

THE EVOLVING WORKPLACE

How experience has become the
new currency of employee satisfaction



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A BRAVE NEW WORLD



At the beginning of this decade, the world changed abruptly. Reacting to an unprecedented event in the form of a global pandemic, in just a few short weeks Australian offices shifted gears to adopt new technologies and ways of working, restructuring operations around digital services that would enable their workforce to operate remotely.

For many of the affected employees, it felt more convenient by some measures to work from home. Rolling out of bed to start the workday without fighting traffic is an appealing thought, and on a cold morning, the comfort of your own home can be an inviting place to get stuck into work with a hot beverage.

But just as sporting events lost the vibrant atmosphere that made them so special, when the office crowd vanished, we soon discovered that teleconferencing and remote work is a poor imitation of working in a real workspace. Many discovered that it was harder to focus with the countless distractions at home, while days and nights blurred together during long stretches in lockdown. The prolonged lack of in-person interaction could leave some workers feeling less structured, demotivated, and isolated from colleagues.

On the flip side, some people reported a net positive effect, feeling that remote work allowed for longer stretches of deep work and more flexibility to choose when they worked. More broadly the sentiment has been that remote work is "good for solo work, bad for collaboration", and this is helpful to know going forward as we restructure places and processes to empower and support workers.

Before the pandemic, conventional wisdom in management thinking said that if you gave employees too much flexibility, they would choose to work from home indefinitely. The world's largest ever experiment with remote work has proven otherwise.

Offices now have access to a wealth of data about remote-work-at-scale, with deeper insights into where efficiencies were gained and how managers can better embrace a decentralised workforce. Insights in this area are contributing to new hybrid ways of working that offer the best of both worlds. Letting workers select which tasks they can tackle remotely and which are more suited to the office builds resilience and flexibility into the way their teams work.

In this new hybrid model, the office evolves from a place where employees show up every day to grind through their work hours, to a purposeful hub of collaboration built for supporting human interactions in broader, richer, more productive ways.





A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

While life begins to normalise again in Australia—despite more than a few adjustments—the workplace, and our concept of it, has had to adapt to keep pace with an ever-changing business landscape amidst the larger societal shift.

As the office environment evolves around us to accommodate new hybrid ways of working, returning employees have come to appreciate the collaborative benefits and sense of stability a modern workspace can offer.

With time away, and the perspective it affords, we see that there are certain experiences you can only have in the office, with colleagues close enough to communicate at high bandwidth. Collaboration occurs organically, free of barriers, dropouts, and unrelated distractions.

As we return to our offices, workforces are generally more interested in enhancing the way they collaborate, pulling together to shape the collective employee experience and contribute to its DNA.

The physical office space continues its evolution as part of that broader cultural uplift, growing from a place of just “work”—with all of the cognitive baggage that term brings—to a truly collaborative place that people value.

In the new experience economy of the workplace, the purpose of the office has evolved—it is now a space that facilitates richer interface between colleagues, enabling a holistic and engrained business-social culture.

Reshaping the workplace experience around human interactions and optimal ways of working means achieving a fluid work/life balance within the office walls, by redesigning not only the space, but the ways we use it from the ground up.

Human-centric work design – featuring flexible work experiences, intentional collaboration opportunities and empathetic management – can increase employee performance by as much as **54%**⁽¹⁾

55%
of employees say that whether or not they can work flexibly will impact if they stay⁽¹⁾

55% of employees are high performers when providing radical flexibility over where, when and whom they work vs 36% of those working 9-5 in the office⁽¹⁾

(1) Swetha Venkataramani of Gartner Research, May 2021



GETTING BACK TO THE OFFICE

As we establish new routines of leaving home to work and adjust to the new normal, there can understandably be some trepidation around travel and building access, bike and car parking, plus logistical issues to consider in social distancing and room occupancy limits. Having a comprehensive return-to-office readiness plan is a good first step to ensure employees hit the ground running.

For office managers, new distancing and occupancy guidelines are more than just a logistical challenge; it is also a unique communications challenge.

Staff education and socialising expectations early are the best ways to avoid confusion somewhere down the line. Thought leaders in the communications space recommend the “rule of three” when providing necessary information to busy and overwhelmed staff—three formats, at three times, in three places they’re most likely to absorb it—e.g. an email, a wall poster, and a verbal announcement.

Buildings may still be running with minimal crew, onsite kiosks or shops could be yet to reopen, and volunteer fire wardens might not have returned to full time work. Confirming swipe card access for teams to all necessary areas, being across lighting and climate controls, checking that kitchen consumables like coffee and tea are restocked, and that areas in use have been cleaned will go a long way to ensuring the baseline “normal” employee experience.

Larger organisations have the luxury of providing onsite parking or subsidising employee travel through discount programs, but there are ways that companies of any size can help their people return to the office in comfort and safety.

With more than 3 million Australians riding bikes in a typical week⁽²⁾, providing a safe indoor location for employees who ride to work to store their bike, as well as changeroom and locker facilities ticks more than a few boxes for employee attraction, satisfaction, retention and safety.

Flexible hours go both ways, and that might mean employees staying at work later than normal. When agreeing to work outside their usually scheduled hours, providing employees with a taxi or ride share voucher is a great way for businesses to ensure their people feel valued, and of course arrive home safely.

(2) Biennial National Cycling Participation Survey
(bike stat—<https://austroads.com.au/latest-news/3.43-million-australians-ride-bikes-for-transport-or-recreation-each-week>)

GETTING BACK TO THE OFFICE CONTINUED

There are plenty of smaller, more manageable perks that can help make coming to the office a rewarding experience. Even something as simple as stocking a fridge with free drinks or providing a good coffee machine that's easy to use will telegraph employee value in its attention to detail.

Returning to work on premises after so long is a big deal. Stocking a work kitchen or breakout room with the best amenities and supplies helps to create a celebratory atmosphere that feels a little bit special.

Some teams stock beer and wine for after-work drinks to reward members or simply celebrate at the end of the week. Providing an additional selection of premium label tea and coffee includes team members in the celebration who choose not to drink alcohol. It's also a perk everyone can enjoy throughout the whole week.



The Best Brands

Gourmet flavours and favourite aromas, give your team the brands they love without taking to the streets for supplies.



Easy to Make

Your team shouldn't need their barista license to make a great cup, explore coffee machines as a high quality one-button solution.



Never Run Out

Once your team are accustomed to getting world class beverages onsite, the biggest risk is running out. Always order plenty!





WORKING TOGETHER

Our return to shared spaces is driven by a desire to collaborate, free of barriers. Modern office design is largely based around empowering staff to assemble quickly in small groups while utilising the environment and amenities to enhance that collaborative process.

In the modern office this might happen in a formal meeting room, or informal breakout spaces like kitchen tables, a cafeteria, or even the trademark watercooler. The best-designed collaborative spaces make it easy for teams to quickly gather in a workspace to concentrate on the task at hand, while keeping noise and distractions out of their way.

A common design feature in modern offices are small nooks that anyone can use without booking, usually with large whiteboard space and supplies for teams to quickly assemble and visualise ideas before departing to work on their own pieces of the puzzle.

This general approach to human-first design accommodates more productive and meaningful collaborative experiences, without being stymied by the need to plan ahead. It's a great example of how removing some of the rigidity can multiply productivity for more agile use cases.

WORKING COMFORTABLY

Workspaces at home aren't optimised for ergonomics or productivity. Chronic pain is responsible for an estimated 9.9 million absent days from work each year in Australia, which costs the economy more than \$1.4 billion per annum.

Many returning employees now welcome the chance to break out of work-from-home routines and return to a more comfortable environment designed for productivity and ergonomics, even if only for a few days a week.

Creating an ergonomic environment suitable for all types of work, people and scenarios is a challenge for any office manager. Fortunately for anyone new to the philosophy, a lot of research and expert thinking has gone into establishing best practices to minimise the risk of sitting for long periods while maximising comfort, communication, and focus.

Making sure people have an ergonomic rated chair, a desk that can switch between sitting and standing, and being able to provide the option for more human-friendly peripherals such as a ball mouse, wrist rest or text-to-voice software sets a good baseline for individual wellbeing.

Advice about how often to take breaks, eye exercises, and stretches for back, arms, neck and shoulders should be visible on the walls and front of mind in regular discussions around maintaining a healthy approach to office work.

Companies with staff who can't leave their desk for long periods may invest in additional perks like at-desk massage, longer break times, and places to meditate, pray or unwind. Even small comforts can feel like an oasis in the desert when people are tied to their desk by a project.

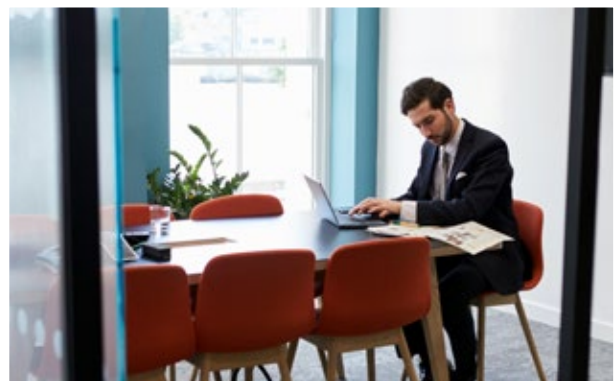




DEEP FOCUS

Working comfortably is as much mental as it is physical. An open plan office lets us keep the lines of communication open, but when deep work needs to happen, it can be difficult to tune out the distracting buzz of a busy workplace.

Amidst the constant flow of calls, messages, small talk and work talk, it's important to have an established way to create a silent space to work alone.



Many leading organisations have integrated single-occupancy meeting rooms and quiet work spaces into their meeting room booking system to allow for easier management and fair allocation. This goes hand in hand with an agreed-upon way for people to politely let colleagues know that they'd prefer not to be disturbed—this might be the 'away' mode on the team's preferred messenger app, or something more traditional like a "Do Not Disturb" sign at their desk.

Employees returning to their work routine will most likely be splitting time between the office and home, necessitating infrastructure that supports hybrid work arrangements. It's important that support items like laptop docks and screens be available and configured for ease of access, enabling a seamless move from remote to on-premises and back. Usability removes friction and multiplies productivity during busy times.

BREAKING OUT

Providing a comfortable place for people to relax, chat, and enjoy meals together is at the core of any functional breakout room. A great breakout space is stocked with plenty of tables and chairs, comfortable places to sit and read or watch TV, the best tea and coffee, and of course a coffee machine, kettle, toaster, microwave and sandwich press.

A well-stocked pantry and plenty of plates, cups and cutlery can help your workers fuel up and refresh themselves onsite more easily with prepared meals. People's culinary needs will vary, and it helps to crowdsource additional suggestions for items your employees wish to see included.

Making breakout areas feel welcoming and comfortable encourages people to be at ease in the office, opening space for informal conversations, and letting workplace culture grow more organically. Fostering an environment for social collaboration establishes new work relationships, deepens existing ones, and facilitates richer conversations that might otherwise not have a business reason to occur.

Breakout spaces are conducive to impromptu meetings and are often used by teams to conduct informal chats about next steps, brainstorm, or get on the same page quickly. Groups can overflow to kitchen and breakout spaces when meeting rooms aren't available, adding value to the areas as multipurpose collaborative hubs.

Keeping employees satisfied with amenities onsite also prevents them from having to wander out into the streets in search of small comforts like good coffee, to keep them happy and sharp through a day at work. Productivity is maximised in a subtle but measurable way when all the pieces come together for a better business-social experience.

Elements of a productive workplace



Space

Space to collaborate (meeting rooms, break room, cafeteria) space to mingle (water coolers, tables, kitchen), and space to work (workstations, meeting rooms, teleconferencing stations)



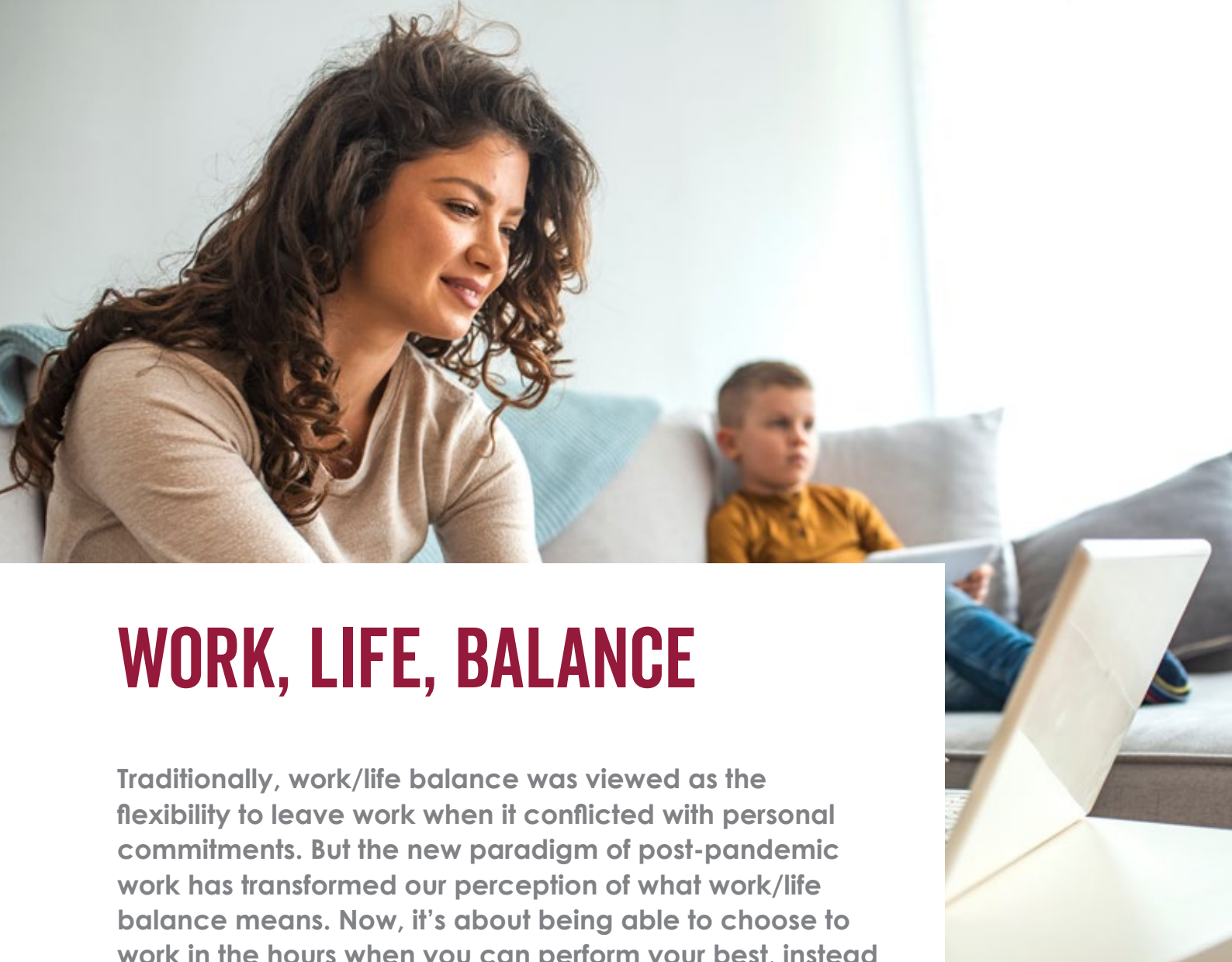
Amenities

Food, beverages, lockers, change rooms and bathrooms, comfortable places to sit, entertainment. Highlighting comfort options such as couches and beanbag chairs, laptop and phone chargers, ice cold and boiling water, fridge and a good coffee machine that's easy to use, with the best coffee beans.



Convenience

Easy access, flexible hours around work patterns, automation around access and booking systems.



WORK, LIFE, BALANCE

Traditionally, work/life balance was viewed as the flexibility to leave work when it conflicted with personal commitments. But the new paradigm of post-pandemic work has transformed our perception of what work/life balance means. Now, it's about being able to choose to work in the hours when you can perform your best, instead of having to conform to the traditional 9-5 workday.

Employees who have had to adapt to home schooling or other commitments during lockdowns in some cases have spread their workday across a 16 hour period, remaining agile during the day as needed then putting in longer stretches of deep work at night. Some have even found that this is the preferred way to work, discovering newfound productivity in the schedule.

Amongst the many mental health stressors that have emerged worldwide during the pandemic is the risk of burnout from overwork. Being stuck at home without anywhere to go left a lot of people feeling like there's not a lot else to do all day but work. Without the clear distinction of the office as a space you go to work, and home as the designated place to relax, boundaries blur easily, making it impossible to 'disconnect' from work.

As we return to the office, socialising strategies and processes designed to make sure people leave work on time without overdoing it will help to ensure work/life balance and wellbeing. Managing the flood of meetings and tasks as we all readjust to life in the slightly faster lane will help mitigate the risk of fatigue and burnout.

Further optimising breakout spaces for work and relaxation, creating areas for exercise and mental health—meditation, praying, unwinding—and maintaining the option of flexible work hours, along with new hybrid models of working and social support for those still experiencing change fatigue, all help to shore up employee happiness, reduce burnout risk and drive overall productivity.

EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE IS A LEVER FOR GROWTH

When we talk about experience being a currency, this refers to providing an incentive for people to come to work that's not just monetary. It's a designed experience that supports employee attraction, satisfaction, and retention through less tangible, but equally important, benefits.

A productive and functional workplace can be the differentiator to attract talent in a world full of competing remote work opportunities, while health and well-being initiatives support employee retention. In a world where output wins the race, rather than hours spent at a desk, a happier more stable workforce makes a more productive business.

"Employee well-being—the total health and wellness of your workers—is the source on which they draw. To thrive, you must go beyond the benefits your organisation has historically provided."

"Take Employee Wellness Beyond Benefits", Forrester 2021

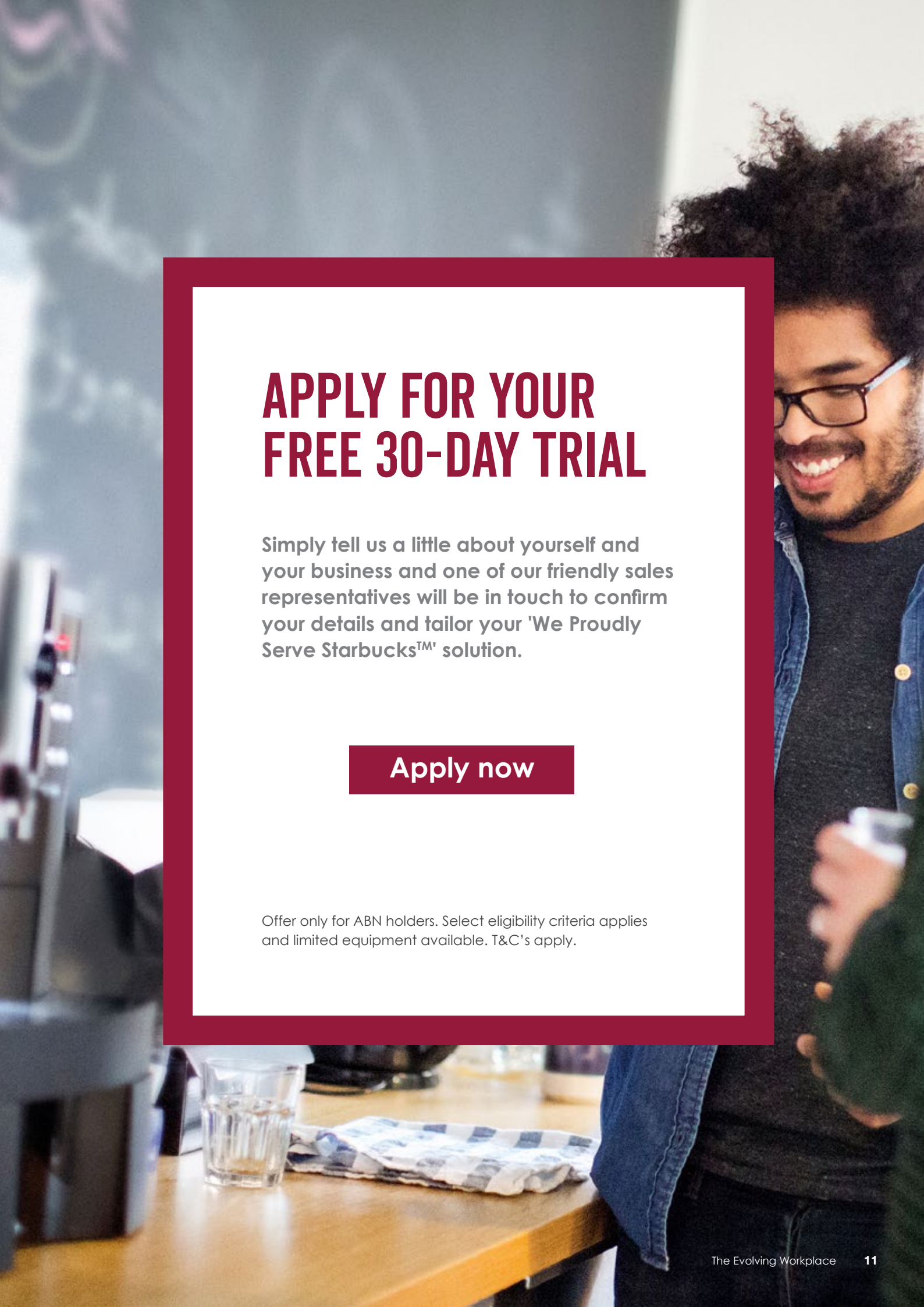
Only 29% of functional leaders reported to Gartner that they have all the talent they need to meet current performance requirements, and just 23% of HR leaders believe most employees will continue working in their current organisation after the pandemic ends.

In a competitive market with a shrinking labour pool, it's important to optimise every element of the employee experience to recruit and retain top-shelf talent. Niche perks and meaningful benefits are highly valued by employees. Setting them up for success at work can go a long way to help you create a more compelling employee value proposition.



Barista vs Machine

The dilemma many procurement managers face when choosing the right coffee machine is finding the sweet spot between effort and quality. A full barista setup is great with freshly ground beans for a superior taste, but the time taken for each cup can grind productivity to a halt. Busy office kitchens are where a pod machine may best serve, condensing the coffee-making process into an easy push-button process, saving time without giving up that superior fresh roasted taste.



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