The Australian Workforce Response to COVID-19:

A call for courage, connection and compassion

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Welcome

I am delighted to bring you the results and insights from the Springfox COVID-19 People Survey 2020.

At Springfox, we have a passion for providing organisations with an evidence-based, integral approach to building resilience and sustainable performance in their leaders and staff. We wanted to find out how Australian workers were coping during COVID-19 and, most importantly, how they expect to bounce back beyond the pandemic.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has shaken the foundations of our society and economy. We are all affected — whether that be on our mental well-being, physical health, personal and professional relationships or on our financial security. The insights provided in the coming pages will help to pave the way forward on both a personal and a broader organisational level.

We surveyed 536 people in Australia across most industries, with a majority of responses from Education, Professional Services, Banking and Finance, Government and Health.

Our survey revealed six key insights which our report discusses in detail:

1. Productivity remains strong as we adapt to working from home
2. Connection is the key to pivot from worry to hope
3. Leadership trust is a vital workplace currency
4. There's no place like home
5. Industry benchmarks — common challenges and sector opportunities
6. The most at risk in our workplaces prove they have the 'right stuff' to last the distance

We hope these findings highlight opportunities for growth as we courageously emerge from COVID-19.

Stuart Taylor
Springfox Founder and Chief Executive Officer

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

— Nelson Mandela

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About Springfox

Founded in 2003 by Stuart Taylor (as The Resilience Institute in Australia), our mission has always been to help our clients sustain and accelerate human performance through improving resilience. We enable people and organisations to thrive with agility, sustainability and compassion.

Since then, thousands of executives and professionals across Australia and the world have engaged in our blended programmes including resilience assessments, learning labs, webinars, executive coaching and our world-class resilience digital solution.

Our evidence-based programmes are specifically designed to be high impact and practical by bringing together modern preventative medicine, positive psychology, emotional intelligence, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and neuroscience.

For more information, please visit us at **springfox.com**, email **enquire@springfox.com** or call us on **+61 3 9509 2881**

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About the Survey

Working with our research partner SocialSuite, in May 2020 Springfox crafted the Springfox COVID-19 People Survey to measure where Australian leaders and staff sit emotionally, cognitively and socially with respect to COVID-19. The aim of this survey was to provide key insights for organisations to ensure that their teams are equipped to operate with sustainable high performance at this critical time and over the next year.

Scope:

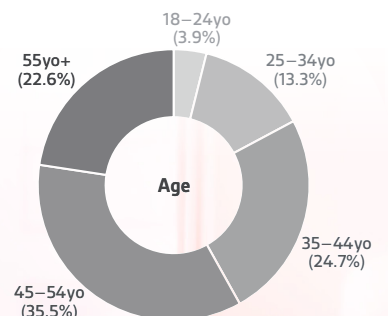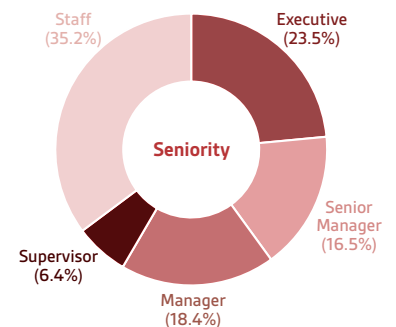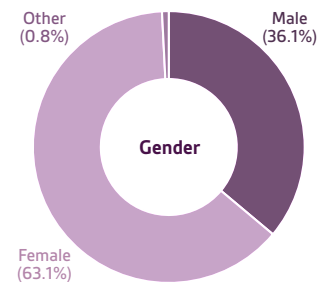Australian organisations

Respondents:

536

Survey response period:

20 May - 10 June 2020

Industries:

- Banking and Finance
- Construction
- Education
- Energy
- Food and Beverage
- Government (including Defence)
- Health
- Insurance
- Professional Services
- Transport

Gender

Other (0.8%)
Male (36.1%)
Female (63.1%)

Seniority

Staff (35.2%)
Executive (23.5%)
Senior Manager (16.5%)
Manager (18.4%)
Supervisor (6.4%)

Age

18−24yo (3.9%)
25−34yo (13.3%)
35−44yo (24.7%)
45−54yo (35.5%)
55yo+ (22.6%)

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Insight 1. Productivity remains strong as we adapt to working from home

The results of our survey showed that while our workload and stress levels have increased, our productivity has remained largely the same as in our pre-COVID-19 work environment. For many, the reaction to COVID-19 and the resulting change in work arrangements has been to compensate with hyper-engagement. This has had a significant impact on our mental health and well-being as we grapple with feelings of dislocation and uncertainty about the future whilst continuing to support the organisational goals of our workplaces.

Stress can impact the biological, psychological and social well-being of an individual and is characterised when the level of external demand is perceived to exceed one's own ability or resources to cope[1]. The survey found that the source of increased stress was not just driven by personal or family health concerns (this only equated to 12.0% of the study population), but rather the change to ways of working which contributed to 55.0%. The primary drivers identified were:

- Working from home
- Blurred boundaries
- Time management issues at home
- Working with technology
- "Always-on"
- Worry about the future

Survey respondents reported worry as one of the top three emotions which surfaced during COVID-19. This supports the insight that stress levels have increased among Australian workers. However, when looking beyond COVID-19, the source of worry shifts sharply to financial viability at both a professional and personal level (18.0% pre-COVID-19 to 44.0% post-COVID-19).

These results were significantly poorer than those reported in previous pandemics, where high levels of worry and anxiety was 25−33% of the community experience[2].
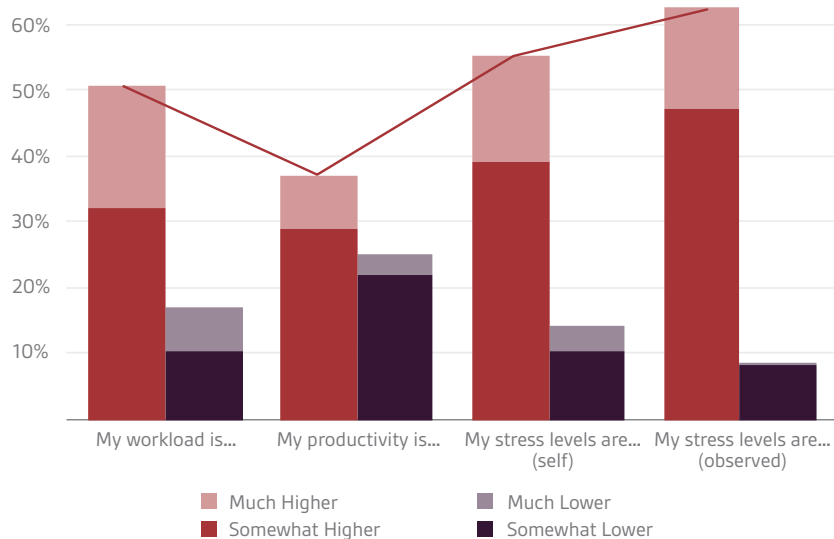
Compared to pre-COVID-19

Respondent commentary:

Blurred boundaries, always on, technology, bad NBN, Google Meet & Zoom not working, Computer crashes & glitches makes me feel incompetent & incapable for not being able to control the technology, feeling older & not being able to keep up with younger more 'tech savvy' colleagues. Lack of energy due to stress, anxiety and worry. Juggling working from home and remote teaching then also teaching my own children. Lack of support from leadership, continually making demands of staff under duress and not understanding or showing empathy for working parents.

COVID-19's uncertainty and abstractness for many has meant that it has provoked strong and divergent reactions from the team I manage. People have become anxious, frustrated, worried and stressed because of what has been asked of them.

How to survive if I lose my job? How can I support my loved ones who are about to lose their jobs?

Implications for Organisations and Leaders

1. **Clarity of Purpose.** To re-establish a sense of hope and possibility rather than imminent burnout and decline, it is critical for leaders to acknowledge what can be changed, what needs to continue and what needs to start. Continuing on the current path is not sustainable for many. Getting clear about what is important is urgent.

2. **Build resilience in leaders and staff.** The pathway to the new normal is unknown in terms of the economy, markets, industry structure, skills, culture and timing. More than ever, organisations with resilient workforces will thrive while others will be unlikely to cope and survive.

[1] Safe Work Australia (May 2020). COVID-19 for Workplaces.
[2] Bults, M., et al., Perceptions and behavioral responses of the general public during the 2009 influenza A (H1N1) pandemic: a systematic review. Disaster Med Public Health Prep, 2015. 9(2): p. 207-19.
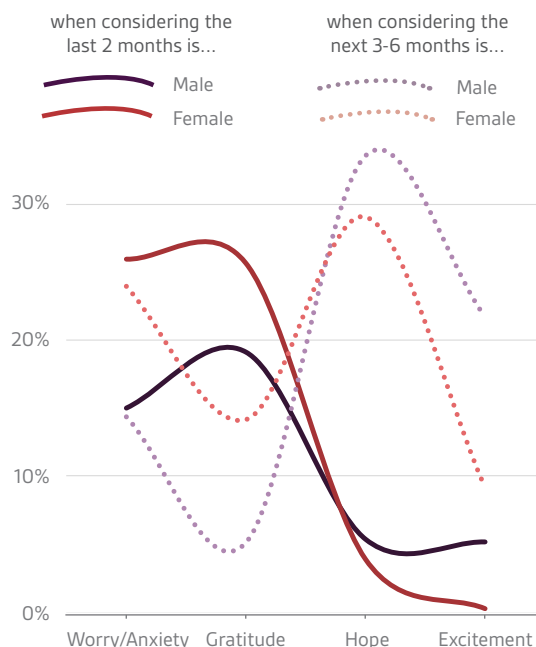
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Insight 2.
Connection is the key to pivot from worry to hope

The results of the survey highlighted the value of both personal and professional relationships and the extent to which they can impact the way we work and how we view the world.

One of the strongest drivers of positivity and optimism for respondents was self-reliance (self-belief and the ability to stay calm). However, an equal weighting was applied to having a connection with others, in particular work colleagues. As workers were removed from corporatised open plan offices, communal break spaces and glass surround meeting rooms they were also disconnected from the constant stream of social interactions that influenced their well-being and sense of belonging at work.

The value of social connection in the current crisis is dampened when connection is sought via social media. Social media will never replace the effectiveness of face to face interaction for connection and knowledge transfer. Research presented in our Global Resilience Report 2018[1], illustrated that resilient people can sit with feelings of worry, overload and hypervigilance but are able to actively utilise strategies that decrease stress levels, improve positivity, optimism and purpose. Connecting to others generates more positive emotions, making it easier to establish and maintain meaningful connections[2]. Whilst the need for connection is greater than ever and social media provides an avenue to achieve this, it may still leave many sitting with feelings of loneliness.

The prevailing feeling I've had...

when considering the last 2 months is...
— Male
— Female

when considering the next 3-6 months is...
···· Male
···· Female

Positivity and Optimism: Compared to pre-COVID-19

MYSELF
My level of positivity and optimism is…

Higher (18.3%)
Lower (32.1%)
About the same (49.6%)

MY STAFF
I believe my staff's level of positivity and optimism is…

Lower (39.4%)
Higher (11.5%)
About the same (49.1%)

Levels of positivity and optimism was lower for 32.1% of respondents, with 39.4% of leaders also recognising that positivity and optimism are lower in staff. Correspondingly, during the past two months (April and May 2020) of the COVID-19 pandemic, worry and anxiety was reported as the prevailing emotion by 21.7% of participants.

The robust and resilient nature of Australians is clearly illustrated when looking forward to the next three to six months. Whilst, worry and anxiety still presented as one of the prevailing emotions for 20.6% of participants, there was a significant shift in outlook. This was reflected in participant responses to feelings of hope (30.7%), gratitude and calm (10.8% and 10.5% respectively) despite the return to recession for the Australian economy due to economic shutdown in response to the pandemic.

Implications for Organisations and Leaders

The ability of staff to directly influence the level of positivity and optimism should not be ignored. Whilst Australia has started it's transition to a new way of normal sooner than initially forecasted, it does not mean that the way we work will fully transition back to pre-COVID-19 ways of being. As teams settle into a new way of working leaders will need:

1. **Empathy.** Be alert to staff feeling disconnected, isolated and operating with a true sense of loneliness.

2. **Connection.** Display personal warmth to build trust and openness. Actively facilitate and openly encourage ways for staff to stay connected.

3. **Face to face interaction.** Teams should be looking to connect in person where possible in line with Australia's Chief Health Officer guidelines[3].

[1] The Resilience Institute (2018). Resilience Enables Strategic Agility: Global Resilience Report.
[2] Prinzing, M. & Fredrickson, B. (June 2020). Four ways to feel good on a hard day in lockdown.
[3] Australian Government, Department of Health. (June 2020).

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Insight 3. Leadership trust is a vital workplace currency

Being a leader through the pandemic may be the best leadership training on how to lead through adversity whilst maintaining a high trust relationship between internal and external stakeholders. One of the key variables for trust is 'team virtuality', as team members are often working in different locations at varying levels of frequency. In today's climate and beyond, team virtuality will continue to challenge leaders and staff as more of us are dislocated from central offices in order to work from home.
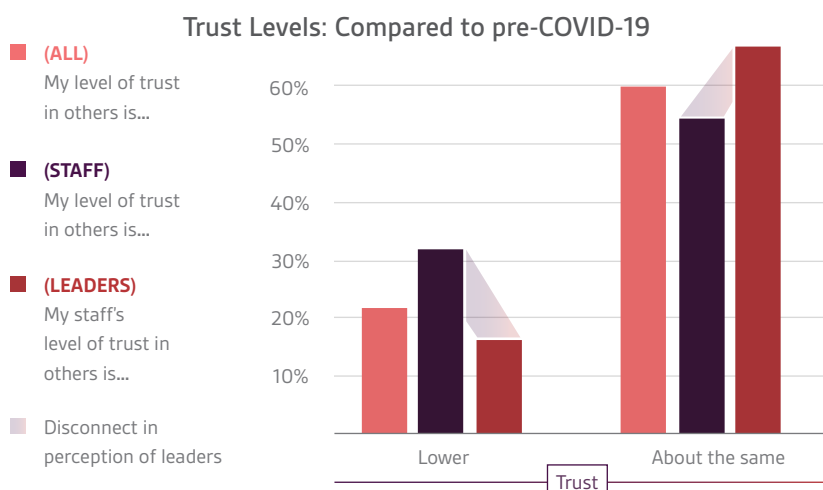
The Springfox COVID-19 People Survey showed that trust in others remained stable for 59.8% of respondents with smaller numbers experiencing either an increase (18.3%) or decrease in trust (21.9%). This is an incredibly positive result given the negative challenge of team virtuality.

When this result is split out by leaders vs staff, leaders believed a small number (16.5%) of their staff's level of trust in others decreased and yet double the number (32%) of staff assessed their level of trust as lower due to COVID-19. This is not an unusual leadership bias however, it highlights the additional work required by leaders to move forward. Otherwise, this blissful delusion will result in low respect from staff, high conflict and loss of discretionary effort particularly when teams are working remotely.

The key behaviours which support trust in workplaces are:

1. honest communications (by a large margin),
2. care from others, and
3. transparency.

Leaders have tried to compensate for the trust lost due to team virtuality by significantly increasing the volume of video interaction with staff. This has gone some way to shine a spotlight on honesty, care and transparency. The downside to this is that it could easily become micro-management. Respondents reported being "conferenced called-out" or worse, feeling "spied on". Beyond the associated loss of trust, this has also caused the prevailing emotions of fatigue and exhaustion for many of the respondents.

Respondent commentary:

Capitalizing on the increased levels of trust and alignment among our staff as well as the increase in staff morale due to the positive feedback received from our community. Our staff have learned first hand that they can trust and rely on their leaders. **—Leader**

I think the greatest challenge is trying to establish positivity and trust looking forward, a lot of people I know have a negative outlook. **—Leader**

My boss, who already has an aggressive demeanour and a love of surveillance, started doing surprise video calls with my team at random times. I felt like I had to be at my computer all day, even though I had nothing to do, just in case she called. **—Staff**
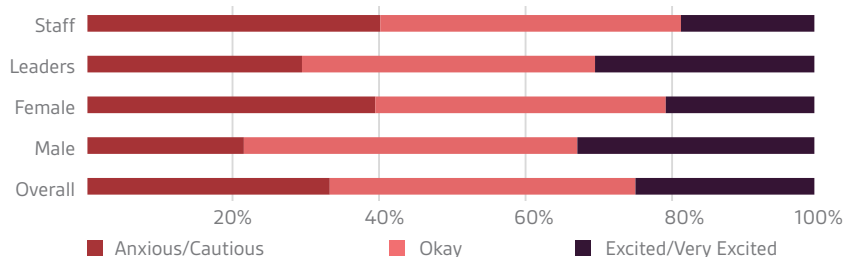
Implications for Organisations and Leaders

1. **Leadership style.** Seek to lead staff to achieve goals through purpose, values and goals, rather than tasks, to-do lists and meeting.

2. **Leadership Team Trust.** Consider measuring and building Leadership Team trust as an executive team.

3. **Trust Factors.** Be unwavering on integrity, care, compassion, purpose and steadiness as the next 3-6 months unfold, especially in September 2020 when Australian Government JobKeeper scheme is potentially withdrawn.

4. **Communication.** Deploy multi-modal communication to ensure staff are not overwhelmed by VC interaction, such as podcasts and email.

5. **Self-care.** Invest in your own resilience and well-being such that you have the perspective, purpose and energy to hold a high position of trust.

Trust Levels: Compared to pre-COVID-19

- **(ALL)** My level of trust in others is...
- **(STAFF)** My level of trust in others is...
- **(LEADERS)** My staff's level of trust in others is...
- Disconnect in perception of leaders

Australian organisations sit very high in distrustor territory (Edelman Trust Barometer — Australia Results, 2018). Research has shown that high intrateam trust positively affects performance (De Jong, Dirks, & Gillespie, 2016). The Neuroscience of Trust. Harvard Business Review. Zak, P. J. (2017, January-February). The Resilience Institute (2018). Resilience Enables Strategic Agility: Global Resilience Report.

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Insight 4. There's no place like home

The Springfox COVID-19 People Survey found that on average two-thirds of the respondents are okay or positive about Return to Work (RTW). Of this 67.0%, however, over 40% are potentially in the ambivalent position of 'okay'. This position holds across most segmentation of the data particularly around gender and leaders vs staff. In comparing the positive view to the negative view, respondents were more in favour of not RTW (33.0% compared to the excited 25.3%). The noticeable shifts were obvious when comparing gender and seniority. Females and staff were both twice as cautious/anxious as they were excited. Relatedly, twice the percentage of female respondents (26.7%) reported caution than the males (14.1%).

For many, a preference for working from home (WFH) is about risks associated with the office. Respondents reported anecdotally that WFH also provides the opportunity to continue to enjoy the flexibility experienced during COVID-19 including no office commute. A large proportion of respondents (25%) reported that new ways of flexible working was a positive opportunity in the next 3-6 months. And so, for leaders, the implication is how to implement a new way of working that allows leadership trust to be built without micro-managing staff who are in permanent or part-time WFH situations. This will require leading through purpose, outcomes and values rather than watching, monitoring and to-do lists.

How do you feel about returning to work after COVID-19

Respondent commentary:

The [COVID-19] crisis is the mother of invention proving WFH is productive, and businesses were able to pivot with technology. WFH has been normalised and we don't need big expensive offices.

New ways of doing things. Greater awareness of the enormous potential from things like employees working from home and the consequent social benefits of reducing traffic, stress, pollution etc. via these newly established work patterns.

Showing resilience and capacity to adapt to the needs of the business and to flexible working arrangements.

Revisit operating model of how I work - mixing up between being in office and working from home.

Scope for increased access to flexible working arrangements for all. Catalyst for improvements to policies and processes that have become outdated.

Implications for Organisations and Leaders

1. **Flexible Working Strategy.** Whilst there are lots of upsides to working from home there also exists the potential for burnout, lost productivity, low morale, feelings of isolation and risks to mental health. Leaders must set clear guidelines on their organisation's flexible strategy moving forward which will likely differ from the pre-COVID-19 approach. They will need to consider the balance between WFH and RTW as it relates to different roles in the organisation.

2. **Staff Boundaries.** Clearly outlined practices for staff with strong boundaries will be essential beyond the fundamentals of 'get out of your pajamas' and 'establish a routine'. The reality is that you cannot simply swap your routine from the office to home.

3. **Staff Education.** Best practice will need to be supported with staff education, detailing the impacts of WFH on our level of focus, stress, fatigue (for many this has been a big shift from office based work), emotional awareness, creativity and problem solving.

4. **Staff Resilience.** Ongoing investment and support of staff resilience and well-being will facilitate a strong performance supply chain and empower great self-efficacy and motivation to achieve goals.

5. **Compassionate Leadership Style.** When people understand the why for the organisation and team, they are empowered, held accountable to achieve and there is increased motivation to self-actualise. This shift to compassionate leadership will make staff location less relevant. For leaders, the shift to WFH will facilitate the need for reflection on how their leadership style differs from face to face and in the virtual office.

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Insight 5. Industry benchmarks — common challenges and sector opportunities

The Springfox COVID-19 People Survey looked to determine the best-practices and pain points for different industries. We found that stress increased significantly for each of the industries shown below and, unsurprisingly, in many sectors trust was also compromised. The reality of increased stress is an expected increase in burnout and a corresponding decrease in trust[1].

Education. This sector was heavily impacted by COVID-19 as they pivoted to deliver the curriculum online. They were also required to work face to face with higher levels of concern for the health and safety of themselves, their family and the children in their care. The result was that 56.9% of teacher's workloads increased substantially with a similar number (61.9%) reporting increased levels of stress (of which 22.8% had much higher stress).

There was, however, a disparity between male and female assessment with male educators twice as likely to record an increase of trust in others. Paradoxically, there was a disconnect between education leaders and teachers with leaders observing an even higher level of teacher stress (74.1%) yet lower observed decline in teacher trust (15.5%). Aligned with this is that one of the major sources of teacher stress was poor leadership.

Professional Services. Although Professional Services also experienced high levels of increased stress and reduced trust, their leaders were in tune with their staff's experience on both measures. Particular to this sector was the significant decline in positivity (40.9%, compared to average 32.1%) alongside higher workload, as well as the stress of personal financial uncertainty, and a much higher sense of caution about returning to work (39.8%).

Transport. As shown below, this sector reported the highest level of increased stress and reduction in trust. Similar to Education, leaders in this sector under-estimated staff stress and decline in trust. Particular to this sector was the significant decline in positivity (47.1%, compared to average 32.1%) matched with higher workload for 58.8% of respondents. Of this, 35.0% had a very high workload with most concerns centered upon personal and family health.

Respondent commentary:

Teachers NEVER stopped being there for our students and their families. Holidays were spent preparing for online and face to face learning. Teachers also have families, children who needed to learn at home, parents to look after, partners who may have lost their jobs. Incredibly poor leadership from management, to the point of bullying behaviour.
—Education

Optimism for personal finances after taking a significant pay cut with an indefinite timeframe.
—Professional Services

The main drawback of this over the last two months is how much work there has been, and how tiring that has been. It can be suppressive and abusive and stressful.
—Transport

Industry	Workload (% higher)	Positivity (% reduced)	Stress (% higher)		Trust (% reduced)	
			Observed by Leader	Self-report	Observed by Leader	Self-report
Overall	**50.4**	**32.1**	62.1	**54.9**	16.2	**21.9**
Banking, Finance and Insurance	**50.0**	**27.0**	60.3	**53.9**	19.1	18.0
Construction	**33.5**	13.3	40.0	**33.3**	**0.0**	14.3
Education	**56.9**	**29.9**	**74.1**	**61.9**	15.5	**23.9**
Energy	**61.6**	**38.5**	50.0	**53.9**	**0.0**	15.5
Food and Beverage	**57.9**	**52.6**	**40.0**	**57.9**	**10.0**	**31.6**
Government	**40.9**	**22.8**	**54.2**	**34.1**	20.8	18.2
Health	**32.1**	**35.8**	48.3	**48.2**	17.2	**23.2**
Professional Services	**50.0**	**40.9**	54.4	**53.4**	18.2	19.1
Transport	**58.8**	**47.1**	**88.9**	**76.5**	**11.1**	**35.3**

Key: **Very High: 40+** **High: 20—40** **Observed difference >10**

Implications for Organisations and Leaders

1. **Industry-specific opportunities.** Identify the opportunities that are particular to your industry and apply them in your leadership.

2. **Best practice.** Seek to learn from how other industries have mastered this challenge and apply into your sector.

3. **Build empathy, trust and compassion.** Seek to understand your staff better so you are able to assist with a smoother transition post-COVID-19 with empathy, trust and compassion.

[1] Zak, P. (Jan-Feb 2017). The neuroscience of trust. Harvard Business Review.

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Insight 6. The most at risk in our workplaces prove they have the 'right stuff' to last the distance

Older Workers (aged 55+ years)

Experience shines through for older workers who show that they still have it. Despite stress levels and workload increasing in response to the crisis, they reported the lowest negative impact. Those aged 55+ years had only 19.5% of their cohort report a decline in positivity, optimism, productivity and trust. When considering the past two months (April and May 2020), worry and anxiety was the dominant emotion for 17.9% of the cohort. Feelings of worry and anxiety were surpassed with feelings of gratitude (25.2%) and replaced with an overwhelming sense of hope for the future as recorded by 35.5% of the cohort.

However, one of the strongest results for this cohort was concern around returning to work (31.3%). This is to be expected given that the risk of serious illness from contracting the coronavirus increases with age[1]. Many were concerned that employers would fail to deliver on newly developed policies and practices required to ensure employee safety including social distancing in common areas and lifts, workstation set-up, cleaning and providing hand sanitising supplies.

Younger Workers (aged from 25-34 years old)

Of the younger workers that were surveyed, 60.6% reported higher stress levels which is the highest of any age group. Correspondingly this group also attributes the highest level of concern for returning to work (45.7%). The key drivers for feeling cautious and anxious are:

- The shift to working from home impacting on their ability to rebuild networks and connections
- Long term professional development opportunities reduced or lost
- Struggling to meet the needs of customers
- Finding purpose amidst organisational restructures and role redesigns and the implications to financial insecurity

Gender Comparison

During April and May 2020, worry and anxiety were reported as the prevailing emotion by 21.7% of participants. We found that females experienced twice the levels of worry and anxiety of males. Correspondingly, expressions of loneliness were more common for female respondents who reported six times the level of loneliness to men. The experience of stress also illustrated differences by gender, with females reporting twice the level of stress than males.

These findings should not imply that women are less capable than males. The pressure placed on individuals and families due to concerns of financial certainty and lack of job security, the blurring of boundaries between home and work, home schooling and caring for children were all disproportionately weighted to female respondents.

Respondent commentary:

To make the best of a difficult situation by leading with purpose, clarity and optimism, and therefore helping staff to navigate the complexities of working in the COVID era while focussing on what is most important...
—Over-55yo

Implications for Organisations and Leaders

1. **Safety.** Ensuring safety concerns of older workers are addressed and actioned will reap robust, strong and resilient employees who are capable of responding well to a crisis.

2. **Compassionate leadership.** Providing clear, demonstrable support and connection will need to be at the forefront of leadership skills to bring younger staff along.

3. **Patience.** Whilst it is expected that levels of anxiety and worry would be high during phase one of the pandemic, it is important to recognise that it will take time for people to recover from the trauma associated with this crisis. As stated by AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, it will be necessary to help people to transition to a new normal with the ability to offer professional support[3].

4. **Assistance.** For many organisations there will be a greater need to utilise the services of their EAP (Employee Assistance Program) provider as well as specialists in areas of mental health, resilience and well-being.

5. **Concern.** Mental health concerns are warranted given the majority of mental ill health disorders present before the age of 25 years, alarmingly only 19-35 percent will seek professional help[4].

[1] Australian Government, Department of Health, (May 2020).
[2] The Resilience Institute (2018). Resilience Enables Strategic Agility: Global Resilience Report.
[3] Australian Medical Association. (May, 2020). Managing Mental Health As We Emerge From COVID-19 Threat.
[4] World Health Organisation. (2011). World Health Statistics 2011.

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In Closing...

As the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison said, "this is the hardest time for Australia since the Great Depression". This time of heightened uncertainty has caused many to experience a profound fear and anxiety about the future. This brings with it a desire for information about how to transition to a new normal. It is important that the source of this information is robust, evidence-based and provides practical strategies to empower action. Action, not for action's sake, but action that facilitates hope, purpose and connection.

The results of our COVID-19 People Survey illustrate the need for leaders and organisations to be agile in their response to changes in the way we work and live. Adaptation in response to adversity and challenge results in growth and is the very essence of resilience and the foundation to sustainable high performance.

At the forefront of any change, it is important that leaders remember that organisations are made up for and by individuals. In order to thrive, staff need trust, connection, steadiness, integrity and purpose to be present in their leaders. The practical application will be demonstrated by how organisations listen to the concerns of staff and embrace their differing needs, and acknowledge the diversity presented by age and gender. Success will mean that a better balance is achieved between working from home and the office, with clearly defined 'best practice' modelled and communicated to all levels of the organisation.

We hope that you have found the information contained in this report informative, validating your own experience and providing insight into how to operationalise the data presented. We welcome the opportunity to discuss these results with you to further enhance the learnings contained in this report.

Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees the others.

— Aristotle

Peta Sigley
Springfox Chief Knowledge Officer