

Transcript: Alexis George panel with Virginia Trioli – ABC Mornings Melbourne – 04/05/20

Virginia Trioli: Alexis George is Deputy CEO of the ANZ, Michele O'Neill, the President of the ACTU, and Peter Konidaris, the Melbourne Managing Partner at PWC. Peter, the immediate need to work from home and to do that very, very quickly with the shutdown of the workplace, I guess in a sense that very rapidly for those who could digitise the workplace and the home in a way that we really hadn't achieved so quickly before. And is that in itself, then necessarily going to be a big productivity gain and achievement for the workplace, do you think?

Peter Konidaris: We're watching the numbers and we'll know a bit more in the weeks and months ahead re: productivity, Virginia. But just anecdotally, the fact that people can avoid that daily commute, getting to work and getting home. I've had a fair bit of feedback from staff that it gathered so much more time to their day. And invariably, one would think it should have an impact on, a positive impact on, productivity.

Virginia Trioli: Has it also made you rethink the idea of travel? Because businesses at your level and I'll put this also to Alexis George of the ANZ, your people must be on and off planes and in and out of airports and to and from Melbourne and Sydney and Canberra all the time. And that travel would have been seen as absolutely necessary for those face-to-face meetings. Have you rethought that?

Peter Konidaris: Yeah look, we are currently sort of developing our post-COVID-19 travel policies and expectations around travel. Bearing in mind health and wellbeing of our staff being our sort of primary concern, Virginia. So absolutely something that we're looking at.

Virginia Trioli: But I don't just mean from health and wellbeing. I mean, has it actually been that 'ah-ha' moment where you thought, I don't need to be in the room with that person, we can do this down the line and it can be just as effective?

Peter Konidaris: Yes, absolutely. I think the point being made earlier was it's forced many of us to sort of, recognise and accept just how efficient we can be working remotely. Definitely.

Virginia Trioli: Alexis George, is that your experience too? A lot of the, up until now, untouchable truths of how you do business, has that all been upended?

Alexis George: It's interesting because I'm one of those people that spend a lot of time on a plane. And I think this experience has really forced us to embrace the way of working digitally, and use the various forms of video to connect with people. I want to say, though, that there really is a value of that physical connection, and I don't think that's ever going to go away. I mean, there is nothing like getting a group of people together and really nutting through a problem and coming up with a solution. But certainly I think the travel will be less as we look forward into the workplace.

Virginia Trioli: Well, I want to get you to speculate on that, because I got a text coming in here saying, until you get a small business person here on this panel, you're wasting time. I guess that's a fair observation. But this conversation point goes to that issue. There's a risk that the cut of productivity you might achieve, say, as you mentioned, Peter, you know, people not having to commute all that time, spend all those hours on planes from Sydney to Melbourne and on freeways and taxis and the like, that productivity then would be achieved at the expense of so many other parts of the economy. If people travel less, for example, that hits airlines, taxis, hotels, those small businesses that are cafes and restaurants where people stop on the way and get their cup of coffee or buy their newspaper or do some extra shopping and the like. It potentially doesn't Alexis, then hit all those other parts of the economy.

Alexis George: Yeah. I do think there's a real value, though, of bringing people together and I'm not a person, and we'll have to wait and see what happens, that thinks the workplace is going to disappear. I think the workplace creates a real purpose for many people. Will it look a bit different? Yes, it probably will, in that it will have much more spaces for collaboration as opposed to rows of desks. But the thought that the workplace is going to disappear, I think is a bit far-fetched, but we'll have to wait and see.

Virginia Trioli: I'm not suggesting disappear, but even if there's even a drop, say, in 30 per cent, 25 per cent, in that kind of, up until now, deemed necessary airline travel, Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane and the like, that's massive for all the ancillary businesses associated with that kind of travel, no?

Alexis George: Well, I think there's going to be many changes in society as a result of the virus. I mean, some of those will affect small businesses and some will create new opportunities for new businesses. So I think we have to wait and see where this all ends up. And I don't have all the answers at the moment.

Virginia Trioli: What do you think Peter Konidaris?

Peter Konidaris: Yeah look, I tend to agree with Alexis. I think there'll be shifts in people's patterns and behaviours, winners and losers. On the flipside of that, Virginia, you could imagine if people are working for home a lot more, this lifestyle is 'hyper-local' is the phrase I'm hearing a lot more. Where people are visiting their strip shops a whole lot more, the local coffee shops. And so, you know, there may be swings and roundabouts as to how this plays out economically.

Virginia Trioli: Michelle O'Neil, what are your reflections on that? On what parts of the economy, some kind of productivity gains might be achieved, to what expense?

Michelle O'Neill: Well, the first thing I'd say, Virginia, is that I don't think we can wait and see. I think we need to have the government with an ambitious, aggressive, government-led effort to rebuild the economy and put Australians back to work. We've seen another million workers lose their jobs over March. We've got, when you talk about airlines, 16,000 workers involved with Virgin, worried about Virgin Australia and what's going to happen with their jobs now that that company's in administration. The unemployment figures are set to rise. So we can't sit back. The government actually has to take this up and take this up in a really forthright way. And we think that's important in terms of creating new jobs, a program to create new, secure jobs. We don't want to see the further sort of, out of control casualisation happening in the labour market, because that'll just leave us vulnerable again.

But also, we need to think about the sort of investment infrastructure, of course, is important. But also we need to invest in the community services and health services, the very type of public and community needs that we have, that we rely on when we're in a crisis and have fallen short in some areas in the midst of this pandemic. So I think we have to think about the sort of society and the sort of economy we want to have coming out of this. And this is where there's an opportunity now for there to be change because we don't want to go backwards. If you think about the need to stimulate the economy, then we already had a problem where there'd been seven years of flat wages growth, no growth, in real wages in the economy, even though we've been in a period of high economic growth. So why was that the case? So we can't just turn back the clock. We actually have to deal with the structural issues, make sure that we stimulate the economy by ... having workers have fair pay and conditions. And the capacity to bargain, I think is a really important part of this. We've got a problem in our bargaining system in Australia where so many workers are locked out of being able to be part of winning fair wages and conditions.

Virginia Trioli: Yes.

Michelle O'Neill: Those are the sort of things we need to change so that nobody's locked out of that. That access to collective bargaining is something that every worker has.

Virginia Trioli: And there seems to be almost unanimous agreement on that. Let's take a couple of calls,

Ray: Good morning. How are you?

Virginia Trioli: Good, thanks.

Ray: I'm just wondering if people have considered the workplace health and safety issues like the lady from the ANZ Bank now ...

Virginia Trioli: Alexis George.

Ray: ... Seven thousand more workplaces. Do they comply to standards, if someone falls down the stairs?

Virginia Trioli: That's an interesting question. WorkCover when you've got a lot of people working outside of the office and working from home. Alexis George, is it anything the ANZ has turned its mind to?

Alexis George: Absolutely. It's a really good question because we have got a lot of people working from home. And firstly, we did give an allowance to all our middle and junior people to make sure their environments were set up as well as they could be, so they could stay healthy and well, so that's the first thing. The second thing, as people did start to work from home, we asked them to do a training module which we'd quickly built and also send a photo of their working environment to their managers. So we've tried to put in place as many controls as we can to help people be well. I think the other thing and your previous caller mentioned it, is the mental wellbeing of people in the working from home environments. So again, as much as possible, have tried to support them there, we've created an app which has got some things for them to think about, had some psychologist talks, etc.

Virginia Trioli: Yeah, you were mentioning before, Alexis, how important it is to get people all together in a room just to problem solve, solve an idea and the like. That is in large part why we go and why we want to go to the workplace, is to see people and to be with people. I don't imagine, not only will that not change, but we might even be craving that more than we did going into this.

Alexis George: Well, I can tell you, I will be Virginia. I think my husband will be, too.

Virginia Trioli: Let's hear from Peter Konidaris on that. I mean, your people, notwithstanding those who really like and will embrace the flexibility of being able to work differently, they'll want to see each other, won't they?

Peter Konidaris: Yeah, no doubt. A sense of community and a sense of team is a vital part for the workplace and something no doubt, our people are craving. The question is whether you need to do that five days a week, there might be some other mix there Virginia.

Virginia Trioli: Yeah which has a big implications of course for our cities, for the way they're designed, public transport and also roads and road use, which I know is a big focus of you, Peter and PWC. So we're going to be talking about transport, what changes there when it's over. So we'll leave that for then. But I'm really glad you could join us this morning. Thank you all. Some really great conversation. Alexis George there from the ANZ, Michele O'Neil, President of the ACTU, and Peter Konidaris from PWC here in Melbourne.