

Transcript: Alexis George with Rafael Epstein – ABC Radio Melbourne Drive – 23/03/21

Rafael Epstein: It's a year to the day since the Premier said you can't go and get on the beers at home. It is the first time in a year that you can have 100 people over at your home, although not quite yet. Got to wait til Friday, six o'clock. The other really big and significant announcement from the State Government today, off the back of the Chief Health Officer recommendations, our office blocks in the centre of the city, they can go back to full capacity. So will they go back? Is that helpful? Do they want to go back? Alexis George joins us, the deputy CEO of ANZ, one of the biggest companies in the country. Their head office in Melbourne has about 12,000 staff. Alexis George, thanks for joining us.

Alexis George: Thank you very much for having me.

Rafael Epstein: If the state government says you can have everyone back, does that mean everyone? How does that impact on a company like ANZ?

Alexis George: It's a very big question and, we've been dealing with this. It's interesting, you talked about it up front, we sent everyone home on the 18th of March. So it's over a year now that most of our people in Melbourne have been working from home. And, we've had to adapt our workplace for the various different regulations that we've had in place. So at the moment we, for instance, can only have 50 per cent of people in the workplace because we need to make sure there's physical distancing, etc. If I look at it, we've probably only had about, maximum 2500. So, we're quite a way from that full time in the office. And while I think it's great that we can get people back now, we've also got to understand that, it has been a year working from home. It's a big change for people and we've got to look after their mental and physical well-being in bringing back in the office and making sure we can support them through that change.

Rafael Epstein: Do you think you, will you even get to 80 per cent back, do you think?

Alexis George: Well, we said to our people that our vision of the work going forward is going to be two to three days in the office and two to three days at home. And that's what they've been telling us, is something they would like. I think it's important that we be in the office because it is really good for culture, for new people, for leadership, etc. But that's kind of where we'll go to, three days in the office, two to three days at home. So, I'd like to think we'll get back to the 80 per cent, but it's going to take time Raf.

Rafael Epstein: Can I be really ... I don't know if you can be specific, Alexis George. Will you hit that 80 per cent you said you would like to. So that sounds like you're definitely not going to go back to 100 per cent. Will you get to 80?

Alexis George: Well we're not going to go back to everyone working in the office every day a week. That's just not going to happen. I think, we've all got to accept that work has changed over the last 12 months and it's not going to go back to that.

Rafael Epstein: And 80 per cent? Is that going to happen do you think?

Alexis George: Well, I think that's where we'll get to if people work in the office two to three days a week. And that's what we're asking people to do. For all those reasons I just talked about before; culture, new starters, just solving problems. It's so much easier if they can physically talk to someone.

Rafael Epstein: I'm not sure what city you spend most of your time in, but I think that ANZ building is the bottom of Collins Street, isn't it? Into Docklands.

Alexis George: Yes, that's right.

Rafael Epstein: I assume, if you're only 80 per cent, do you stay in the building? Do you stay as the dominant tenant in that building?

Alexis George: We've been looking at our property footprint because we've had many buildings throughout Melbourne. I think at one point, maybe even seven. So, yes while the head office is down in Docklands, we've got several others. And we've been consolidating down into that campus over a number of years. So, we're going to continue to look at the property footprint. I think we're in the early days of seeing how people are going to behave. So we're just going to have to manage that over the coming months and see what happens and what it looks like and how people are going to behave.

Rafael Epstein: So that's a maybe you might have to sell off city property?

Alexis George: We don't actually own anything except our head office.

Rafael Epstein: Well get rid of some leases, I mean?

Alexis George: Yes, I mean we'll just look at that as we watch what happens with people's behavior. And as I said, we've been out of the office for a year. It's a big change getting people back in.

Rafael Epstein: Then does it matter what the state government sets as a capacity limit? I'm hearing different things privately about this company did want the 100 per cent, another company didn't. Do those announcements matter?

Alexis George: I think they matter in that they allow us to get full teams in at once. Because at the moment, as I just mentioned to you, we've only got 50 per cent capacity. So that means we can only bring 50 per cent of the team in at once. And I think, why do we all love being at work? Because we love being with our mates. We love having a chat as well as getting the work done. So I think it does allow us to be a bit more flexible with that footprint and just create that greater sense of fun about being back there.

Rafael Epstein: Really appreciate you joining us today, Alexis George. Thank you very much.

Alexis George: No problem. Thank you.

Rafael Epstein: The deputy CEO of ANZ.