

# How COVID-19 is disrupting and transforming the future of sports

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The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted Australian sport, but accelerated long term trends that are fundamentally changing how sport is consumed, delivered and managed, suggest researchers of a new report

from Swinburne University of Technology, Deakin University and sports thought leadership summit, SportNXT.

The researchers analyzed the experiences and perspectives of senior sport executives from professional teams, sport governing bodies and [advocacy groups](#) to assess the impact of the pandemic on [business practices](#) and the key lessons learnt.

Three key areas stood out as to how business practices were disrupted, which should inform how sport is managed and delivered going forward in Australia and around the world: [digital transformation](#), new styles of [leadership](#) and collaboration.

## **Embracing digital transformation**

Sport organizations proactively and quickly embraced the role of technology during the pandemic, finding new ways to reimagine [digital content](#) and augment broadcast delivery.

Director of Swinburne's Sport Innovation Research Group Associate Professor Adam Karg, says digital practices, once a strategic competitive advantage, became 'essential for survival.'

"The pandemic provided new ways for athletes and coaches to work together, and we found new ways to watch sport, undertake new rituals, and interact with teams and athletes."

Sponsors and broadcasters also found new ways to engage fans via digital media and at home experiences, including digital crowds, fake crowd noises, showing images of fans in their lounge rooms as part of broadcasts, new apps, new camera angles, and increased social media content.

Associate Professor Karg says the most critical outcome has been the way organizations were able to rapidly embed digital offerings so rapidly, think flexibly and take risks.

"Going forward, we would expect to see far greater capacity from sport organizations to utilize data practices and technologies, including blockchain and artificial intelligence to continue to provide better experiences for fans and truly lead sport into the next era."

## **New styles of leadership and collaboration**

The collective uncertainty created by COVID-19 also drove new leadership practices and previously unseen levels of collaboration in an industry known for hierarchies and silos, which advanced the efficiency and effectiveness of the whole sport industry.

Deakin Business School's Dr. Jonathan Robertson says: "We found the successful leaders were agile and innovative, not hesitant to create new norms, support decision makers in new ways, and adjust quickly to the challenges of remote leadership.

"Many sport organizations responded by embracing new ways to work and communicate, reimagine their products and processes and break out of entrenched views of leadership styles."

Dr. Robertson says one clear tool to overcome this uncertainty was collaboration.

"Leaders and organizations communicated with each other more, shared information, formed and strengthened partnerships. Continuation of these practices opens the door to central systems and procedures, and for the right kind of partners and provided to thrive in the sport ecosystem."

## The future of sport

Dr. Robertson says the sport industry will continue to be asked to do more with less, as they begin 2021 with few staff and less resources.

"The gradual return of participants and spectators, alongside vaccination programs and the reopening of borders does provide opportunities to rebuild," he says.

"However, the learnings from the pandemic about the importance of new leadership practices, collaboration and reimagined digital practices are critical for the ongoing productivity and success of the sport industry."

One concern from the researchers is what might be left behind or 'lost' as a result of working with less resources, including that organizations may be forced to focus less on social responsibility and leadership in areas such as education, equality, diversity and community benefit.

"Certainly, this is just the start of a challenging time for sport, and one that might either be seen as a disruption on the way back to 'business as usual' or an accelerator for new leadership, better collaboration and a more digital and efficient future," says Associate Professor Karg.

"As players and spectators return to sport, the lessons learnt from leaders in the Australian sport sector have domestic and international relevance about how to manage through and recover from the pandemic."

**More information:** The full report is available online:  
[sportnxt.org/media/mehltzvp/digital-sport-industry-final.pdf](https://sportnxt.org/media/mehltzvp/digital-sport-industry-final.pdf)

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