

6 essential actions to support your workforce as they navigate the new COVID-normal

A qualitative research study uncovering insights from industry leaders on what they expect their COVID-normal workplaces to look like.

November 2021

We've spoken with industry leaders across Australia to identify key actions to ensure a successful transition to the COVID-normal workplace.

1 Hybrid working is here to stay

For the professional workforce globally, hybrid working is here to stay. Yet how it is adopted equitably and supports effective teams, communication and performance is still an experiment for many organisations.

Identifying the policies, procedures and tools to enable effective communication and productivity, is essential. Establishing clear flexible work arrangements, remote workstation setup, and choosing the right online platforms to support workflow and project management are critical.

2 Build confidence in return to work through COVID-safety

Having a comprehensive COVID-safety management plan not only minimizes public health risks, it is part of your workplace employee value proposition. Your workforce and clients need complete trust that a tailored COVID-management plan is in place and understand their role in meeting those requirements.

3 Workforce wellbeing protects productivity

Prioritising workforce wellbeing is not just a nice thing to do, research shows it improves productivity and engagement.

4 Internal communications are critical to ongoing workforce engagement

As Australian organisations progress towards a COVID-normal workplace, improving your internal communications content and approach are critical to ensure the workforce is better connected and moving in the same direction. This is also important to allow quick and effective communication with everyone when situations change - again.

5 New normal, new skills...

Every workplace will need new skills to effectively move into this new era and way of working. You will need to identify the professional skills needed in your workplace, how collaboration and culture-building can happen in a hybrid world, and which platforms will best support your day to day operations of collaboration, onboarding, meeting and delivering.

6 Identify and articulate your employee value proposition (EVP)

A steady pay cheque is just one part of an employee value proposition. By articulating your organisational values, culture and what makes it a uniquely great place to work, it will be easier to attract and retain your workforce.

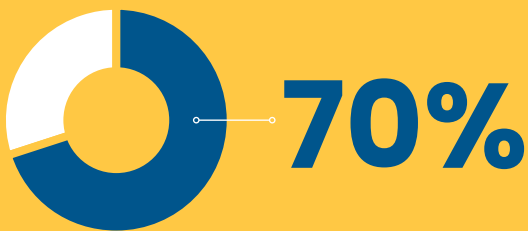
Note: In addition to these actionable ideas, ensure you are meeting all your legal and other work, health and safety responsibilities as mandated in your State/Territory - check out [Safe Work Australia](#) for useful resources.

“This thing isn’t over yet – none of us can afford to think that COVID-safe means no more disruption for our staff or our workplace.”

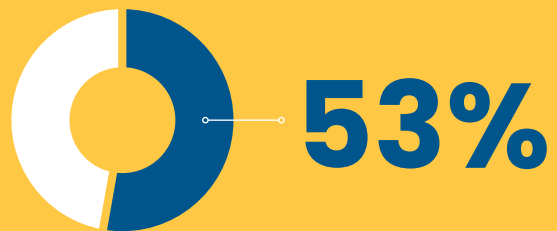


1 Hybrid working is here to stay

“The genie is out of the bottle on flexibility.”



Over half of workers who worked in this way during the pandemic 'definitely' or 'probably' want **flexible work hours** to continue.¹



Over half of workers who worked in this way during the pandemic 'definitely' or 'probably' want **hybrid work model** to continue.²

For the professional workforce globally, hybrid working is here to stay. How it is adopted equitably and supports effective teams, communication and performance is still an experiment for many organisations. Your organisation is unique, tailored planning will establish a new operating environment that reflects your unique values, culture, operational considerations and goals. Establishing clear flexible work arrangements, remote workstation setup, and choosing the right online platforms to support workflow and project management are critical.

“Going forward there will be more remote working for sure, but there will be some people who want to get back completely normal, **we need to find a balance**, making it work for the individual and also the organisation.”

There is a strong desire from employees to retain some work location flexibility

For workers who worked in offices prior to the pandemic interruptions, there is a global resistance to returning to the same arrangements. Having undertaken ‘the great work from home experiment’³, workers have adjusted their expectations, and there are many aspects of working from home that they hope to continue, whether full or part-time. The pandemic has inspired a shift towards remote work and while some struggle with longer hours, more feel work-life balance has improved.⁴

“Some people are nervous, some people are busting to get back into the office, either living in share housing, and they’re very happy to be in the office. People with families are really happy to be working from home. **Transportation is part of the decision, a lot of people don’t feel safe on the bus or train.**”

What workers ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ want to continue:



Figure 1 Worker Priorities, Global Consumer Trends, New Lives in a New World, Dynatq, 2021.

In our research with industry leaders, views on productivity of remote workers were mixed. For medium sized organisations there were consistent views that if someone wasn't performing, it would be obvious to the team and management. Large organisations used existing formal performance management processes.

In an interview with one participant, they shared their views regarding the tension between workforce preferences for remote work and organisational needs.

"I'm paying them to do a job, to be available, when I call you I want you to be available. They're often not. **In the office, I can see if someone's available.** People say, 'I do my best work uninterrupted'. **What I'm paying you to do is to be interrupted constantly.**"

A blend of in person and remote working is likely long term, there is a need to 'take stock and take action', by considering broader business intentions, people and culture, compliance and risk, and technology and learning, as well as the physical environment.⁵

"Full COVID-normal whatever that is, I'm predicting it will remain a part-time office for the foreseeable future, currently that seems to be two days a week, that might creep up to three. **We will need a flexible office environment that's smaller and to introduce hot desking.**"

It's important that staff at all levels work both remotely and in person some of the time to ensure that new hybrid work practices are understood by all. By understanding both individual employee concerns and organisational ones, hybrid work arrangements can be designed to ensure a successful transition.

"... you can see working remotely has made some teams flourish, others physically need to be in person. **We will really re-think what we've learnt when we return to on site work and change for the better.**"

Role related place and time related requirements should inform workplace arrangements.⁶ Recognising what work can be completed asynchronously, enables greater flexibility, though requires thought for effective collaboration and communication.⁷

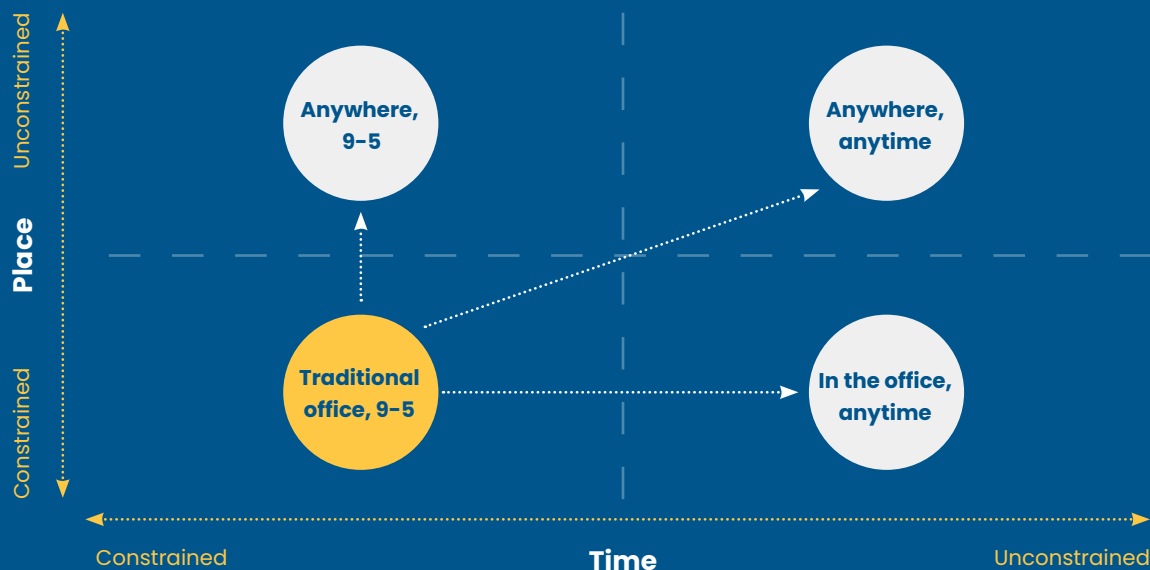
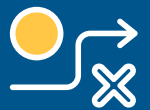


Figure 2 Workplace Time and Place Matrix. How to do Hybrid Right. Harvard Business Review, June 2021

“People are inclined to work different hours, can start earlier and finish earlier, advantageous for patients too, they like consults outside normal consult hours”

Innovative ways of engaging staff and encouraging a return to the office were shared.

“We’re not requiring people to come back but make it so good they want to be back so they don’t miss out. That will look like social events at the office, we’ve purchased a whole lot of picnic rugs, for picnic meetings, picnic lunches. The picnic rugs we bought were \$10, **it puts the return to work in a positive light, people look forward to having picnics with their colleagues.**”



Action

- 1 Introduce regular staff sentiment surveying and make sure you are closing the loop to update the team on how you are responding to their ideas.
- 2 Check your organisational policies and procedures are up to date: do you have a flexible work toolkit and a work from home checklist?



2 Build confidence in return to work through COVID-safety



All employers are required to take care of the health, safety and welfare of all workers, customers and visitors at their workplace. Employers and employees need to consider their obligations under workplace health and safety (WHS) laws in their state or territory when reopening.⁸

In addition, having a comprehensive COVID-safety management plan is part of your workplace employee value proposition. Your workforce and clients need complete trust that a tailored COVID-management plan is in place and understand their role in meeting these requirements.

“In terms of positives during the pandemic, for store team members it was a way to show them that we support them. **Nothing is more important than their safety**, if there was an initiative we could put in place we did. We met with public health professors from Monash [University], who told us everything we can do to be COVID-safe, and we did. We invested a tonne of money.”

All currently operating businesses must assess the risks associated with exposure to COVID-19 and implement control measures to manage those risks. They must also assess any other new or changed risks arising from COVID-19, for example, customer aggression, high work demand or working in isolation and how vulnerable workers will be supported.⁹

The International Labor Organisation advises implementing a hierarchy-of-controls strategy that prioritises engineering, organisational and administrative controls to prevent disease transmission. This involves avoiding physical interaction, ventilation, avoiding concentration of workers, and providing training and information about the process and measures taken.¹⁰

Existing policies and procedures need to be reviewed and updated to ensure there is clarity around working when required to self-isolate, attendance at the workplace, and how to request flexible working arrangements. New considerations include whether to formalise staggered start times, provision of sufficient ventilation, cleaning, compliance with any state health directives on mask wearing and QR check in code use.

Action



1

Review whether there are new or changed workplace risks and prioritise their mitigation.

2

Consult your workforce to identify those who are at greater risk of more serious illness with COVID-19, develop an appropriate plan to protect these vulnerable workers.

3

Promote and celebrate your COVID-safety champions!

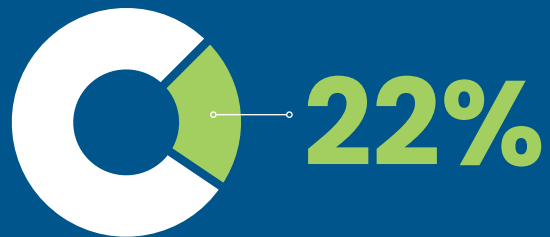
3 Workforce wellbeing protects productivity

“Staff wellbeing comes first.”



\$1 = \$2.30

For every \$1 spent on **mental health programs** = average return of \$2.30.¹¹



22% of workers **rank wellbeing considerations** as to what they value most from an employer.¹²

Supporting employee wellbeing is an investment in performance and engagement. Mental health and wellbeing has to be integrated through every operational activity – practical steps businesses can take include encouraging rest and recovery, role modelling, monitoring attrition, managing return to work and driving clear communications.¹³

“Now there is a work life blend, some staff have difficulty with self-care. **Now that work is possible anytime, they need to make time to step away at particular moments of the day** – we have to keep reminding staff about that.”

Science tells us what the world’s best athletes have known for years: peak performance requires cycles of rest and recovery. More and longer hours don’t equal higher impact. Create a culture where taking breaks is a mark of intelligence, not of laziness. Embrace time outside to help rejuvenate. Wellbeing isn’t a set of slogans. It’s best practices informed by evidence.¹⁴

Employee wellbeing is important to protect against stress and burnout, and to ensure high productivity. The Productivity Commission found that for every dollar spent by businesses on successful mental health programs, organisations can expect a return on investment of between \$1 and \$4 for an average return of \$2.30.¹⁵

“Another benefit [of the pandemic impacts] we’ve seen, staff focusing on their mental health, [a] reminder that taking care of themselves needs to come first. Our organisation has backed that up as a position – [we deal with] impact on work in a supportive way. **Staff wellbeing comes first.**”

Change remains constant in the new normal, this is not the first or last pandemic and building workforce resilience will support organisational success. For smaller organisations, with limited budgets, there are numerous free resources available to direct the team to: check the Black Dog Institute, Beyond Blue, Worksafe, and World Health Organisation websites for free resources.

Action



1

Identify how leaders in your organisation are ‘walking the talk’, role modelling healthy professional boundaries and attending to their own wellbeing. Make sure this is proactively communicated with the rest of the staff.

2

Convey the importance of your team’s wellbeing and share with them the tools and supports available to optimise their wellbeing, performance and engagement.

3

What tools and resources can you share with your team to support their self care?

4 Internal communications are critical to ongoing workforce engagement

“We want to make sure they still feel connected.”



Less than half

Less than half of leaders surveyed had a **return to work roadmap**

In a dispersed workforce, effective, regular and consistent messaging is essential to organisational cohesion and productivity.¹⁶ In our research, internal communications activities varied widely, and very few organisations had a defined roadmap to share with their workforce on what the COVID-normal workplace will look like. Leaders in larger organisations were more likely to have the resources to plan and prepare a coherent suite of communications material. There was acknowledgement that as the volume of messaging had increased during the pandemic, monitoring the open rate helped inform future materials to ensure the workforce is informed and stays engaged.

“Through comms and HR, good engaging e-news, people matters surveys, all comms and HR, we have a great CEO who holds ‘all staff’ sessions, people know what is going on. **We want to make sure they still feel connected to what’s happening within the organisation.**”

During the pandemic many organisations who have found the need to communicate with their workforce, has dramatically increased. Regardless of whether their operations were in the Gold Coast or Melbourne, each organisation we spoke with had needed to convey their business-as-usual messaging as well as state health directives during the pandemic. Translating state health directives into the organisational impacts and employee requirements, often outside of usual business hours, was deemed necessary.

As Australian organisations progress towards a COVID-normal workplace, internal communications are critical to ensure the workforce is moving in the same direction. New approaches will need to be developed to respond to the increased hybrid working arrangements.

“We’ve become more intentional about knowledge sharing, and induction. We’ve formed a broader leadership group to include middle managers, shortened duration of staff meetings but increased frequency. We have weekly 30-minute informal team catch ups – work talk is banned. Induction – intentionally scheduled regular check ins, we’ve introduced some project management plans and tools, and started having a fortnightly CEO newsletter.”

Action



1

Create a return to office communication roadmap.

2

Ensure your workforce knows where to find relevant corporate communication policies and procedures.

3

Audit your internal communications to ensure the frequency, mode and tone of your suite of internal messaging hits the mark.

5 New normal, new skills...

For people managers at all levels, there are new considerations in the new normal. The role of the manager becomes even more important in hybrid work. Microsoft research findings show a gap between manager and employee expectations, but one-on-one conversations create trust and give people the confidence to embrace their version of flexible hybrid work.¹⁷

“We have learnt that our staff can engage with others remotely. We won’t go back to the old normal way, it’s good in a way, it’ll save the environment, it’ll save money.”

- Can collaboration and culture building only happen in person?
- What are hybrid work best practices for collaboration, onboarding, and meetings?
- How do you lead a team effectively in the new normal?

Looking ahead, many industry leaders reflected on aspects of professional life which were challenging, or seemed impossible when working remotely. Collaboration and onboarding were mentioned regularly in our interviews. As organisations adjust to hybrid work on a longer-term basis, new skills can overcome common pain points.

“It’s been a challenge to support new starters, to immerse them in work.”

"I think one of the biggest challenges for working remotely is the inability to mentor within teams, fundamentally the ability to knock on a colleague's door and say 'I've got a problem, let's fix it up'. Now you either email, phone, Zoom, it requires more planning. **We need different ways of approaching mentoring or problem solving with a colleague.**"

For many of our research participants, bringing new team members onboard remotely was challenging.

"...more than a quarter of our team are new, a quarter of the team have never been to the office, their whole experience is based on Zoom, they've never met their immediate team or boss. **It's been a challenge to support new starters, to immerse them in work.** We're planning a secondary induction when we return to the office in a COVID-normal way".

"Thinking about how to do remote onboarding, and support moving from person to person communication to something else as the business scales up."

Proximity bias is a known phenomenon where people connect with and trust those they interact with in person more readily than those they do not see as regularly. In hybrid work arrangements a conscious approach to addressing proximity bias needs to be factored in. Proximity bias can be recognised and overcome, and a level playing field can be created where everyone feels included.¹⁸

Action



1

Assess whether your team has the tools and knowledge to effectively collaborate with a dispersed workforce.

2

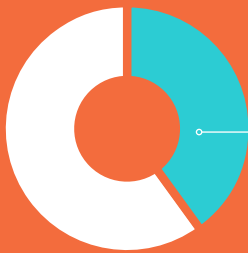
Review whether your internal e-learning modules are up to date.

3

Establish what new practices and procedures are required for hybrid working in your workplace - update existing policies and processes and ensure all relevant staff are provided with this information. (Great opportunity for a workplace leader to run a hybrid team meeting to talk through how things will work).

6 Identify and articulate your employee value proposition (EVP)

“We want to make sure they still feel connected.”



40%

40 per cent of the global workforce are **considering leaving their employers this year.**¹⁹

As talk of ‘the great resignation’ echoes across the media landscape, leaders are asking themselves if they’re doing enough to attract and retain skilled workers.

A steady pay cheque is just one part of an employee value proposition. Articulating your organisational values, culture and what makes it a uniquely great place are also necessary.

According to recent research by Microsoft, more than 40 per cent of the global workforce are considering leaving their employers this year.²⁰ PWC commissioned Australian research and found comparable results, including that 38% of workers planning to leave their current employer during the next year.²¹

In our research, workforce retention and recruitment was an established challenge for some, compounded by the Australian border closures. Actively cultivating the organisational culture and supporting staff development and morale was one strategy to minimise staff turnover.

“We are trying to retain good people who might be poached. We do this mostly through care packages, more professional development, and planned career progression. We’re trying to retain people because they want to stay. There is much more talk of employee value proposition, we try to play on this a lot. We want people to want to stay and grow in their roles.”

An EVP is complex and highly nuanced. There are objective elements, such as the terms of a leave policy, and subjective ones like the experience of working for a particular leader. So the employee experience will differ across industries, organisations, and even across functions and teams within a business. It will vary depending on the individual, as their personal circumstances and priorities evolve.²²

Action



1

Review the full range of financial incentives for employees, and consider if these are sufficiently competitive.

2

Consider what other elements are considered strong parts of your organisation’s unique EVP, and ask ‘what’s missing?’.

3

Cultivate an affinity between your workforce and your organisation’s values and culture to increase your employee value proposition.

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development**

About the **report**

We undertook this research to understand what industry leaders across Australia expect their COVID-normal workplaces to look like. We asked them to identify anticipated challenges and what supports are needed to transition their workforces effectively after this period of extraordinary upheaval.

Our approach

We undertook an extensive desktop literature review to identify emerging trends in work life following the COVID-19 pandemic impacts of 2020 - 2021.

In depth interviews were conducted with 13 senior leaders in a broad range of industries, across Australia. We made donations on their behalf to a charity of their choice to thank them for their time.

Who we heard from

Industry sector	
Government sector	3
Community organisation	1
Not for profit	2
Private company	7
Organisation size	
Small (under 20 employees)	4
Medium (between 21-200 employees)	3
Large (over 200+ employees)	6
Location of head office	
Sydney	2
Melbourne	8
Brisbane	1
Gold Coast	1
Adelaide	1
Job title	
CEO	4
CFO	1
Commissioner	1
Partner/Director/Executive Manager	7
Total industry leaders we spoke with	13

Desktop literature sources

- Changing Places: How hybrid working is rewriting the rule book, Price Waterhouse Cooper, The Global Consumer Trends, New Lives in a New World, Dynata, 2021.
- Fair Work Ombudsman Australia.
- Here comes the Great Resignation, Lisa Leong with Monique Ross and Maria Tickle for This Working Life, ABC Radio., 28 September 2021.
- How to do Hybrid Right, Harvard Business Review, Lynda Gratton, June 2021.
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- “What the great work from home experiment has taught us about the way we work”, The Conversation, March 26 2021.
- Why the Future of Work Might be ‘Hybrid’, BBC, Worklife, 31 August 2020.



Endnotes

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