

A black and white photograph of a business meeting. A man with a beard is looking at a woman who is pointing at a laptop screen. Another woman is partially visible on the right. The background is blurred, showing other people in a professional setting.

Redefining the Future of Work

**Insights from Smartsheet's Leadership Roundtable
on Finding Success in the Australian Landscape**

Produced in collaboration with Mark Pesce



The way we work has changed. Simply, it had no choice but to – the entire world has rapidly changed around everyone over the course of the past year. Though some markets have experienced bigger shifts than others, countries that faced large COVID-19 outbreaks – like the USA – needed to embrace remote work more than places like Australia, where some states barely experienced restrictions at all. But no matter to what degree, the working world has been forever transformed by the pandemic.

In Australia, [three in ten businesses](#) currently allow staff to work remotely and the majority (80%) of these expect it to continue in the long term. And why wouldn't they? Businesses will have to adapt to changing pandemic conditions for the foreseeable future and, beyond that, 45% of organisations that allow some form of remote working have seen an uptick in employee wellbeing.

This figure has seen only a small decrease from the height of the first wave of pandemic lockdowns, when according to Roy Morgan, 32% of working Australians logged in from home. This figure increased substantially for those working in offices, with 58% of employees in finance and insurance and 51% in public administration working remotely. For those industries that have the option of flexibility, the conversation is steering to the ins-and-outs of a hybrid workforce.

According to Hays, 61% of Australians surveyed believed a hybrid working model – with some employees remote and others in the office – was the most productive. While this approach is arguably the best-suited for the future, it's not without its challenges. According to research produced by Smartsheet in collaboration with 451 Research, almost [one-half of Australian businesses \(49%\)](#) are concerned about lower productivity for those not in the office and 46% are worried about work/life balance difficulties. Business leaders must empower individuals to work effectively while bringing everyone together to collaborate.

So what next? The challenge now is defining the new future in a way that allows businesses to compete and find success in the coming years. When it comes to the new paradigm of work, there's some clear must-haves along with more grey areas.

Recently, we brought together experts and business leaders in Australia to discuss reimagining the future of work. Hosted by Mark Pesce, award-winning author, futurist, and researcher, the roundtable event opened up the conversation on how to use change as an opportunity to rethink work and workplaces. This whitepaper summarises the key findings of the event.

The three employee personas

It's easy to make generalisations when it comes to employee preferences for remote work. But, according to Mark Pesce, where before you had one unified body of workers there are now three distinct groups.

The office aficionados

The first group are individuals who love being in the office. Often more extroverted, they thrive off the energy of the office space and its collaborative nature. They'll always return to the office because it's a source of joy for them.

The challenge now, however, is that the office they are returning to is very different to before. For workplaces with flexible policies, there are fewer people to connect with. Technology can help to bridge that gap, but not all the way. Managers must find ways to manage relationships and keep them satisfied.

The homebodies

The second group are the full-time remote employees, who make up around a quarter of the workforce. While there's always been a small proportion of employees who work remotely, they've been an outlier up until recently.

Now, they make up a significant portion as they've realised that the ability to work from home allows them to live their best life. The challenge for managers is that they need to check in with full-time remote employees more than those they see face-to-face – and the broader team may find it harder to communicate or collaborate with them.

The inbetweeners

Finally, the third group are the hybrid workers, making up the majority of employees. Hybrid work wasn't prominent pre-pandemic but is going to be the most significant way of working post-pandemic – something already seen as most Australians were able to return to the office after the first lockdown restrictions eased.

While most organisations now have a hybrid work policy, they vary substantially and many are surprisingly inflexible, according to Pesce. Each hybrid worker is different and has their own unique reasons for wanting hybrid work, whether it's reducing travel time, caring for family members or simply that they are more productive from home. Satisfying these individual needs while still collaborating well is a challenge moving forward.

Businesses are starting to see a shift in power balances as a result of these new groups – what Pesce calls the 'no' normal. This is where remote or hybrid workers insist on maintaining their newly found flexibility and will resign if they don't get it.

Recently, employees of the Washingtonian magazine went on strike after their [CEO shared views](#) against working from home in an op-ed. Meanwhile, 80 Apple employees [penned a letter](#) to CEO Tim Cook expressing their displeasure at his insistence that everyone return to the office by September 2021. Employees have now learned remote work can be just as efficient, if not more, as working from the office, and are willing to fight for their flexibility.

Make or break for managers

One of the great paradoxes of remote work is that the less an employee is in the office, the more they need face-time with their manager. Businesses may be granting more flexibility for the individual, but the role of managers – at all levels of the business – is changing.

Our research found that four in five (82%) Australian employees believe the strategic vision and guidance from company leadership needs to change in the coming year to face disruptions. More than one-third (35%) would also like clearer strategic direction for their department to navigate the new business landscape, meaning they'd like to see greater involvement from leadership at a more granular level.

So bearing the weight of new responsibilities, what can managers do to improve how their team functions in a hybrid model? Three main methods emerged from the discussion:



Focus on team building

While people may not be together all the time, getting them in the same place can be very rewarding if done right. Internet browser company Mozilla is a prime example: having endorsed working from anywhere long before the pandemic, the business concentrates its team building efforts to two weeks in a year. It brings all employees together to spend a week together somewhere fun, like Hawaii, and structures the event around getting to know each other more, rather than the nitty gritty of work. Managers should design events that allow the team to be social and build relationships. This will help their teams feel more comfortable in bringing their full selves to work, whether they're collaborating via chat, virtual meetings, or email.



Amp up the office

Managers should embrace that flexibility can win (if they haven't already) and should instead work hard to make the office enticing. When they're able to, employees should go in because they want to, not because they have to. Making it a great experience can involve improving the office resources and space, offering incentives like free lunch or yoga classes, and organising team social events near the office. In some cases, local governments have even offered incentives like the [TGIF vouchers](#) to encourage spending in Sydney's CBD on Fridays. Our research found 41% of Australian employees believe improving culture and engagement is important to be able to innovate in the coming year; creating a great in-office experience has major flow-on effects for the business.



Improve managerial skills

Managers' roles are now expanding in ways many aren't fully equipped for. Training can help to bridge this gap and introduce structured practices that help the individual and their broader team. Businesses can also consider tools, including collaborative work management (CWM) platforms like Smartsheet, that offer visibility across all activities while improving workflows and communication in teams. Managers need the best tools so that their hybrid teams can be successful in the long term.

Emphasising the individual

The one-size-fits-all approach to working is over. Shifting power dynamics mean employees have more control over where and how they work. But there's also a shift to putting power in the hands of people to innovate – innovation at the edge. Historically, business decisions have been top down; at some point in almost everyone's career they've received a directive completely out of touch with the day-to-day reality.

Bottom-up innovation holds many promising ideas. Within Smartsheet, a team came up with the idea of an information hub to track the health status of employees globally during the pandemic. This timely solution worked so well, it was turned into a template and made available to customers – it's now been downloaded 17,600 times.

Learning directly from employees who engage with customers on what works and what doesn't will help your organisation be more proactive. Many businesses don't even need to ask employees to innovate but rather conduct inventory of the ideas employees already have. There's already many solutions in place that can be recognised and replicated at scale – you just need to know where to look.

No-code software solutions empower workers to take the action they need to get their work done. The Smartsheet platform empowers teams to rapidly build no-code solutions, align across the entire enterprise, and move with agility to launch everyone's best ideas at scale.

For example, our platform offers capabilities like dashboards, web forms, templates, which teams can use to manage anything from employee onboarding to IT requests and ticketing.

We also have WorkApps, which goes a step further to democratize app building and empower business users to make a visible impact. WorkApps, also a no-code solution, allows anyone to package Smartsheet items — such as dashboards, sheets, forms, and reports — and external online content such as Microsoft 365 or Google documents, Tableau and Lucidchart dashboards, Domo visualizations, Adobe XD Creative Cloud assets, Prezi presentations, and more — into a single app. In Smartsheet, people can build solutions without help from developers or IT, which helps everyone focus on areas where they can make the biggest and most immediate impact.

Ultimately, according to Pesce, the businesses that will succeed are the ones that understand and meet the needs of each individual knowledge worker. Different people are inspired in diverse ways and perform optimally in different environments. The more business leaders can harness their creativity, the more they can give their best work.

The future of work continues to shift rapidly. Australian businesses are now putting hybrid work practices in place and planning for future, global work disruptions. From the insights of this discussion, one thing is clear: while we may be more reliant on technology than ever, professional relationships are at the core of a successful hybrid work approach.

The vast majority of [Australian workers \(79%\)](#) surveyed believe greater collaboration is needed to effectively adjust to changes over the coming years. Finding ways to improve collaboration – whether by empowering individual employees to work in the way that suits them or boosting team morale – will go a long way in creating a culture that resonates.

This doesn't mean we haven't made progress. During the pandemic, Australian employees reported that collaboration was even stronger (38%), meaning many found these new ways of connecting more useful than before. Collaboration is at the centre of work and is important to how businesses redefine their future. How they achieve this will need an individual approach to suit the unique needs of the business and its employees. But from the discussion, it's clear that people from all areas of the business need to be empowered to help shape how they work.

If you're interested in finding out more about improving collaboration and building your new future of work, reach out to set up a call with the Smartsheet team.

