

by dr marc levy

Don't say it's over:

a snapshot of COVID-19 and questions for executives to ponder

Right thinking

Last year was an immense shock with devastating human consequences. In Australia, there's cause for great optimism; but the pandemic isn't over – there remain very significant risks and many people are still suffering here and overseas. This article presents a COVID-snapshot and poses a handful of questions for executives to consider at this juncture.

The strength of the recovery and the resilience of the Australian economy has surprised many of us. As an illustration of that, recent research by scholars at the University of Melbourne suggested that, despite some public policy headwinds, if their momentum holds for a few more weeks, some super funds are likely to return around 15% for the financial year (Brugler, Kim & Zhong as cited in Bavin, 2020).

But we shouldn't kid ourselves that the pandemic is over.

The Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees recently asked me to moderate a CEO panel on lessons learnt from COVID. Preparing to set the scene for the discussion, I was struck by how challenging the topic was. Was it a privilege to reflect on the last 14 months, a morose task or an opportunity to sound a few hopeful notes? Perhaps all three.

Whatever it was, COVID is something we need to talk about.

A big shock with serious reverberations

The pandemic was an immense shock with devastating human consequences. By mid-May 2021, there had been 165 million cases globally since the onset of COVID-19 and nearly 3.5 million recorded deaths. Australia is the 53rd largest country by population, and we are 120th by case numbers. That's good, but there has still been nearly 1,000 lives lost here (Worldometer 2021). For context, about 250 died during Australia's 'horror flu season in 2019' (Woodley, 2019).

While the number of cases was comparatively low, and the thrust of the government's pandemic response is now generally regarded as effective and necessary, there were some awful ramifications. Spikes in domestic violence and elder abuse. Many people lost their jobs and haven't been able to get back into the workforce. Female dominated industries have been disproportionately impacted. The pandemic allowed new and differing forms of economic abuse to

manifest. A lack of direct human contact was challenging for some and many were working remotely under difficult circumstances (Maury, Levine, Lasater, Vidal & Ulbrick, 2020).

On top of the national lockdown, Melbournians had the 111-day lockdown from July to October 2020. While it helped stop the spread of the virus, it took a toll on the local economy and mental health of Melbournians. Victoria lost an average of 1,200 jobs a day. Demand for mental health services soared (Gross, Scott & Gale, 2020).

Cause for optimism

So, we had a big shock with serious reverberations, and yet in Australia there's now cause for great optimism: restrictions easing; vaccination programs gaining traction; an apparent V-shaped economic recovery, the economy having proven much more robust than many of us expected; fiscal and monetary policy tailwinds; surging business confidence; decarbonisation commitments; and share market highs. There were also improvements in ways of working, and trust between employers and employees.

Cause for optimism, yes, but it's not over. Many people are still suffering here and overseas, from the historic global falls in economic output and employment we've seen and the psychological effects of lockdowns and restrictions.

There's also the toll of the withdrawal of support from governments, banks, other institutions. And the ongoing, debilitating impacts on certain sectors in the Australian economy such as higher education and hospitality, and on certain cohorts, including people from low-income households, people with tenuous links to the workforce and recently arrived people (Henriques-Gomes, 2020; Maury, Levine, Lasater, Vidal & Ulbrick, 2020). There are of course countries still experiencing high numbers of virus infections – 363,000 confirmed new cases in India on 14 May (Worldometer, 2021). Devastatingly, there have been increases in global extreme poverty reversing years of development progress in some parts of the world (Kharas, 2020).

Risks remain

There remain very significant risks, even here in Australia. Only a few weeks ago, prominent epidemiologist Prof James McCaw from the University of Melbourne said that the risk of a significant coronavirus outbreak in Australia is now at its highest level since the pandemic began due to the chance of cases escaping from quarantine hotels and more social mixing (Franks, 2021).

Questions to ponder

Here are some questions we think executives should ponder as we navigate the coming months, part catharsis, part 'planning under uncertainty'.

Looking back on the period following the outbreak, what do you remember most? Was there something that inspired you about the way your people and other stakeholders responded? What was the experience like for you personally as a leader? Were there particular coping mechanisms that you put in place that worked?

What did you learn from remote working that's been helpful this year as we've shifted to hybrid working? What's been your experience of hybrid working so far? How are you and your team adjusting?

Why are you getting together, what for – human connection, to enable learning and development, to foster 'unscripted, innovative collaboration' (Fayard, Weeks & Khan, 2021)?

A client of ours summed up well the current world of work recently when he said: 'COVID has diminished the feeling of being part of a team and the development experience of staff has certainly deteriorated. Those incidental interactions and observing people at work are important. That said, the flexibility we afford our people is better than it's ever been.'

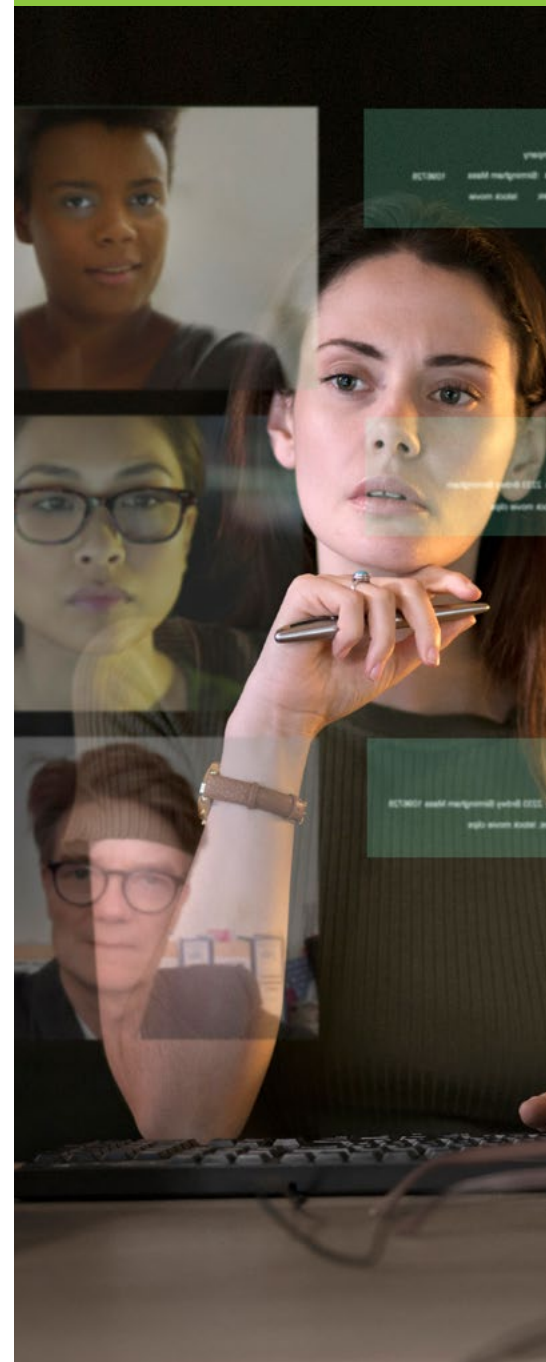
How do you make sense of this internal dialogue we are all having about the pros and cons of hybrid working, and what do you plan to do about it?

If you cast your mind back to the middle of 2020, there was a lot of talk about snapping back, and the strength of the recent recovery has surprised many of us. In his new book, *Reset: Restoring Australia after the great crash of 2020*, Ross Garnaut argues that we shouldn't 'go back' to the way things were during the years preceding the Pandemic Recession. He calls the seven years from 2013 to 2020 the 'dog days' and argues that they were miserable years for a lot of Australians – decreasing real incomes per capita, low productivity growth, ever increasing underemployment.

Is there an opportunity, on the back of this highly disruptive event, to 'build back better' and, if so, in what ways?

COVID is a lot to process. Wherever we are on the COVID clock, we've all experienced, and are experiencing, challenges in one way or another. And I think we should talk about it.

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[Foodbank](#) is helping to meet higher demand for food relief due to COVID-19 and the response to it



[Lifeline](#) is dealing with high levels of domestic and family violence, loneliness and isolation and financial and other stress.

All of these organisations are taking tax deductible donations on their websites, which take less than a minute to make.

Sources: Organisation websites (2021).

CLICK organisation logo to access website.

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If you would like to discuss this article in more detail, please contact
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