 'Few of us would admit to being a micromanager,' he says, 'but most of us have some of those tendencies. Constant Zoom 'Check Ins' that are actually focused totally on what people are doing are a common example of the new form of micromanagement. If a sales rep has a KPI of making 20 sales phone calls per day and updating the CRM accordingly, does it actually matter that they do them between 9am and 11am or between 3pm and 5pm? It might, but the question certainly needs to be asked. We have to get used to monitoring people's output, not their activity.'

Borg agrees: 'Engaging with employees in an authentic way has never been more important. Set clear expectations; hold people to account; ensure everyone knows the value of their contribution; acknowledge it. Measure by outcomes, not desk time – and make sure the outcomes you're measuring are actually the ones that really matter. Yes, these things always mattered, of course, but now the benefits of getting them right, and the costs of getting them wrong, are magnified.'

For O'Donnell, it's more important than ever to plan and to be proactive in your leadership. 'Have regular check-ins, both for individuals and for teams. When the team is physically together, build in more social interactions. Be aware and sensitive to how people are looking and feeling when they are online. Offer flexibility and adaptability frequently – don't wait to be asked. Identify and address issues and concerns appropriately and get onto them early. And above all, consult and involve your digital natives in solving problems, including these new ways of working. They may be much younger than us, but in these things, they are absolute masters – they've been online all their lives! They are bound to have a better feel for it than someone who's come to it with half a lifetime of experience already under their belt.'

He also warns against remote working by virtue of seniority, where those with leadership positions are allowed to set their own terms: 'Your managers need to be engaging with their people,' he says, 'and that means them taking responsibility for getting their teams together and maintaining their interaction.'

The Case for (and against) Shutting Down the Office

Do people need to come into the office? No, argues Borg: 'If you get it right (engagement and everything else) why should they? Why should you even *have* an office? Though it would be fun to see each other face to face once in a while, and an important part (though not the whole) of building relationships. But is this "coming into the office"? Why force people to "come into the office" to "work" if the goal is to build relationships? Instead, why not design interactions for that specific purpose? And I'm not just talking love-ins and cringe-inducing team building activities – perhaps a team can schedule windows for genuine collaborative activities to achieve specific goals.'

It is true, Nenke accepts, that hi-tech organisations such as Netflix, GitHub and Zapier have made a big deal of the ultimate flexibility of never having to come to the office: Tata Consulting Services (TCS) has said they want 75% of their workforce to be at home by 2025. However, he points out that other organisations such as HP and Yahoo have had to reverse their working from home policies and are now bringing their people back into the office.

Assuming that you aren't persuaded, and that you do wish to have staff in the office, when and under what circumstances? 'Primarily these would relate to people-oriented activities,' says Ash, 'such as staff recruitment, staff induction, team-building events, disciplinary procedures and redundancies. In fact, any activity in which comprehensive communication – noting body language as well as voice tone and content – is required would likely require personal presence as well.'

McPherson agrees: 'It's vital for your people to get to know their colleagues and build initial relationships. They can then be maintained largely in a remote environment, but it's very hard indeed to build that initial connection at a distance.'
But there are also other factors, such as maintaining team morale (we are social animals who all need some level of human contact) and brainstorming (less potential for distraction as opposed to working from home). 'It can be really beneficial to organise social interaction,' says O'Donnell, such as having lunch together, celebrating birthdays, even having yoga groups. These things are more important now that the ad hoc interactions are less likely to happen. 'And they won't necessarily happen organically in quite the way they used to,' he adds: 'You may well need to be more proactive about such things, to show that you value them, but also because if you don't, they simply may not happen at all.'

However, Ash points out, there are those who simply cannot be trusted to be productive at home. That is a tough conversation right there, but one you cannot afford to fudge. McPherson: 'It's true. There is no doubt that some individuals are more productive working from home and some happier working from home. But this isn't the case of all employees (and employers for that matter), so identifying the individual needs of employees and looking to maintain a balance for the full workforce is just as important, regardless of what balance of face to face versus remote working you are seeking to achieve.' And Macdonald is clear that your doubts about your employee's ability to perform without being in the office constitute a 'reasonable reason' within the terms of the Fair Work Act to direct them to be in the office. Even so, what if your 'reasonable reason' comes up against an employee's expression of fears about returning to the office, concerns about using public transport to get there and so on? Safework Australia has a **useful set of questions and answers**; and here is a **helpful checklist**.

Conclusion

The point has been made several times in this discussion, but bears repeating: we are right in the middle, or perhaps even closer to the beginning, of a massive experiment in changing working conditions, culture, expectations, goalsetting, work relationships. There will be those who bet big – as Nenke pointed out earlier, some organisations are pushing strongly for a remote workforce, while others are having to push even harder to persuade their staff to return to the office. Who is right?

Actually, that may be the wrong question. Perhaps, as with technology, the current crisis is really an amplifier and an accelerator: good businesses will thrive and get better, and bad ones will suffer and get squeezed out. Those that commit to a particular approach that suits their industry and the nature of the work they do, and who support it with smart planning and outstanding execution, stand a far better chance of succeeding, whatever they do, than those who allow the situation to develop or who take decisions based on short term or poor thinking.

McPherson argues that a good business that is well run by a good owner-operator, that has a strong focus on strategic planning that is not narrowly focused on its own past nor its own particular industry, that has quality products or services and makes a sincere effort to offer a high-quality culture for its people to work in, will survive and may indeed thrive, however tough the conditions. Poorly run businesses, on the other hand, will always come and go, and significant external impacts, such as recessions or indeed COVID, will more likely damage these poor businesses and potentially be the final step in their demise, which was always a likelihood in any case. Altered circumstances requires greater flexibility, and those that cannot provide it will pay a high price.

There is no doubt that there will be casualties. Its legacy will be with us for decades. But COVID presents opportunities, too. O'Donnell sees it accelerating the uptake of technology, for example, and opening up the potential for regional and even global collaboration.

Nor is the impact even. Fairly obviously, knowledge workers are more likely to experience its impact on their working conditions than those on a production line, for example, or those in hospitality. Borg suggests another fault line: an ever-increasing divide between those perceived as 'the talent' versus those seen as a cost, and a variable cost at that. Lower cost means less margin to be spent on engagement, with such workers ever more at risk of being treated as a commodity, put on the front line with inadequate support to face angry customers.

As always, the lawyers will do well out of all this. With an increased blurring between work and home we can confidently expect an expanded responsibility on the part of employers for workplace health and safety. We will see claims from employees endangered by poor ergonomics and impacted mental health. We will see security breaches. We will see stable doors being bolted after horses have departed.

Do not let drift determine direction. Just because your people want to continue working from home, or indeed want to return to the office, that by itself should not be the sole determining factor. On the other hand, nor should your decision be based solely on your own desire either to reduce head office costs or to have your staff where you can see what they're doing. All of our participants report that far too many businesses (not the ones they advise, obviously) are still not yet actively engaging in this subject with sufficient rigour, open-mindedness and ingenuity. If you don't work the concrete while it's wet, it may soon be too late.

This is not an internal discussion. It's not even one for you to have solely within the confines of your industry association, though you absolutely should do that. It is far broader and deeper than that. There is a huge amount at stake here, not least the shape of your business for decades to come, and indeed the survival or thriving of it.

McKinsey has a helpful [Report](#) on the future of work after COVID-19. Here is an [opinion piece](#) about Apple and Google's efforts to get staff back to work.

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