



# Who decides where we work from?

## Has the balance of power shifted from the employer to the employee?

Article 5

Everyone wants flexible work conditions, but who determines where we work from – is it the employee who now holds the power in decision making? This article gives examples of employee concerns raised with Illawarra managers as well as physical offices being occupied on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, and ghost towns on Mondays and Fridays. Management of teams, innovation, fostering employee development and workplace cultures are all challenged in flexible work environments.

Everyone wants flexible work conditions – of course. In fact, flexible workplaces are attractive places to work! We like flexibility, but on whose terms? Who decides what flexible means, looks like and how it is best applied given our new world of remote work opportunities?

During COVID lockdown periods, employers were inclined to leave the decision up to the employee, stating something like “if you feel up to coming into the office, and we can work in a socially distanced way, then do so. If not, then you can equally choose to work from home, I will leave that decision up to you and how you feel.”

During the most uncertain period of the pandemic, when COVID case numbers were increasing exponentially each day, some individuals had reasons why they didn't feel up to coming into the office, including “someone in my family has a health risk, so I need to shelter”; “it makes me anxious to come into the office”; or “I'm pregnant”.

Fast forward to 12 months on when COVID case numbers are low, and the same conversations are still being had between management and employees outside of COVID lockdown periods. Does this mean that employees have become so accustomed to sheltering that they no longer feel safe coming to a shared work environment?

Has the extended 12+ months 'leniency' or flexible arrangements fuelled individuals to want to stay at home indefinitely?

Several managers have shared their frustrations with me about wanting to have their teams back on site, but facing pushback from employees. One example provided by an anonymous organisation, is a manager who sought their team to return to the office one day per fortnight for a team meeting. This was met with resistance from team members including responses “it's not time efficient, I lose too much time out of my day travelling to the office” (15-minute commute); “how will I get to the gym”; “how will I get my kids to school”; “I can't find a parking space”; to my personal favourite “it's just not convenient”.

Not only are the examples above from conversations the author has had with Illawarra-based organisations, but it raises a fundamental question – who decides where we work from? And has the balance of power in determining where we work from shifted from the employer to the employee?

Managers and organisations have a need to collaborate, to work through teams of people, and to cross-fertilise and foster employee development through being in shared places. When faced with employees who are determining where they work from, is there

regard for these organisational imperatives and the cultures that drive them? Or does the employee choose? The resistance to returning to an office is real and present. It would seem it is all about I – I, I, I – but we all know there is no “I” in Team.

Let’s look at this from a different perspective – what if we consider what’s happening in capital cities for a moment. We are aware that Barangaroo office towers, where organisations such as KPMG, PWC, Westpac and HSBC are based, are bustling office areas again – BUT, only on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Conversely, Barangaroo is a veritable ‘ghost town’ on Mondays and Fridays.

remote working model. Some even state that they are more productive, and others that they work longer hours when working from home. However, is this sustainable in the longer term, and is there a downside to overhead costs such as office utilisation? Furthermore, do we need to have more consideration for culture, teamwork and innovation?

The question remains, how do I manage my team to work collaboratively in a flexible work arrangement which is dictated by the employee choosing when they will work remotely and when they will work in the office. Is this the way it should be? Is management prerogative gone?

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This implies that the employees are determining when they work from the office – not on Mondays or Fridays! This does not bode well for efficient office utilisation rates, nor for efficient transport systems and the flow-on to businesses such as cafes who need to operate more than 3 days a week.

As mentioned in Article 4, the Fair Work Commission has drafted flexible working conditions into some Awards and enterprise agreements, where they previously did not exist. This would seem to be a good thing, and make common sense across some industry sectors and types of roles. Or is it?

The flexibility that has dawned with post-COVID lockdowns, has highlighted that 75% of workers think their employers will support them working from home in the future, according to the Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies (ITLS). However, is this realistic and efficient?

Employers and employees have demonstrated that there is both trust and productivity in the

In terms of where we choose to work, has the balance of power shifted too far to the individual? Most workplace contracts state that office work will be done from a specific office location or domicile. There are a plethora of considerations on where this domicile will be for payment systems such as “travel time/mileage” and “start and finish times”.

Hopefully, common sense will prevail and pushback to working together will decline as the risk of contracting COVID decreases. Flexible work conditions should be agreed and/or negotiated on a mutual benefit basis. Both the employer and the employee agreeing to what works best for all parties, considering all factors.

In our next article...

‘Creating New Work and Social Paradigms’

