The pandemic has had a devastating impact on lives and livelihoods, but also unlocked a unique opportunity for change – a catalyst for a better future. It has forced new ways of working to protect individual health as well as maintain continuity and productivity to protect livelihoods – the largest ‘work from home, work apart experiment’ ever. It is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform the future of how we live and work. Transforming the future will require a reinvention of how, where and when we work – a new COVID-19 safe workplace model, as well as a new workplace contract between employer and employee. Employers must ensure trust, flexibility and choice, as well as the highest quality digital experience, and most importantly a COVID-19 safe workplace. Employees must accept autonomy with responsibility, each accountable for their own performance and productivity. Success will require balance, a shared vision and great leadership.

**Keywords:** innovation, pandemic, productivity, strategy, workplace

### Key points

1. The pandemic has devastated lives and livelihoods, but unlocked a unique opportunity for change. Now is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform the future of how we live and work.

2. Transforming the future will require a new workplace model and contract between employer and employee. Employers ensuring trust, flexibility and choice, with COVID-19 safety. Employees accepting autonomy with responsibility and productivity.

3. The future – simply the ability to work from where, when and how we are most productive, and COVID-19 safe. Success will require balance, a strong shared vision for a better future and great leadership.

### Introduction

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating and unpredictable impact on people’s lives and their livelihoods across the globe. However, the pandemic has also created a unique opportunity for change, an opportunity to capture the good, and the innovation that has emerged in our response to its impact. Significantly, our response to
COVID-19 and the control of its spread has forced the need for new ways of working to both protect the health of individuals, and to seek to maintain continuity and productivity to protect our livelihoods. This rapid forced change has resulted in the largest ‘work from home, work apart’ experiment ever, generating a powerful catalyst for a better future; a force to reassess, to adapt and to transform how we live and work.

The impact of COVID-19

The damaging impact of COVID-19 has been tragic, diverse, far reaching and unpredictable. It has caused serious illness, suffering and sadly a significant loss of life, including for some of our most vulnerable. It has forced social isolation, separation and segregation, all of which have led to the generation of high levels of uncertainty and anxiety throughout our communities. The fear of the disease has also resulted in us seeking control of our own personal safety and circumstances, as well as that of our family and friends. While this has largely been a force for caring and well-being, it has also initiated for some in our community a loss of trust, as well as panicked and selfish behaviours. Commercially we have witnessed both a significant toll on employees with rapid high levels of unemployment, and for businesses, unprecedented disruption, financial loss and for some, failure and collapse.

Yet amongst all the loss and suffering, we have also experienced amazing innovation, creativity and most notably resilience, and a vision for a better future. We have experienced the rapid creation of new ways of doing business, new products and services, new competitors, new ways to shop with contactless home delivery of everything you could imagine, new ways of teaching and learning, with absolutely online everything. All combining to transform how we work, live, socialise, be healthy and happy in what has become a highly uncertain and constrained world.

We have also witnessed unforeseen flexibility and adaptability. Faced with the need to act quickly and effectively, these attributes have worked not only to enable an ability to respond to and navigate the negative impacts of COVID-19, but most importantly they have also enabled our ability to grasp and leverage this opportunity of forced change to reinvent how we live and work. Another positive outcome of our response to the pandemic has been the witnessing of a growing sense and importance of community, caring and social connection. While we have experienced a major shift of so many aspects of our daily lives into an online and virtual world, our human need for social connection in these challenging times has led us to seek increased opportunities for COVID-19 safe interaction, plus a return to old ways, along with valuing being local and of being with those you know and trust.

These factors of innovation and creativity, of flexibility and adaptability, of old ways and being local, of renewed trust, along with our forced new ways of working and doing business will be the drivers of an entirely new workplace model, one that has the potential to be truly transformative for us as individuals, for the world of business and for our society as a whole.
Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic is both a health crisis and an economic crisis with unprecedented loss and impact on our lives and our livelihoods. Clearly, without question we must address the health crisis as our number 1 priority. However, we must also develop a well-considered and integrated approach to restoring economic and financial recovery for individuals, for business, our communities and our shared global economy. One cannot be addressed without the other.

Recovery will require us to restore the health and well-being of our world in every aspect and dimension – education and training, full employment and productivity, business confidence, investment and sustainable growth – all in a COVID-19 safe way, so as to ensure trust and to achieve sustained lasting success. As a critical platform of our recovery, the future of work will require a new ‘workplace contract’ to ensure both COVID-19 safety and to simultaneously drive a high performance economic recovery.

This new contract between employer and employee will need to mitigate the health and well-being risks of COVID-19 while at the same time unlocking the productivity potential offered to employees through new ways of working, with new levels of flexibility and autonomy discovered and successfully adopted in our forced response to the pandemic. Further, this new contract must go beyond the traditional realms of workplace health and safety, of protection from injury and harm, to one of being authentically COVID-19 safe in every regard and to the highest standards, that is, designed, implemented and operated to be formally certified COVID-19 safe. It is strongly considered that the ability to offer a formally certified COVID-19 safe workplace will create a unique and powerful new dimension of competitive advantage, one that will act to attract and retain the very best people, the true drivers of high performance.

The future. So is the office dead?

Many commentators are arguing that the office is dead, and that finally we will see the end of the so-called cost-saving-driven ‘hot desking’ and that our cities will be a world of no office workers and empty commercial buildings.

So . . . is the office dead?

The answer is no. The office is not dead, it’s just different to how we once knew it.

COVID-19 safety, along with new employee demand for increased autonomy and flexibility, will be the drivers of the reinvention of how, where and when we work, and therefore of the open plan office environment as we know it today. The redesign of our workplace environments will demand new and unconventional ways of thinking and practices that will create a new workplace model for the future. A model that has been emerging prior to the pandemic at the leading edge of workplace strategy and design, one that will give us the best of centralised and decentralised working, as well as that of the collaborative and private working worlds.

During the pandemic, many have enjoyed and benefited from the forced ‘work at home’ opportunity and experience, delivering gains in personal productivity, while also
realising a new form of work, life and family balance. This group of workers have expressed a strong desire to retain these benefits and so are seeking to continue working from home as a standard way of work and life for the future. Equally, many have struggled working in the new world of work from home isolation, from a lack of technology, due to the lack of suitability of the home office, as well as the distractions and challenges of combining work at home, with home schooling and locked down family life. Further, the online technology driven work from home solution has generated increased stress and a reduction in overall well-being for many due to claims of longer work days, always being ‘on’ – that is, accessible and available – more emails to answer, more and bigger meetings, along with zoom fatigue with little or no downtime between online meeting and calls, as well as no wind down or transition time between work and home life experienced during the usual commute. These workers are said to be looking forward to their return to the office and the benefits it offers for both their personal productivity, and their overall state of well-being.

Others, however, are seeking a return to work to restore access to an environment that facilitates creativity, innovation and problem solving. The return to the ability to interact face to face with colleagues, to bounce ideas off each other, to have chance conversations, all of which has been missing in the isolation of working at home. Still others are simply seeking a return to the office as they crave the social connection, interaction and the friendship of work, the fun casual banter, the shared celebrations and challenges of life, as well as the richness of being a member of a productive commercial business unit, a team and a network of friends.

Prior to the pandemic in 2019, it is estimated that less than 20 per cent of the workforce regularly worked from home. In 2020, in response to the pandemic, working from home is estimated to have increased to 80 per cent of the total workforce. The transition, though forced in nature, has been reported as being highly successful both in the scale of the shift as well as the levels of productivity achieved. A workforce sentiment survey, conducted by the Boston Consulting Group in June 2020, identified up to 60 per cent of employees have an ongoing preference to adopt a hybrid model in the future, with a split of work between home and office, with 2 to 3 days each week working at home (Mattey et al. 2020).

Some may argue that the success of the pandemic-driven work from home outcomes are a strong reason not to return to the office. However, it is worth acknowledging that a critical element of our work from home success and the transition to an online virtual world of work has been in part due to the strong personal connections and relationships between work colleagues. Connections and relationships that existed pre-pandemic and so prior to our forced move to working from home, and that these were relationships that had their foundations in our face-to-face interactions and the shared work environment of the pre-pandemic office. Therefore, a future of 100 per cent working from home may not simply achieve the same success without a component of ‘face-to-face’ interaction, an element of work that is best fulfilled as a critical function within the corporate office environment.
A final factor to consider in regard to our return to the office is that of the commute. For some, the lack of commuting is one of the major benefits of working from home, but it is also a significant factor of concern for those with a desire to return to the office. A Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in May 2020 found that the vast majority of Australians were comfortable about returning to work, but 60 per cent were not comfortable with using public transport (ABS 2020). This may therefore act to slow the rate of return to CDB office environments, but it could also become a strong driver for the development of a future distributed office model, one that removes the risk of the commute, reduces the commute time, and reaps the benefits of being local to the lives and homes of employees.

So what will be the workplace of the future? How will we respond to the lessons, the great benefits and the difficult challenges of the largest ‘work from home, work apart’ experiment ever, that we have experienced, as a response to ensuring the safety and security of both our lives and our livelihoods in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Today’s workplace design**

The typical workplace of today is mostly or partially open plan. Over the past 20 plus years workplace design has seen a progressive transition from enclosed individual assigned offices to open plan shared environments. Workplace strategists and designers have also sought to optimise shared use of space and facilities, as well as create environments to drive interaction, collaboration, knowledge sharing and social connection. We have also witnessed a significant reduction in space allocation and increased workplace density from as high as 30 m² per person to as low as 9 m² per person. Overlaid on these aspects of space and density, observational analysis regarding the type of use and effective utilisation of a typical open plan workplace records a vacancy level at any given time throughout the work day of 40 to 50 per cent. These findings illustrate that many employees are already working highly flexibly, that is, working in and away from the office or working at various locations within their open plan office, as well as away from the office meeting and working with customers, or on leave, training and travelling and so on. These findings also highlight both the provision of spaces that are not truly fit for purpose, as well as high levels of underutilisation of the office environment.

In response, contemporary best practice workplace design has been seeking to achieve five primary objectives:

1. Deliver a clear and strong expression of an organisation’s vision, values and culture.
2. Drive high individual performance and team performance.
3. Unlock underutilised space and provide a new diversity of environments to match both individual high concentration tasks, and team collaboration activities.
4. Deliver significantly improved utilisation of space and hence reduced cost.
5. Provide environments that are both sustainable in design and promote health and well-being.
As a critical outcome of achieving the above objectives, the modern workplace has become more than the simple provision of a physical place to accommodate the workforce, to that of a strong driver of competitive advantage – defining the unique brand and culture of an organisation and acting as a key facilitator of high performance and a powerful mechanism to enable:

1. Formal and informal collaboration.
2. Innovation and creative problem solving.
3. Ad hoc knowledge sharing.
4. Mentoring and team building.
5. Access to ‘better’ technology, as well as to secure systems and information.

The workplace – a driver of competitive advantage

Most significantly, these factors have also acted as a potent attractor for the very highest performing and most talented individuals. This is the real source of any organisation’s competitive advantage – the best people, driven by a clear strong vision and purpose, working in an office environment optimally designed for high performance, sustainability and well-being.

However, the contemporary workplace is not directly or simply aligned to the new and strict requirements of being a COVID-19 safe environment. The workplace design drivers of shared use, of higher density, of chance interaction and close interactive collaboration are at odds with the need for social distancing, individual personal hygiene and COVID-19 safe practices. Hence the great new opportunity. The opportunity to create an innovative COVID-19 safe workplace represents a new and unique dimension of competitive advantage, the next generation of attracting and retaining the very best people in a safe, highly performing and effective workplace environment.

A new workplace model

The key to unlocking both the individual and organisational high performance opportunities of the future is the design, development and implementation of a new workplace model. A model that is based on the simple premise of enabling individuals to work from where, when and how they are most productive, and in our current health crisis in a way that is COVID-19 safe. While this may appear as a new model for many, it is an approach to office design that has been emerging prior to the pandemic at the leading edge of workplace strategy and design.

The new workplace model will require unconventional thinking and practices by both the designers and the client organisations, their leaders and managers. It must meet the diversity of individual employee workstyles and preferences, of extroverts and introverts, of high concentration and focused solo workers, as well as highly collaborative and interactive teams. The new model must deliver previously unexperienced levels of employee flexibility and autonomy in terms of work location, days of the week and time of day, and
so authentically enable individuals to work from where, when and how they are most productive. It must also respond to the desire by many for reduced commute times, and the ability to work locally both for personal safety as well as continuing to realise the benefits of a new level of work, life and family balance offered by working close to home and in their local community. Performance and productivity measurement will be required to be truly focused on productive output and tangible delivery of business objectives versus simply time at work or time committed to the task. Finally, the new model will have an obligation to respond to a new era of societal change, and responsibility for the care not only of our young, but of parents and our older family loved ones. The future not only demands a more flexible way of working but also one that is both more intuitive and more humane.

The best people and the great performers are going to be attracted to the authentic organisations that deliver on this new future model of work, and most importantly to those organisations that adopt and promote COVID-19 safe ways of working as a committed priority, and an underpinning value of their operations and culture. Those organisations that make flexible COVID-19 safe work really succeed over time, will become the unmatched ‘employers of choice’ and as a result the organisations of unmatched competitive advantage, of market leadership and customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Many business, economic and workplace design commentators to date have described the physical and operational translation of this new workplace model as a simple two-dimensional hybrid; that is, a split of employee time and location between working at home and working in the traditional corporate central business district (CBD) office. However, the optimal high performance solution that is directly aligned to both the lifestyle and workstyle preferences of individual employees and the vision and purpose driven operational and cultural objectives of organisations, comprises three integrated elements as follows, and as illustrated in Figure 1:
The retention of a modified corporate head office.

The introduction of a new distributed local offices component.

The promotion of working from home as a committed and supported long term workplace component.

Each of the three elements of the new model will fulfil uniquely different roles, as well as meet the work and lifestyle preferences of employees described as follows.

**Corporate head office**

The corporate head office will undergo a realignment and intensification of its core purpose and function. The corporate head office will fulfil the critical primary function as the place that provides a clear and strong physical expression of the organisation’s vision, values and purpose, and hence create an environment that delivers a deep immersion of employees in the organisation’s unique brand and culture.

Further, the corporate head office will be the place for leaders to engage face to face with their teams, so as to provide personalised moments of mentoring and coaching, training and professional development. In this new model, it will also be the place of collaboration and interaction, a place to facilitate creativity and innovation, planning and problem solving. Importantly, it will be the place for employees to engage face to face with colleagues, to build personal relationships, as well as to establish and strengthen team connection and identity. All key factors in optimising knowledge and information sharing, productivity and performance in the online world of work.

Finally, the corporate head office will still offer workspace for traditional solo work, so as to meet the work and lifestyle preferences of employees who simply prefer and enjoy conducting their work activities in the corporate office environment.

**Distributed local offices**

The introduction of this new element will respond not only to the demands of COVID-19 safety, but also positively to the newly realised benefits experienced by employees when working local to their families, their homes and their community.

Employees working locally will benefit from a reduced commute resulting in improved work, life and family balance, while also avoiding the health risks of travelling on public transport. Further, working locally will also provide an avenue for achieving increased flexibility and availability to meet the demands of family life, as well as eliminating the challenges experienced by some, when working from home is the alternative.

Importantly the distributed local office element will serve as the place beyond the corporate office to have access to all the same facilities and amenities, as well as the systems and technology to support and facilitate the highest levels of personal performance and productivity.

Finally, distributed local offices will be designed and constructed to prioritise and optimise solo work, and to meet the work and lifestyle preferences of employees who simply prefer and enjoy conducting their work activities in a local office environment.
Working from home

The final element of the new workplace model comprises employees working from their homes, a choice that enables employees to optimise time and place flexibility, and leverage the associated personal benefits of no commute, and no travel or workplace driven COVID-19 health risk; as well as gains in personal productivity, and most significantly unleashing a new level of work, life and family balance.

Finally, this element of the model provides the workplace option that meets the work and lifestyle preferences of employees who simply prefer and enjoy conducting their work activities remotely and within their home.

The design and implementation of these three elements of the new model will depend on the industry, the organisation and its people, and will be different for different parts of the organisation and the diversity of its functions. The optimal design solution will be developed by individuals and their teams within the framework defined by the organisation’s vision, values and culture. This approach will enable employees to have authentic choice to decide where it is best to work, when it is best, how it is best and, as a result, do and create what is best.

Pre-pandemic, two of Australia’s leading organisations in the fields of financial services and global property development and construction, both who are at the forefront of workplace design strategy and performance, had already developed and were successfully trialling a three-component workplace model. This trial was, and now continues to be, developed as the next evolution of workplace design to deliver both individual and organisational high performance. The trial model was also based on the simple concept of enabling employees to work from where, when and how they are most productive, and is being driven by an alignment of the organisation’s performance goals and objectives and the individual employee’s work and lifestyle preferences. The pandemic has not only resulted in the recognition of this as a suitable and safe response strategy, but also acted to accelerate its development as the next generation of workplace design.

Transition strategy for the future

In today’s COVID-19 world of work, we will require a clear transition strategy and plan for the future. We will require short-term immediate solutions to make our office environments COVID-19 safe, as well as to establish a bridge to the future of the new workplace model. The long-term solution will evolve rapidly as the next generation of workplace modification and design. This will necessitate a change in the structure of the corporate office environment to be COVID-19 safe, the introduction of the local office element, as well as the establishment of home work environment policies and protocols to ensure not only the performance but most importantly the health and well-being of employees.

The future and the success of this new model to drive high performance will also be driven by the continued adoption and leveraging of new technologies such as the
introduction of 5G and the anticipated spectrum of new opportunities that these technologies will unleash.

In the corporate office we will experience a reduction of individual and shared communal space transitioned to a substantial increase in collaboration spaces. This will not necessarily drive a reduction in space but a repurposing of the same space and a realignment of densities in the near term to meet the social distancing requirements of COVID-19 safety. The emergence of the demand for people to work locally, will drive the establishment and availability of full amenity local offices distributed in alignment with employee demographics and the geographic diversity of our cities, suburbs and regional centres. It is anticipated that people will work more from where they live, and hence spend more time in their local communities. This factor has the potential to drive a renaissance in the suburbs as well as the movement to, and growth of regional centres offering both a higher quality of life for families with the benefits of a lower cost of living.

On the down side, this shift will reduce the working populations of our inner cities and other commercial CBDs. Importantly, these environments are significant generators of economic activity in their own right through the delivery of a wide range of commercial goods and services to meet the needs of these communities, such as business support services, food and beverage services, entertainment, retail and transport services. In response, it is considered cities will need to undergo a remix of commercial space use in the short term, with cities and public spaces needing to be reimagined to prioritise people and their safety as well as respond to the impact of lower office worker populations.

Overall, the change in the structure of the workplace will initially be shaped to meet the needs of being COVID-19 safe, but in the longer term will be driven by the diverse range of personal work and life demands and preferences of workers.

The challenges

The transition to a COVID-19 safe workplace is not without significant challenges. The challenges not only of workplace design, but also of cost, and most importantly the challenges of trust, and of leading and managing distributed and remote working teams, as well as fostering and maintaining strong team connection, culture and ultimately high performance.

Today’s commercial office environments have been purposefully designed as shared, high utilisation environments to maximise chance interactions, spontaneous knowledge sharing, interactive problem solving and strong community building. We have seen the introduction of ‘high performance destination lifting’, designed to lift workers to their workfloors at maximum capacity and efficiency. Once on the workfloors there are shared open worksettings, shared office equipment as well as shared self-serve kitchen environments with café style shared seating. Typically employees also have access to shared change and shower rooms, lockers and bike storage with the purpose of promoting active health and well-being.
Addressing the design challenges will require adhering to the clearly articulated COVID-19 safe public health advice and directives of social distancing, cleaning protocols and personal hygiene. It will also require the implementation of a range of unconventional thinking and practices that will need to include:

1. Daily assigned – that is, not shared – use of facilities and equipment, with strict between use cleaning protocols.
2. The use of touch free technologies.
3. The introduction of controlled directional movement through corridors and hallways; up and down stairways.
4. Higher levels of ‘in-house’ service provision versus self-serve shared amenities.
5. Scheduled arrivals and departures.
6. Introduction of split teams and preassigned allocation of the employee population across the mix of work modes of corporate office, local office and the work at home, to ensure COVID-19 safe standards can be achieved and maintained.
7. Ensuring work is moving to the worker, rather than the worker moving to the work.
8. Optimising video conferencing and non-contact modes of interacting and collaborating.
9. The reassignment, expansion or addition of elements of the workplace in order to meet COVID-19 safe requirements such as the provision of additional end of trip facilities, that is, change and shower rooms, lockers and so on.

Clearly the cost impact of all aspects of the transition to both a short-term COVID-19 safe workplace and a longer-term distributed workplace model will be substantial, but essential, and so will require realignment of cost structures and reallocation of financial resources. Such decisions must be driven by clearly defining and implementing strategies to unlock both the individual and organisational high performance opportunities of the future. In regard to leadership, for many the new workplace model will create new and evolving opportunities for highly engaged and effective leadership of self-directed teams. Teams driven by output not input, underpinned by flexibility and genuine choice, with teams solving for themselves how, where and when they work. However, for some, the shift will require a new level of trust and a new level of maturity and sophistication to successfully lead in a new distributed workplace model. Finally, leaders and team members together will need to actively develop and implement strategies to ensure all employees maintain a strong sense of both organisational, team culture and connection, as well as individual personal well-being. All critical factors that are required to maintain high levels of trust and engagement, openness, knowledge sharing, productivity and performance.

Conclusion: Transforming our future – a new workplace contract

Finally, to transform our future to a new world of life and work opportunity will require more than just a new workplace model and a series of transition strategies. The realisation of our new future will require a new ‘workplace contract’ – a mutually beneficial
NEW WORKPLACE CONTRACT

employer

trust
flexibility
and choice
COVID-19 safe

employee

autonomy
with responsibility
accountable
new protocols

new dimension in competitive advantage and performance

Figure 2  New Workplace Contract

relationship between employer and employee that delivers both COVID-19 safety and success. As illustrated in Figure 2, a unique, once in a generation opportunity to establish a new dimension in competitive advantage, of culture and performance based on trust, confidence and shared commitment.

Under this new contract employers must ensure real employee trust, deliver unmatched place and time flexibility, with authentic freedom of choice that delivers a genuine culture enabling employees to work from where, when and how they are the most productive. Supported and sustained by the provision of the highest quality digital technology and experience, employers must also deliver a certified COVID-19 safe workplace. One that is not only safe, but also sustainable and healthy. A place of both high performance and well-being.

Equally, employees must match the work and lifestyle autonomy benefits of the new world of work offered by their employers, with genuine accountability for performance and unmatched delivery on agreed performance objectives and outcomes. Employees must also acknowledge and strictly uphold the procedures and protocols demanded of them to achieve COVID-19 safety.

Success

Ultimately, success will require:

1  **Balance** – a fine but clear balance between the social and organisational forces pulling us together, and the health forces pushing us apart in order to maintain social distancing to keep us COVID-19 safe.

2  **Shared vision** – a strong shared vision and commitment for a new and better future of innovation, and of growth to capture the ‘good’, and the unique opportunity for change for better in our lives and livelihoods arising from our response to the pandemic.
3 Great leadership – simply, nothing can replace great leadership to ensure success.

The future ... simply the ability to work from where, when and how we are most pro-
ductive, and COVID-19 safe.

A unique, once-in-a-generation opportunity to establish a new dimension in competi-
tive advantage, of culture and performance based on trust, confidence and shared
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