



# Interview transcript

## Series 1: Future of the workplace

### Lauren Watts

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people, work, Slack, office, business, burnout, remotely, remote, hire

#### **SPEAKERS**

Karen Kirton, Lauren Watts

#### **Karen Kirton**

Hi Lauren and thanks for joining me today. I was just wondering if we could start with you taking me through what your workplace was like before the pandemic so did people work in an office. Was anyone at home and how did you do that?

#### **Lauren Watts**

Yep. Perfect, thanks for having me Karen. So before the pandemic, we worked remotely anyway. So, when the announcement came that people weren't able to go to the office there was no change in our business from a day to day sense on any point, which was good. So we were completely unaffected by the change.

#### **Karen Kirton**

Did you find that other businesses that you compete with were affected to give you a bit of an advantage in that sense or was it pretty much business as usual?

#### **Lauren Watts**

It was just business as usual. I'm not really sure we became so busy we didn't focus on anyone else. So, yeah, I don't know what other people were doing but we just became so busy that we just focused on, just kept going and kept growing.

#### **Karen Kirton**

And how many staff do you have?

**Lauren Watts**

At the moment, as of next Monday we will have 17.

**Karen Kirton**

That's across Australia right?

**Lauren Watts**

Across Australia.

**Karen Kirton**

So why did you decide to start your business with everyone working remotely?

**Lauren Watts**

I did have the option of having an office but then I just thought, I don't really want to go there every day like. To me it was like, I left corporate and offices for a reason. First it was like I was saving time by not having to get off and get dressed and get ready I could just kind of walk into the other room in my pajamas and start work so there was that kind of downtime I was saving I could work longer. Then as we grew, Oh, I have an office that's more expenses, more overhead, and I didn't want that. So I just kind of thought, well what about if I hired people who could work from home and just expand that way.

**Karen Kirton**

Excellent. Did you have any concerns about working remotely?

**Lauren Watts**

At first, and I've obviously learned a lot of lessons along the way.

Just being a bit of a control freak at first as well, kind of contemplating well, scared of things not going well, things going wrong like being taken advantage of as you're working from home. So, there were those concerns but over the years, we've built a really good team, where there's a lot of trust there that I don't have those concerns anymore.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah, because a common concern with working remotely is productivity. So, how did you release the control? How did you make sure that you're comfortable that everyone was doing what they should?

**Lauren Watts**

When I had my baby, I kind of had to let them look so when I was pregnant I knew I had to get to that point where they could do things and not worry about where I was or what I was doing. I guess that was kind of my, my little strategy, my little kind of, I guess mini exit strategy. So yes, they had to learn to do what they were doing not rely on me all the time and some of the girls stepped up into different roles so

that they then become like that person talking to the client. So it kind of, I guess, grew us to that next state a little bit more.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah, because that's interesting with the client meeting so I'm finding at the moment that I'm getting pretty much every request for face to face meetings again which even two months ago that wasn't the case, everything was remote. So how do you manage the client meeting site? Do you do that remotely as well?

**Lauren Watts**

Everything's remote. So the options on our website are all based on online. Our clients don't really like every now and then you might have a client say Oh, next time you're in the city like can you pop in like, and things like that but a lot of my clients were in the state as well so there's no real chance of us kind of seeing each other.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah! So you're able to stay in your pajamas all day is that what you're telling me?

**Lauren Watts**

I love it and in winter like you know they'll have in the group chat they'll talk about oh you know like what tracksuit pants are the warmest so when they you know it's it's kind of good to see that.

**Karen Kirton**

So when you had a baby, well I know for me, your life just kind of goes on pause in every other way because you're just tied to this miniature creature that wants everything from you. So what did you put in place to make sure that things are still happening like did you had to create a lot of assets for the business that people know the processes that you're relying on technology, how are you doing that?

**Lauren Watts**

I only took two weeks off.

**Karen Kirton**

Oh wow. Good for you!

**Lauren Watts**

A client of mine emailed me probably a week after I had a baby and I had a massive job come through, and I couldn't kind of say no and so it was kind of all hands on deck and I even had to hire more people for the job. So my husband who had a property maintenance business at the time he had to put his business on hold and be a homestay dad.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah and he was okay with that?

**Lauren Watts**

Yeah, he loves it. Like most dads don't he got to do a lot of things that you know dads don't generally get to do so he was pretty good.

**Karen Kirton**

I think the newborn baby stage is probably easier than the toddler stage anyway! You mentioned before talking about you know when you have, you know, which tracksuit pants are warmest for winter. So how do you maintain team culture because that's obviously a big concern for a lot of people when it comes to working remotely as well?

**Lauren Watts**

So that was like a big thing for us because everyone was so remote we had people in WA, Queensland New South Wales like I was like, how do we kind of have a run talking to each other and just having. So they weren't, and I guess I was worried about them being isolated being at home, working by themselves. But three years ago we implemented Slack. So we have multiple channels on our Slack channel, a general one that every team has a different one, depending on who's working with who. Like every morning the girls hop on they say good morning to each other, then, you know, if they're talking they might have chat throughout the day while they're talking and that's fine. It was someone's birthday today so that goes in our announcement channel. So, that way that we really stress that's there if someone's had a problem with a phone call, they'll post about it in the chat as well and just let everyone know what's happened and everyone kind of rallies around to help. When Victoria went back into lockdown late last year one of our girls was in Victoria, and she couldn't get a mask. So everyone banded together and sent masks more straight to Victoria. So, that culture that's been built, they joke around talking about different things. You know the hobbies of the kids and things like that and I think it's just slowly over time but now it's just something that's engraved in the company.

**Karen Kirton**

Do you ever physically get together?

**Lauren Watts**

We were going through last year but then COVID happened. That hasn't happened. One of the girls the year before she was invited to a client Christmas party with me so we flew her down to Sydney to come to that. Some of the girls work in Sydney, so I've met, like live in Sydney, so I've met them. We've all seen each other on zoom and things like that as well but yeah the pandemic kind of stopped the idea us of having like in, we're gonna have a in face Christmas party but yeah didn't happen.

**Karen Kirton**

Because you have someone in Western Australia, how do you manage that time change that doesn't make any difference to your business so do you stagger people's start times? How do you work that?

**Lauren Watts**

We've got three in WA. One of them starts at 8:30, our time, like she just gets up and does it and she works a long day. But that's her choice like that's what she wants to do. She might stop some mornings, she might get up, start work for two hours and then she goes and takes the kids to school and then

comes back so I guess she really utilizes the fact that she can work extra and make more money, because of the time difference.

So then some of the other girls will jump on at about eight o'clock their time. Then we've got one who's on about one o'clock, 12 to one o'clock, our time and then she just kind of has a shorter day. But if we always make sure they've got stuck in WA, if they want to work longer, they've got that option there.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah, because it can be quite a big difference over summer with that three hours

**Lauren Watts**

Yeah. So we prioritize them to have WA calls like over the East Coast.

**Karen Kirton**

Makes sense. But hiring new staff so another concern I get sent to a remote environment. So do you have any tips on how to recruit and onboard people effectively.

**Lauren Watts**

So that's where our Slack becomes really important so we had a new girl start today. So when they start one of the first things we do is send them the invites through Slack we send them into the channels and then we introduce them to everyone, so that everyone then everyone just reaches out and says if you need anything we're here. It allows us to ask them if they have something rather than picking up the phone which sometimes they can't do because they are on the phone. We've got that instant there to talk to each other. So, which is really good so that makes life a lot easier when we've got a new person starting. We have a pretty, pretty good onboarding process I think we've got a lot of, like, step by step instructions screenshots like everything's kind of now, to have a taste so when someone starts, they get a whole lot of documents and we give them like a whole day to read them to do step by step to play around with systems and see how things work. So we give them that day and then if they have any questions they can come back to us before they actually start anything.

**Karen Kirton**

When you're selecting for new staff are you looking in certain areas of the country or are you just opening it up to wherever someone wants to work?

**Lauren Watts**

Wherever someone wants to work. Like wherever they are. Sometimes when we want to go to the WA well we kinda need to not have WA. It was like okay we've got three for WA, that's fine but we can't keep hiring in WA a bit more, I guess on the other side.

**Karen Kirton**

Of all the East Coast.

**Lauren Watts**

Yeah, Australia would be fine.

**Karen Kirton**

Have you considered going over to New Zealand or any other country?

**Lauren Watts**

No.

We've got like, actually when we do calls into, sometimes we do calls into Malaysia and Singapore, we have someone in the Philippines who would help us with that because they speak like that language, but outside of that everything's here.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah. What do you say is the future of your workplace? Are you going to stay remote forever? Do you think there's ever a time that you would go into an office so is this going to be your model?

**Lauren Watts**

This will definitely be the model it was set up to be like this.

It's easier and I find that we do not have many sick days. I guess what was the other thing like if you work in an office if the kids are sick, then the moms don't come to work because they have to stay remotely for kids. Whereas if the kids are sick they put the kids in the bed or in the lounge room and then they go to work. If they're sick they'll still jump on for a few hours and although like they'll be the arms gonna jump on for a few hours and not feeling well but I still wanted to get something done. I think the productivity is amazing because they don't really care, I'm here anyway I might as well get on one of the girls this morning she jumped onto my, why are you on today it's Tuesday. She's like, Oh, I'm about to do some stuff but I thought I'd just check in first. So even like it's just because everything's remote it's so easy to just jump on your computer and have a look at things. Yeah, and I like that we don't have that big of you know, there are other big absent days.

**Karen Kirton**

But it just made me think about when people first speak remote there were some people that really burnt out because what they were trying to do was take office work, and just replicate that into their own environment. So, having meetings all day long on zoom but then still getting messages through from Slack or Teams and the phone was ringing, as they were just completely burnt out. So, how do you kind of structure, the days that is up to everybody in terms of what time they start is it more of , you know, this is actually the packet of work, so to speak, that you have your these are the outcomes that you need to get, because I'd imagine that you wouldn't necessarily have that burnout issue because you haven't started at an office you started working this way. So how do you structure that?

**Lauren Watts**

We actually had a burnout during COVID. As COVID, everyone did more hours, because we were so busy so why November. Most of the girls had burnt out. So, yeah, I felt so horrible then at Christmas time, everyone had longer off. You know and they would say, Oh, you know, I'm so burnt out. I really need the extra time and some of you make comments like how do you need this extra time like, you know, at least you had. I guess I have a job but I'm so busy. Because of this, I'm. Some of them were

doing, you know, 10 hour days and they don't normally do that. But they were just trying to keep the whole thing ready for COVID.

**Karen Kirton**

Okay, so we just had a bit of a break in the recording because Laura does work from home so she had someone come to the door, and we just had a bit of a break, so we'll just continue on with what we are talking about burnout. I think you had some staff burning out over Christmas.

**Lauren Watts**

Yeah, perfect Thanks Karen. Yeah, so we had a longer break over the Christmas period than what we'd normally do, but the staff came back refreshed. They choose what hours when they start that they'll have set, I guess, wake hours so they might do 20 hours a week 25 but it's up to them to work out how they're going to do that. Obviously they have kids and they have other responsibilities as well so they're really good at working that out, if, if they say oh, I might be late on Tuesday, but I'll work back on Thursday. So they juggle it around. What they put on outside of work, and I think that helps as well, with work we don't have a high turnover of staff I think because of that flexibility when we offer it actually does help staff stay. A lot of them will say we can't like we're never going to have to find what we have here, anywhere else because people don't offer that flexibility.

As long as the work is done and that's what we say to them, like we're happy to be flexible. As long as the work starts. And that's what we need at the end of the day.

**Karen Kirton**

With your new recruit that you just hired have you found recruiting different now to what it was pre pandemic? Did you have more applications? Was it harder or was it pretty much the same for you?

**Lauren Watts**

So, the first time we hired was probably a month after COVID, and I think everyone had just been told I had to work from the heart, and we had to hire 10 people in one week.

**Karen Kirton**

Oh, Wow!

**Lauren Watts**

Yeah, so we ended up with that getting 100, we have 500 resumes around that. So that was absolutely huge for us. Then, and that was fine. So under those girls we've actually still got now so as people have gone back to work they've decided to stay which has been amazing. But then I think around July, August we had to hire again we got 10 resumes, and we've never had that little before. Obviously that would have been because of job seekers', job keep up all these payments people were getting, they were a bit comfortable, but then around September October when all that was ending we were getting more applicants because people were saying my job keep is about to end. I actually now need to find a job. So that kind of affected us in finding work because they were getting that assistance. Now last

round at the end of last year I think we got about 150 to 300 resumes so the numbers started to build back up again.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah. Wow. I watched your selection process. If you get, if you're looking for 10 people and you have 500 applications. How do you?

**Lauren Watts**

What we actually did first was we actually went out to the girls and said, if you have family members or friends that have lost their job or need work. Like, let us know and we'll give them. Like, as long as they've got like the skills, we'll give them priority. That was just to help them out as well. So, and everyone really appreciated it so we had cousins, we had sisters, we had moms, we had a lot of people joining the team. So that was, that was all good for them and then and that was also easy for us because that other person could train them, that they were near each other or live near each other so they could do kind of face to face training and do it real quickly. We didn't have kind of a longer process like we normally do. But then we go through every resume, and we look at what skills they have, how long they've been working at and we also look at the last, the gap between. They don't like their jobs as well.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah. I feel like going through the pain of 500, though it's a lot right.

**Lauren Watts**

You just kind of get the iPad and you just kind of sit down on the iPad you're like yep gone no keep like, it's like Star or trash. Are the ones that you want to interview and then you put the other ones in the bin.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah! Excellent! Now my last question is do you have top tips. Is there one thing that you think if someone's looking to stay fully remote? You know, what do you think is the one thing that really makes a difference to having a successful business that doesn't have an office.

**Lauren Watts**

It's the culture. Either having slack has really changed our business, it allows us to be in regular contact with people. It allows the girls to talk and I believe and I think that's just kind of really bonded the business so that we can still do the things in the office that we couldn't do before. So having Slack is being able to communicate with each other. Also having a mental health kind of preparation plan so we always check in with the girls make sure they're okay. How everything is going because they are working from home, making sure that they're at least having some separation between home and work as well. So, and that all comes after you've been doing it for a while, making sure that they don't just sit at their computer or a day that they do get up and walk around the house as well. You do the exact same things in the office that you do at home. I think some people just get scared that they think because they're in an office they have more control and they can see things that just because you're at

home doesn't mean someone's going to have less productivity. Some people are more productive at work, at home, than they are in the office.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah! Absolutely. Well, thank you for your great advice and for sharing your experiences. I really appreciate it. All the best for the rest of 2021, we'll see what it brings us.

**Lauren Watts**

Thank you so much Karen.