

Building Back Better – Lessons from COVID 19

Cities are, at their very core, economic entities bringing together actors and agents to create a system that generates and circulates value.

This pandemic is a stress test for our city and for our society. It is challenging our institutions, structures, social norms, and our way of life. It is calling into question our current public policies and assumptions and is forcing us to reassess our values and beliefs.

This isn't a bad thing because out of disasters and major upheavals in life, many of the 'norms' in life can change for the better, others less so.

Now is the time to take stock of the way things have changed in our lives and reflect on the lessons we are learning each day around our work - life balance and what we value most in living in a city like Sydney, so that we can truly build back better a City where businesses, big and small, can continue to provide the places and spaces for economic value exchange in which its citizens can thrive.

1. Rise of distance working

Working from home has created many challenges including balancing parenting responsibilities, finding a productive and comfortable physical and mental space in our homes along with integrating technology. Most of us have been able to adapt and cope for now.

With many companies rising to the challenge, demonstrating that business can still function without the need for all of us to be congregated in an office building after a testing Sydney peak hour commute, it is tempting to think that working from home could become the new norm.

For some that may become a reality, but social science is against us. As a social species, we crave the workplace interaction and physical cues are an essential part of our repertoire. Even the most introverted among us find solace and comfort in a crowd, particularly a well-known group. From a work perspective, face to face interactions help us understand each other better, enhance our productivity and stimulate creativity. The chance encounter in the lift, the sharing of ideas over a coffee, the watercooler conversation, all promote the spillover of ideas, knowledge and learning. It is no surprise that the demand for co-working spaces, innovation hubs and shared offices has grown, leading to the advent of global giants such as WeWork.

The science has also shown that despite many futurists' predications of distance working being the new way, more and more of us are gravitating into downtowns and clustering in urban centres and office parks. The end of the regular workplace in this City is far from over.

Alternatively, our current pandemic predicament can lead to a valuable and productive hybrid model of work. Embracing a scalable, increased acceptance and flexibility where employees can work hours or whole days from home, or work across a broader spectrum of hours is a reality now. This will change our city. It will shift commuting patterns and take pressure off our straining transport system. It will mean the peak hour crush would be eased, there would be less unproductive time spent in congestion and crowds and we would edge towards becoming a truly 24-hour City.

2. Return of manufacturing

This pandemic has challenged our City's social and economic resilience. As global supply chains froze, borders closed, airports and ports shut down, international trade has gone into steep decline. We have found ourselves in short supply of some essential goods and products; surgical face masks, surgical gowns and spare parts for respirators, hand sanitizer, to name a few.

While we have been able to skillfully negotiate the importation of some 30 million masks and repurpose some production lines, our local manufacturing base is narrow. This is not a call to reinvigorate local automotive or ship manufacturing, nor the re-imposition of expensive and ultimately futile protectionism and tariffs, but it is the time for greater effort and investment in the development of a targeted and technologically advanced manufacturing capability.

Sydney, with nearly 6 per cent of the local economy in the manufacture and assembling goods, is still Australia's manufacturing capital and is the perfect place for a refreshed industry policy and approach that broadens and deepens key production and processing capacity.

A strong, focused manufacturing capacity will not only ensure our society's wider economic resilience, but will provide new employment opportunities and a beachhead for export when global markets return.

3. Refocus on population health

This pandemic is a stark reminder of the critical role population health measures play in keeping us well. In recent years the emphasis on population health has given way to innovations, inventions and research promising to give us extra years of life - things such as gene and immuno-therapies and cancer treating drugs. These are of course important, but interventions that improve the overall health of the whole population like food safety, good sanitation and hygiene and regular exercise, have saved more Australians than anything else in our history. Preventing cancer by 'slip, slop, slap' and 'quit for life', preventing the spread of disease through more regular hand washing, and the all-important role of having more of us vaccinated, have and will continue to have, significant population health outcomes.

Adequate beds and staff in our hospitals is important but keeping people out of hospital through preventative health measures, is much better alternative. A refocus on population health expenditure, on preventative health measures and on our physical, emotional and mental wellbeing, are key lessons imposed through this health crisis.

4. Revalue and reskill

Covid-19 has caused abrupt and disruptive change to all aspects of our lives. It has prompted us to rethink what and who we most value in our lives. The heroic efforts of our frontline health workers in keeping us safe and caring for those infected and nursing them back to health, the emergency service workers stepping up to the task, the trials and tribulations of parents learning to home school our children have all shown us the value of having well trained teachers, and the necessity of access to quality and affordable childcare. A light has been shone on the importance and value of these professions.

The recent call to arms to bring back and retrain many who have left these professions will help meet our immediate needs, but this should be enhanced by a concerted effort to attract new talent to professions critical to our economic and social welfare.

Similarly, over recent months the value of technology has been highlighted. Whether it is greater use and appreciation for telehealth, company systems enabling thousands of workers to productively from their homes, or businesses pivoting to online service delivery, the demand for robust, reliable and secure technology has skyrocketed. While our technology and knowledge-intensive jobs have been steadily growing, it is time to put a foot on the accelerator and embed and advancement in technology infrastructure, skills and our way of life.

5. Rediscovering local

In a globally connected City, we have suddenly been forced to live in and stay close to home – 24/7. The corner shops have become a place to procure essential items, local parks have become a place to get physical and take a mental break, and we are re-acquainting ourselves with our neighborhood characters, streetscape, footpaths and laneways. Playing Frisbee in a park you may have only walked past before, has replaced the more impersonal gym workout.

Australia is one of the most urbanized nations in the world and Sydney has long been on a rapid trajectory of exponential density. Recently, some have argued that now is the time to reassess planning policies around urban consolidation and move to greater population dispersal to deliver both sustainability and resilience.

While personal proximity is currently not our friend, Sydney's growing urban densification has contributed greatly to our enviably strong visitor economy, fueled our burgeoning international airports, busy sea ports, enabled an internationally focused education sector and grown our globally connected industries like finance. This has delivered many high value, jobs and employment growth, securing Sydney as by far the biggest contributor to national GDP. Urban containment comes with high economic risks.

As we rediscover our local environment, a light has been shone on urban density - how we manage land use, what amenities are available, accessible, affordable, and how we engage with our local community. The call to 'shop local' has become so pervasive that large corporations from banks, to retail and technology are shifting business models to be 'local' and embedded themselves deeper into the communities in which they operate.

This lesson of prioritising localisation creates the opportunity to not only build business, but build a city that is centered on enhancing the places where we live, work and play. This means rethinking urban design, land use and mobility, to enhance the social and economic connectivity to the local ecosystem.

Such an approach will enhance engagement, social cohesion and loyalty, making business and the City as a whole, stronger and more resilient

As a City we must not simply bounce back, we must 'bounce forward'. We must grab with both hands the opportunities that this dreadful disease has forced upon us to improve many aspects of life in our city and how it works. We must think afresh about what a more resilient, competitive and global city

Sydney can be. This will take strong and sustained collaboration across all tiers of government, business and the community – as united we have a real and unique opportunity to reshape our City and our lives.