

COVID-19 and the changing employee experience



While remote working has been available to many employees for many years, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly accelerated its scalability beyond what could have been imagined. From our research in Australia, most organisations had only a specialised few or no employees working from home before the pandemic. Over the last two months, however, these organisations have had to make fast and agile change to facilitate remote working in order to achieve business continuity. Inevitably this has led to a very different experience for most employees than that which previously prevailed.

The COVID-19 situation is potentially a pivotal cultural shift for some employers who have, in very recent times, sought to focus on the employee experience as the gateway to achieving greater employee engagement and productivity. It seems clear that typical attempts to engage employees have been characterised by abysmal failure. And, so the argument goes, if organisations can focus on the feelings employees have about their interactions with their employer a more positive experience can be created. This, in turn, it is argued, will lead to employees who are more engaged, committed and satisfied, particularly if the nature of these interactions is co-created with employees. In seeking to enhance the employee experience, organisations, such as IBM, have used design-thinking to co-create better employee experiences by involving employees in the process of design.

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Our research among HR professionals and managers with people management responsibility shows that beyond COVID-19 the overall view is that the world of work will transform into a new normal. What does this mean for the employee experience?

The employee experience is largely related to three spheres: the work itself, the social sphere and the spatial or physical, sphere. These spheres of employee experience in turn underpin key dimensions of ‘job quality’, a notion central to the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda and to the European Union’s Quality of Work practices. Employees interact with and have feelings about the work/working sphere. These interactions are embodied in HR systems, policies and procedures, for example, on-boarding, learning and development, career opportunities, rewards and performance management systems. They also concern the design of work and the extent to which employees think their work is purposeful, and that they experience autonomy, discretion and mastery. Employees, in addition, will want the ‘tools’ to do their job and perform their specific role and responsibilities.

The social sphere relates to the interactions employees have in the workplace with other people. It will involve their interactions with the boss, peers and other stakeholders. It will encompass the experience employees have of teams and collaboration. In addition, it will relate to feelings of perceived trust and fairness that an employee experiences in relation to these relationships and also organisational systems more generally (as in the work sphere). The social sphere would also involve workplace friendships, mutual support and the alleviation or creation of workplace stress and issues of well-being as a consequence of the social environment and interactions.

The spatial sphere is the physical environment or space within which work is performed. Employees will experience this environment in multiple ways and the more control they have over it, the more likely they will have positive work experiences.

It is argued that through intense and regular feedback and co-creation of the work, social and spatial spheres by the employer and employee, the overall employee experience can be made much more positive with greater job quality. In turn, this will lead to 'real' employee engagement. Apart from IBM, we know of a number of organisations experimenting and using design-thinking in this way to improve the employee experience.

Our research in Australia indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic, as elsewhere in the world, has significantly impacted the spheres of work and sites of employee experience. While many will transition back to offices and other sites in the post-COVID situation, our respondents indicated that there will need to be a re-evaluation of work and the design of work. As one respondent stated, *"we need to redesign jobs to best suit the modern world, and work out what that is"*. Many respondents were also clear that new HR policies and practices would need to be introduced for more to fit the requirement for greater agility and flexibility. As far as the work sphere is concerned, we argue that now is the time for co-creation of these new policies and practices and work designs by specifically engaging employees in this process. In a situation where there are very few experts to show the way forward, co-creating more positive experiences at work seems to make sense.

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Similarly with the social sphere. An increase in remote working means that people-to-people interactions will take a different form, many will be virtual. In addition, issues of trust and fairness take on a different hue in such situations, particularly where there is a lack of 'visibility' in the workplace. Networks and formal and informal connections are also impacted, with the social contact of the office lost or reduced. There is likely also to be a need to re-think traditional workplace signalling and managing promotion and career development expectations. This is more so when visibility is lost or reduced, which needs to be thought-through and managed. Once again, this is an excellent opportunity to consider how the social experience of work might be co-created in a number of ways to ensure that this crucial element of work produces positive people-to-people relationships. One respondent stated that *"connections will need to be completely re-thought and we are still thinking about what this might mean for collaborations and careers and staff wellbeing and stress levels"*.

Our respondents overwhelmingly indicated that remote working would increase in the future and that new policies and practices would need to be developed. However, with respect to the spatial sphere remote working raises important issues. At the simplest level is the actual space, typically the home, where work is done. Employees will experience this as a work space very differently from the office. One respondent stated: *"business needs to think now much more about supporting staff who are not working in the office, just in terms of how to deal with working full-time at home"*. The home space may be filled with others who are not co-workers. Employees who are working at home will also need to establish spaces to facilitate work which are safe and will need support from their employer to perform well in very different environmental contexts. This new spatial sphere for work can also be the subject of co-creation, as long as employers do not see remote working as simply a source of cost-savings.

Having stated this, however, some respondents did recognise the financial benefits from the reduction of physical infrastructure. One CEO from an organisation undergoing significant growth, and planning to relocate to larger premises prior to COVID, stated that remote working would now replace the need to relocate. Another respondent, a board chair and non-executive director, also anticipated a future without large city office buildings and unnecessary infrastructure costs stating, “CEOs will be asking, ‘why do we pay \$1 m rent each year for these big buildings?’”.

Organisations that have focused on the employee experience of work have found that it is a complex task of mapping and co-creating with employees. The employer journey to improve interactions with employees needs to be ongoing and fluid because *feelings*, derived from *interactions* that form into *experiences*, are ephemeral. They have to be always under review. Now, more so than ever, employee experiences of interactions with their employer will be complex, volatile and uncertain in the work, social and spatial spheres. This might provide a great opportunity for the co-creation of positive employee experiences in the post-COVID world that enable more meaningful long-term and fruitful employee engagement as well as higher quality and more decent work. Such work could also be shaped with all the rights and protections that employees should expect.

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