PAST | FUTURE

71%

OF BUSINESS LEADERS DO NOT FEEL PREPARED FOR WHAT IS COMING.

The Future of Work: Lessons in Leadership

Interaction Consulting Group

This is the second in a series of articles that explores the challenges and successes experienced by public sector leaders as they lead through crisis and pivot their teams to accommodate new ways of working.

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The phrase 'future of work' has long been the hallmark of HR conference themes and conversation pieces. Now, I don't know about you, but when I imagined the future of work, I envisaged a futuristic sci-fi world of AI and high-tech gadgetry. I didn't picture myself ensconced in the spare room of the family home communing with my colleagues via video links and delivering leadership programs through the lens of a hastily procured camera. But, along with a large percentage of the global workforce, that is exactly where I have found myself.

I suspect the term 'future of work' may have lulled many into a false sense of security. The implication that change was futuristic suggested leaders would have time to respond in a deliberate and controlled environment. Not only has Covid-19 voided that much anticipated response time, but it has challenged our assumptions of what the future of work would look like, and it turns out that it is much more mundane than any of us had hoped. While the age of digitisation and AI is still advancing, we now have an interim future that requires a more immediate response and presents a unique opportunity for growth.

New Ways of Working

Recently I have had many conversations with leaders about their experiences in adapting their workforces to accommodate the demands of flexible and remote work arrangements. Significantly, all reported the biggest functions to be impacted were business continuity, workforce planning and organisational design.

Fiona Scotney, Associate Director for the Australian National University's (ANU) Sir Roland Wilson Foundation[1] recalls that the initial approach to business continuity was to replicate the office environment, anticipating things would quickly return to normal. Once they moved past the idea of being post-COVID-19 by the end of the year they realised it was imperative they change their approach to work; their response was to reimagine the office virtually. She identified three challenges to maintaining business continuity, but which provided potential for growth within the team: virtual by default, technology, and ways of working.

[1] The Sir Roland Wilson Foundation builds public policy capability and leadership through postgraduate scholarships, professional development and networking opportunities.
[2] Title page: The Future of Work is now - Setting the course for a n empowered and connected workforce, 2019, Harvard Business Review.

Adapting the technology, both hardware and software, included setting up physical spaces, and provided a unique opportunity to upskill staff to effectively utilise new online platforms. The workplace transition challenged them to analyse their ways of working and provided an opportunity to reconsider priorities, clarify expectations, adapt ways of communicating, and revise roles and responsibilities.

Another senior executive who leads a branch responsible for delivering corporate functions in a Commonwealth government agency observed that within their agency the workload increased exponentially in response to the crisis and through necessity there was a strong focus on prioritising core deliverables. As the Branch settled into a routine they commenced capacity checks to ensure people had enough work to do, and to identify whether they were doing the right type of work. It quickly became apparent there were areas where unnecessary work was being undertaken. One of the positives to emerge from the crisis has been the opportunity to review the type and way work is being undertaken across the branch; this activity has significantly contributed to productivity increases by introducing improved work processes and streamlined service delivery. A larger workforce planning exercise will now be undertaken to take advantage of these finding and adopt many of the lessons realised.

> ## The future depends on what we do in the present.
>
> **Mahatma Ghandi**

Both of these success stories remind me that organisations have already been incrementally preparing for the future of work and implementing new ways of working through myriad organisational re-design processes; for many COVID-19 simply hastened the imperative. The challenge organisations need to overcome is not losing sight of their strategic intent in their haste to redesign their workforces and work processes.

Poor organisational design will lead to role ambiguity, confused communication channels and ineffective decision making. Interaction works closely with clients to support them to build capacity and capability in their work teams; when undertaking workforce planning and organisational design consultancies I encourage leaders to start with their organisation's strategic objective. Once the purpose is understood, the structure, work processes, people resources and their roles and functions will become apparent.

Contact us if you want more information

If you would like to learn more about the future of work the team at Interaction have extensive expertise in leadership development, wellbeing, facilitation, coaching and consulting. Contact us on us on 02 6282 9111 or email icg@interactionconsulting.com.au or visit www.interactionconsulting.com.au.