A Post COVID-19 Playbook

How to future proof your workplace

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COVID-19: The world's biggest remote working experiment

In the first few weeks of Australia's first confirmed case of COVID-19, two main camps emerged in the business world – those that immediately embraced remote working, and those who delayed it for as long as possible. Across the border, in New Zealand, the decision was taken out of the hands of CEOs, with level four lockdown measures introduced on March 23rd.
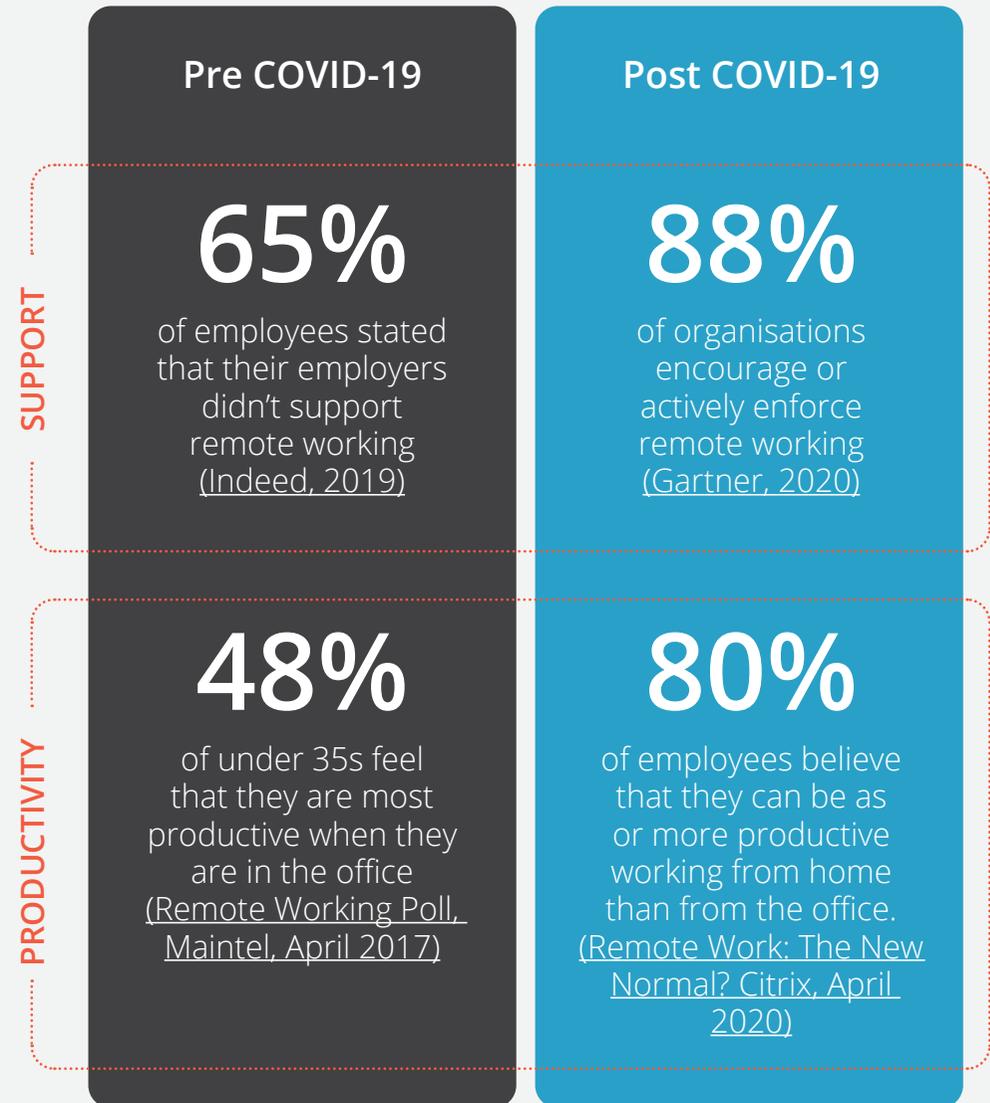
How did we get here?

Remote working has been a contentious topic for businesses for decades. Despite consistent research proving that remote working can boost productivity, attract talent and reduce absenteeism, many businesses have avoided the practice, plagued by fears of reduced productivity.

Prior to the pandemic, some of the biggest companies such as IBM and Yahoo made global news when they dramatically revoked their working from home policies [1] and 65% of Australian and New Zealand (ANZ) employees stated that their employers didn't support working from home [2].

By the time the Australian Government had started introducing COVID-19 restrictions and officially advising employees to work from home, if possible, an estimated 88% of organisations around the world had already either encouraged or enforced remote working [3] – leading to what many have called 'the world's biggest remote working experiment'. [4]

1. IBM, Remote-work Pioneer, is Calling Thousands of Employees Back to the Office, Quartz, 2017
2. REPORT: Working from Home, Indeed, 2019
3. Gartner HR Survey, Gartner, March 2020
4. Coronavirus Forces World's Largest Work-From-Home Experiment, Bloomberg, February 2020

Pre COVID-19	Post COVID-19
SUPPORT	
65% of employees stated that their employers didn't support remote working (Indeed, 2019)	**88%** of organisations encourage or actively enforce remote working (Gartner, 2020)
PRODUCTIVITY	
48% of under 35s feel that they are most productive when they are in the office (Remote Working Poll, Maintel, April 2017)	**80%** of employees believe that they can be as or more productive working from home than from the office. (Remote Work: The New Normal? Citrix, April 2020)

The new remote office environment

Whether or not the 'world's biggest remote working experiment' turns out to be a success, is very much down to how organisations manage and support their new remote workforces. It seems that the majority of employees have long been in agreement that remote working is more desirable than office-based working, with 54% stating that they would change jobs[5] and 51% claiming they would be prepared to take a pay cut[6] if it meant switching to a more flexible work environment.

For those businesses willing to invest in providing adequate support for remote workers, there are significant dividends; in fact, according to Gallup research, highly engaged remote workplaces enjoy:

17% higher productivity

41% lower rates of absenteeism

21% higher profitability[7]

Savings of up to **$11,000 (USD)** per year, per part-time worker[8]

5. Is Working Remotely Effective? Gallup, January 2020
6. Telsyte Australian Digital Workplace Study 2017, NBN Australia, April 2017
7. The 38 Most Engaged Workplaces in the World Put People First, Gallup, March 2020
8. Latest Remote Work Statistics, Global Workplace Analytics, March 2020

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However, the consequences of failing to support remote workers can fulfil every manager's worst fears, with remote employee disengagement and isolation leading to a **21% drop in performance**.[9]

Managing remote workers presents an entirely new set of challenges for organisations and goes well beyond simply providing workers with a laptop and scheduling regular online video conferences. In fact, isolation and inadequate IT present two of the biggest challenges for successful remote working, with 37% of workers citing loneliness and 32% poor connectivity as the main obstacles to productivity, when working from home.[10]

Why remote working fails

37%

of workers say loneliness impacts productivity.

32%

of workers cite poor connectivity as the main obstacles when working from home.

21%

the average drop in performance, when employees feel isolated or disengaged.

9.   Remote Worker Isolation: Perception Vs Reality, Gallup, September 2019
10. 'OUT OF OFFICE' Virtual Working Survey, Korn Ferry, February 2020

How to create a digitally enabled workplace

As we've already discussed, connectivity (or the lack of) is one of the biggest obstacles to successful home working. Providing employees with the tools, systems and connection speeds to be able to perform tasks just as quickly and easily as if they were office-based can have a direct impact on output and productivity, as well as employee satisfaction and stress levels.

As Richard Wells, Manager Digital Products NSW Department of Customer Service, puts it:

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"No-one wants to do a bad job – empower them with the culture, systems, technology, equipment and resources they need, and they will continue to do great work".

culture

+

systems

+

connectivity

=

Productive remote employees
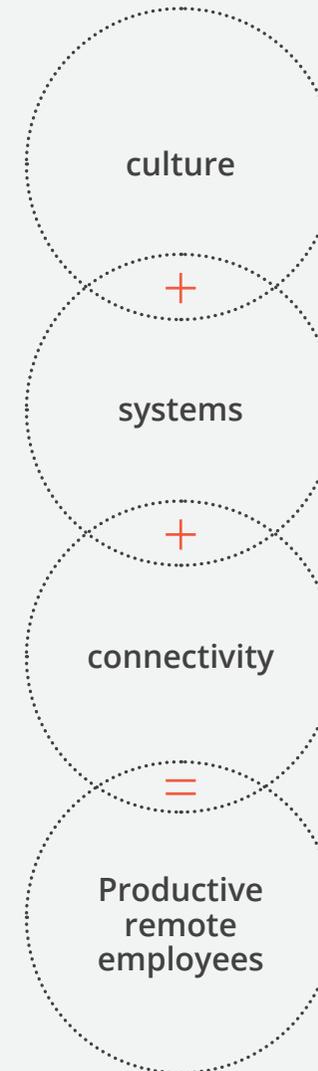
Here are three crucial technologies to help, not hinder, productivity:

▶ **A fast, stable connection** – According to McKinsey research, "Expanding VPN (virtual private network) access and bandwidth is one of the first steps many CIOs took to enable their employees to access systems remotely." [11]

▶ **Cloud-based connectivity** – Cloud-based, scalable technology is essential; something that many organisations learnt the hard way when their websites were unexpectedly swamped during the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak. [12] The ability to spin up new sites, cope with unexpected spikes in demand and minimise downtime will help to future-proof your business and your virtual workplace.

▶ **A robust employee intranet** – Being unable to find the information we need quickly and easily is hugely frustrating, not to mention a waste of time. A modern intranet can provide a central source of information, empowering your staff to find anything they need, instantly.

stable connection

Productivity

robust employee

Cloud-based

11. A Blueprint for Remote Working: Lessons from China, McKinsey, March 2020
12. Cloud Computing Faces COVID-19 Test, Which-50, April 2020

Enhancing the employee experience

The employee experience is now front and centre. No longer able to reach out to ask colleagues for help, fundamental tools, such as your employee intranet, are now more vital than ever and can either become a lifeline, connecting employees to the heart of the business – or the clunking machine that leaves them feeling lost and frustrated. A recent report found that employees waste more than 2.4 hours per week at work because they don't have the right technological support – specifically, the right tools or the right training to use them effectively. [13]

13. Insight Report: The Employee Experience, Insight, June 2019

To ensure your internal systems and technologies support employees, rather than hindering their productivity, here are some key considerations:

▶ **Create a single source of truth** – providing employees with a one-stop-shop for all important company information, communications and tools will eliminate confusion and ensure they're always kept up to date. A modern intranet can play a pivotal role, but more important is ensuring that information is current and easy to find. An intranet with intelligent search will ensure employees can always find the information they need, quickly, while a quick and intuitive publishing tool will empower staff to create fresh content daily.

▶ **Who's who** – for large organisations, a common challenge can be identifying the correct person, when seeking approvals or asking questions. This can become much more difficult when working remotely and almost impossible for new employees. Providing staff with a dynamic org chart and company directory can help employees to find the right person to talk to, with the ability to search by name, skill, department or line manager.

▶ **Streamline your tech stack** – too many tools can be almost as detrimental to performance as not having the right tools. Thirty eight percent of employees claim to miss important information at least once a day because they've been forced to manage too many communication channels.[14] Instead of constantly adding more technologies to the mix, focus on auditing and integrating existing solutions, consolidating your tech stack and creating a central hub so employees can see and access the full range of tools at their disposal.

▶ **Personalise the experience** – in the same way that customers expect personalised experiences, increasingly, so do your employees. Not only will a personalised experience enhance engagement, but it can directly improve productivity, with functionality such as targeted filters reducing the risk of miscommunications and enabling staff to find relevant information faster.

14. Insight, 2019

5 ways to keep employees engaged

Recognising that remote working can bring an entirely new set of challenges, as well as a new management approach, is key to creating a successful virtual work culture. Here are five ways to keep employees feeling valued, connected, and engaged:

1

Create virtual 'water cooler' moments

2

Beyond the 9 to 5

3

Same work, new processes

4

Keeping sane, staying safe

5

Be real, be vulnerable, be human

1

Create virtual 'water cooler' moments

While there are lots of social opportunities that can't be recreated remotely, it's important to recognise that team members could be missing those water cooler moments without even realising it. When isolation creeps in, the temptation can be to overcompensate by scheduling more meetings and sending more emails, hindering productivity. To find the balance, Heidi Davidson, Head of People and Culture at Rotor Studios, suggests discouraging excessive or unnecessary email communications and encouraging high-quality, 'human' interactions. Try booking Google Hangout sessions or arranging virtual pub quizzes to maintain team building; "People need the humour and the chit-chat now more than ever", Heidi reminds us.

To keep employees focused on 'quality over quantity' communications:

▶ Keep meetings as short as possible (15-30 mins maximum) and always keep to time.

▶ Always have an agenda, be strict on the invite list and empower staff to decline meetings they don't feel they need to attend.

▶ Establish clear communication channels for different contexts; e.g. phone calls for simple discussions between two people; video conferencing for team catch-ups and social events; Slack for non-essential chat; email for work-related documented matters; intranet notifications for personalised relevant news etc.

2

Beyond the 9 to 5

By its very nature, working from home blurs the work/life balance and it's important to know when to allow more flexibility and when to encourage more structure. While some staff may need greater flexibility on exactly when they work during the day, if they have childcare commitments, others may benefit from enforced office hours, to ensure they allow time in their day for family and relaxation.

To foster a healthy work/life balance, try:

▸ Reminding staff that there is no expectation to respond to emails outside of the 9-5

▸ Sharing tips on how to track screen time

▸ Scheduling 15-minute morning and 'sign-off' meetings, to signal the start and end of the working day.

3

Same work, new processes

Another consequence of team members not being 'visible' in the office is that it can be easier for work, projects and accountability to fall between the cracks. Asking for help via email or video meetings is far more confronting than the more private, one-on-one chats that may have previously occurred between team members – which can force new team members, or those struggling with workloads or complicated tasks, to 'go quiet' and hope that mistakes and missed deadlines go unnoticed. According to McKinsey,

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"The answer is to shift from large, siloed teams to smaller, cross-functional teams of five to nine people with clear, outcome-based objectives. Establish a clear cadence of scheduled daily and weekly meetings... to deal with more ambiguity". [15]

15. How to Lead and Manage Remotely Adjusting to the COVID 19 Pandemic, McKinsey, March 2020

4

Keeping sane, staying safe

Laying strong foundations for a safe, healthy and supported virtual work environment will create robust remote working practices well after COVID-19 restrictions have been eased.

Setting out defined work-from-home (WFH) policies, Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and gender-neutral parental leave policies will help employees to understand what is expected of them. Identify employee needs and how your organisation can provide support;

▶ when the NSW Department of Customer Service had to quickly switch its 10,000 staff to remote working, it set up a service delivering essential office and IT equipment to their doorsteps.

▶ Similarly, when software company, Zapier, realised new employees were feeling isolated, it introduced random video pairings, introducing staff to people they might otherwise never have met, while working remotely.[16]

16. From Thinking About the Next Normal to Making It Work: What to Stop, Start, and Accelerate, McKinsey, May 2020

5

Be real, be vulnerable, be human

Internal communications need to be real, vulnerable and human. As Juhi King, HR technology expert points out, "Connected doesn't mean seeing people all the time in video conferences – it's about seeing the person and being more authentic and open. Be professional, but also reach out, be compassionate and ask people about their lives and how they're coping".

Tips for more authentic, human communication include:

▸ Avoid well-scripted or polished corporate emails (sent from a department, rather than an individual).

▸ Create new ways to show appreciation and recognition, such as one-on-one catchups and sharing internal success stories.

▸ Trust your staff – current restrictions won't last forever and those who are juggling home-schooling, mental health or hostile home environments will need real support, patience and understanding at this time.

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"Connected doesn't mean seeing people all the time in video conferences – it's about seeing the person and being more authentic and open."

Juhi King, HR Technology Expert

The new normal

The lockdown life we experienced at the beginning of 2020 was never intended to be a long-term solution; however, despite pandemic restrictions already easing throughout ANZ, social distancing and a more flexible approach to working will very much become part of the new normal.

With both businesses and employees reaping the many benefits that can come with remote working, it seems that many are already forging ahead to make remote working a permanent solution, well beyond COVID-19 restrictions. Those that succeed in establishing a supportive culture, robust processes and the right technologies will emerge from the pandemic with a highly engaged, productive and loyal workforce – not to mention a work environment that's likely to attract prospective talent.
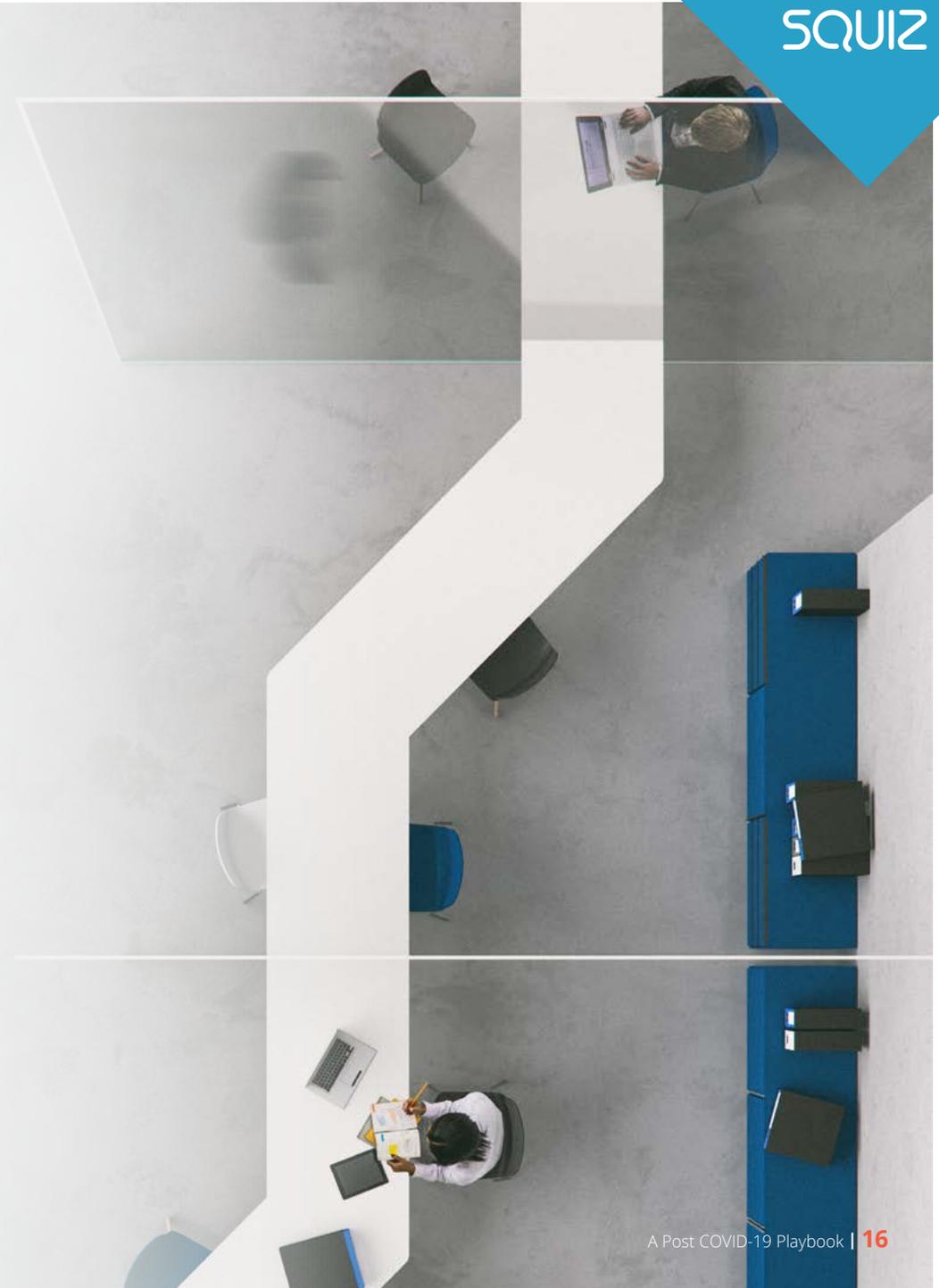
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Here to help

Squiz is committed to providing the practical tools and resources businesses need to respond to the current and post COVID-19 environment. With a range of digital tools and solutions to deliver critical information to your employees, when they need it, Squiz can help your business to establish the ultimate remote working environment.

To find out how Squiz can help to unite your workplace and connect employees on one platform, visit Squiz Workplace.

Get the insights and tools essential for success

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