

Hello! It's so great to be back in a room full of people. It has felt so long since we have had this luxury of connecting and collaborating in person, but oh how great it is, and also how unusual it is! Even more unusual for me as I have just returned from 4 months of Maternity Leave with my 3rd child, a little girl after 2 gorgeous boys.

Reflection is important for growth, and in order for us to continue to grow and flourish as an industry, we must look back and reflect together on the year that was 2020, the year that pushed our people beyond boundaries in more ways than we were prepared for, with so many challenges and hurdles as we all headed into the unknown.

We were hit with something no one expected. It was like a tidal wave, and in March last year the world as we all knew it, changed. No more quick coffee chats, no more incidental collab meetings, no more breakfasts with clients, or drinks after work celebrating a deal.

Our freedom had gone. For the first time in Australian history as WE all knew it, we had lost what Australia gives us all so well, freedom to feel safe secure. The nation was told to go home and bunker down.

Growthbuilt were holding "crisis pandemic zoom meetings" every day. What's the plan?? What's our pandemic response plan?? What's our rejuvenation pipeline plan?? What will we do to help our people stay calm, how will we all stay focused when the world literally feels like it's crashing around us, how can we provide support and be open for our people, how can we provide them with surety it will all be ok. The truth is we couldn't, but as leaders we remained strong, but stayed vulnerable for our people - we were all in this together.

There was a continuous sense of anxiety, the unknown was immense. The senior leadership team felt it strongly, so we

wondered, how did our people feel? Were they sleeping ok? How was their family? Those that still had to travel and work on site, did they feel protected, how could we provide them with the comfort they needed to feel safe? And the most important question of all - did they have toilet paper????

I have to say the way in which WE as a company came together so respectfully empathetically and intelligently was second to none. We held each other up, gave each other advice, allowed each other to share our concerns and fears, and all helped on each other's section of the business to ensure we were only as weak as our weakest link. Which wasn't weak at all because of all those things we were doing for each other.

Over months, we continued to build strength support and guidance in our people as really tough decisions had to be made about the business and our people. Really tough decisions. But again, it was softened slightly, as leadership, management and even the people were all there to support one another as no one had the map of how to navigate this war zone. We were in it together, so we were supporting one another like we were in war. Standing alongside your soldier (whether on zoom on or site) and would only move if they could move. We reached out to collaborate to our consultants, subbies, clients, partners, affiliates all working on strategies and ways to get through the tidal wave and hopefully come out alive. All through zoom and teams that no one had ever really used before. In this new world, one of the biggest questions in the morning was - do I dress ALL of myself or just the top half? I was certainly cheering I could ditch the high heels and wear ugg boots, and also strategizing ways on how to lock my light switch so my 3 yr. old couldn't come in and flick the switch on and off, on and off whilst I was presenting or pitching (that happened too many times for my liking).

Now what we did learn out of 2020 was how to flourish in times of adversity. And a constant reminder that what's most important is the people beside you internally and externally, helping one another find ways through something no one had ever experienced before.

Whilst some, if not most construction companies diminished in size in some way, it helped Growthbuilt grow in strength, resilience, maturity and empathy to continue and also thrive in the best way we could, side by side.

So, it's safe to say that when COVID-19 hit it reshaped the way we work. And whilst COVID definitely had quite a negative impact on the Australia economy in so many ways, there is definitely a silver lining. It led our world and our industry to adapt to new unforeseen ways of work. It showed us we have new ways to flourish when pushed to extremes, especially when you back your number one resource your people. People adapted quickly to these new ways of living, at work and at home, so we need to ensure that we are continuing to back our people and provide them with the courage to continue doing the great things that they are in this new environment. We need to 'choose to challenge' (in the theme of international women's day) the push to go back to the way they were.

For me personally, my COVID journey was somewhat interesting. I fell pregnant in January, and when I was starting to show we all started to work from home! So, no-one knew for months and months.... how could they? We were all sitting in front of computer screens! No one could see I had a baby growing in my belly. We then decided it would be a great idea to move in with the in laws to help with the kids whilst they were off school (which we thought at this point was going to be a few terms) BUT then school went back, so that all backfired and we were stuck with the in laws for while! Well,

that was fun!!! I was also pregnant, so the added hormones and emotions made it extra extra fun!

Although whatever your work/home situation, what Covid proved was that people around the world living with families, kids, wives, husbands, partners, friends, mothers, fathers and.... in laws, had the ability of being able to successfully work from home during situations like mine and many others. Realising that you can be just as productive was a big wake up call for many companies, employers and the like. I guess we never really knew how possible it was until we all had to take the challenge.

Now I do strongly recognise and support the office. Work zones and collaboration spaces, are definitely still necessary and to be used as a place for strategizing, brainstorming, workshopping, critical face to face meetings where you need to read body language. It seems that flexibility has really allowed everyone, employees and employers to see that flexibility is and needs to be the way of the future.

COVID has allowed us to catapult into that world of acceptance for a variety of different ways of effective working and allowed all of the career driven and ambitious people (all in the room today) to be around and with your families more. What our families experienced last year was having us all around more and at home more and certainly being more present, more than we usually would be during the weekdays. And why wouldn't we want to continue that great connection (recognising there may have been a very different view when the kids were being home schooled!), but it certainly is possible, as perception has changed forever.

The perception that you are *actually working* when you are at home. You can potentially be there for breakfast and dinner each day, and

even more, a few days a week by avoiding the travel, still ensuring success and delivery of our roles, but giving our families that accessibility which allows them, and us, to feel connected and more involved as a family than ever before.

As Sylvia mentioned, a number of surveys around team's productivity working from home have been overwhelmingly positive. Nearly 60% thought that their productivity was the same and 33% said their productivity was actually higher. So now that we have all gone through that remote working lifestyle and with returning to work, we do realise and acknowledge that it is just as possible to be as productive at home as in the office, ensuring there is a balance of both.

The beauty of this new perception for me personally is, I have been able to transition both myself and my daughter into a new routine gracefully, by allowing me to be at home a little more often than I would have been able to be a year ago. In my role, there is that flexibility of using your own home as a base some of the days in the week and coming and going from there to meet with clients, which has enabled me to still be able to breastfeed my daughter on those special days when the timing works. It's been quite amazing and refreshing and something I have definitely needed this time around, even after having returned back to work with 2 other children. As a mother of now 3 beautiful children and a very supportive wife, it's been a great experience for us all.

I am only one person, and I can't even imagine how many people around the world would have similar situations, proving that we can reshape the way we think we have to, and should be working. We need to "choose to challenge" the way we have always seen the way people work effectively.

Changes like this for women in general and especially women in our industry are paramount for increasing women's participation. In Construction, women make up only 12% of the workforce, although as Nicki mentioned surprisingly, female participation in construction has increased relative to that of men in 2020. Another silver lining!

As a strong advocate for women and encouraging young girls to join our industry, I think there are a number of barriers which are stopping them from seeing the amazing opportunities that the construction industry has to offer, and one of them is flexibility. If we can tackle flexibility and choose to challenge the way the workday/delivery day/construction day looks like, this will benefit not just women but also men. And here's why:

1. Higher profits and productivity - supported by Catalyst data, it's revealed that companies with a higher percentage of female leaders outperform those on the low end of the spectrum by 26 per cent, when it comes to return on invested capital. Their shareholders also enjoy a 34 per cent higher total return, according to another study. And a recent workplace study found that diverse companies produce 19% more revenue, that is, increasing diversity has a direct effect on the bottom line. Companies that have more diverse management teams have again 19% higher revenue due to innovation.
2. An inclusive workplace culture which results in better mental health for all. Dr Phillipa Carnemolla an industrial designer and senior research fellow at UTS Sydney states - the fact that men also benefit from gender diversity shouldn't be taken lightly, considering the building sector has a problem with mental health. We already know that construction workers are more than twice as likely to end their lives, compared to the rest of the population. Much of this comes

down to the fact that depressed men are reluctant to seek life-saving support because they don't want to appear weak. Perhaps it's time to soften the edges of our industry? Higher numbers of women in building jobs could help to foster an environment where everyone feels supported.

3. Fresh ideas, lower turnover, extra hands-on deck to boost productivity -. Evidence shows that team collaboration drastically improves with the presence of women, so it's expected that employees would work better together too.

The government has released a number of initiatives and there is a significant push from within the industry to focus on encouraging women to pursue a career in building and construction. The 2021 Sydney Build Expo has dedicated an entire panel to gender diversity, naming it the "Women in Construction Summit". If we continue to push for summits like this, along with events just like today, we will continue to inspire and encourage women and younger women who are considering their career paths.

While 2020 was not the year we expected during covid, there are also plenty of positive things that have come out of it. As we kick off the first half of 2021, it is stated that there will be an increased demand for work due to the cause of delays in 2020 across industries, from this we can expect new jobs to be created.

I think it's exciting that we can promote to the world and women who are looking at coming into our industry that now there is more flexibility, no matter what age you are and where you are at with your career. If it's the fact that you are a mother or a father with a new-born or a number of kids like me, you have the flexibility of working efficiently from home, the office and on site where possible.

With this year's IWD theme being 'choose to challenge', I implore you to choose to challenge going back to the way things were, choose to challenge the silver linings of covid and choose to challenge the reflection of 2020. Let's challenge ourselves to not to forget all of these new things we have learnt and adapted to. Namely remote working which has had such a positive impact on a large number of people's lives, especially our families. Working in such a flexible way was the unknown. It is now the known. And known to work!