

Transcript: Alexis George with Virginia Trioli – ABC Mornings Melbourne – 18/01/21

Virginia Trioli: So are you heading back to the office? Are you in the office now? If you are, call me one three hundred two seven seven four. Alexis George is the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the ANZ Bank. Alexis, good to talk to you. Good morning.

Alexis George: Good morning, Virginia. How are you?

Virginia Trioli: I'm well, thank you. How many of your employees do you have heading back to the office today?

Alexis George: Well, actually, we're not opening our Melbourne office until next week. We just needed a bit more time to make sure we were ready for people to get back. I know many people are excited to get back, so we wanted to make sure the office was perfect for them.

Virginia Trioli: So what makes an office perfect for them? What changes are you making?

Alexis George: Well, I think, you know, as a result of everything that's gone on, we've had to make a number of changes. I mean, firstly, we've got to ensure the physical distancing that you've been talking about. So that means moving desks in some cases, making sure we've blocked off certain desks so people can't sit there, so we keep them safe. Similarly, in meeting rooms, there's signs up everywhere about how many people can be in each meeting room. The same in lifts. We've also had temperature checking outside. And of course, we have to put in the sanitisers, the cleaners, et cetera, to make sure that that office environment is really safe for our people.

Virginia Trioli: I know you've of course had everyone at work ever since the beginning of this - I think back in March, most offices cleared out then, if not before. Have you not been using that time to get your offices covid safe?

Alexis George: Yes, we have. And I think we've spent many months doing that. It's just we have to adapt to the requirements of the local state authorities. And as you can imagine, that changes quite quickly at times between being in or out, depending on what's happening in the community. So we have to adapt for that. And that's why we really just wanted to give our people time to get ready. As you know, it's still school holidays. So we wanted to make sure they had ample time to get all the arrangements in place before we opened it. I should say, though, that throughout this whole time we've had some of our essential workers coming into the office. And also there's those people who just ... for whatever reason, mental or physical well-being, want be in the office as well. So we've always had space open for them inside.

Virginia Trioli: Are your employees anxious about coming back? And as a senior executive, are you anxious about being in an office full of people?

Alexis George: Yes, it's a good question. And we've been polling our people throughout the last nine months. And I think it would be fair to say that they're not terribly concerned about the work environment. I think they trust that we will keep it clean and safe. But there is that bit of concern about public transport still. And of course, if they're if they're living in a household with any vulnerable people, I think they are fearful of transmitting something to that household. And I can fully understand that. And that's why when we do get people back to the office, at least for now, we'll make it on a voluntary basis if they're working productively at home.

Virginia Trioli: So no one will be pressured to come back?

Alexis George: No, not at this point.

Virginia Trioli: Not at this point, but you're giving them fair warning there'll be pressure at some stage.

Alexis George: No, look I don't think we'll get to that, Virginia, unless there's really a point where we feel safe in the community, that vaccinations are there and everyone feels really comfortable.

Virginia Trioli: Is it possible that you might get people back and once they are all there with each other - not at close quarters, of course, it'll be 50 per cent at this stage - that they start to feel like this isn't the right thing for them. Are they able to go home and work from home?

Alexis George: Yes. As I said before, it's completely voluntary at the moment about coming into the office. And if I look at what's happened in, say, a Western Australia where they have had quite a bit of freedom for some time, we're still at less than 50 per cent of our capacity in those offices. Now, we can't go past 50 per cent, but it's taken an awful long time to get to that because of the reasons you said, some people still don't feel comfortable and that's okay. We've had ample time now to make sure people can work productively at home.

Virginia Trioli: I just want to ask you a quick economic question before I let you go. Alexis George is with you, the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the ANZ at six minutes to nine. A report out by Deloitte Access Economics today saying the Victorian economy is set for the biggest recovery of any of the states. People like Chris Richardson were saying mid last year that he predicted a V shaped bounce down into recession and then straight out and the figures seem to indicate that. Is that what you're inside-the-bank economists are saying, too?

Alexis George: Look, I think people are much more positive today than they were six months ago. Whether it's V shaped, L shaped, U shaped. I think we've all debated what shape, but there's definitely a greater positivity in the community and I think ...

Virginia Trioli: I'm just going to stop you there. I think I think the V shape and, I quite like the Economist letter terms of this, actually is significant because if that turns out to be the case, that is an unqualified return. I mean, it's a bounce straight back up.

Alexis George: Yes, and I think there definitely is more positivity in the community. I think we're still facing some uncertainty in the future, but I definitely hope that that economist is right.

Virginia Trioli: What's the uncertainty you're seeing?

Alexis George: I just think around the pandemic still. I mean, we're still seeing outbreaks. You can see what's happening across the rest of the world, we've been a bit insulated here. But, it's just that concern about what is going to happen, when will the vaccines be rolled out. But, I definitely see a greater positivity in the community, and I think we all welcome that.

Virginia Trioli: Good to talk to you, Alexis. I hope we get to speak again.

Alexis George: Thank you, Virginia.

Virginia Trioli: And good luck to your workforce as they gradually trickle back. Alexis George there from the ANZ.