

# TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE

EPISODE #93

FLEXIBLE PUBLIC SECTOR WORKPLACE

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PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Well, hello everybody and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public sector and how it serves the Australian community. I'm Patrick Hetherington and I'm your guest host for today. In my day job, I'm the Chief Operating Officer of the Department of Social Services. Before we get started, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land in which we're meeting today, the Ngunnawal people and any other families with a connection to this land, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of the lands where anybody listening to this podcast is joining us from today.

Today's episode is one that is close to our hearts. Originally planned as an event in August, we're now recording this discussion in memory of Dr. Damian West PSM. Damian sadly and unexpectedly passed away days before the event. He was an integral part of our IPAA as national secretary and also a member of our IPAA ACT Council. He was involved in countless events as a facilitator and speaker, always freely sharing his ideas and knowledge. Damian will remain in our thoughts as a valued colleague, friend, and supporter of IPAA. Our sincere condolences go out to his family and friends.

Today's episode is all about flexible work, a topic that Damian himself worked on closely with the ACT Public Service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ever since, flexible work arrangements have been here to stay. In fact, many job seekers are prioritising it with 83% of Australian workers considering flexibility of working hours to be important according to the report from Randstad. Today, we want to discuss what this means for the public sector going forward, from greater employee wellbeing to achieving more workforce diversity, to getting ahead of labour shortages and burnout. Joining us today, we have three experts in field of flexible work. Joining us from the UK is Clare Kelliher. Clare is professor of work and organisation at Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield University. Her research examines the organisation of work and the management of the employment relationship. In particular, she's focused on the implementation and outcomes from flexible working arrangements. Welcome Clare.

CLARE KELLIHER: Thank you very much. I'm very pleased to be part of the podcast today and look forward to both sharing some of my own research work, but also hearing about the work that Fiona has done and the experiences in the public service from Adam.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Thank you, Clare. I'd now like to introduce Dr. Fiona Buick. She's a senior lecturer at UNSW, Canberra. Her research identifies key people management challenges within public sector organisations and how to address them. She's particularly interested in finding ways to improve human resource practices and processes to build capacity and achieve desired outcomes. Welcome Fiona.

DR FIONA BUICK: Thank you very much for having me, Pat.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: And lastly, I would like to introduce Adam Fennessy PSM, he is the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. He was previously the Dean and CEO of the Australia New Zealand School of Government. And Adam has over 25 years of public sector experience at state and federal levels. Welcome, Adam.

ADAM FENNESSY: Thank you very much, Pat. It's great to be part of this discussion. I'm on Ngunnawal country as well, and I also want to thank you for mentioning the memory and reflecting on the work of Dr. Damian West.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Well, we might jump straight into it and start firing off some questions and hear from our experts. So, the first question to really anybody is flexibility in the workplace can mean different things to different people. Can I get an idea from each of you of what the ideal flexible workplace looks like for you personally? And I might start with you Clare.

CLARE KELLIHER: Okay, thank you for that question. I suppose the first thing I would say is the type of flexible working arrangements that are offered need to meet the needs of employees. Genuinely, we need to understand what type of flexibility employees need in order to be able to set up the right kind of arrangements. So ultimately, I think we're looking for a set of circumstances where employees have enough flexibility to be able to match the demands of their non-work lives, whatever those might be, caring activities for children or for eldercare for example. But also, the other things that are important to

them, to be able to match those with the demands of their work. And I think that we need to always to be mindful about how those working arrangements need to take account also of coworkers. So, everybody may not be able to have exactly what they want, but also the operational demands of the organisation. So, it's kind of a confluence of those things in an ideal set of circumstances.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Adam, I might throw that same question to you next if I may.

ADAM FENNESSY: Yeah, thanks Pat. I think in my experience with flexible work, it's been more at the practitioner level. And one thing I'm a very firm and strong believer in is that particularly from a leadership perspective, leaders have to model what they say is important. So, for me, my ideal workplace were workplaces that I worked in, where I followed the guidelines that we set up. So, I was a secretary in a state government, the state government of Victoria, and this was back in 2015 and we went all roles flex. There was a lot of work we have to put in place to make that work, similar to what Clare just commented on. I was the Secretary or CEO. So, in order to give life to that, I went flexible as well.

Now most or all big government departments in Victoria are based in Melbourne. When I was Secretary, I lived in Bendigo, which is about two hours north of Melbourne. So, I was very flexible in my working. I had a young family, I used to catch the train down to Melbourne. I used to stay one night a week in Melbourne and generally work from home or work in Bendigo on a Friday. On a good week I'd work on a Thursday and Friday from Bendigo. So, I tended to start in the office at about 10:00 AM and leave by about 4:30. I did a lot of work on the train. So, my workday was quite different to the standard in the office and this was all pre-COVID. And that was important because I could model to other people that it wasn't about where you were or how many hours you sat in the office; it was about what you did. And even though it was a few years ago now, we were all very well-connected.

So, I could do that role from wherever I was and very much model that flexibility. We had a huge uptake in flexible work approaches in that organisation because I strongly encouraged that we put processes in place, importantly people could see that it was being done. And then where I'm now, I'm a secretary in Canberra. I live in Brisbane where my

three daughters live. And so, I'm also working flexibly. So tomorrow I'm in the Brisbane office. Today I've been in the Canberra office and I'm trying to, or I'm modelling that as well.

The culture I've seen in Canberra is quite different in the APS to Victoria. So, I'm moving that ethos through the organisation, working closely with the Australian Public Service Commission. And it's very interesting just to see the different cultural assumptions and norms in the APS. And I will say, and this is in memory of the wonderful and late Dr. Damian West, the ACT public service is very flexible. And I know Fiona's done very specific research on that. And indeed, I did it my last job at ANZSOG. So, it shows it's not about Canberra, it's about the ethos, the practices, and the leadership in the APS versus the ACT public service. So, there's a few reflections Pat about my ideal workplace.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON:

I mean it's a pretty fantastic example of how you can achieve this even at the most senior levels of government. So, thank you for sharing that reflection and it's a perfect sort of handover point to Fiona. So, Fiona, the same question to you.

DR FIONA BUICK:

Thanks, Pat. So, my ideal flexible workplace is one that values hybrid working. So that kind of builds on what Adam said. And so that means that hybrid working is embraced, but it's also utilised in a really purposeful way. So, this is where we are in an ideal workplace, in my mind, there's a purposeful and explicit approach where discussions are held about what are our priorities, what are the tasks we need to do, what are the requirements, what needs to be done in person, together, what needs to be done, what can be done together virtually? And what are the activities and the tasks that employees can be given the autonomy and control to work independently, but they can determine when and where works for them? So that's what Clare says about balancing work and non-work demands as well as optimising their productivity through being able to choose the time of work that they're most alert, they're most on, they're able to focus and so forth.

And so, what I would really love to see is where there's this more purposeful and explicit approach. There's a shared understanding about why we work from the office, why we work from home and very much centres the need for negotiation and focusing on mutual benefits. So, this is about addressing individual needs but also recognising that we

need to meet team goals and team requirements and we also have an obligation as individuals to the culture within the organisation. So, it's trying to get the balance of all of that. And of course, leadership plays an absolutely integral role in enabling that to happen.

**PATRICK HETHERINGTON:** Fiona, I'm going to stick with you. Thank you for those remarks. I'm going to stick with you for the next question. And the question is, we've seen demand for flexible work rise across Australia and really around the globe, and some of that's been supercharged by COVID. Here, the federal public sectors just recently agreed to what I think are some pretty far-reaching flexible working and working from home rights and arrangements. Why in your mind, is flexible work so important in the workplace these days?

**DR FIONA BUICK:** Well, I think as you've mentioned, I think COVID has certainly accelerated the extent to which flexible working has been embraced and accepted. I think the more widespread working from home that happened during COVID managed to debunk some of the concerns about people working from home. And I know Clare's research has touched on this, but historical barriers have been concerned about employee productivity and we have learned that people can actually be productive and if not, actually optimise their productivity while working from home.

And we've also recognised that we can still work together. So just because you're working from home doesn't impede collaboration, it doesn't impede knowledge sharing. So, with the benefits of working from home, I'm focusing on working from home in particular just because of COVID, have been demonstrated. So, I think over the last few years in particular, we've grown accustomed to working in this way, which now means it's an expectation of employees and we overlay this within Australia. There's a very competitive labour market as we know, and so flexible working has become key to the employee value proposition and is a key lever for attracting and retaining employees. So, I think, and we now also recognise, and this touches on Clare's research if we want a more diverse workforce as well, then flexible working is actually a key way to improve the inclusiveness and participation of groups that were otherwise potentially left out of the workforce, particularly those with disabilities.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Thanks Fiona. You touched on some of Clare's research, and we'll go there next. Clare, you've recently led a major report looking at flexible work arrangements in the UK, and I understand it's got some tips for leaders who are interested in employee wellbeing, workforce diversity and tackling labour shortages. What are some of the key changes that you've observed in UK workplaces?

CLARE KELLIHER: Yeah, I'd like to just get a little bit of background to some of that work. We've done quite a few projects in relation to flexible working over a long period of time, and some specifically that have been around the time of the pandemic. But one of the things that is perhaps a little bit less usual about our work compared to some of the work, the proliferation of studies that have taken place on flexible working since the pandemic has been that we focused on employers rather than the employee experience. And we looked particularly about the kind of things that employers learnt as a result of being kind of thrown into different working arrangements when there was lockdown in so many countries and people were mandated to work from home.

Now we know quite a lot about what was learned through the great working from home experiment as it tends to be referred to. The impossible became the possible, jobs that people previously said, "No, no, no, these can't be done from home. We need these people in the workplace." There were ways that it was facilitated in order to happen, and very often the experiences were such that actually people said, "Well, it's not as difficult as we thought it would be. There are ways of collaborating, there are ways of communicating, coordinating."

But I just want to spend a moment on a piece of work that we did, which was actually around part-time working. Partially because part-time working I think has been less prominent in the debate since the increasing remote working during the pandemic. But also, part-time working is significant in terms of being able to include more people in the workplace, people who perhaps either can't work full-time because of other life commitments or perhaps people who have some kind of illness. And as a result, full-time work isn't an option for them. And indeed, people who don't want to, who are making active

choices, that they don't want to engage on a full-time basis with employment.

Now the UK government during the pandemic introduced a scheme whereby they supported employers to keep people in employment as they shut down, as with lockdowns. And my understanding is there was something similar in Australia. When they introduced the part-time variant of this, so when employers wanted to bring people back to work because their businesses started to reopen, then they could have people working part-time and then get government support for the amount of time that people weren't working.

Now, one of the things we hypothesised about this scheme was how would employers who hadn't had much experience of managing people working on a part-time basis or only being fairly peripheral, how would they respond to this? Now in fact, we found, we did a large-scale survey. We did both a questionnaire-based survey but also some interview-based work as well of UK employers in the public and the private sector. We found that actually employers learned a lot about how to manage part-time working more effectively. For some, they'd kind of seen it as a bit too difficult previously, having people on different numbers of hours. If everybody was on the same number, it was much easier to manage the workforce, to schedule, to think about what skills needed to be available. But also, some costs associated with many costs are per employee rather than pro-rata if people work on a part-time basis.

However, those experiences of managing people, putting people onto working part-time basis in order to access the government funding was a big learning experience for many employers. And we found employers learning how to calibrate workloads in relation to how many hours people were going to be working. But particularly also to be able to forecast when they needed employees, when they didn't need employees to be available and the kind of skill mix that they were looking for. And many of our employers that were included in the study have actually talked about how this has allowed them to manage people more efficiently in a post-pandemic world, by actually really analysing what happens in their workplaces and perhaps really importantly, their perceptions were challenged in relation to the difficulties associated with part-

time working. And people talked about encouraging more part-time working, be more open to requests from both existing employees but also to people they were hiring.

And I think this thinking about how we can offer work in different ways in something that differs from the traditional model certainly opens it up to other groups who either are unwilling to work full-time or are unable to work full-time, different amounts are important to attract different people into employment. There's been quite a lot of debate in the UK about the over 50s withdrawing from the labour market and many of those now are returning to work, but on a part-time basis. They're not looking to get the jobs that they left back but to engage with employment in a different way.

Also, issues around work-life balance and wellbeing. There is good evidence that people who are working part-time are often able to bring more energy to work because they are doing different things and there is if you like, an enrichment process between their non-work lives and their work lives. So, I think really I'm using that to illustrate to say I would very much encourage employers to be open to considering different ways of working rather than defaulting to a traditional model of full-time permanent employment, which is based in a workplace in designated hours, that opening up. And I'd go one step further to say, actually, I would encourage government to support employers doing this. Governments often encourage employers to be innovative in their business practices, but here innovation in relation to employment practices, I think is something that there would be real benefits from government encouraging that more widely.

**PATRICK HETHERINGTON:** Clare, that's a fabulous response to that question and I'm going to throw the next question to Adam, and I think it probably leverages your time at ANZSOG perhaps more than your current role. I'm interested, and this is something that's very near and dear to my heart. I'm interested in, I suppose, how some of the changes that Clare has just mentioned are playing out here in Australia in our major institutions in particular in terms of diversity. It seems to me the things that you've just outlined around better forecasting of workloads, the opportunity for more flexible work arrangements, including part-time, lend themselves to a broader range of potential employees. I'm just interested in your thoughts on that, Adam.

ADAM FENNESSY:

Yeah, thank you Pat. Well, I'll make two reflections. Firstly, I did a lot of work, more from the practice level around gender diversity. And that went back a number of years and to start that process and to see the link with gender diversity and flexibility, we surveyed our staff. This was back when I was in the Victorian government at the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. And we said to staff, "What do you think will make our workplace a more gender equal workplace?" And the number one response by far was more flexible working. So that was a more sort of qualitative approach, but it made that link. And that's when we went all roles flex, and we set targets, we put in place training for managers, for employees, a whole lot of different things. And we moved the dial and we got to more of a gender balanced organisation within about two years.

But what we also noticed, well firstly, when you measure what matters and hold yourself really to account, you can shift the dial, which is encouraging. We then noticed we had a more gender diverse, but still quite a white organisation, not a very culturally diverse organisation. And I then learned, and this was in Victoria, Victoria set up the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, which was a legislated role under the Victorian Gender Equality Act. A lot of those legislative approaches are now reflected through WGEA, the Workplace General Equality Agency, which has also been around for a long time. And the Commissioner for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, Dr. Niki Vincent also had the power to measure and promote intersectionality. So that's been the next step to create more diversity, more inclusion, and frankly, that leads to better insights, better advice to government, better service delivery, better risk management.

To give you one example, when we went into deep COVID lockdown and we were working with communities who had very diverse multicultural backgrounds, in order to connect with those communities during really difficult times in COVID, if we were a more monocultural public service that wasn't going to help us do good service delivery. So that was the first set of insights, and it is really about measuring what matters.

I think the other thing I've seen is that I've been working for a number of years or part of a network called the Champions of Change Coalition, and that was led for many years. It was set

up by Elizabeth Broderick, then it was convened by Kate Jenkins who went on to become the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner. And that's done a lot of research, not deeper research we might see from Clare and Fiona, but nevertheless, a good starting point of research that also showed the different diversity levers and data out of private sector, not-for-profit and public sector. And that's a really good truth basis to see if something can work in one sector, there's no reason why it can't work in another sector.

One example I'll draw out from that is when we went into deep lockdown and I was in the Victorian government at that stage for office-based workers, we could go very flexible, and we could work from home. That didn't carry through for frontline workers, for nurses, or teachers, or people working in prisons in the correction system. The Champions of Change Coalition working with some big industrial companies across Australia, including mining companies, have looked at what does flexibility look like to promote better diverse outcomes in heavy operational industries? And there it's about agency and job design. And it goes to some of Clare's key points. It's about talking to your staff, giving staff more agency and taking away if you like, or what I call the tyranny of the shift cycle and the people that design shift work. If you give staff more agency to shifts in around what works for them and their family or their life circumstance, you get more engagement, more productivity, happier staff. But managers are generally not used to doing that.

I've got that challenge now in that at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, we've got about 2,000 frontline staff that do biosecurity at airports. Whatever flexibly might look like for our head office, which could be all sorts of excellent things, what does it mean if you are on shift from 7:00 AM till 3:00 PM at Brisbane Airport and you've got no say in it? Well, what we're learning from other sectors is that agency and that innovation and design and hard thinking work you've got to put into it rather than just saying they're here to do a job, they've got to turn up. And that goes to Clare's other point, how do you put yourself into the employee mindset and also think about job design and the service that has to be provided?

So, I think my final reflection about what I've seen across other sectors, including the research we did at ANZSOG, I learned from a wonderful head of diversity inclusion at BHP who said their approach across Australia in particular was work where you get your best outcomes. And that provides much more agency. You might be an online trader and you might work from home where you do lots of good online trades. You might be a truck driver at a big open coal mine. And if you can have more flexibility about your shift arrangements from day-to-day or week to week, that might be the flexibility that works for you. So, there's a range of reflections of what I've seen across various sectors, and it is fascinating to come back into the Australian public sector where there's some great work that's been led by the APFC and there's also I think some good learnings from ACT government, Victoria, other jurisdictions that had different experiences throughout the COVID lockdown.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON:

Adam, thanks for that. That's a really good reminder that flexible work is not just work from home. There are lots of ways to offer flexible opportunities for people and as you say, give them some agency. And I do love that phrase, work where you get the best outcomes. I think that's a really good one for our listeners. Fiona, I'm going to throw to you next and just following on from Adam's points there, I'm interested in how you think the pandemic has affected the prevalence of burnout.

DR FIONA BUICK:

Yes. I mean obviously it's been an exhausting three and a half to four years for many people. It's been tough. It's been huge. There's been enormous stresses and disruptions. And so particularly when we had the periods of lockdown and those that were either experiencing isolation if they lived alone, we've seen a greater prevalence of work-life conflict, and particularly for those with caring responsibilities, trying to juggle work and non-work demands, and also ongoing concerns about health issues. I could keep going on about that. But I think what's important to put front and centre is also looking at flexible working in the context of COVID. So, I think we've got the backdrop of COVID, we've got the backdrop of so many people are exhausted. But then we've also got more widespread working from home. And as I think we've seen a lot of employees prefer to continue working from home.

But what we also know is that sustained working from home is associated with several risks and challenges, and I'm not sure that those are discussed enough. Certainly, amongst academics, there's a lot of papers on the risks and challenges of sustained working from home and in particular psychosocial risks. And this is particularly for those employees that experience incredibly high work demands. And I'll do a shout-out to Clare's work as well. So, she's done work on work intensification and the impact of that on the wellbeing of employees in the context of flexible working. So, we've got a lot of people who are, they might be seeming productive, but they're working incredibly long hours. We see greater prevalence of work-life spillover, so there's not as much separation. I mean, Clare and I were talking the other day about the transition points when you commute to work and commute home, that provides an opportunity to, in your mind, separate, okay, I'm moving from work, I'm going to home. And you can be present in that domain. But where we don't have that, there are risks.

And also, when we see sustained working from home, that's where we see the greater prevalence of isolation, potentially impeded quality of relationships and whatnot. So, I think all of these factors impact both burnout but also more broadly the wellbeing of employees. And I think this is why I started with the original point about why we really need purposeful hybrid working, because I think we need to recognise that too much of either working from the office or working from home can be problematic, but there are enormous benefits associated with using working from home and office space, working in a complimentary way. And also seeing the need to utilise the virtual space to also act as a bridge to at least mitigate some of the risks that I've just identified. So yeah, so I think in summary, it's been a huge few years for many people, and I think moving forward, it'd be great if we can start to talk about these a bit more explicitly and figure out mechanisms for mitigating the risks.

**PATRICK HETHERINGTON:**

Thanks, Fiona. I want to stick on this topic of wellbeing for a minute and throw to you, Adam. The question is how can organisations measure and assess the level of employee wellbeing within their workforces going forward?

ADAM FENNESSY:

Yeah, so because I've worn a few hats, I'll talk about the work we did in Victoria during deep lockdown when I was the Victorian Public Sector Commissioner. One thing I'll do very quickly though, I'll give a quick shout out. I referenced that BHP work where you get your best outcomes. That was Fiona Vines, who was the Global Head of Inclusion and Diversity for BHP, and Clare as a shout-out to you, she's now Chief Inclusion Diversity Officer for BT Group, and I think she's now in London. So, you should see if you can talk to her because she's an incredible global practitioner and I think she's now doing some research as well alongside that work at BT Group. Sorry about that, it's a bit of a plug, but I see her as an incredible Australian leader in diversity, and now she's working for BT Group.

So, when we were in deep lockdown, we were very worried about that exhaustion in the Victorian public sector. Melbourne was one of the most locked down world cities in the world. It was well-documented, and we were very worried about what Fiona mentioned, Fiona Buick, work-life spillover work-life separation, exhaustion, and burnout. So, two things we did. Firstly, we modified and adjusted some of our annual census data collection across the public sector. Now it's very similar to the APS census. That's a long-term, I think it's been going for more than 30 years in Victoria. So really good longitudinal rich data collection. And that data was very informed by research. I think we did that work with Deakin University and the University of South Australia, so very empirical, and we did change some of those questions to do subjective measurements of wellbeing. Now that's subjective, not so much objective, but it was a good way to measure the relative changes.

We also did quick turnaround data collection to find out how things were tracking from month to month. Interestingly, what that data showed, and this was all published in 2020, 2021 and 2022, is that those subjective perceptions of wellbeing improved with certain levels of staff and went down particularly for those who were stuck in that middle management, manage up, manage down. So firstly, the data told us some very interesting things, and I'm sure Clare and Fiona have mined that data very richly. And that allowed us to work out how to target wellbeing interventions. And working with lots of good local and global experts, we worked with

psychologists with wellbeing experts and tried lots of different things. The Victorian Public Sector Commission published toolkits. I do remember, and in the spirit of open reflection, some staff are saying, "Stop tool-kitting me. Just take the work pressure off me."

At the same time, we thought it was important to put as many things out there as we could. And then as the lockdown started to lessen, we did find that connection point much better and thinking of purposeful connection as much aimed at wellbeing as well as delivering services as public servants. And at the time at the VPSC, we were looking locally and globally for good research, and we didn't see a lot of it, but I do want to give a shout-out to UNSW, Canberra. That was some of the best research that I saw. Swinburne Uni of Technology did some really good work with Deloitte, and I know UTS, University of Technology Sydney's done some great work. So put the wellbeing support in there.

We also at a senior leadership level, engaged secretaries and deputy secretaries to make it more explicit about that engaged support for senior managers who were really feeling that impact. And a lot of that initial support was online because we're all still locked down. But there were lots of different ways to have conversations and just acknowledge the challenges that people were going through. So that was more a point in time set of examples. My view was collect the data, get the data, use the data to target those wellbeing based interventions. We also worked with other areas of expertise within Victorian government, so we did a lot of work on psychosocial safety with the WorkSafe authority. So Pat, there's a range of examples. We learned a lot. And then to me there are great ways of partnering with deeper expertise and research like I was doing at ANZSOG with the University of New South Wales Canberra, to do that monitoring, evaluation and measurement and drawing conclusions to then try in current circumstances.

**PATRICK HETHERINGTON:**

Thanks, Adam. I want to go to Clare now. So, we've talked quite a bit now about the benefits and some of the challenges, and I just want to pull on that thread a little bit more if I can. Clare, the question to you is how can organisations strike a balance between providing flexibility to employees and ensuring business continuity and collaboration?

CLARE KELLIHER:

Thank you. Just before I do that, I'd like to pick up some of the points that Fiona and Adam made just very briefly on that. I think a lot went on. The pandemic was a great catalyst for flexible working. I think that's undeniable in many senses. And particularly with remote working, we did learn a lot, particularly about the physical aspects of being remote, the things that you can, and you can't do well when we're not co-located.

What I think we do need to recognise about the research that has been done during that period of time is that it did involve a very specific set of circumstances. And Fiona, you made reference to everything else that was probably going on in people's households, let alone in their lives at the same time as work that they were having to juggle. But one of the things that's important for me in analysing this work also though, is that so much of the work pre-pandemic on flexible working on the benefits of flexible working have been about the choice that employees had, the choice that was available to them to match their working obligations with their non-work obligations.

Now, of course, in the pandemic, there wasn't choice. Working from home and sometimes working at different times was mandated. And it was mandated not by anybody who was party to the employment relationship or at least not directly to the employment relationship. So, so much of that kind of reciprocation that we've seen of where employees are more committed or are working harder, putting in more effort to their work is about being allowed to use flexible working to balance their work and their non-work lives. So, some of the studies, some of the academic studies that I think have been published have some very interesting findings, but we also need to be careful about what we can fast-forward if you like, in terms of the design of particularly remote working in the future.

So having just taken the opportunity to kind of respond to that, I will return to this issue about how do we balance needs, particularly with remote working. Now, I think we would all admit that there are certain types of activities in the workplace that are done better face-to-face, when we are having that one-to-one or in a group environment where we see the whites of the eyes of our colleagues and our coworkers. And maybe in some tough conversations, that may be really

important. But that doesn't mean to say obviously that we need to do all the work in a face-to-face context. I think this involves quite a lot of analysis about the way in which jobs have been put together, the way in which work has been designed to think through how we really get this right.

What does a job entail? What different parts of the job are things that might work well on a remote basis, things that might not work so well on a remote basis? How much collaboration is actually involved with coworkers? Is it constant collaboration? Is it collaboration in relation to specific aspects of a particular job? And thinking about, we use terms like teams very glibly in organisations. Fiona and I have had several conversations about this previously. There's a big difference between people who are in a team who kind of happen to do broadly similar work to those people who are genuinely interdependent, that in order to progress the next stage of my job, I have to be collaborating with someone else.

Now those are kind of key points in order to identify and to think about where it is ... Some of those are fine to do remotely. Some of them perhaps don't work quite so well to do remotely. So really kind of analysing the aspects of work and thinking where is location important or co-location important of employees and where is it not? And trying as a result to be able to work out a pattern that will work for employees who do need to collaborate and who do need to communicate in a face-to-face environment. So, I think that thinking about also maybe the social aspect of work. Fiona made reference previously to people feeling isolated, thinking about why and when the social aspects of work are important. I'm sure we've all had conversations. So, something that you meet at the coffee machine or in the corridor and actually you have a conversation with a colleague that you would never ever have set up a meeting to discuss, but somebody threw something into the conversation, it sparked to some ideas and something has emerged as a result of that.

So, thinking about that social interaction, but also how that feeds into perhaps creativity in the workplace is important. There's nothing more demotivating than employees who go into the workplace only to find there's nobody there at the time that they ... And those people they want to collaborate with or just have a chat with aren't available because they're in on

another day. So, thinking about sort of phasing of those activities. But of course we can't lose sight of the organisational purposes and perhaps particularly in public service organisations, the need for responsiveness, the need for availability of people to communicate is an important factor, particularly when there are unanticipated things that need to be responded to. So again, that comes back to thinking about what does the work entail? And I think the public service context is perhaps quite specific in relation to some of the immediacy that is important and the availability of people because of accountability issues.

So overall, I think it's about thinking about the design of work, the way in what a job comprises, what of those things genuinely can be done better on a co-location basis, and which of those things, it really doesn't matter where people are or possibly even maybe they don't have to do them in person? Maybe actually they can simply do a written communication to deal with some of these aspects. So that requires some investment on the part of managers to think through the work of the people that they manage in order to come up with a solution that can at least in part meet employees' needs. And also, to work with the operational aspects so that the standards and the quality of work that are delivered is high. And the context, the environment is matched to the needs of the work to be done.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON:

Thank you, Clare. That was a fabulous response to that question and the context leading into that was equally as valuable. Folks, we're coming close to the end of our time together on this podcast that I have one final question that I'll throw to each of you. I might start first with you, Adam, and the question is, what are your top three tips for leaders who want to create more flexibility in their workplaces?

ADAM FENNESSY:

So, my top three tips are firstly, ask your staff about what would work for them. So, ask and listen to the answer. Secondly, do match it to your organization's needs and settings, very much what Clare has said in this discussion and the needs of your customers or your minister or the people that you are serving. And then third, and this is the most important, whatever your tips are and whatever your aspirations are, do it yourself. So, unless you model it's not going to work. And that creates discomfort for a lot of leaders.

So, try it out and you'll probably find it's really good. So, they're my top three tips, Pat.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Thanks, Adam. I will throw that same question to you Fiona, and then Clare, you'll get the final word.

DR FIONA BUICK: Great. So, at risk of repeating myself, I think my tip number one is to be purposeful about flexible working. And I think Clare articulated it incredibly well. And certainly, our research has highlighted very similar things about the need to think about job design and interdependence and being purposeful about social interactions and whatnot. But I think what this means is there really needs to be an emphasis on creating the space and the opportunity to have the ongoing conversations about priorities, tasks, requirements, valuing the need for a rich social environment as well, and then figuring out across multiple employees within teams, et cetera, how to make that work in a way that meets individual team and organisational needs.

My second tip is please make sure that managers are adequately supported. This is a very different way of working. My colleague, associate professor Sue Williamson's work suggests that many managers are on board, and they really want to make this work. But a key barrier to them for them has been lack of senior leader support.

And I think that's my third tip, and I think it is on the back of what Adam said about the need for leaders to be genuinely committed to flexible working. They need to role model desired behaviours because we know that's how culture perpetuates. We know if you want a culture that values flexible working, leaders are key. And realising the incredibly powerful role that leaders play in overcoming any resistance to change and improving effectiveness of flexible working.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Thanks Fiona. And finally, onto you, Clare.

CLARE KELLIHER: Yeah, I'd echo many of those points. I think some great points from Adam and Fiona. Consulting employees, finding out what works with them, not making assumptions that we actually understand what happens in their working lives and their non-working lives and how that needs to be balanced first of all. I'd also pick up Fiona's point, I think about preparing managers to be able to manage in different ways.

And I think that also comes through to how we manage managers themselves. Managers who are under pressure to deliver targets very often are tempted at least to default to what they know works, something that's worked in the past. That does not encourage a context in which they might explore different ways of working for employees. So, I think we need to go, well, yes, we need to provide them with the tools to manage people who work in different ways, but also think about the context in which they manage themselves.

But finally, and I think my big point that has come up in a number of the comments I've made earlier is this about being willing to experiment, being creative in the approach to the way in which work is organised and managed. And saying what we have done has not necessarily in what we've done in the past, has not necessarily been the gold standard. It's not necessarily the best way of getting committed, satisfied employees who deliver high levels of performance. It may have been okay, but there may well be better ways to engage with our employees. And it's that experimentation and preparedness to say, "Okay, some things didn't work, so we need to maybe adjust it somehow" rather than seeing it, and I think this has been one of the issues with hybrid working. It's been did it work or didn't it work? Rather than saying, "It needs refinement, we need to think about it on an ongoing basis to get the best results."

PATRICK HETHERINGTON:

Thank you, Clare. Well, the task is on me to try and summarise that, which I feel is practically impossible given the amount of ground that you've all covered. But what I would take away from this, and my own personal view, is there are vast opportunities here with flexible work for so many reasons. If we think about our employee value proposition, meeting people where they're at, giving them agency and choice ultimately can lead to greater diversity in our workforces and greater productivity and all of the following benefits of that. But there's a cautionary side to this too. It has to be done purposefully, as Fiona has mentioned a number of times, it takes some deep thinking about job design at quite a deep level to get it right. We will get it wrong, and we need to refine over time. So, this is a key tool for us. It's a key tool in managing employee satisfaction and burnout. But there are some risks as well. And I think Fiona touched nicely on some of those risks to sustain working from home arrangements.

But if we get it right, if we get the balance right, and importantly, model behaviours that you want to see play out in your organisation and the benefits of flexible work and thinking about flexible work broadly, not just in a work from home context, are certainly there for us to harness and a great opportunity for the public sector going forward. So, with that, I want to say a great big thank you to all of you, Adam, Clare, and Fiona, for spending time with us this evening and responding to those questions and sharing with us some of your deep research and experience in this space.

For our listeners, if you're interested in reading more about research on flexible work, we'll make sure we leave links and relevant studies in the show notes. Listeners, don't forget to follow contentgroup and IPAA ACT on LinkedIn or email [events@act.ipaa.org.au](mailto:events@act.ipaa.org.au) if you have questions. Work with Purpose is produced in collaboration between contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration Australia, ACT, and is supported by the Australian Public Service Commission. If you're keen for more Work with Purpose, make sure to tune into some of our past episodes on your favourite podcast platform. We're on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, and more. Last but not least, if you have time, please leave us a review. It really helps us get the word out about this podcast. Work with Purpose will be back soon. Bye for now.