

Think.

Think. is *Qantas* magazine's thought leadership series that combines smart conversation with good food and wine. This event, at the recently refurbished Stokehouse restaurant on Melbourne's St Kilda Beach, featured a panel discussion moderated by Kirsten Galliot, Editor-in-Chief of *Qantas* magazine and *Travel Insider*.

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Three Australian leaders on what the best companies look like in a post-COVID world



Tamara Graham

Sparkling wines supplied by

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The leaders



Dale Connor

Connor joined Lendlease as a graduate in 1988 and became CEO of Lendlease Australia in 2021. He is based in the company's flagship headquarters in Sydney's Barangaroo, which has ranked in the top 6 per cent of workplaces surveyed globally by the Leesman Index for design, functionality and effectiveness. Connor is passionate about ensuring that Lendlease gives back to the community.



Vanessa Gavan

Gavan founded Maximus International more than 20 years ago and her background in psychology has informed her approach to leadership development. Today, she is joint MD and the firm works with the boards and executive teams of some of Australia's biggest companies. Gavan believes the future of leadership is about growing your impact and having a sense of purpose.



Owen Wilson

Wilson has been the CEO of REA Group since 2019 and has spent more than 30 years working in IT, recruitment and banking. Headquartered in Melbourne, REA Group is a global tech business specialising in property and is an ASX Top 20 company. For the past two years, it's been named the fourth-best workplace in Australia: 93 per cent of its employees describe it as a great place to work, compared with 56 per cent of employees at a typical Australian company.



(Above from left) Owen Wilson, Vanessa Gavan, John Good, managing director of LSH Auto Australia, and Dale Connor



(Left) The dining room at Stokehouse restaurant

We've seen momentous change in the past couple of years. I'd like to ask the three of you if you think it will eventually be a good thing for our workforces.

OWEN WILSON (OW): The move to hybrid working has given people better work-life balance and they're better employees as a result. From a sustainability point of view, there are fewer people commuting. People are spending more time with their families. We've broken the myth that working from home meant you were taking a day off.

VANESSA GAVAN (VG): It brought humanity to the workplace. People connect with what they can see and, all of a sudden, we have this visibility into people's homes, their kids and their other responsibilities. Like anything, there are bright spots and there's a shadow side. What people went through during lockdowns, we won't forget for a long time. But I like to focus on the good things, including the role that organisations now play in focusing on the wellbeing of their people.

DALE CONNOR (DC): As Vanessa says, it's really brought a focus on people. At Lendlease, we had two-thirds of our people dealing with the struggle of keeping the business going forward on construction sites, while everybody else was at home. We need to also recognise that people are really spent. They're exhausted from going through the COVID experience. Amid conversation of how we get people back into the office, we have a lot of people who never left.

I'd love to hear from you, Vanessa, about the visibility of leadership in a hybrid workplace.

VG: There's never been a more challenging time to lead. You stack up post-COVID recovery, people's mindset and fatigue then add the challenges of economic pressures. Being visible means that leaders can signpost; they can create perspective in terms of the stress people are feeling and bring that into context. It's incredibly important that leaders are highly visible but they can role-model flexibility, too.

What does that look like on a day-to-day basis? Would a leader be in the office as much as possible?

VG: Recent McKinsey studies have most CEOs saying they want their leaders in the office at least three days a week. That's just about time. It should start with a question: Who does it matter to if you're here or not? That question relates to the home front and the work front. For an intern, it's their foundational work experience so it matters to them if you're there. Equally, if you promised one of your kids you'd be at something then it matters to them.



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People see leaders as key to influencing things that we need to progress – the things that people feel are wrong with the world that need correcting. They're looking to their leaders and saying, 'What's your perspective on this?', and they expect you to have one.
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Vanessa Gavan

Owen, you've empowered your teams to make their own decisions about where they work. Tell us about that.

OW: We were lucky at the start of COVID because, being a tech company, everyone had a laptop and a mobile phone. When we made the call to close the offices, we didn't skip a beat. Now we treat hybrid working like product design and do it around what we call “the moments that matter”. We asked each team to look at their activities and decide which are performed better together, which are better done on their own and which can be done hybrid. We've developed a hybrid working guide but we've also said nothing is set in stone. We just completed our third hybrid-working staff survey. There's good and bad: 94 per cent felt our hybrid arrangements were effective; 78 per cent said they thought it was probably best in class in Australia; but 50 per cent were really concerned about the reduced social connection and relationship building. That's something we've got to work on and we don't have the answer yet. It's about making sure we set up the time and space for that connectivity, which has to be face-to-face in the office.

Dale, you talked about construction sites and how flexibility can extend outside the office. How have you managed that with your workforce?

DC: We were focusing on flexible working guidelines for our construction sites even before COVID. A construction site may be 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It's not about presenteeism for everybody to be there when the gates are open; it's about empowering a team to make decisions. You can have a foreman who takes the kids to school on Wednesdays or a site engineer who has sports training on a Thursday afternoon. The team decides the roster and how to focus their efforts on getting a project done. We're working with stakeholders and union representatives – everybody's aligned on the wellbeing of people in our industry.

Can you tell us about some of the initiatives with corporate staff, too?

DC: We have Clear Space Wednesdays, where we encourage and empower people to block out 3pm to 5pm every Wednesday, with no meetings. You can use that time to think, go for a walk or strategise. People often say, “I have no time to progress my career or think about learning and development or think about my people.” If we can free up some time for them to have clear space to think, it will do wonders for them – and wonders for our organisation.

Vanessa, with skills gaps and staff shortages, there's so much emphasis on employee expectations. How do we give employees what they need, without creating a culture of entitlement?

VG: People have really high expectations but it's all about balance and reciprocity. You've got to look at it from the employer mindset and the individual mindset. This is the modern way of working; it's not going away. You need to embrace it or you're going to be questioned in terms of whether you're keeping up with the times as an employer. On the flip side – and putting my psychologist's hat on – no relationship works without reciprocity. At Maximus, we talk about freedom with accountability – people want more freedom, more ownership and to focus on outcomes. We believe the way to do that is to fuel their passion by focusing on purpose: on enriching, getting the discretionary effort from people and building reciprocity in the relationship.

How do you balance the emotional needs of the workforce with business needs?

DC: Unfortunately, in the construction industry you're six times more likely to take your life by suicide than to die from a workplace accident. Our focus on physical safety has done wonders in Australia; now it's about psychological safety. We've got a whole range of programs – 900 people in our business have gone through the Mental Health First Aid course to be able to identify those who need help. Leaders need to listen, engage and respond in a positive way.

And how are you helping people grow their careers? What are people looking for?

DC: We're very fortunate to have a business that's in the United Kingdom, Europe, United States and across Asia. Coming out of COVID, it's an attractor that you could develop an international career at Lendlease. I was fortunate to work in China for four years and the United States for eight years and it never feels like it's one career. That's an attractive thing to be able to put on the table.

What else do you think that people want from their careers, Vanessa?

VG: Purpose is number one. They want to know you stand for something that's real. People also want to know they're growing at an accelerated rate, especially millennials and Gen Z. The challenge for us as executives is that there's a real risk we can trade off a lot of development because there's no longer the apprenticeship model happening in the same way in the office. We need to make



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We've increased our learning and development budget, peer groups are coming together again to meet in person, which is excellent, and we're engaging a lot with our clients and government, making sure we are externally facing.
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Dale Connor

sure we have ways and means of doing that in a virtual and physical environment.

Owen, is the balance of reciprocity thrown out by the candidates' market?

OW: I don't think it is. In the past three years, it's been the most competitive talent market that we've ever seen at REA but it's slowly changing. Our vacancy rate is the lowest it's been in about three years. People are voting with their feet and going to larger – what I'll call safer – quality names like REA, Carsales and Seek. I talk to my colleagues and they're saying the same thing.

Vanessa, is it helpful to provide a fairly structured career pathway? Does it make it more attractive for people who leave then return?

VG: There's a lot more leaving and returning happening so it's important how you create those moments that matter – how someone starts, how you send them off, the reciprocity of the relationship and how it's set from early on. Having some structure to a career path – providing a visibility of options – is really important. These days, careers aren't linear but certainly context and perspective around where the opportunities are is important. People are impatient for growth.

Are people driving their own careers or are companies?

OW: We've got a fairly structured career planning process but it's not linear. People are encouraged to think about their areas of interest and if those don't match their skills, we've got REA University that shows you the courses and learning you can do to get those skills. It's a combination of us providing the wherewithal for them to make those zigzags through the organisation, with the emphasis on the employee sitting down and thinking about what they're interested in, the skills they've got then taking control.

You're also working with women who have an interest in tech but who might not have tech experience, aren't you?

OW: REA has 50/50 gender diversity but we don't have it in tech. We're probably one of the leaders in Australia, with 30 per cent female tech staff, but we want that to be 50 per cent. Our graduate program tends to bring in an equal gender split so that's starting to change the balance. We also have a springboard program designed for women who aren't in tech but want a tech career. That program is full every year and they're so grateful for the opportunity to change careers that they stick with it. So it's been very successful.



(Clockwise from above) The Think. panel; guests at the dinner; cars provided by LSH Auto Australia; veal tonnato with smoked tuna dressing, capers and fennel was on the menu



Are leaders who are panicking about productivity missing the point?

VG: I think it's generational. As much as they're attending to the focus on purpose and culture, boards and management teams still ask a lot of questions around productivity. The challenge is this focus on time, which is a very transactional relationship. The focus needs to be on purpose, discretionary effort and outcomes – you'll get more from that equation than if you're purely focusing on time. When I hear those kinds of questions, my counsel is: "You're not focusing on the right things."

Owen, I know you feel quite strongly that the days of clock watching are long over.

OW: We think of it in terms of output. That's why we have Summer Fridays. If you've got to Friday lunchtime and your output's there then you spend the rest of the day on self-development or reading – things that are going to get you set up for the next week. There's no productivity panic at REA.

Do you feel the same way, Dale?

DC: It's thinking about benchmarks, metrics and how we can demonstrate that we are the best at what we do. We're high-performing – it's part of our purpose. And we want to attract the best people who want to be high-performing. So I do think that there's a connection there. It's not hours of work in a productivity sense but it is about demonstrating that you're an organisation that cares and is also successful. I want to reward everybody for their great connection, their great teamwork, their great effort.

Do you think there could be a shift back to the times when employees were really valued and loyalty was rewarded?

DC: Absolutely. I've been with Lendlease for some 34 years. In the early days of my career, I felt that I wasn't just an employee, I was a part of the business and I was engaging with the CEO. We talked about visible leadership earlier and that's



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Remuneration is important and the tech sector is a very competitive market. But the first question a tech employee will ask you is not about money. It's about your flexible working policy and they want to understand your purpose and know how they're going to develop in the company.

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Owen Wilson

really about connection. You want everybody in your team to feel connected and that there's a greater purpose in what we're doing.

What do you hope your legacy will be as CEO of Lendlease?

DC: It's all in the people. I've been in this organisation for so long and you get nothing but the greatest thrill to see somebody who started in the organisation young and see how they've risen. Long after I'm gone, the legacy of the place will be in the people who are still there running the organisation.

Vanessa, can I ask you the same question?

VG: It's twofold. For the communities that we work in – all the leaders – I'm very conscious that those people go on and do something remarkable. We always push for the unreasonable in terms of what we expect them to do in their workplaces, whether that be growth or purpose. Equally, they go home to their families and those families are connected to communities. I hope my legacy and our legacy as an organisation is to leave those people in those communities better off as a result of us being involved. For my team, I hope they look back and say we built something extraordinary and meaningful that we can't believe we got to be part of.

And finally, Owen, your legacy?

OW: I inherited a spectacular business as CEO so it's a bit like "Don't break it!" And, like Dale, I know there are people I worked with 20 years ago who look at where I am today and think, "Wow, I probably played a part in that." That must be incredibly rewarding. So for me, it's watching our people grow and take opportunities. It won't all be at REA – I think there are three ASX CFOs who worked with me over the past 20 years. You think, "Wow, I probably had some sort of influence on that", and that makes me really proud. ●

Think. will be back in 2023

The event Think. 2023 is slated to return to Sydney on Monday, 3 April. Tickets on sale in March 2023 at thinkbyqantasmagazine.eventbrite.com.au

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Clockwise from left: John Good, LSH Auto Australia managing director; LSH Auto Australia Leadership Development Program kick-off; sessions at LSH Auto Australia's Apprentices Open Day.

Driving positive change

LSH Auto Australia was recently named one of the best places to work in the country. Here, the company's managing director, John Good, explains how employee engagement leads to external success.

What is LSH Auto Australia – one of the country's leading Mercedes-Benz dealer groups – doing to ensure it's a positive workplace for its employees?

We've been working towards being an employer of choice for quite some time because we want to attract and retain the best staff. This was recently recognised when we were named a *Financial Review* BOSS Best Place to Work, the only automotive company to receive this accolade.

We've launched a leadership development program and we're launching a junior sales program later this year. We offer volunteering leave and we have The Choice Awards, where staff can nominate a top-performing colleague to be awarded \$500 for a charity of their choice. We've seen a high level of engagement since introducing the quarterly awards.

Why is the engagement of your staff so important?

Having passion within the business means that passion will be felt outside the business. The team is then more receptive to developing new initiatives and being able to adapt as the market continues to change.

How is LSH Auto Australia continuing to better its offering to its staff?

I believe in finding a work-life blend, which is why we've recently enhanced our parental leave policy. We have an apprenticeship program to attract younger talent and I'm also proud that we have a youthful executive committee. I want to ensure we continue to develop and highlight the talent within the organisation.

Why is giving back to the community so important to LSH Auto Australia?

It's a core value of the organisation and we know our team wants to work for a company that's doing something for the local community. For instance, as a company, we work closely with Dr Daniel Nour at Street Side Medics. Now our staff are getting involved in supporting the charity, most recently by providing and packing materials for them. It's completely voluntary and we've seen a huge uptake. By engaging our staff in community-based projects, it's helped to build trust within our team. Building trust means the whole team has a common goal and purpose – they want to drive the business forward.

Visit lshauto.com.au for more information.



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