Futurecasting Cape Town

Exploring the changing nature of work in Cape Town: Towards a post-pandemic environment

What is Futurecasting?

Futurecasting is an approach that aims to anticipate the changes in a sector or in society in the next 10-15 years. It incorporates past patterns and trends, combines current insights, and includes futures thinking to help shape the future and mitigate risks. It is an approach that can applied to business, a specific sector, or a city.

The EDP and the City of Cape Town (CCT) are working together on a series of Futurecasting events, with the aim of providing an opportunity for all sectors to contribute to a shared, inclusive future in the city. These events are one of the key deliverables of the CCT Resilience Strategy, which is being driven by the Resilience Department, and which aim to lead to a more general participation in urbanisation solutions, access to shared knowledge and expertise, and the ability to tap into the economic opportunities inherent in rapid urbanisation and technological transformation.

Exploring the changing nature of work in Cape Town: towards a post-pandemic environment

The first Futurecasting event was held on 15 March 2021, and focused on exploring the how the nature of work in Cape Town has changed, and will change, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The EDP and the City of Cape Town were joined by representatives from the Western Cape Government, Provincial Conservation, academia, local government, international organisations, NGOs and NPOs, parastatals, and the private sector.

Four speakers shared their ideas, insights, and experiences on the subject of the future of work in Cape Town. The speakers addressed how the pandemic caused their companies and organisations to shift their modes of work, and what the expected legacies of these approaches would be as everyone moves towards a post-pandemic world.

The panellists consisted of Zukiswa Mandlana, Director: Organisational Effectiveness & Innovation Department, City of Cape Town; Pumeza

Mphuthi, General Manager: Enterprise Applications, Distell; Ann Lamont, Founder: DiiVe/SOLVE@, Waterfront; and Shelagh Goodwin, General manager: Manager Human Resources, Media24. The panel was moderated by Andrew Boraine, the CEO of the EDP.

Zukiswa Mandlana
Director:
Organisational Effectiveness
& Innovation Department,
City of Cape Town

Ann Lamont
Founder: DiiVe/SOLVE@
Waterfront

Pumeza Mphuthi
General Manager: Enterprise
Applications, Distell

Shelagh Goodwin
General manager: Manager
Human Resources, Media24

Why explore the changing nature of work?

The idea of working from home has long been mulled in the public and private sectors, ever since the 1970's oil crisis. There has been some experimentation over the years, but the idea could not gain enough traction for full-scale implementation. Approaches to remote working were curtailed by incompatible and conflicting views on critical issues such as trust, productivity, connection, problem solving and innovation.

A few large businesses in Cape Town implemented working from home and hot-desking programmes before the pandemic. These were aimed at understanding how to reshape office culture as well as improve work-life balance, but also at addressing traffic congestion. Some sectors of the economy called for staggered work hours to mitigate the impacts of load shedding and rail infrastructure destruction. Overall, there was enough motivation to change the nature of work; however, finding an approach or mechanism to implement any proposed academic solution was out of reach. The idea of city-wide adoption of a work-from-home approach was unthinkable a year ago.

The pandemic has forced significant changes in the way society functions. The academic debates of how to effect social and behavioural change in work and commuting became moot. The implementation of working from home solutions became a global experiment in swift response, agility, adaptation, and innovation.

At the start of the pandemic many feared that productivity would slow down and negatively impact business even further. However, globally, this

fear has proven to be unfounded. Companies are seeing the value of allowing employees to work from home, with some big tech companies implementing it permanently. The technical and mechanical aspects were successful, and the issues of trust, productivity, connectivity, problem-solving and innovation were not major hurdles. All companies adopted some measure of digital transformation to ensure they survived the initial lockdown. Research showed that productivity increased and new approaches to innovation and problem-solving flourished.

The working from home approach still requires physical interaction, however, and has led to an increased interest in the use of communal office space. Having access to an office is important for physical engagement as well the physiological connection to a group. For many people, this physical engagement is an important aspect of creativity, problem-solving, and innovation.

Not all sectors can adopt a work-from-home approach. This approach favours the knowledge-based sectors and sub-sectors. In addition, there are concerns about the impact of having a distributed workforce, data security, displacement of operating costs, mentoring, performance evaluation, and a general sense of team cohesion.

The pandemic has highlighted and accelerated the need to think about working from home and, by implication, how we address challenges such as congestion, land-use planning and access to education. The pandemic has given employers and employees a unique opportunity to enter into a dialogue, not only on the way we work, but on the values we seek to frame for our new approaches - mutual accountability, output quality, reliability, transparency, adaptability, commitment to on-going learning, personal connectivity, and work-life balance.

The overall consensus is that working from home will form a permanent part of the way we work in future. We need to proactively design and develop new business and operational models that could help frame a sustainable and balanced approach to the way we work. The shift to a work-from-home model has had a profound impact on businesses in the Cape Town CBD, property rentals and investment in property development.

In Cape Town, the pandemic has therefore raised many questions on the nature of work, how aligned the private and public sectors are, the City's ability to be resilient to shocks and stressors, its focus for areas of economic and physical growth, and the pathway to greater sustainability and socio-economic equity.

Futurecasting workshop insights

Acceleration of the change journey: Many companies were on change journeys before the pandemic and were looking for new ways to work. The pandemic accelerated and disrupted the change processes. This raises the question of how we respond to disruption when we have rigid processes that do not easily allow for change.

The need for a structured approach to enable flexibility: Flexibility and adaptiveness also need structure to allow effective responses to challenges.

The need for awareness that the work-from-home model is not possible for all due to inequality and job roles: Systemic inequality is very evident, as many people cannot work from home due to issues such as a lack of home space, internet connectivity issues, loadshedding, connection to the power grid and social support. Further, people may not feel safe carrying valuable technology to and from offices, and some jobs (in service industries, for example) simply do not allow people to work from.

Working from home impacts on stress and mental health: The social impact of working from home becomes more pronounced when the lines between work and personal life becomes blurred. Domestic demands become woven into professional demands, adding additional stress during the workday. We need to acknowledge one of the outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic is also the mental health pandemic that will become more visible in the years to come.

Increased visibility of the demands made on women in both the domestic and professional workspaces: The pandemic has created the space for gender role reversal, with men experiencing the demands of the total domestic workload, many for the first time.

The need for adaptive leadership: The importance of visible leadership and shared values during a time of crises cannot be more underscored.

The complexity of work relationships and learning: We have learnt that online engagements cannot replace meaningful contact in the workplace. Online engagements can be efficient, but are clinical. People may want to return to work simply to reconnect with colleagues.

The need for an inclusive approach to the design of online tools: Online tools are not optimal for people with disabilities. As an example, not all video conferencing tools allow for closed capturing to support people with hearing difficulties. Employers have a duty to ensure an inclusive approach in a distributed work environment.

The need to consider the costs of operating from home: Loadshedding complicates the approach of working from home. This raised the issue of where the responsibility lies for the cost of work-related infrastructure in the

home. As an example, should a staff member or the company pay for a UPS to ensure an uninterrupted workday?

The need to consider and plan for the impact of the global trend of working from home on city centres, buildings, and businesses: Companies no longer operating full-time in the City centre has a systemic impact on other businesses such as restaurants, parking garages and street traders. Further, the drop in demand for office space can also have an impact on the structure and form of the CBD. One example is that the increased need for shared office space can impact the design of new buildings. This poses a strategic question on the future planning of Cape Town: do we continue to support centralised business, commercial and industrial nodes, and potentially greater traffic congestion or do we encourage a decentralised approach? The City of Cape Town has started the conversation about the future of the CBD and the surrounding areas.

The need to manage the effect of continuous online meetings: Remote working has increased the number and duration of online meetings, resulting in longer workdays and a lack of separation between personal and professional lives.

What next?

The EDP will continue to work with public sector and private sector stakeholders to explore ways to share information, insights, and effective work models to support growth and development, as well as build conversations that lead to collaborative action and collective impact.

The insights gained from this Futurecasting webinar are useful for public sector officials and private sector stakeholders faced with finding solutions to the challenges raised by the global trend of working from home; challenges such as the loss of jobs in the property rental and construction sectors, loss of jobs and support to the hospitality sector and related service sectors. The EDP will share the information from this webinar with WCG officials who were unable to attend the Futurecasting webinar.

In addition, the link to the webinar on YouTube is available here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7dN3UYrzGc

For further information or questions about this report, contact Selwyn Willoughby of the Western Cape Economic Development Partnership (EDP) at Selwyn@wcedp.co.za.