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OPINION

Woolley Marketing: Keep working from home or back to the office?

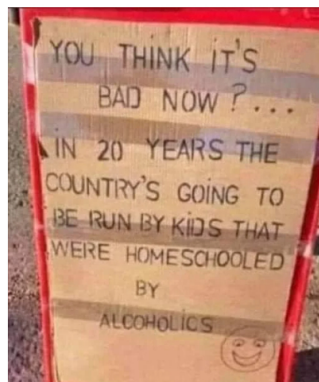
In his regular column for Mumbrella, Trinity P3 founder and global CEO Darren Woolley suggests the "return to the office or work from home" debate fails to see the bigger picture.

October 8, 2021 8:35
by DARREN WOOLLEY



As vaccination rates increase (NSW has now hit 70% and will begin reopening next week) and we learn more about what life will be like "living with COVID-19" it is interesting that much of the industry conversation is focused on either returning to work or continuing to work from home. Sure, I understand that after what feels like a lifetime of working from home, either isolated or suddenly expected to deliver home schooling for your darling eight-year-old, the possibility of escape back to the office is appealing.

Extra Gum captured this in their two and half minute ad "For when it's time". But more cynically, it was best expressed by this prediction of the future shared on Facebook by Lindsay Mouat, CEO of the Association of New Zealand Advertisers.



But for every person that cannot wait to get back to the office, there are those who are worried about returning to the office. They have come to enjoy wearing sports clothes and casualwear (even from the neck down) for all day, while in back-to-back Teams, Zoom and Google Meet sessions. They are worried how they are going to lose those extra COVID-Kilos, from the home baked sourdough, pastries and UberEat deliveries, in time to fit back into that corporate suit.

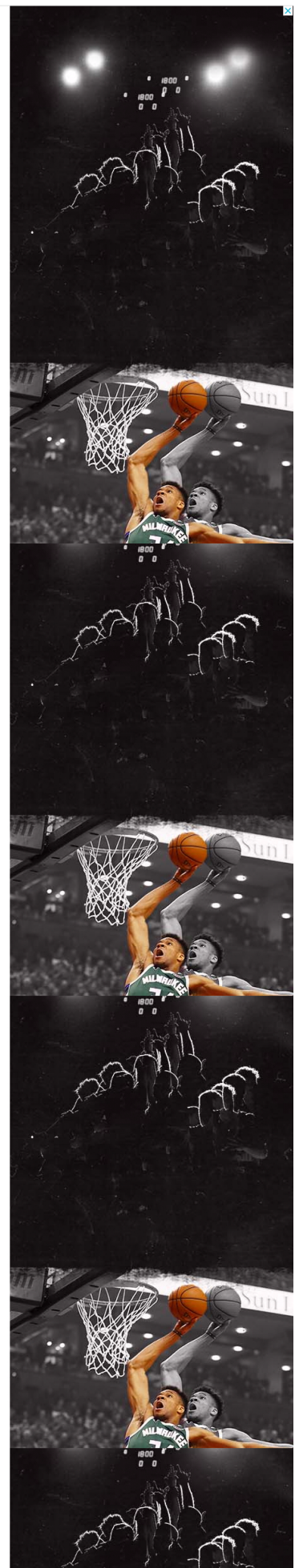
Yes, there are positives and negatives for both options. Both have been well documented. Working from home comes with significant mental health challenges, as much from the difficulties of working remotely as the isolation. But on the plus side, some people find themselves more productive at home, with fewer interruptions and less time having to transit to and from the office, giving them more time in the day. There is also the fact that those who can work remotely can choose to live where they want, if they can afford the sea or tree change.

Returning to the office means bringing social interaction and collaboration back into three dimensions and beyond the Teams and Zoom screen. Working in close proximity also helps on-the-job learning and training. Also, with many people attracted to marketing, media and advertising because of the people focus of the business, it is not surprising that many report missing the social interaction that the office provides, and which is poorly fulfilled using video conferencing technology.

But really, is the future of work, and particularly for the marketing, media and advertising industry, actually going to be reduced to a simple binary question from The Clash hit "Should I stay, or should I go"? After all, isn't this the part of business that is meant to be creative and innovative? Isn't this where business comes to get creative solutions to business problems? Or has it really been reduced to an advertising factory, where people clock on and off to work long hours churning out the bits that fall between and around the content consumers really want?



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So, what is the crisis or problem we need to solve creatively? It has been called the Great Resignation – thousands of people resigning from their jobs hoping to find contentment doing something other than climbing the greasy corporate pole or working themselves into burnout and early retirement running the corporate treadmill.

Why does it have to be either return to the office or continue to work from home? If we are facing living with a virus that has managed to kill more than four and half million people, why can't we as a creative industry find a way to create flexibility in the way we work?

Now, business and industry are again discussing the concept of the four-day working week. But even before the pandemic, Kath Blackham at digital agency Versa introduced a four-day working week for her staff. Digital agency Deepend did the same. Both agencies find it had a positive impact on staff and financial performance.

But this is just one solution. How do we redesign the work to make it more attractive and productive for the people we want to attract and keep in the industry? Is there a hybrid model that provides people with more flexibility? Do we move the focus from hours spent to outputs and outcomes produced? Do we continue to embrace the technology that allows people to connect, collaborate and create, no matter where they are in the world?

Less than 12 months ago you could not read an article on business without someone talking about the new normal. The normal post-pandemic. But in the face of perhaps having to live with COVID-19 for perhaps years to come, isn't it time to be thinking about what our new working normal will be?

The idea that the only choice is return to the office or to continue to work from home is just too limiting when the real options are practically unlimited. As for my own business, it will be fun to spend time again with my fellow consultants and hopefully meeting face-to-face with our clients again. But to be honest, I have never worried about where our people are working or how much time they have spent on a job. The more important thing is delivering the outputs agreed and achieving the outcome desired.



Darren Woolley is the founder and global CEO at Trinity P3. Woolley Marketing is a regular Mumbrella column.

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