



**The Future of
Work for Australian
Manufacturing
and Logistics,
post COVID-19**



Methodology

Interviews with Tony Pearson, CEO of A.H. Beard, and James Dixon, NSW Operations Manager of B&D, provided first-hand accounts of the challenges both manufacturing companies had to overcome during the COVID-19 pandemic. An interview with Frank Federico, Country Manager of WestRock Australia and New Zealand, provided additional insights into the global manufacturing picture.

Additional information was sourced from online newspaper articles addressing the common issues affecting manufacturing industries in Australia.



Introduction

The year 2020 presented Australia's economy with unprecedented challenges. As COVID-19 took a hold of our nation, resulting in far-reaching lockdowns and unparalleled economic uncertainty, the Australian government confirmed the country's first recession in almost three decades in February 2021.

The nature of COVID-19 has impacted every sector of the Australian economy to varying degrees. In this paper, we will focus on the effect of the coronavirus on the Australian manufacturing industry. First, we will give a brief overview of the history of manufacturing in Australia. We will then delve into the issues specific to the manufacturing industries in Australia as a result of the pandemic.

Next, we will discuss the future of Australian manufacturing covering a variety of facets, including recruitment. In conclusion, we will attempt to answer the question of how to build and maintain a long-term sustainable manufacturing company in Australia.

The History of Manufacturing in Australia

The coronavirus crisis has placed the spotlight on Australia's manufacturing sector. An online ABC newspaper article published in April 2020 states, "The sudden restrictions in overseas markets and the extraordinary global demand for products such as medical supplies have laid bare Australia's over-reliance on supply chains out of China."¹ However, this wasn't always the case.

Back in the 1960s, manufacturing constituted nearly 30% of GDP and employed almost one-third of the Australian workforce. Protected by tariffs, which elevated the price of imported goods, manufacturing experienced exponential growth in the 1970s and early 80s. Stephen Bell, a professor of political economy at the University of QLD, highlights the fact that Australia developed 'quite a diversified manufacturing sector.'²

Unfortunately, the tariffs proved to be a double-edged sword. According to Craig Emerson, a former Labor minister and Economic Adviser to Bob Hawke, "The tariffs proved to be a massive disincentive for industrial excellence."³ Instead of companies improving their productivity and becoming increasingly competitive, manufacturing firms became reliant on protectionism.

Drastic cuts to protectionist tariffs caused one of the 'most sheltered and protected manufacturing sectors in the world in the 1960s to [become] one of the least protected manufacturing sectors in the world by the early 1990s.'⁴

The consequences were catastrophic. In October 2017, iconic car manufacturer Holden closed its factory, resulting in 2,500 people losing their jobs. Ford, Toyota and Mitsubishi had already ceased production.⁵ On a more positive note, Volvo, Mack, Kenworth and Iveco trucks continue to be manufactured in Australia. Three significant truck factories, owned by multinational giants Volvo, PACCAR and CNH Industrial, still operate in Australia.⁶

"The sudden restrictions in overseas markets and the extraordinary global demand for products such as medical supplies have laid bare Australia's over-reliance on supply chains out of China."¹

Today, manufacturing has fallen to just below 6% of GDP.





Minister for Industry, Science and Technology, Karen Andrews, admits that the pandemic had shown ‘some gaps’ in our manufacturing ability and supply chains.⁷

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg has promised a re-evaluation of supply chains and a focus on national manufacturing where Australia does well, and the government has set up a task force to look at how manufacturing can help the economy in a post COVID-19 world.⁸

Moreover, the 2020–21 Budget includes a \$1.5 billion investment over a four-year period for the Modern Manufacturing Strategy to ‘allow Australians to scale up, compete internationally and create more jobs.’⁹

2020–21
Budget

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over
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COVID-19 and the Australian Manufacturing Industry

With many Australian businesses struggling to keep their heads above water as they ride this wave of uncertainty, it has become more important than ever for Australian consumers to purchase genuine Australian-made goods.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus on Australian-made products has never been greater. According to Karen Andrews, Minister for Industry, Science and Technology, 'there is a groundswell of support for Australian-made products.'¹⁰

New consumer research from Roy Morgan revealed that the vast majority of Australians, a staggering 89%, 'believe Australia should be producing more products locally following the COVID-19 pandemic.'¹¹ This research highlights that Australians prioritise 'manufacturing self-sufficiency and job creation' while showing renewed interest in addressing 'the imbalance between locally made and imported products' to safeguard Australia's long-term prosperity.'¹²



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Focus on Australian Manufacturers

In order to provide a more in-depth understanding of the direct impact of COVID-19 on Australian manufacturers, we interviewed executives from two well-known Australian brands:

- A.H. Beard, a high-quality bedding manufacturer
- B&D, a division of the Dulux Group, a manufacturer of customised roller doors

The focus of these interviews was to hear their COVID-19 stories, the resulting challenges and the changes that were implemented in response to the coronavirus crisis. An interview with Frank Federico, Country Manager of WestRock Australia and New Zealand, provided additional insights into the global manufacturing picture.

Manufacturing Issues during COVID-19

The interviews highlighted a range of factors that impacted manufacturing as a direct result of the pandemic. A common thread soon became apparent and revealed three core issues that need to be addressed:

1. **Supply chain security**
2. **Cost increase**
3. **Staff continuity**

1. Supply Chain Security

“COVID-19 has put a spotlight on lazy supply chains,” according to Frank Federico, Country Manager of WestRock Australia and New Zealand. “Supply chains have faced conditions that had never been considered in contingency plans.” For example, tissues and toilet paper faced extreme shortages as manufacturing couldn’t keep up with demand, while other industries came to a sudden halt.

This unexpected scenario has forced companies across the globe to evaluate their supply chains. An article by McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm, puts it this way: “COVID-19 is a crisis and a threat, but it also presents opportunities to leaders who understand the short-term prospects of their industries.”¹³

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Minister Karen Andrews agrees that ‘the pandemic has brought Australia’s reliance on other countries into sharp focus,’ essentially resulting in a ‘wake-up call for many businesses.’¹⁴ However, she pointed out that the future of local manufacturing was not to return to Australia’s golden manufacturing era.

She states, “There are many things Australia won’t and shouldn’t be making, but it is clear we cannot just rely on foreign supply chains for the essential items we need in a crisis.”¹⁵

Frank Federico of WestRock highlights the importance of trying to obtain a reasonable balance between global and local suppliers because the ultimate goal is ‘to be better prepared for the next Black Swan event.’

Market Security

A.H. Beard’s Chief Executive Officer, Tony Pearson, identifies ‘supply chain security’ as the single-largest issue during and post-COVID-19. Securing supplies to provide market security to their clients was undoubtedly the most pressing matter after providing secure employment to their staff.

Lockdowns across the globe, including China, directly impacted the company’s supply. It became essential to establish relationships with four to five suppliers, instead of one or two, in order to achieve supply chain and market security. New Australian suppliers were sourced to ensure supply chain continuity during the pandemic.

Steve Purvis, a warehouse consultant, agrees with this approach and states that post-COVID-19 businesses will prioritise building ‘far greater resilience into their supply chain.’¹⁶ Dave Evans, co-founder and CEO of digital manufacturing ecosystem company, Fictiv, recognises that ‘we are in the early stages of the development of the supply chain into an intelligent system that is quick to react to any unexpected disruption.’

“There are many things Australia won’t and shouldn’t be making, but it is clear we cannot just rely on foreign supply chains for the essential items we need in a crisis.”





Lead Time

James Dixon, NSW Operations Manager of B&D, also states that 'supply chain security was one of the prominent issues.' Container delays resulted in slower deliveries, impacting the company's ability to supply their clients with a standard five-day lead time for certain products.

This supply challenge was met by seizing the opportunity to reassess the company's reliance on overseas suppliers. The decision was made to grow the local supply chain to enable the company to follow through on its standard lead time. For example, drum wheels can be sourced within Australia, though cost, volume and delivery need to be negotiated to ensure a competitive price for the end product.

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2. Cost Increase

The move to engage local partners, particularly in Australia, is likely to result in a cost increase, even though there is a continual focus on suppliers to ensure their products can be sourced at the most competitive rate.

A dramatic increase in cost compounded the issues surrounding supply chain security as it 'became prohibitive of manufacturing,' A.H. Beard's CEO, Tony Pearson, explains. Costs rose astronomically as a result of an increase in electricity, insurance and shipping costs. To illustrate this point, the cost to ship a container from China to Australia increased from \$1,200 to \$5,500.

A customer channel threat introduced by an increase in low-cost mattresses and a rise in online purchases of lower quality bedding added to this challenge.

However, according to Frank Federico, Country Manager of WestRock Australia and New Zealand, 'increased cost is not necessarily a deal breaker' for all industries, e.g. pharmaceuticals, where some of the increase can be offset by reductions in freight cost particularly in the current freight environment.

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Energy

Studies show that Australian manufacturers can spend up to 20–40% on gas and electricity. The Australian Workers' Union (AWU) wants the Australian government to prioritise the tackling of high energy costs. Delivering low-cost energy will be a game changer for Australian industries, according to the AWU.¹⁸

Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced the government's intention to lower gas prices as part of Australia's road to recovery.¹⁹

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Labour

Wages in Australia continue to be among the highest in the world, directly affecting the nation's competitiveness. Manufacturing has to work with a high labour base rate which has forced many industries offshore, for example, the automotive industry.

Automation is a strategy employed by many companies to lower labour cost.

Automation

Some players in the global manufacturing industry expect to see 'further automation and artificial intelligence' within their supply chains to remain agile and competitive.

However, the most efficient way to offset labour expense is not always automation, according to James Dixon, B&D's NSW Operations Manager. B&D products are highly customised and incorporate complex design, thus limiting the possibility of automation. Instead, the focus should be on introducing tools for staff members to increase productivity.

WestRock's Frank Federico is also not convinced that automation is always the answer. "In general, automation is expensive and comes out of other countries, the lack of volume compounds the challenge." Automation needs to 'provide a competitive advantage', which is hard to achieve, and for this reason, Australian manufacturers may be more likely to pursue 'process innovation.'



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Staff continuity is essential for any business to consistently produce top-quality products which are highly regarded by the Australian consumer.

A.H. Beard is Australia's second largest bedding manufacturer, with a reputation for producing top-quality bedding, which is handmade by highly skilled craftsmen in factories in Australia and New Zealand. Remarkably, many staff members are third- and fourth-generation workers.

This staff continuity is a direct result of the company's unwavering commitment to put people first. CEO Tony Pearson states, "We can't run the business without them. They are important." The company prioritises communication to engage staff with their long-term vision and remind them of their importance.

Skilled Work

Mr Pearson continued by commenting on the difficulty of accessing skilled labour, as bed making is no longer taught as a trade. He is of the opinion there ought to be some recognition of the cost of training staff through payroll or other tax relief.

The company had to bring in additional labour during the first lockdown to meet high demand without affecting the core workforce.²² MTC Recruitment was instrumental in sourcing highly skilled staff who also aligned with the company's values and vision.

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Capability

Karen Andrews, Minister for Industry, Science and Technology, praised the agility of many Australian manufacturers who jumped in to fill major supply gaps. "Capability exists in this country. What was needed was a change in the culture of how we think about our capability, about how we challenge the status quo."²³

For example, bedding manufacturer A.H. Beard partnered with a group of Australian manufacturers to produce emergency hospital beds in response to the pandemic. In collaboration with Stryker South Pacific, AmTek Australia, Fallshaw Wheels & Castors and Varley Group, this initiative resulted in the production of 'over 1000 additional Australian-made emergency beds per week to boost our nation's health response, while also supporting neighbouring countries in their COVID-19 response efforts.'

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Safety and Communication

WestRock Australia and New Zealand's Country Manager, Frank Federico, is convinced increased communication is essential during a crisis such as the coronavirus to ensure the 'visibility of management' and to 'build greater trust between management and staff.'

James Dixon, B&D's NSW Operations Manager, states, "The safety of our staff is paramount, while we also prioritise communication to ensure everyone is on board with our strategy for success. The ultimate focus is on the customer and our goal is to deliver products people can be proud of, while contributing to the community."

Working from Home

The shift to working from home is likely to continue in a post-COVID world, especially for employees with young families who desire greater flexibility. Westrock's Frank Federico supports this trend as he believes 'companies must cater for family requirements.'

A survey by SME Media completed by more than 700 manufacturing professionals revealed that 52% of respondents will allow some employees to 'regularly work remotely.'²⁵

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The Future of Manufacturing in Australia

Joe Masters, Ernst and Young Oceania's Chief Economist, points out that we find ourselves facing an almost unimaginable economic landscape driven by a health crisis that's plunged the country into recession for the first time in 30 years. However, it is important to note that the recession is not as bad as the downturns experienced in other countries.

On a more positive note, futurist and demographer Bernard Salt believes 'optimism and entrepreneurship will characterise post-Covid society in Australia.' His positive outlook is based on past highly disruptive events, such as wars and pandemics, which were followed within a matter of years by a 'celebration of life and innovation.'

The following factors will play a crucial role in the successful recovery of Australia's manufacturing industry.

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Supply Chain Sovereignty

A legacy of the coronavirus will be a business focus on supply chain sovereignty. Some companies will seek trading alliances, while other companies will prioritise onshore solutions, driving a renewed need for manufacturing in Australia.²⁹

For example, bedding manufacturer A.H. Beard has started to engage more local businesses in the supply chain, and gaining highly skilled labour impacts positively on unemployment in Australia.

Quality

Minister for Industry, Science and Technology, Karen Andrews, states that Australian manufacturing companies need 'a return to quality over quantity' and 'need to compete on value, not on cost.'³⁰

Bedding manufacturer A.H. Beard has successfully carved out a niche in the high-quality bedding industry by differentiating on quality instead of price. B&D, a manufacturer of roller doors, has chosen a similar approach by producing customised products that are known for their reliability and quality.

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The \$1.5 billion Modern Manufacturing Strategy, announced on 6th October 2020, is part of Australia's vision 'to be recognised as a high-quality and sustainable manufacturing nation.'

Australian made

Roy Morgan CEO, Michele Levine, reports that the preference for Australian-made products has only increased since the onset of the pandemic, with 88% of Australians indicating they were more likely to buy products manufactured in Australia.

In addition, the renewed focus on buying Australian-made goods has resulted in more Australians to check labelling, 'with 43% of Australians now more likely to look for country of origin labels on products.'³¹



88%

**prefer
Australian-made**

Government Initiatives

The Australian Government recognises that 'manufacturing is critical to a modern Australian economy' as this industry is 'key to almost every supply chain and adds value across all sectors.' The \$1.5 billion Modern Manufacturing Strategy, announced on 6th October 2020, is part of Australia's vision 'to be recognised as a high-quality and sustainable manufacturing nation.'³²

Ryan Pollett, National Leader, Manufacturing & Wholesale at BDO Australia, is of the opinion that this bold initiative represents 'a positive first step to securing Australia's future growth in manufacturing and fuelling economic recovery.'³³

Collaboration

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union National Secretary, Paul Bastian, calls for ‘a more collaborative approach between government, industry and workers.’³⁴

At the centre of the Modern Manufacturing Strategy is a \$1.3 billion investment, ‘aimed at getting manufacturers on the right growth trajectory – through targeted support to better commercialise their operations, enter new export markets and innovate through closer collaboration between government, research and industry.’³⁵

Sustainability

A.H. Beard’s CEO, Tony Pearson, advocates a three-pronged strategy incorporating sustainability in the physical, social and economic environment. Minimising their product footprint is a top priority by launching fully sustainable products incorporating organic cotton and chemical-free components. Moreover, their new range of mattresses can be deconstructed as they are fully recyclable, reducing the burden on landfill.

Recruitment

The Australian Government announced in its 2020–21 Budget a focus on creating a manufacturing sector that is ‘modern, dynamic and highly skilled.’³⁶ In line with this vision, the Budget includes a ‘\$2.8 billion wage subsidy to support apprenticeships and trainees [that] will allow manufacturers to bring in new talent and upskill their workforce to meet the demands of a continually changing sector.’³⁷



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Conclusion

Having discussed the history of manufacturing and the effects of COVID-19 on this significant industry, we will conclude by attempting to answer the question of how to build and maintain a long-term sustainable manufacturing company in Australia.

Futurist and demographer Bernard Salt states that 'companies will look for solutions onshore which will drive a renewed need for manufacturing in Australia and that in turn will impact industrial spaces in our cities. Logistics, transport, distribution and warehousing will be growth businesses in a post-Covid environment and there is already increased demand for those roles in the job market.'³⁸

According to Steve Purvis, warehouse consultant, 'post COVID-19, businesses will be looking to build far greater resilience into their supply chain,' which will call for 'greater flexibility' and 'enhanced agility.'³⁹

Tony Pearson, A.H. Beard's CEO, agrees with this approach as he believes it is imperative 'to build flexibility into your manufacturing process and supply chain' while the other challenge is to become, and remain, agile.

Part of building an agile and resilient manufacturing company is to attract, and retain, the right staff. As our nation gradually emerges from the recession and seeks to address the many challenges caused by the pandemic, it is imperative to invest in creating a highly skilled, committed workforce.

Here at MTC Recruitment, we are committed to supporting your business during these difficult times by providing specialist recruitment solutions that help your business, and community, prosper.

Want to know how we can help?

Send a message to recruitment@mtcrecruitment.com.au
or call 02 9914 3270.

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Suite 1, Level 5
91 George Street
Parramatta NSW 2150
p 02 9914 3270
e recruitment@mtcaustralia.com.au
w mtcrecruitment.com.au