

Project Management in the time of COVID¹

Rethinking Teams

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Dr. Lynda Bourne

This year in Australia we are averaging COVID 50 deaths each day; this data is hard to find even on Department of Health websites.³ We are now experiencing a very cold winter and there are warnings about greatly increased influenza infections along with continued COVID infections. Ironically, we are ‘living with COVID’. What ‘living with COVID’ means in Australia is that most restrictions have been lifted: our borders are open, masks are now only required in a small number of circumstances such as public transport and air travel. Most importantly project workers are now able to return to their offices, but many are reluctant to do so. Reluctance to return to the office is not unique to Australia; it is now common in many other countries.

This is the third paper in the series: PM in the time of COVID, offering ideas for reviewing and reforming the practice of project management, focused on experiences in Australia but also reflecting on global experiences. In the previous paper *Rethinking Governance and Leadership*, I did not propose any radical changes, merely a strong reminder about how governance and leadership should be done to benefit successful project management and the delivery of value to the organizations. That paper described basic elements of leadership most appropriate for rebuilding and reforming resource management post-COVID.

This paper will discuss issues that must be considered for managing resources in the post-COVID age where material resources are in short supply, costs are rising and many office-based workers are reluctant to return to the office, leaving major experience gaps.

This paper is organized as follows: firstly, a description of the current situation in ‘living with COVID’ with regard to acquiring and supporting teams and team members, and dealing with the residual issues of the pandemic - anxiety, loss of control over the work product and re-negotiating work-life balance. The second section will focus on new modes of working – In-office or a hybrid, flexible mode, examining the advantages and disadvantages of these modes from the perspective of both workers and organizations. The third part discusses how best to manage teams in the hybrid

¹ This series is by Dr. Lynda Bourne, author of the books *Stakeholder Relationship Management: A Maturity Model for Organisational Implementation* (2009), *Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders* (2011) and several others. She is a globally-recognized expert on project stakeholder engagement, risk management and other PM-related topics. For more, see her author profile at the end of this article.

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³ <https://theconversation.com/> COVID Deaths barely mentioned in the media (downloaded June 23, 2022)

mode, based on the learnings from the previous decade's use of virtual teams. The final section discusses urgent emerging issues, shortages of experienced staff, and how to reform training, acquisition and retention of project team members.

After Lockdown – the aftermath

Organizations must prepare for 'afterwards' and seek opportunities to reform people management processes and practices through:

- Recognition that the current climate of uncertainty is still causing anxiety for workers.
- Addressing the complexities of project relationships within teams, and among other stakeholders who have experienced a different mode of team and project working over the past two years.
- Supporting the development of resilience and adaptability to enable effective delivery of outcomes in the changing contexts of uncertainty.
- Re-negotiating work-life balance.

The work of project management is complicated⁴: and often complex⁵ due to the combination of technical and operational intricacy within the web of relationships of the stakeholder community. Uncertainty and unpredictability are always present in projects, but now with experiences of the disruptions of the pandemic many project workers are more sensitive to uncertainty. They revisit those feelings of uncertainty in the new or emerging 'normal' post-pandemic. The ongoing causes of anxiety can be some or all of the following:

- **Disruption:** pre-pandemic, projects and organizations were experiencing disruptions of work and leisure through the changes driven by increasing use of AI, social media, and other technology. The requirement to change modes of working in an environment of physical restrictions (lockdowns other precautionary measure) intensified disruption.
- **Lack of structure:** most regular activities had to be curtailed or modified; old habits were replaced by new ways of work and leisure; new habits take effort and time to become 'normal'.
- **Distortion of time:** enforced restriction of activities also meant that time is distorted. My own experience during Melbourne's many lockdowns was to enforce a strict schedule for other work, exercise, and other activities. This schedule 'filled my day', time both seemed to accelerate and drag at the same time.

⁴ Complicated = a large number of interconnected and interdependent parts.

⁵ Project work is complex if it consists of many interdependent parts each of which can change in ways that are not totally predictable and which can then have unpredictable impacts on other elements that are themselves capable of change

The anxiety generated by this extreme combination of uncertainty, disruption, lack of structure and distortion of time ebbed and flowed throughout the period from first lockdown to now. Our tolerance of risk – risk appetite - changed throughout the pandemic; over time sensitivity to the earlier disruptions diminished and we tried to just get on with management of our lives or our work.

It is essential to acknowledge that an individual’s reaction to the uncertainties of the last two years will vary; some will be greatly affected and need help to recover and adapt while others may adapt seamlessly. Anxiety may cause team members to fluctuate in their decisions; to seek one mode of work initially but then change their minds later. Efforts to ensure that all team members can resume work and re-build teamwork are essential. Assisting team members to develop new techniques to build resiliency and help to adapt to the new environment should be top of the list for their managers and the leadership of the organization.

Building resilience

Resilience depends on *adaptability* and *decisiveness*. Once the most acute period of the pandemic subsides, organizations must focus on a resilience agenda for workers. Becoming resilient helps you work through difficult events; in its most basic form it can be considered as “bouncing back.” To be relevant today, resilience must include learning from past experiences and developing new coping strategies. Resilience is not purely an individual attribute; it thrives when supported by strong relationships and networks. In fact, resilience is not discovered within the individual; it is best developed through connection with others, particularly those experiencing stress or trauma alongside the individual. These people are the support systems that motivate persistence and recovery, with empathy, humor or reminding us that we are not alone.⁶ It stands to reason that resilience cannot be built when there is not face-to-face connection with others.

New modes of working

The results of a recent survey conducted by the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI)⁷ published June 6, 2022, show that only 1 in 5 workers in the Melbourne CBD are willing to return to work 5 days per week. 69% of employers surveyed said that they do not expect employees to return to the office full-time. Generally, those who return are happy with the chance to renew the social connections of face-to-face work, but not happy with their commute⁸ or with the loss of flexibility that working from home (WFH) offers. Office occupancy, as reported in VCCI’s media release, is at 48% of pre-pandemic level in Melbourne and 55% in Sydney.

⁶ <https://hbr.org/2021/01/the-secret-to-building-resilience>

⁷ <https://www.victorianchamber.com.au/news/victorian-chamber-survey-offers-clearer-picture-on-return-to-office>

⁸ <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/hilda> reports that the number of people commuting two or more hours has risen from 12% in 2002 to 18% in 2017

Restrictions on attendance at their workplaces have been mostly lifted in Australia, with authorities relying on a vaccination-based approach to ‘living with COVID’. Employers really want workers to come back to project life 2019-style. But many workers are demanding *flexiplace* and *flexitime*!! The following section examines the different modes of working – full-time attendance at the workplace or a hybrid mode of part-time WFH and part time face-to-face at the workplace, and the advantages and disadvantages for workers and for organizations.

There is an opportunity for reform of working conditions for project workers (and their managers who may also have been affected by disruption), and much has been published contributing to the discussions. I have quoted from some of the publications, particularly reports of recent surveys. There is a great deal of conflicting information with contradictory views and data that is needed to help both project workers and organizations to chart a path to better workplaces. The table below (Fig 1) is offered to assist, by focus on the key issues of:

- **Mental health:** many workers have not yet fully recovered from the disruptions of COVID and may need to negotiate and re-negotiate return to work with their managers
- **Technology:** while the benefits of communication technology have been fully exploited throughout our lockdowns, Cyber security risks of the lower security of remote technology concern organizations; continuation of WFH means greater effort to update security and perhaps software and hardware for project workers away from the office
- **Work environment:** pre-COVID open-plan working spaces were not optimal for effective teamwork. Distractions such as noisy, personal phone conversations and lunch smells were counterproductive, stressful, and did not really improve collaboration, often aggravating hostilities between workers.
- **Access to the workplace:** Commuting time can be quite long and tiring, reducing days at the office will be beneficial and support worker’s effectiveness.
- **Flexibility:** WFH offers workers more flexibility but also more challenge to ensure discipline to start work each day and focus on work tasks
- **Promotions, advancement:** workers who do not regularly attend the office may be overlooked by managers for promotion. One major challenge for organizations is the development of performance measures in this new environment that are acceptable to both workers and management.

- Costs savings: for workers reduction in commuting is a large saving and for organizations fewer workers in attendance at any time will reduce energy costs and perhaps accommodation costs.

Table 1 expands on this list.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages for workers

Working from Home (WFH)	Workers		Organizations	
	Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Mental Health issues	Anxious workers or those with health issues that may be affected by COVID or Flu Infections can make the return to face-to-face slowly	Social connections with work colleagues and team working is best for building resilience and developing adaptability	Managers can support anxious workers by allowing them flexibility to return to work at their own pace	Managers may experience inconvenience when making allowances for mental health issues and be concern about missing deadlines etc.
Technology	Modern technology such as Zoom or MSTeam, screen sharing etc. can facilitate exchange of documents and sharing ideas	Remote technology may not be at the same standard as work-supplied	If workers use own devices, Capital Cost of providing hardware may be reduced	Support costs may increase. Security issues – need to ensure remote workers understand and apply appropriate anti-cyber practices
Environment	Possible to have quiet conditions for thinking and creative work	Distractions of home environment: family, pets, visitors	May be able to reduce accommodation costs – furniture, real estate, energy costs	Managers may feel they can't control workers that are not situated in the office
Access (commuting etc)	Reduction in time spent and cost of long commutes to work	Long commutes may enable reading, thinking preparation time	Stress on staff may reduce if commuting time is reduced – they may become more productive	Can't simply walk over to worker to ask questions.
Flexibility	No need to work corporate hours	Need discipline to start work and focus on work tasks	Organizations may be able to introduce 'hot desking' and thus reduce costs	Managers want to be able to contact workers during working hours
Promotions, advancement	Enhanced creativity may produce better outputs	Minority groups may be overlooked for promotion or interesting work if they are not in 'plain sight'	Independent and innovative thinkers may shine, Major challenge to define performance measures acceptable to both workers and management	Managers may not be able to properly assess workers for promotions or more interesting challenges
Cost/savings	Cost of commuting, work apparel reduced	Unused wardrobe of work-clothes – 'stranded assets'	Lower costs for accommodation, energy etc.	Organizations may have difficulty in ending leases etc. on office space

These stories have echoes in other parts of the globe. In 2013 Bloom from Stanford University conducted a study of WFH in China; management's view at that time was encapsulated in the phrase 'shirking from home'. Results from that survey show that participants working from home did record higher levels of performance (13%) with higher job satisfaction and less turnover, but their promotion rate conditional on performance fell.⁹

In 2022 Bloom surveyed 30,000 Americans reporting that most full-time workers expect to continue working remotely at least two or three days a week. The stigma of "shirk from home" has largely disappeared; employers have recognized that remote work can boost productivity. Nearly 40% of respondents said that they have been more efficient working from home. The main source of that efficiency comes the reduction in commute time, up to billions of hours a year. Bloom and his colleagues state that working from home has resulted in a savings of 60 million commute hours every workday.

The report concludes that hybrid working modes with some days WFH and some days in the office can provide the best of both worlds but adds a word of caution – unless managed properly such arrangements have the potential to stifle innovation¹⁰.

Virtual teams

Pre-pandemic, organizations doing multinational projects relied on virtual teaming for financial reasons (reducing costs of travel and accommodation and consequences of culture shock and separation from family and the consequences of that). Sometimes for political reasons as the best way best to include local skills and ensure full visibility of what is happening in distant parts of the team. Restrictions introduced during the pandemic forced project team workers to work remotely; some project workers may have been caught in their overseas posting and unable to return.

Pre-pandemic, project managers needed to guard against the possibility that remote team members might 'go rogue' or 'go native'. Separated from the team culture, not subscribing to be part of the team identity, remote workers often felt more affinity to the culture of the group with whom they were working. This situation is less of an issue for WFH; feelings of isolation from the rest of the team were more likely to cause concern for managers.

⁹ <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/gsb-box/route-download/364391>: *Does Working from Home Work? Evidence from a Chinese Experiment*. Downloaded May13, 2022

¹⁰ <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/pandemic-blew-american-office-better-worse>

Rather than having to guard against alienation from the main team, successful management of WFH post-pandemic must resolve issues of worker safety and reviewing labour award conditions such as penalty payments and additional payments included in the negotiated work contract.

For successful WFH leaders must ensure workers have appropriate technology to ensure security of data, adequate skills but also central support on technological issues. Even more important leaders must ensure that remote workers are still connected to the work of the team (still have ownership of the work) and facilitate communication both within any remote groups.

Ideally team meetings will be scheduled on the days when all the team is present in the office. If this is not possible, there are some obvious rules for virtual meetings to agree to. These rules will not be unfamiliar to team members who attended team meetings during lockdowns through ZOOM or MSTEAM:

- Ensure that f-2-f participants continue to be aware of the remote participants – no private conversations, speak out, say your name, give remote speakers equal opportunity to speak and ask questions.
- Only one speaker at a time – chair will invite speakers, when questions or concerns need to be expressed chair will invite this comms in turn.

It is worth reminding leaders and team members of the benefits of f-2-f comms¹¹. ZOOM and MS TEAMS helped us all keep connected during the pandemic – and this is where we were reminded of the importance of agreeing to rules of meetings (the ones described above) as we talked over each other, read our emails, or played our games, left to make coffee, or dealt with cats or children wanting to interrupt. Many of these things will probably not occur now – but maybe they will. However, the best means of dealing with conflict, negotiating or reaching agreements in a team context are still face-to-face meetings.

Benefits of face-to-face meetings

- Changing minds or consolidating ideas: texts or emails are less effective than real-time conversation where the speaker(s) can see the responses of listeners and can adjust tone, style or attitude to adapt to the responses. In person it is obvious if the recipient is not engaged; in virtual meetings, less so. Participants can still read emails, play games get coffee while the presenter is speaking.

¹¹ <https://www.valueprop.com/blog/5-benefits-face-face-communication>, downloaded May 9,2022

- Building trust through more personal connections: the best salesmen of the 20th century kept personal details of clients as well as those of the clients' families. It may be possible to have a virtual lunch or pub party, but why bother!!
- Negotiation and problem solving: works best with ability to see others' opponent and to exchange ideas and concerns real-time.
- Enhance team participation: best decisions and best team attitudes come from joint decisions, joint discussions on how best to deal with issues.
- Addressing sensitive issues: not personal coaching issues, but sensitive issues that affect the whole or part of the team can only be conducted effectively face-to-face.

Refreshing the team

The profile of the workforce in Australia has changed as COVID restrictions are lifted and organizations are urging workers to return to the office. Along with the staff shortages experienced in many other parts of the economy, there are significant shortfalls of skills in the project world. Many experienced team members (grey hairs) have decided to not to return to work, taking the opportunity to retire or choose different work/leisure options during the earlier lockdowns. Organizations everywhere are struggling to replace experienced team members. Securing experienced technical and project workers through migration is slow resuming since Australia closed its borders in early 2020. Overseas workers are reluctant to come, and the Australian government's visa system is overwhelmed; unacceptable lengthy waiting times for the issue of visas has aggravated the shortages.

The 'Great Resignation' phenomenon experienced in other countries appears to not be a factor in project and technical worker shortages in Australia. Younger generations of project workers have a different work ethic from the Boomers' approach to work of 'whatever it takes'; their focus is more on 'work-life balance' and so are prepared to change jobs to achieve that. The Forbes survey¹² lists the top five reasons that team members would change employers as:

- Toxic company culture (62%)
- Low salary (59%)
- Poor management (56%)
- Lack of healthy work-life boundaries (49%)
- Not allowing remote work (43%)

Organizations are struggling to find ways to rebuild their project teams; bridging the vast experience gap between the grey hairs and the next level of project workers – and the even wider gap between project workers with some experience and fresh graduates of University project management degrees. It is probably time for organizations to rethink how they form teams, how

¹² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrobinson/2022/05/03/discover-the-top-5-reasons-workers-want-to-quit-their-jobs/?sh=617a44775d46>

they acquire, reward and retain project workers and how they influence and redefine what work ready means.

How to fill the gap?

Younger recruits may follow a less traditional pathway than previous generations of workers, some even building online businesses before applying for positions within projects. These individuals will have more experience than team members straight from university, where often the focus is on theory without any practical work experience to consolidate the learnings. To fill the experience and skills gaps within project teams, organizations may need to significantly reform their approaches. Some approaches to consider:

- Develop and strongly support apprentice/mentor programs to fast-track and support sharing of experience and skills from the more experienced to new project recruits. Such a program must be formally defined and overtly and continuously supported by senior management.
- Develop strategies to support team members who want to specialize in specific project skills, such as development, implementation, or testing? How would organizations develop specializations paths in younger team members?
- There is a parallel need to support multi-skilled resources or generalists. Leadership and communication skills are just as important to project success as specialist technical skills. Encourage individuals with management experience to join project teams. They will have minimal technical expertise, but should excel at leading teams with support from technical experts within the team.
- Younger team members with most recent technical knowledge but have no experience can be productive members of the team; their inclusion in established project teams will encourage sharing of the knowledge and expertise of each group of project team members. Careful selection of teams with new recruits must be considered to reduce conflict.
- Reduce the dependence on a transient workforce; each team member is precious in these times of staff and skills shortage.
- Succession planning – but how can you guarantee that successor will stay.
- Work harder to entice team members through migration.
- Support and encourage adaptability in the face of staff shortages.

Conclusion

As organizations everywhere grapple with the need to resume delivery of projects, they need to prevail over the global threats of staff and material shortages, the demographic changes to the project workforce and the general reluctance of project teams members to resume full-time face-to-face modes of working. These are complex issues for organizations and may need courage to introduce innovative flexible work modes and to introduce new people resource strategies to acquire and retain project workers. It is a great opportunity for innovation and flexibility and will require a measure of audacity from often conservative organizations. They will need to ensure that communication and people management strategies match any changes they plan to introduce, and even more important, to ensure adequate consultation with their people. The next paper in this series will discuss strategies for improving communication within projects and within organizations, followed by a final paper that examines strategies for successful change.

Rethinking teams is key to project success in the post-pandemic future.

About the Author



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Lynda Bourne DPM, FACS is a senior management consultant, professional speaker, teacher and an award-winning project manager with 50 years professional industry experience. She has been focussed on the delivery of stakeholder management and other project related consultancy, mentoring and training for clients world-wide.

She has presented at conferences and seminars in South America, Europe, Russia, Asia, New Zealand and Australia to audiences of industry leaders and project managers in the IT, construction, defence and mining industries and has been keynote

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In 2010 she was engaged as visiting professor at EAN University, Bogota, Colombia, teaching leadership in the Masters of PM Program for five years.

Most recently she was a member of the Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University, lecturing in IT management subjects, in particular, stakeholder management, communication and leadership.

Lynda Bourne has authored the following books:

- *Stakeholder Relationship Management: A Maturity Model for Organisational Implementation*, (Gower Publishing Ltd, Aldershot - 2009)
- *Project Relationship Management and the Stakeholder Circle: A guide for developing stakeholder management maturity in organisations (2010)*
- *Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders*, (Gower Publishing Ltd, Aldershot - 2011)
- *Making projects and programs work: What really matters for achieving successful project and program outcomes (2015)*

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