Future Series
Reimagining Culture

Hosted by: Sian Lewis, Group Executive, Human Resources, CommBank

Panellists:
Michelle Rushton, Director, People of Influence
Sarah Gatehouse, Head of People and Culture Fujitsu General Australia.

With company culture rapidly evolving, what are the key considerations for businesses planning for the future?

The growing shifts to a distributed workforce are testing traditional notions of organisational culture. Having a culture that keeps people engaged has never been more important, or more challenging.

Jinny Olney:

Over the next three weeks we'll bring you a leading panel of Australian female experts who will explore new possibilities and spark some curiosity about what the future might hold for our workplaces and everyday lives. Our first episode of the Future Series today is all about re-imagining culture. Just like other big events in history, this pandemic has caused extensive changes to our business models and coupled with acceleration in technologies we're already seen major changes to our business landscapes.

We're delighted to bring to you a panel of experts today who live and breathe this topic. Sian Lewis, Group Executive, Human Resources at CommBank, Sarah Gatehouse, Head of People and Culture at Australia and New Zealand Fujitsu General, and Michelle Rushton, director of People of Influence. And now it's my absolute pleasure to hand over to the panel.

Sian Lewis:

Thank you, and good afternoon. Thanks for joining us. It's been quite an eight months, and what we'd like to do is just explore a little bit about what's been accelerated that we think will benefit us, what has perhaps been accelerated that we're worried about, and just talk about the impact of that on the workplace. I certainly know from a CBA perspective, I could never have envisaged us running the organisation with something sub-10% of our people in the office, which is where we found ourselves in February and March, this year. But there's been a lot of good, but mainly a lot of change.

So, without much further ado, I might start the conversation about what's been an incredible eight months and an incredible amount of change. Sarah, I might start with you, if I may. How has your culture shifted over eight months? Because obviously one of the things that we all relied on in terms of connection and culture was lots of people in the same place at the same time, that obviously hasn't been the case. What's been the impact on Fujitsu?

Sarah Gatehouse:

Thank you Sian. Well, thanks for having me. It's lovely to talk about such an important topic. I think for me it's really looking at the empowerment of our people. It's a lot stronger now through that ownership, flexibility, trust. It's really had a shift and it's had to have a shift to be able to cope with the remote workplace.

Sian Lewis:

So, Michelle, is that something that you've seen more generally? And empowerment and words like that, HR functions tend to throw them around a lot, what have you really seen generally in terms of what that empowerment means?

Michelle Rushton:

Well, it's a double-edged sword, is what we've seen. Our clients come to us when they want to develop their people, so for us, we have exposure and visibility over a number of different industries and lots of different organisations, and the way it manifests in different places has been really diverse. So that empowerment piece has been wonderful for many people to feel like they have much more control over their work and their life, but the flip side of it that we're also seeing is that now work bleeds into everything.

And that with the combination of different factors we've got at the moment with a lot of redundancies and resourcing issues and big workloads and an undercurrent of job insecurity for many people, that they feel they can't necessarily push back. And so, yes, I have a level of empowerment in how I do my work, but sometimes the amount of work over this prolonged period has been immense. So, it's been diverse.

Sian Lewis:

Yeah, I agree. We're certainly very conscious of that. We've provided lots of support for our people and I think particularly at the time when people were having to home-school and work at home, to parent, really tough. And so, we've actually given people the support to talk about rituals because our ritual is getting dressed, going out of the door, getting on public transport or your car or whatever. That's the ritual that separates home from work, which disappeared overnight. So, we've certainly been encouraging our people to say, "Think about what your ritual is." Is it stopping work at 5:30 because you're going to play with the kids? Or stopping so that you can have your dinner at a set time? How do you enter the workspace in your home in a way that separates your life from home? I think it's a really, really important point.

Sarah Gatehouse:

I think for us it was more about the fact that we were already on that journey, so it's just that COVID-19 brought that journey forward.

Sian Lewis:

Definitely been an enormous acceleration in people's acceptance, I think, of that flexibility. I hope it will be a turning point in the Australian economy going from a clock watching time-in-time-out to a genuine knowledge economy, output focused organisation. I genuinely don't care how many hours people work unless it's impacting their mental health and if they can do it in half the time, good on them because actually what we want is great outputs, right?

Sarah Gatehouse:

Yeah, that's right.

Sian Lewis:

Rather than numbers of hours on the clock.

Michelle Rushton:

There's been a couple of inflection points I've seen. One when people started to work from home and then as they returned to the office, that have been massive opportunities for organisations to shift, as you talk about the

rituals, and now as people are coming back to work it's this opportunity to do things completely differently, to completely rethink how we do our work at work and how we do our culture.

Sian Lewis:

Yeah. And how do you think leaders need to respond to that? Because again, there's lots of people who, "I want everyone under my nose," and to be fair that's the bad interpretation of it, but also, "I want to see how my people are doing. I want to understand if they're struggling so I can help." It was all very immediate and physically focused. How do you think leaders are going to need to change?

Michelle Rushton:

Yeah. I think it's less of a productivity issue and it's much more about a connection and a collaboration issue and especially innovation within the culture to be wanting people to be together for that reason. And that leaders now really have to think more deliberately and more constructively about, "When I bring the team together, when I have my people here face to face or all of us together as a group, when am I going to do it? Why am I going to do it? And how am I going to use that time so that we're doing our most important work all together?"

And part of that now increasingly has become more important for us to spend some of that time working on the team itself. We're finding that a lot more people are coming to us with briefs around the idea of, "I need time to work on the team itself and its connection because I took it for granted a little bit and I leaned on the physical space to do some of that work for me." But now we need to, as leaders, be thinking more and more about, "Oh, okay. How do I keep this team high performing in a way that's location independent?"

Sian Lewis:

Yeah.

Sarah Gatehouse:

I think for us it's really about that shared leadership and that collective leadership. if one of our exec team members are out of the office then we step in and help run that team for him. And so if you're not in the office on any particular day and someone else spots an issue, then it's just about making contact with that leader and saying, "Hey, I've just spotted this going on in your team, and do you want me to do anything while I'm in the office?" and making sure that you've got that care for each other and that empathy for other teams as well.

Michelle Rushton:

Which means leaders have to be far more adaptable. They have to be able to just step in on the spur of the moment, and one of the key skills that I think is required more and more for that than ever is that empathetic communication, to be able to do that effectively and to be able to read the room, especially the virtual room, because when time and technology keeps you apart from people, your ability to read like that is blunted, the signals are more crude.

Sian Lewis:

A little bit about your upside and downside. One of the things I've actually really enjoyed is seeing people in their natural environment, so not in their suits, not in the office, but at home, and being able to connect to people on a much more human level and also seeing the inventiveness of both our people and our leaders. So, I'm sure we have paid lots of money to people who run online quizzes, because I know that all of our leaders stepped into the, "How can we actually have fun together rather than only meet on Zoom when there's business happening?"

And so, I know there's a highly competitive quiz running in my performance and reward team on a regular basis, so I think there's been some very good things about the connection level. You're right, we have to think about it more, it has to be more deliberate, but at some levels I think it could be more profound.

Michelle Rushton:

Definitely, and sometimes more profound because it's more deliberate.

Sian Lewis:

Yeah, that's right.

Sarah Gatehouse:

Yeah.

Sarah Gatehouse:

I just have flashbacks of the naked partner walking past the camera and the husband in the underpants, and that that's been actually quite the amusing side of seeing people's home life.

Sian Lewis:

Fortunately, I've not seen any nakedness, so I'm pretty happy with that.

Michelle Rushton:

You're doing well.

Sian Lewis:

But lots of dogs, lots of children, and lots of just very good relaxed conversations, which is fantastic.

Michelle Rushton:

And I think some of the best leaders have leveraged that. They've taken the opportunity to have more frequent, more direct, more open conversations with their people. They've made it really clear. We talk a lot in one of our programs about warmth and strength and the fact that in influence they're the two most important traits we look for, and being able to walk that line now as leaders has become so much more important, and it's been an opportunity to show more warmth, more authenticity, and the good leaders have really taken that.

Sian Lewis:

And although we've accelerated, clearly, the work from home bit, the other thing that's accelerated and Fujitsu being a technology organisation, digitisation, automation, it's certainly accelerated those trends. They're already in the economy that accelerated them fast. How are you thinking about how you might re-skill people to adapt to that very fast pace of change?

Sarah Gatehouse:

It's such an important topic, and we're fortunate enough to have an amazing innovation team, but it's really about engaging your broad team around being not fearful of technology and asking them, "How can we make your job easier in relation to technology? So, what changes can we make?" And it's coming with you on the journey and

it's really about getting them to think of the future of work and what does that look like? How will that impact my role? And if it is going to impact my role, how can I reinvent future me? Am I going to move sideways?

We take high potential people, whether they're qualified or not, and we move them sideways and we support them for success. And there's a number of steps you can take in regards to training your team around that. So if you start with resilience training, wellbeing, health and nutrition, change management, career direction, if you take all of those training programs, which we were fortunate enough to do before COVID-19, I think that really helps them to take on future and embrace it, embrace technology.

Sian Lewis:

Yeah. I think the interesting thing is it's made it reality because re-skilling for some unknown future is a bit like saving for your retirement. It's always easy to put it off. I think what we've shown is that actually things can change very quickly, and I hope that actually unlocks, because you say that many organisations like ourselves are very lucky to have a lot of those resources available to us and have had for some time. But I hope what it will do is actually make people a bit more thoughtful about the pace of change and the fact that leveraging those great technologies and education opportunities is really important.

Sarah Gatehouse:

And I think business success follows when you do that, when you encourage that resilience.

Michelle Rushton:

Yeah. It's really shown that just in time learning works. Your learning is contextual, if you need it right now because you're working from home all of a sudden then the Zoom call's in half an hour, you're going to work it out.

Sian Lewis:

Yeah, that's right. I think it's been a theoretical construct for a while with people saying, "Yeah, but I'd still prefer face to face. I'd still like to go to the classroom," and now it's like, "Yeah. No, I'd better get on that learning and get it absorbed."

Sarah Gatehouse:

But it is interesting because the Australian Institute of Company Directors did release an article recently saying that Australians do prefer the water cooler conversations in comparison with the rest of the world. And I think that's really important for us to consider how we balance that technology and remote working with face-to-face interaction with all of the activities that we do.

Sian Lewis:

It's, yeah, interesting. A couple of things that I know some teams in CBA have tried is they've set up their own Facebook groups or their own LinkedIn conversations so that they can actually have non-work focused conversations in that same kind of environment. And again, I think it's necessity being the mother of invention. The technology's there, people have used it, and we haven't directed people to do this because it's good for their mental health. They've just thought, "Actually, this is a great idea and I miss my team and I'm going to make sure that I can keep the connection going."

Michelle Rushton:

Yeah. And then there's a case too of trying to balance the communication for connection purposes and communication for collaboration purposes, and making sure that it's optimising productivity and they're

connecting and they're getting that fix that they wouldn't from the water cooler, but they're also not distracted by it all the time and that they've got certain channels for work collaboration and certain channels for the chat.

Sarah Gatehouse:

Yeah. Actually, we did have a couple of concerns about that while we were remote. I think it's just people who perhaps didn't have as much work as others wanted to chat and socialise and the other's like, "Oh, I've got so much to do. Can you just give me space?" But they didn't want to be rude, right?

Michelle Rushton:

Yeah.

Sarah Gatehouse:

So that's an important thing to manage as well, how to push back and say, "Look, sorry, I've really got to go. I've got some work to do."

Sian Lewis:

Well, I think Michelle, as you said, we take the cues of, "I'm not lifting my head up from my desk so you can keep talking, but I'm telling you that I'm busy and you need to go away." We just have to pick up the cues in the new virtual environment and find it out.

Sarah Gatehouse:

It's a bit harder on chat, right?

Sian Lewis:

A couple of times you've mentioned resilience, mental health, and that's obviously been a key focus as we've gone through this very extraordinary time. What do we think we've learned as organisations and as people about mental health, maybe?

Michelle Rushton:

Yeah, I think one of the things we've really learned about mental health is we need to have two approaches. We need to think about it holistically, but we also need to be able to go down to the granular level as to what are the specific behaviours that we're trying to shift. So if you think about things like resilience and wellbeing and a culture of wellbeing, and that can be quite a big nebulous thing, and we can have a lot of initiatives going at the one time, but if we're really digging into what are the specific behaviours if we want workplace wellbeing?

Okay, well we want a positive psychosocial climate. What does that look like? Well, we want more workplace stability because we know that's correlated with it. Okay, but what does that look like? Well, it looks like people saying hi to each other in the morning. Okay. Well, how do we make that happen?

And we've seen this, especially when people are working from home where people are starting to do their morning check-ins and making sure that these things happen regularly, that you've got to bring it down to what are the one or two or three high leverage behaviours that make the biggest difference for it and make sure you're prompting people to do those things.

Sarah Gatehouse:

I think It's about educating our leaders to be compassioned and show care, and we're trying to do that through our external coaching programs. It's really led from the top down in that safety first. So, we have a value safety first and two years ago we changed it from just physical safety to emotional wellbeing. And it's really about creating that safe conversation. And I'm starting a diversity and wellbeing committee, and I really want those conversations to emerge out of that. So, talking about sexual preference, mental health, diversity, wellbeing, and empower them to drive that change.

Sian Lewis:

Yeah. We have a really great platform called Thrive, which is virtual, which looks at both physical, mental and financial wellbeing. And again, that was a great platform to have going into this, and most of the material that we source on there is requested, so if people have got a specific issue that they're worried about or they're concerned with, then they can actually request it and we can usually turn around an expert to give us some guidance within about 24 to 48 hours.

So that's been a really great way of being able to respond where people are very disparate. Interestingly, some of our employee networks, so we have five employee networks covering gender, sexuality, disability, age, et cetera, cultural diversity, they found it more challenging because their model was very much getting people together, having conversations about their particular...

So, they've had to rethink about how do we support those diverse communities when we're actually separated? They've done a great job and they've used technology and storytelling as a really great way to bring people together and just talk about how we're coping in the current environment. I have a slight concern about poor behaviour being missed because we're not in the office so I think we need to actively surface these conversations, so people know that even if no one else except the person you're talking to knew it happened, we've got your back.

It's no more acceptable to behave in an inappropriate way on a Zoom call than it was when you were in the office, and I think surfacing some of those things really helps that kind of resilience and mental health. And as I said earlier, I think everyone's mental health has improved since the kids went back to school. Tough time.

Michelle Rushton:

Absolutely, absolutely. I want to come back for a second to your storytelling. So, were they using storytelling beforehand?

Sian Lewis:

Yes, we were. So many of our diversity networks, but particularly our indigenous network has yarning circles for telling stories, and most of the other, then, diversity networks picked up the success of that. We've also been able to have some really great conversations about the Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter and broadcast in light we're doing today to many more people than we could ever have fitted in a theatre in the building here. And that's been another great advantage in terms of... For a long time, comms and HR experts have said the cascade doesn't work, but we haven't really changed. This forced us to change.

So, the ability of our senior leaders to reach vast numbers of people at the same time with the same message has been an enormous upside, I think. I debate whether we'll ever go back to the days of trying to cascade things to the organisation. I think we've found that we're getting better and better at using the technology to be able to really get to people. So, I think that storytelling, using things like this, podcasts to allow us to really talk about specific examples, specific ways of addressing has been a really great step.

Michelle Rushton:

Yeah. The other thing we've noticed a lot with resilience during this time, because understandably, as a company that runs resilience programs and antifragility programs and has done for a decade, it's been in high demand, shall we say? And one of the things we've found is that more and more we've had to have the consultative conversation with companies to say, "Look, it's wonderful that you're equipping your people with these skills and

you're investing in this way, but sometimes what's overlooked is the other side of the coin, which is the culture and the environment that they're in. And it's wonderful that you've upskilled them, but have you looked at the psych safety in the team that they're in and how that might be undermining your efforts? Have you looked at the fact that the exec team has got 15 priorities and they're all important and the effect that's having?" So, there's needed to be much more of that conversation in terms of the resilience, wellbeing piece over the last number of months.

Sian Lewis:

And that connection point, I think, is really key as well, and showing that everybody's vulnerable. I count myself incredibly lucky being in an organisation that hasn't been interrupted so that's great, but I'm originally from the UK. And when the government announced that I couldn't go home, that was a bad day for me. And so, I think sharing that with your people, because everyone goes through peaks and troughs, so if actually, I'm nailing this, I've had a great day, everything's gone really well. I'm feeling great about the environment. And then suddenly something can happen very quickly and it's not such a great day.

And so, we talk about ensuring everyone has a great day at work and I think we have to recognise that in the downtimes you've got to be attuned to that, but also share yours because you're not always going to be attuned. You want people to know actually that it's okay, that nobody's going to think anything less of you as a human being because you've had a bad day. We all get them and certainly over a time like this we've all had those, "Oh my goodness, how are we going to get through this?"

Michelle Rushton:

And a lot of leaders struggle with that because they consciously or otherwise think, "Oh, but I'm going to be seen as weak." But if you de-stigmatise the struggle and you frame it when you communicate about it as part of the process, of course, and you make it clear that, "Sure, I have weaknesses, I have struggles, but that doesn't mean I'm weak," and you do it with that sort of posture and that tone, it's a completely different ball game. You can be vulnerable and strong at the same time.

Sarah Gatehouse:

I think for us it was just showing that those first couple of people were supported and then everyone relaxes after that, and it does become much more easy to have those conversations.

Sian Lewis:

So, we've obviously explored a lot of things that have changed, and I think this is a fantastic opportunity for companies to really think about how they're going to reshape their culture with all of the things that have happened over the last eight months. What do you think is going to be the biggest change and the biggest challenge as we take some of these trends and forecast them into the future?

Sarah Gatehouse:

I think definitely it's leaders adapting to the remote workplace and how to manage that, which is very focused on communication and that technology, and we all know that when pockets of issues come up, it's generally about communication. It's working with that shared leadership and really empowering their team. It's managing your talent because we've seen that with... And we put it down to generations, but people now really want to be recognised, they want to feel like they're participating, they want to see a path or an opportunity, they want to move sideways, they want to grow and develop. And I think whilst the younger gen has brought that in the older generations have also engaged in that journey with them and as a result, if you take those steps in your workplace, then all generations work well together. So, it's adapting your leaders to manage that both in the workplace and outside of the workplace.

Sian Lewis:

Sure. Michelle, can you add to that?

Michelle Rushton:

Yeah, I'd agree. I'd agree. Of course, we're here talking today in our knowledge worker bubble and our corporate bubble. So, I would say yes, of course, working from home for us, not so much for the essential workers, the doctors, the nurses, the teachers who-

Sian Lewis:

The branches which we've had open throughout the crisis.

Michelle Rushton:

Exactly, exactly. But look, I would say one of the greatest challenges and greatest opportunities right now moving into the future is that during this time employees are watching and they're taking notice of how we treat them. It's a job market where they're not necessarily going to get up and move and go somewhere else. If you think about attracting and retaining talent, they're not necessarily going to go, but they're paying attention.

There's a large medical company that we work with, and back at the beginning of the pandemic they had to cut salaries by 80% and a few months later were fortunate enough to be able to put them back to 100%. Now, most employees would be thrilled with that, but they didn't just do that. They took it back to a hundred percent, they back paid everybody with interest and a holiday. Now, noted.

Sian Lewis:

Yeah, that's right.

Michelle Rushton:

And we all know of times when we've had personal struggles or been grieving or whatever else, and people at work have not necessarily extended kindness or generosity or have put more pressure on at a time like this, noted. And so I think though employees may not necessarily have power on the job market now, once we finish this cycle of change and upheaval and pain and we're post-pandemic, those that weren't happy with how they were treated will pick up and move and those that were thrilled, your companies will be paid back in loyalty. So, it's a great opportunity to show people how you're really going to treat them now.

Sian Lewis:

Sure. And I think in terms of the challenge and the culture that we've had, the culture for the future, I think you've mentioned flexibility, flexibility in terms of work, I think there's also going to be a challenge around problem solving and innovation. So, I think working remotely is fine, but I think the type of work will still draw us back together. It's very easy to look back and go, "Gosh, how could we ever have set up work so that we all came into the office where it's so much better to be at home?" Actually, we did that for a very human reason. We like to interact with people face to face, and particularly if you're facing something very complex or difficult, then it's important, I think, you can interact.

So, I think that the challenge for organisations is going to be how you get that right balance at micro moments, because you can't legislate for it. So, in the old days it was, "I'm going to legislate a shift pattern or a be here at this time, or don't be there at that time, or work a three-day week." And I don't think we'll be able to do that. I think we're going to have to skill our leaders and their people to have really sensible micro conversations about where they can produce best, and how they balance that with their family life and their work-life balance and mental and physical health. That's a much more challenging individual context than we've been in before, I think. And so, I think that's going to be one of the challenges we're going to have going forward.

But given the way we've coped to date, I'm pretty optimistic that we'll be able to move. And so, we've looked at the opposite... What's the challenge? We've talked about the opportunity, the flexibility to move across, and I've mentioned a couple of challenges there, anything that you think is a real watch for, particularly for people building and growing their own businesses now, what's the watch for?

Sarah Gatehouse:

I think for me, you really need to be careful of that ergonomic home environment and that set up of their workspace as well as that wellbeing. If that is an issue it's going to create long-term problems for your worker's comp and your liability, so just making sure you educate people around that ergonomic setup at home is really important. And you've just got to really focus on training them in those transparent conversations, so they do communicate any concerns like you mentioned, that they do have and that's safe for them, which I think sometimes people are hesitant in having those transparent conversations.

Michelle Rushton:

Yeah, I would agree. I think there's the innovation piece that you mentioned, Sian, that's the core challenge and human connection, and balancing those two. I agree, it's got to be a decentralised continuous conversation, and that requires quite a sophisticated leadership skill because you're not just requiring it of your top leaders, you're requiring it of everybody, and it has to be a two-way communication. So, to be able to do that there needs to be much more focus on those conversations, how you do them, how you do them effectively and I think that's going to be a core challenge.

How do you have those conversations for connection and innovation all at the right time and carve out deliberate time for that? We were talking just before we came live about how people are now at this stage where they're doing roughly 2.5 days a week in the office on average and they're choosing, "Okay, well, our team's going to come in on a Wednesday because that suits us," but it needs to be more ad hoc, it needs to be more flexible than that. And carving out that time to deliberately do the important work together to innovate and connect, that's going to be the ongoing opportunity, but challenge.

Sian Lewis:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So, I'm looking for questions from the audience, but I think we're just waiting for some to come through. I might just ask a more personal question. How have you both coped with this? Because I know that there's, for all of us, big responsibilities in terms of either looking after our people, running a business on which other people rely. How have you both gone with the crisis?

Sarah Gatehouse:

Well, COVID-19 was a pretty crazy time. Basically, between March and June I don't remember coming up for air. I was running our COVID-19 response, so I just found by the time I met with my team in the morning, met with my team in the evening, I had the COVID-19 meeting, it was crazy. It was after hours, really, before you were starting work, by the time you fielded a couple of phone calls, and obviously that takes time because you're going through that salutation. "How are you?" What's happening? How are the kids?" Every time. So, it's much more difficult than being in the office where you can just go and quickly ask a question. So, it was busy and 1st of June I was very keen to get back into the office. So, I really have a lot of empathy for those who are still remote and particularly our Melbourne team who is still remote.

Michelle Rushton:

Yeah. Look, it was really challenging. We're running a business that's in the business of bringing people together face to face. We do leadership development; we do team development. It's usually in a room with humans and one week in March that became incredibly unpopular all of a sudden, so that was really difficult. And I remember in that week when everything fell out of the diary, we had this last call where a big piece of work fell out of the calendar. He came and told me about it, and I said, "This is going to be the making of us." And he's like, "I get what you're doing because you've been resilience training for 10 years, but what do you mean? How?" I'm like, "I

don't know, because when the stock market goes down it's an opportunity to buy? I don't know, we'll work it out." And there is that pressure when you're running a business and you've got people that you're trying to look after.

But in answer to your question as to what's helped, I go back to what you said earlier about routines. You've just got to focus on what you can control; you've got to keep the routines going to keep moving forward, lots more exercise in my life this year like a lot of people.

Sian Lewis:

I wish I could say that.

Michelle Rushton:

And just that approach of what's the best next step?

Sian Lewis:

Right.

Sarah Gatehouse:

The sleep in was nice, that's for sure. I'm usually up at 4:30 so it's nice to have an extra hour.

Sian Lewis:

So, I have had some questions. First question is have you seen this have any impact on purpose and engagement in the organisation? So, Sarah, maybe...

Michelle Rushton:

I'm happy to jump in at any point. Yes. So initially I found with the organisations I was working with that there was, in the first few months, an enormous uptick in sense of purpose because everybody banded together and were pulled together rather than being pulled apart, which was beautiful. It's just that over the months as the prolonged stress started to take its toll, that was more difficult. It's been more difficult to keep that together.

Sian Lewis:

I think there is definitely that, yeah, in a crisis people can band together.

Michelle Rushton:

That's right.

Sian Lewis:

I certainly saw that we've been able to really live our purpose during this period, which is to enhance financial wellbeing. So, the work we've done with our customers, the work we did as team Australia in terms of how are we going to support the economy? It's sometimes easy in a very big organisation to lose your direct link to our purpose of enhancing financial wellbeing, but actually during this period and continuing, it's much clearer to everybody how they're contributing to enhancing financial wellbeing.

And we also recognise that we've got a tough year ahead. So, having a lot of money being put into the economy, that's going to gradually come off. We're going to have to have some pretty confronting conversations with some people about how they've emerged from this. But I think keeping our purpose in mind will really help our people have those conversations. So, I've seen our engagement increase significantly during the crisis.

Sarah Gatehouse:

Well, we really haven't had any change in our engagement. I think that when I look at Melbourne, and down there we've had much harsher restrictions to deal with, it was probably navigating around the ability for our field technicians to go and service the customers. And how do you differentiate between the essential and the non-essential, they're impacting life and are critical, and also the construction, being able to keep that running and going for the economy. But I think we've managed that quite well, and fortunately we've been fairly resilient as an organisation to get through COVID-19 and actually... Because people want air con at home, right?

Michelle Rushton:

That's right. Yeah. The other one thing I'd add about purpose is that at times like this it's brought into sharp relief for a lot of people what's most important to them in their life. And though they may not have the luxury of going and looking for a job or a place with more purpose right this minute, I think it's one of the things that's shot to the top of the priority list for talent that you might be trying to attract or retain along with the flexibility and the human connection. I think it's up there now because everyone sees, "Well, gosh, I know it's really important and life's short."

Sian Lewis:

Let me ask another question that's come through. How are you understanding how the broad workforce are experiencing the current circumstances? Do you utilise leaders or formal challenge such as sentiment survey? So, I might kick off with that, if I may. We actually pulse surveyed through the crisis, so we have, as I'm sure lots of organisations do, that biannual engagement survey. What we did was use the same technology to ask our people every six weeks key questions about their physical and mental health and their work patterns so that we could really keep in touch.

So, we had lots of informal channels as well through leaders saying, "I've connected my people, this is what they're concerned about." We treated it as we would any other crisis, so we had a central team who was managing all of the impacts, which meant that there was good communication going backwards and forwards. But again, it goes back to having the infrastructure in place before the crisis. You just really appreciate your ability to then leverage that as you go into a crisis situation. So that really helped. How about you, Sarah?

Sarah Gatehouse:

Yeah, we do have an engagement platform that we use, and we do regularly, we always have done the six-weekly check-ins. So we just changed the nature of the questions for those check-ins and made them more personal and more about how you're tracking, how you're feeling, how you're going, anything we can do to support you, and noticeably our platform now has added that question permanently, which is really great, about wellbeing. And not only are you getting a score for how happy they are out of 10, but how happy are they for their wellbeing? Are they thumbs up, thumbs down or neutral? That's going to be a really helpful tool to help us measure our mental health going forward.

Michelle Rushton:

And of course I've noticed too that a lot of companies, and I'm sure yours are both the same as you mentioned, that they're combining that data from the pulse surveys with the colour of the communication channels that

they've got in place and hopefully are strengthening during this time, coming up through all the team leaders, what's being asked at the town halls, all of that more qualitative data, I suppose. That adds colour to the pulse.

Sarah Gatehouse:

We could also see how people were going through the participation in competitions. Submit your recipe, wear your favourite hat to the teams meeting, so all those sorts of quirky things and asking people to write stories about and having it at home, which was, yeah, that was really great as well because it gave everyone an insight, whether they're in their team or not to what's going on.

Sian Lewis:

So, I have one question I'm going to go for a yes or no answer. Do you think remote working is here to stay?

Sarah Gatehouse:

Yes.

Michelle Rushton:

Oh yes.

Sian Lewis:

Yes. That was a resounding yes, and I think that brings us very close to the end. Thank you very much for joining us. I really appreciate it. I hope you've found today useful. I certainly think that while the last eight months has given us plenty of food for thought, I think it's accelerated a lot of good for both individuals and organisations. It's certainly put to rest some of the myths about people needing to be in one space at one time in order to get great results and I think many of organisations against across Australia have just got phenomenal results over such a challenging time. I really hope this has been useful and that you can tune in next Thursday to the next future series. I appreciate the time that you've spent with us and thank you again for joining us.