

A brave new world without a map for employers—are ad-hoc responses the best way forward?

February 23 2023, by Jennifer Scott, Beth Tootell, Kazunori Kobayashi and Wayne Macpherson



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Increasing demands from staff for flexibility in the post-COVID era

have left small businesses in New Zealand scrambling.

[Our earlier research](#)

[found two-thirds of workers were asking for more flexibility in where and when they work.](#)

[We have found employers are, indeed, reacting to](#)

[employee](#) needs with creative solutions. However, sometimes these are too spontaneous and possibly short-sighted in nature. Additionally, despite the demands from employees being widespread, employer responses have remained ad-hoc and informal.

Owners and managers want to do right by their staff, but are unsure if their actions are good for their [business](#), both now and in the long term. They need (and are seeking) support in making [good decisions](#) and assessing the impact of their new initiatives.

Learning to adapt

As part of our [ongoing research and engagement with NZ businesses](#), we have developed ten [case studies](#) to explore employer actions as they respond to employee desires in a post-COVID era.

Key themes are apparent across [small businesses](#). Businesses have been focusing on "people power" (recruiting and retaining staff), understanding and testing out different business models (organizing and managing people and their [work schedules](#) differently) and responding to individual values (adapting [company](#) strategy and tailoring recruitment to priorities of the next generation of employees).

However, [small businesses dominate the NZ landscape](#). This means

there's a large number of employers each trying to respond to demands coming from within their own organization. A lot of different decisions are being made to respond to employee demands, but the decisions ultimately impact only a few people at a time.

In each of our ten cases, the decisions and actions were different and diverse. They were creative and embraced "Kiwi ingenuity", but they were very specific to individual companies and their employees.

For example, one company that relies entirely on [solar power](#) allowed some of its line workers to start their shifts before sunrise, much earlier than other staff. This was in response to their personal schedules, even though the company had to pay for additional electricity.

Another company now only works Monday to Thursday to give employees a weekday to themselves for enhanced family, personal or other employment activities. This is a policy for all staff and the company refuses to make exceptions for Friday or weekend work, no matter the potential customer.

We found an [employer](#) who worked one-on-one with employees to understand their personal situations. One example here was the owner helping an employee into their first home by providing [financial help](#).

Finally, a company implemented both policy changes for all shift workers and self-management for administrative staff. The shift workers moved to four 10-hour days, while the administrative staff organized a roster for working from home while maintaining an on-site presence.

Implementing an holistic approach

In all cases, the importance of caring for employees in an holistic manner was evident, but the needs of each employee and the practices in

each company differed.

The desired benefit for each situation might be different. In some instances work-related outcomes were sought after. These included reducing turnover and absenteeism, increasing productivity, and enhancing job satisfaction.

Other times, non-work-related outcomes were the focus, such as enhanced personal well-being, personal growth and increased family and life satisfaction.

We observed that, while employers were focused on different possible solutions for their employees, their responses were often put into action quickly and focused on achieving short-term results. These were often at the expense of exploring longer-term benefits to both employees and the company.

The future of running a business

So what does this mean for small businesses in New Zealand going forward? Kiwi ingenuity is flourishing. Businesses are looking for a number of different, creative ways to respond to their employers. However, it is taking time away from core business operations, and it is not always organized for clear outcomes.

Because each company is responding to its own unique challenges and own employees' needs, the awareness of possible solutions can remain quite narrow. With each business doing its own thing, understanding and assessing the impacts or harnessing benefits from the initiatives become increasingly difficult.

Acknowledging the challenges for small businesses, which are often limited by resources, perspectives, experience and expertise, we suggest

a more collaborative approach or sharing of practice is needed.

As employers navigate their own strategic decision-making about how and when to implement new initiatives, they could leverage the experiences and perspectives of other organizations.

We do not want to diminish the ingenuity in business responses, but take what others have learned and share across the NZ small business environment. This can help raise awareness of changes that have been tried by other businesses and how they worked.

When small businesses can learn from each other (what works, what doesn't, and what changes could improve similar initiatives in different firms) they can leverage a broader understanding that will benefit their company and employees in economic and non-economic ways.

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