

# Rebuilding the post-pandemic economy

The Covid-19 pandemic is set to realign the world's social and economic structure, and fundamentally change the way people work and interact, personally and professionally.



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While the current social measures in place around the world are aimed at stemming the spread of the virus, there's a good chance that there'll be a residual adoption of elements of them as humanity adapts to 'the new normal' – because the world will fundamentally never be the same again.

Hundreds of thousands of people are set to lose their jobs as economies tank – but the optimistic view is that that's an opportunity for the future, rather than the very real catastrophe it feels like at the moment – particularly in the SME space.

It's a rare economic situation that sees major corporations struggling as much as SME's, and the upshot is that people may have to create employment opportunities for themselves and others, rather than returning to the jobs they had before the pandemic.

“The world will need more entrepreneurs, whose smart ideas can help rebuild economies, create employment opportunities

and re-establish – and rebuild – the livelihoods of entire communities,” says Charmaine Lambert of Absa’s WorkInProgress.

### **Time saving**

Many have glibly asked ‘could that meeting have been an email?’ but the reality is that the working world is rapidly discovering the benefits of finding new ways to address business needs, that rely less on physical face-to-face interactions.

Catching up as a group on a Zoom meeting is important, but cutting out a commute, the niceties of the preamble to a meeting and repeating yourself for the guy who stumbled in five minutes late has made meetings more efficient and to-the-point.

Meetings won’t go away, because humans are collaborative. It takes one person to have a great idea, but it takes a team to realise and implement it – which is why co-working spaces will remain an important part of life for those taking up the challenge of employing themselves, and others by forming SME’s, in the new world order.

### **Decentralising operations**

The shift in ways of working has also shown that decentralisation is possible – something that may become a necessity in the future. All those shiny offices in global centres are expensive line items on the annual budget, and since budgets are going to be way tighter – if not non-existent – in future, even SME’s may have to make peace with the fact that not everyone needs to share a space. And knowing what we know now about how easy it is to spread viruses in close-contact working spaces, there’s a convincing health argument for decentralisation, too.

If an SME team is driven enough, nobody will have to worry about clock-watching or ensuring that people are doing their jobs by having a manager stalking the halls and peering over cubicle walls. There will be essential functions that rely on being physically present in a space – but there’s no reason that different functions of a business can’t be split across different spaces, cities or even time zones to maximise efficiency and save costs.

And with the flexibility of working time now becoming an option across many industries, that demand will need to be catered for by SME’s and other employers, in the future.

### **Greener business**

Building more efficient spaces has been an important global trend over the past few years as companies realise the impact their business has on the planet. What about the environmental cost of getting people to that office every day, and of business travel?

Cutting out the commute for the global workforce has already had a noticeable effect on the environment – fake-news dolphins in the canals of Venice, aside – so now that we’ve proven it’s possible to decentralise or work remotely, why not continue that?

Carbon monoxide emissions in New York have been slashed by 50% over the past few weeks – mostly on the back of reduced road traffic - and analysis by climate website Carbon Brief indicates that the shutdown in China has resulted in a 25% drop in energy use and emissions over a two week period at the height of the pandemic there, which is set to lead to an overall drop of 1% in the country’s carbon emissions for 2020.

As the industry ramps up again around the world, emissions will rise once more, but those numbers do illustrate the significant impact a reduction in worker commuting, can have for the planet.

### **4IR creating opportunities**

While there's plenty of concern that the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is going to cost millions of jobs, it's also set to deliver millions of opportunities and plenty of efficiencies.

Robotic Process Automation (RPA) can take over manual, repetitive tasks – but instead of making the people in those functions, redundant, it frees them up to tackle more important and non-automatable tasks which can improve business operations. The global economic crisis means that efficiency and multitasking are going to become the order of the day – something the lean SME space is used to, to an extent.

Embrace technology and let the people who are the heart of your business focus on helping you re-establish it and re-invent it. It's time to innovate.

“While things are set to be very different, there's a huge benefit to collaboration to establishing and maintaining a dynamic, agile business,” says Lambert.

“Entrepreneurs and innovators thrive off being able to kick around ideas, sense-check decisions with others and find ways for seemingly-unrelated companies to work together to deliver unprecedented opportunity – and there's nothing the world is going to need more than opportunity, once we come out the other side of this”.

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