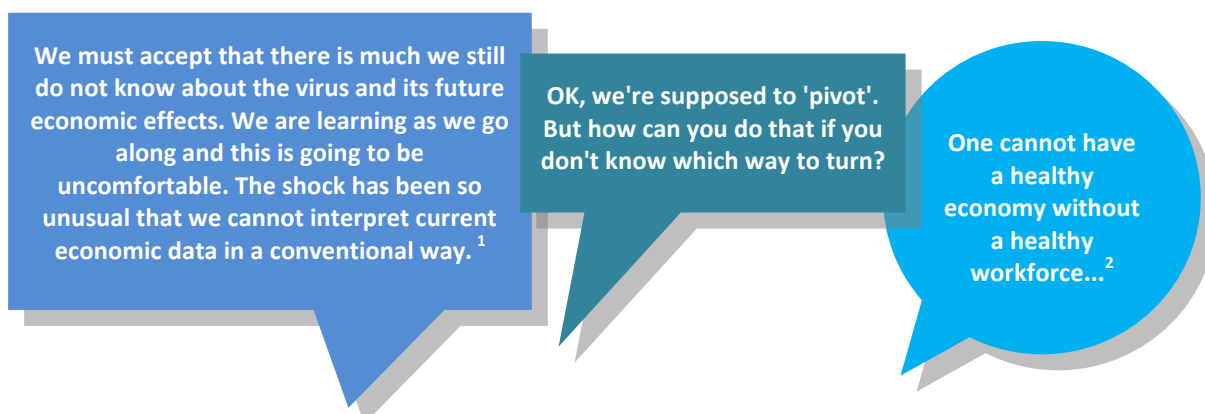


Business uncertainty, wellbeing as usual



Business as usual — even in pre-pandemic times — includes a good measure of uncertainty. Back in January 2020 a headline reporting on international and local trends warned: [NZ economic uncertainty soars, business optimism dips](#). Eight months after the National Health Coordination Centre was activated for New Zealand's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and a few short weeks out from national elections and referendums, where now is business certainty and optimism?

Well, that depends. The new conversation opener "How was your lockdown?" allows for the possibility of everyone having had a different experience, and perhaps the same applies to how businesses and organisations are faring in these unprecedented times. Different sectors have been impacted differently — essential services have been busy; those that rely on spending by international visitors have suffered. In some industries front-line staff had little or no work to do, but many managers found themselves working long hours to plan and implement new ways of working for their teams and themselves. At the time, doing what needed to be done for business continuity or closure in the necessarily quick entry to lockdown was all-absorbing, but managers were also finding their own way in the new challenges for everyone, such as:

- 24/7 contact with household members or separation from family members who were exposed to risk in essential services
- home schooling
- ensuring supplies and social interaction for vulnerable neighbours and family members
- finding focus amidst distracting newsfeeds, let alone finding something better than an ironing board for your new desk.

The shared experience and solidarity in a team of five million holds its own lessons and affirmations: the commitment and resourcefulness of communities and iwi in supporting and protecting those who were vulnerable; people checking in with each other, connecting and creating in imaginative ways online.

'Where work happens' quickly became less an academic question than an actual relocation for many, making it obvious that 'work' is not just the place you go to — the place of work is also an arena of social engagement and belonging. Technology enables connection of people in different places, but it's caring about what [technological capability](#) can be used for that makes the real connection.

It may be more certain than uncertain that working from home will be part of the 'new normal'. In May this year the Work Futures Group at Otago University surveyed people working at home, with most responding under Level 3 (must work from home unless that is not possible) before the

national state of emergency was lifted. Working from home was a new experience for many, most felt equally or more productive than at their usual workplace, and many wanted to continue to work at home at least part of the time in the future. These findings are in line with what we already know about flexible work arrangements.

Whether people are working from home under pandemic measures or new organisational policies, wellbeing at work involves the same issues as usual but with the challenge of connecting remotely and not being able to 'read' what is happening for a team member through the day or week:

- whether we think about productivity as hours in the office or outcomes
- whether people find their work to be in itself motivating and rewarding
- whether people have the equipment and resources they need to work efficiently and safely
- how to provide flexibility fairly so that people can manage their work inputs amongst their many other commitments.
- how to best manage work-life balance — whether more a matter of separation or integration.

Talking with people about their work performance or wellbeing can be difficult even when it's face-to-face, and it may be even more difficult without the immediacy of in-person interaction. This is why managers more than ever need to feel [equipped with the skills, resources and support](#) to talk with their people. It's also why managers need to prioritise and manage their own wellbeing.

Paradoxically, the pandemic and our shared response to it has perhaps created a foundational shift for wellbeing at work — it has

- encouraged us [to be kind](#)
- made [it OK to not be OK](#) - and OK to talk about our mental wellbeing
- helped us see when to [cut others some slack](#) when they're doing it hard
- resulted in a huge offering of [resources for mental health and wellbeing](#), including [Vita's resources specifically developed to support workplaces](#) in Covid-19.

And, as a bonus for wellbeing at work, our experience of the Covid-19 response has hopefully increased social acceptance and uptake of good health and hygiene practices, such as deciding to stay at home if you are not feeling well. We are yet to see if this makes an impact on transmission of the common cold and 'flu in the workplace (and of course, it follows that sick leave provisions must also allow for people not coming to work when they need to get well).

However uncertain our times, or what business direction results from a pivot, it's worth knowing about [studies that show a positive return on investment](#) in mental health workplaces and how to [calculate ROI for workplace wellness](#). Let's make wellness as usual part of what we've learned about work in these times.

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