

THE **SABPP™**

FACT SHEET

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**EVOLVING NARRATIVES OF
THE NEW NORMAL: BLENDED
WORKPLACES, METAVERSE,
AND WEB 3.0**

INTRODUCTION

As we reflect on the past two years of the pandemic and the changes brought on by it, and on our responses to it, we are beginning to identify the new and emerging contours of our ways of working, living, playing, and relating. The term, 'new normal', has been used to encapsulate this change and the many and continuing shifts in how we work, live, play, and relate to each other. Although it may be an awkward term and brings on questions of what is normal and not, what we may demarcate as new, and whether the new normal is a state or process, the term has gained currency and mainstream use. Given this, the present Fact Sheet uses the term and explores the prevalent narrative of the new normal of the *hybrid* workforce and working arrangements. It suggests the need to critically examine how terms such as 'hybrid' and phrases such as 'hybrid workforce or working arrangements' are used. This means interrogating the prevalent narratives of the new normal and attending to shifts in these.

The Fact Sheet suggests that one of these shifts is the recognition of *blended* workspaces and the blended realities and identities therein. The Fact Sheet aims to open a practical debate among HR practitioners on the blended workspaces, realities, and identities – leaving aside for the moment the more philosophical questions on these realities and identities. That is, a debate on how we can understand and manage these in this new and third year of the pandemic and going forward. Relatedly, the Fact Sheet will incorporate two prominent future trends in the discussion of the evolving new normal of blended realities and identities: the metaverse and Web 3.0. It suggests that blended workspaces, the metaverse, and Web 3.0 will shape the contours of our ways of working, living, playing, and relating. The Fact Sheet first begins with a brief examination of the term, new normal.

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NEW NORMAL?

The term, new normal, has been and continues to be used in varied ways. A quick internet search shows that the term has been used regularly in the past during times of significant social, economic, and political turmoil. For example, it was used during the 2008 financial crisis and with the introduction of the monetary policy of quantitative easing by various central banks. The search also illustrates the bewildering range and volume of descriptions as well as prescriptions of the new normal during the current COVID-19 pandemic. This means there are many views of what is new and what is normal. For present purposes the Fact Sheet will utilise the term new normal to mean the *continuing shifts* in how we work, live, play, and relate to each other. Thus, the question mark in the heading. For it is not clear whether we have now arrived at a complete, fully formed new normal or in the process of arriving at a destination that will be the new 'normal'. That is, whether the new normal is a state or process.

Consider, for example, the debates on the return to the office that began in the latter part of 2020 and the question on whether there is a push to return to the pre-COVID status quo (see the August 2021 Fact Sheet)¹. This may suggest that the new normal may not be a clean break from the 'previous normal'; and that the present is not as clearly defined or definite. That there will be a blend of past and future elements and trends in the present world of work. This means the present can be characterised by hybridity, which means it will include the blending or integration of elements of the past and future as well as splitting or negating of other elements of the past and future.



¹ Relatedly, it is important to note the recent shifts in the macro-economic environment with concerns on inflation and the central banks debating the tapering of quantitative easing and the raising of interest rates, as well as the recent sell off reaction in equity markets and particularly the stocks of technology companies.

NEW NORMAL OF BLENDED WORKSPACES

Over the past two years of the pandemic there has been increasing debate on managing the *hybrid workforce*, with the term 'hybrid' generally used to indicate that the workplace now has both co-located and remote working staff. That is, staff that are physically co-located and working in offices and staff who are working at a remote site or home. These debates included, for example, discussions on managing the performance and wellbeing of the hybrid workforce. There were discussions as well on how the hybrid workforce is evolving – the July 2021 Fact Sheet explored dynamics in hybrid teams, the August 2021 Fact Sheet surveyed the return to the office debate, and the June 2021 Fact Sheet explored wellbeing and stigma in remote and on-site working.

What appears to be implicit in the above discussions on the hybrid workforce is that there are two differentiated sets of employees that we can distinguish based on their *site* of work. Similarly, with the discussion on hybrid working arrangements there is an implicit dichotomy of physical and remote (or digital or virtual). These implicit dichotomies meant, however, that there was no attention to hybridity as in the creation of a new forms of work experiences and arrangements incorporating elements of physical and remote/digital/virtual. For example, there was no exploration of how the physical and remote/digital/virtual workspaces may combine, blend, influence, and disrupt each other. What is becoming clear now, though, is that we will – directly or indirectly – inhabit and be represented in some form or another in the *blend of physical and digital/virtual workspaces*. And this trend becomes more evident when considering developments such as the metaverse and Web 3.0, as will be discussed later.

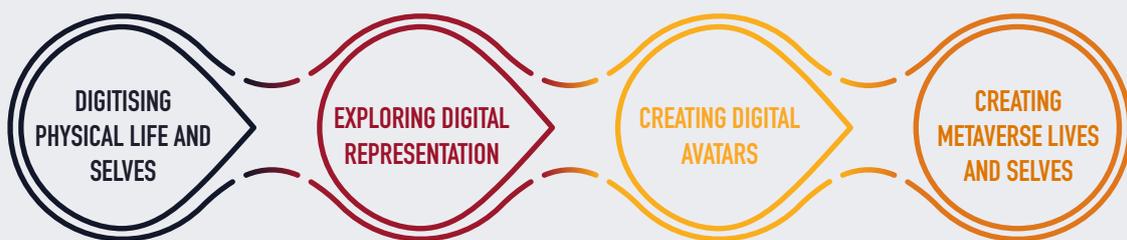
First, we need to recognise that increasingly organisations will comprise of *blended workspaces* and *realities*, no matter its specific hybrid working *arrangements* and *sites* of work. Second, we will inhabit and will be present and/or represented in these blended workspaces and realities, directly and/or indirectly. This means that we cannot see the digital workspaces and virtual realities as a simple extension or carbon copy of the physical workspaces and realities, nor are the digital workspaces simply an additional communication medium for the physical workspaces that can be switched on and off. Similarly, the physical workspace is not just the infrastructure or 'hardware' for the digital workspace and virtual realities, nor simply the wiring and bandwidth for data transfer. As will be discussed below, social media may provide cues of how the digital/virtual and the blended workspaces can evolve. The recent film, ***Matrix Resurrections***, and its philosophical exploration of real and simulated realities as well as the physical and digital/virtual, can also serve as a useful resource in imagining and thinking through the possibilities and complexities of blended workspaces. As one of the characters in the film provocatively poses, we need to consider "*maybe this isn't the story we think it is.*" Maybe we need to reconsider our characterisation and narratives of the new normal and the hybrid (or rather blended) work model.

In distinguishing the physical and digital workspaces, it does not follow that these workspaces are completely separate or insular silos. That would mark a return to the previous implicit dichotomies and neglect to explore hybridity. For we are realising that these workspaces can influence and shape each other in complex ways; and, thus, the use of the description *blended workspaces*. We are beginning to recognise how we can be actively and/or passively present, engaged, and represented in these blended workspaces. We are also

realising how absence and marginalisation can take form in these workspaces, and that our presence and absences within these workspaces can impact on us and our identities, careers, jobs, performance, and wellbeing.

It is not a simple dichotomy, then, of presence or absence in these different workspaces. We need to also recognise how the boundaries between these spaces are shaped and influenced. At times we may experience the boundaries between the physical and digital workspaces blurring and with it the blurring of work, personal, and social spaces. This can be seen as a blending of another form – and we can see this, for example, with how organisations are grappling with employees’ presence and use of social media and the impact on the organisation’s branding and reputation. The blurring of boundaries has been deliberated on by many in terms of the impact of remote working on work-life balance, work and family, and burnout (see the June 2021 Fact Sheet).

We may also experience the possibility of the different physical and digital workspaces affording experimentation with different ways of working, relating, and being. This is already reflected in our social and personal lives with the prevalence of social media profiles and our digital presences or representations in virtual/immersive and augmented realities. Consider how the ways individuals present and represent themselves and inhabit social media and virtual worlds has evolved over time. The below diagram provides a rough schematic, from the shift from digitising one’s physical lives and selves in the form of sharing photos and statuses on social media platforms to creating new digital avatars in virtual worlds or creating new virtual lives, selves, and artifacts in the **metaverse**.



METAVERSE

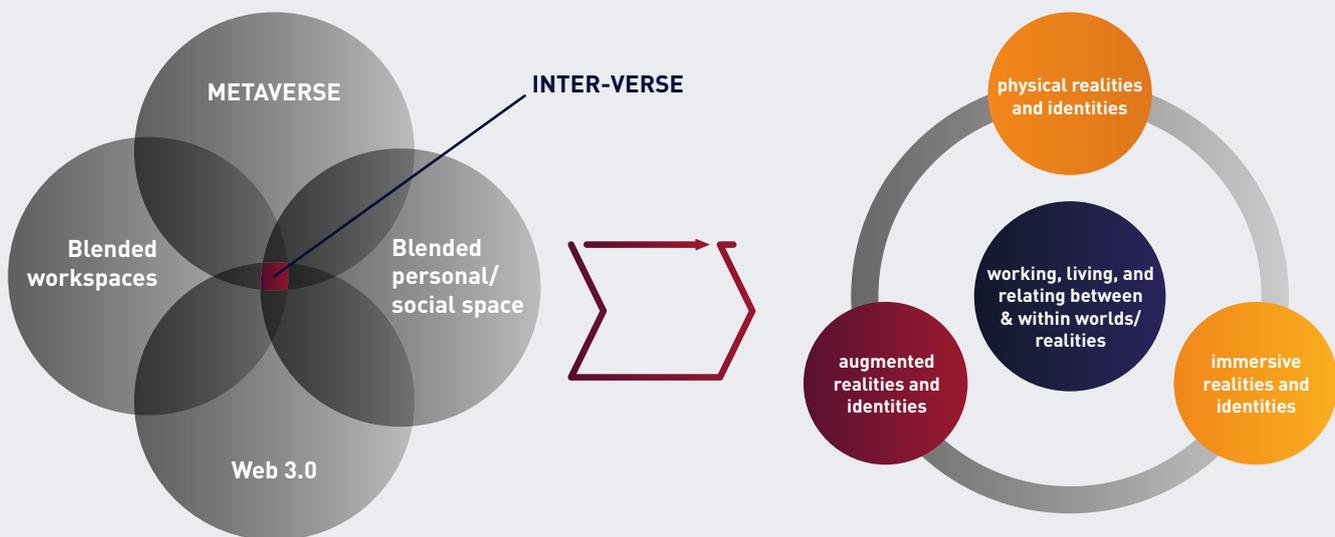
There are various descriptions of the metaverse, the following can be a heuristic description for present purposes. The metaverse is a fully immersive 3D shared virtual ecosystem that is always live and where different virtual worlds are connected to each other; providing a shared space in which you can interact simultaneously with others and their virtual lives and selves through virtual reality (VR) gear (such as Facebook’s Oculus); and can afford some interaction or exchange with the physical world in the future (Benford, 2021; Canavesi, 2022). The massive multiplayer online games (MMOG) and the Second Life platform can give us glimpses of the form and substance of the metaverse. Some suggest that one can include augmented realities as part of the metaverse, while others may differentiate these. Augmented reality requires the use of AR gear such as Google’s Glass and Microsoft’s HoloLens or devices such as AR-enabled smartphones and tablets.

Large tech corporates are investing in the metaverse. We can note how Facebook has changed its name to Meta in its strategy to leverage the metaverse. On augmented and virtual reality in the office, Microsoft has also announced plans for the virtual office (or should we rather say the blended workspace) as well as in virtual immersive gaming and the metaverse. One could suggest that there may be a similar shift in the blended workspaces as with social media (as illustrated above), with the shift from digital presence and representation of our physical selves through profile pictures on Zoom or Teams and the sharing of statuses to creating new digital avatars in virtual workspaces and creating new virtual work lives, selves, and artifacts. This could afford a

web of identities, roles, and experiences for individuals across the different workspaces and within each of them; but also present the same risks and ethical dilemmas that social media present. Consider as well how consulting companies and organisations are exploring the digital transformation and gamification of selection and the learning and development of employees for example (see the August and October 2021 Fact Sheets respectively).

Thus, as HR practitioners we need to critically examine how blended workspaces afford and influence how employees craft their work, job, engagement, roles, identities, learning and development, and career paths through these workspaces. Already organisations are exploring how to leverage social media for learning and development; for example, for collaborating and sharing knowledge or developing communities of practices (SHRM, 2016). As noted previously, organisations are also deliberating on employees' use of social media and how it can reflect on the organisation as an employee may be seen as a representative of the organisation – pointing again to the blurring of work and personal spaces and lives boundaries. Some organisations are reviewing social media profiles of prospective employees, and some consultancies offer psychological profiling based on prospective employee's social media engagements and profile. Individuals though may also profile prospective employers by examining their social media profiles, including how the employees post on the organisation's culture, values, and management and how customers and other stakeholders post on the organisations and its value creation for example. See the Glassdoor website for instance.

Perhaps given the blend of workspaces and the metaverse and multiple virtual world platforms that will likely be developed, one could suggest that we will inhabit and work and relate between many worlds/realities. This we can denote as an inter-verse where we navigate between and within multiple worlds². This can be roughly illustrated as in the diagram below. This means we will inhabit and will experience multiple realities and identities as will be discussed in the next section, from physical, augmented, to virtual immersive realities. This way of thinking of the blended workspace can also enable the HR practitioner to explore how the employee experience and lifecycle will take form in these different realities (see the August 2021 Fact Sheet), as well as the digital divide. And consider potential ethical dilemmas including corporate surveillance and control with the emerging technologies and digital transformation of many aspects of our lives and with the creation of digital avatars (see November 2021 Fact Sheet).



Source: Vantage Lab (2022)

² One could consider the term, multiverse, as an alternative to inter-verse. However, some use the term multiverse to refer to unconnected virtual worlds in contrast to the metaverse which can be seen as an interconnected web of virtual worlds.

In cosmology, the multiverse refers to the theoretical possibility of multiple dimensions and universes. In the present context, the multiple dimensions can be the physical, augmented, and virtual realities with the many different spaces and platforms providing the different possible worlds. The use of inter-verse indicates that we navigate within and between these worlds, and it acknowledges the possible hybridity from navigating these different worlds.

As has been noted before on the digital divide, we need to deliberate on access and inclusion to the multiverses and metaverse. Questions on access and inclusion are being raised in the debates on Web 3.0, as will be noted later.

WEB 3.0

One could also consider the flip side of corporates such as Facebook and Microsoft/LinkedIn developing and controlling the metaverse platforms. That is, the experimentation and investments in decentralised platforms and ways of exchanging goods and value through decentralised ledger technologies (such as blockchains) and digital tokens (such as cryptocurrencies), which some have seen as heralding in **Web 3.0** (Silver, 2020). This means overcoming the reliance on centralised platforms and intermediaries/monopolies such as Facebook and Google, which ‘owns’ your data and the meta-data of your search, exchanges, purchases, interactions, and preferences within the world wide web. And the ability for individuals to control their identity, credentials, data, and the sharing of these on the web. This includes being rewarded for sharing these, rather than the centralised platforms. Together these form the vision of Web 3.0.

Vision of Web 3.0

“In a Web3 world, people control their own data and bounce around from social media to email to shopping using a single personalized (sic) account, creating a public record on the blockchain of all of that activity” (Allyn, 2021)

The table on the right provides a heuristic differentiation of Web 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0 for reference. Note how the organisation row in the table shifts from companies (providing content to read), platforms providing services (such as Facebook, Amazon, and Google), to networks that enable the decentralised ‘creator economy’ (where individuals can exchange value peer-to-peer through blockchains and digital tokens or cryptocurrencies); and, relatedly, the control from centralisation to decentralisation with the shift from platforms to networks (see the November 2021 Fact Sheet on organisational networks).

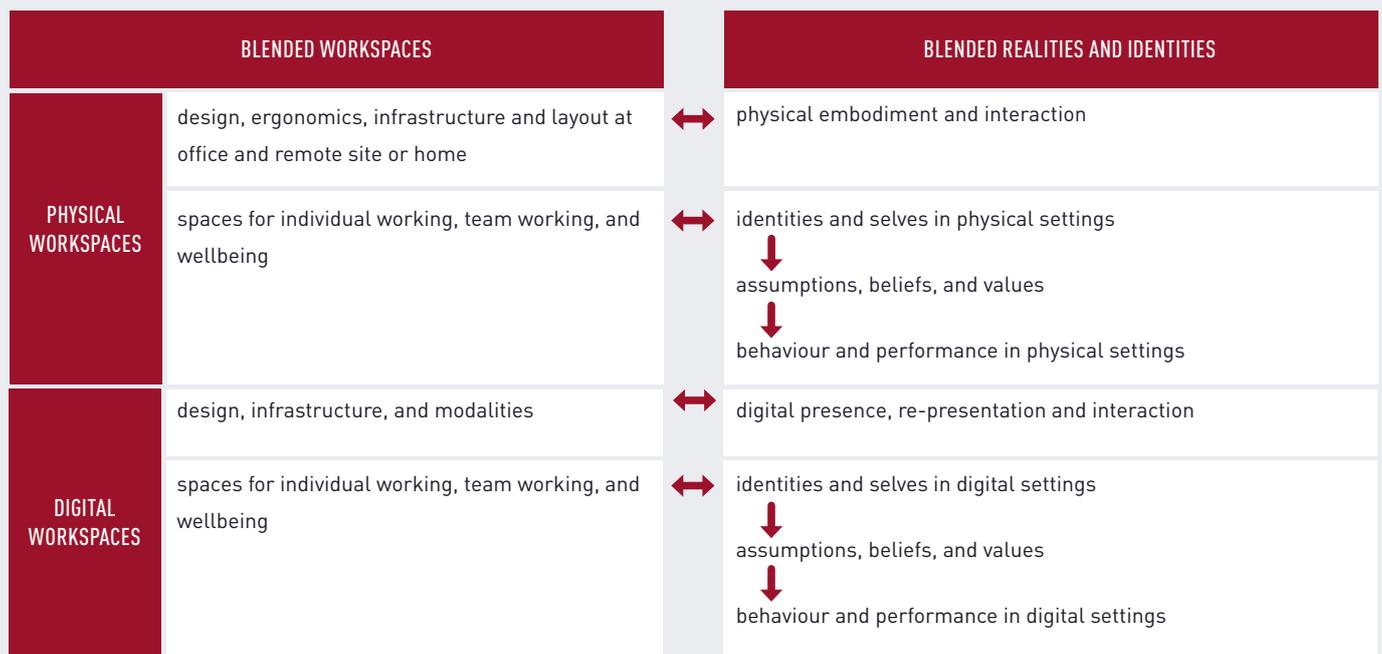
	WEB 1.0	WEB 2.0	WEB 3.0
INTERACT	READ	READ-WRITE	READ-WRITE-OWN
MEDIUM	STATIC TEXT	INTERACTIVE CONTENT	VIRTUAL ECONOMICS
ORGANISATION	COMPANIES	PLATFORMS	NETWORKS
INFRASTRUCTURE	PERSONAL COMPUTERS	CLOUD AND MOBILE	BLOCKCHAIN CLOUD
CONTROL	DECENTRALIZED	CENTRALIZED	DECENTRALIZED

Source: Grayscale (2021)

Decentralised platforms can lead to decentralised ways of working and collaborating for example in the form of decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOs), which depend on automated or smart contracts on a blockchain for the creation, investment in, and the policies and functioning of the DAO. The DAOs do open up questions on ownership of digital profiles, avatars, and digital simulations or copies of ourselves, which we will explore in a future Fact Sheet. We can note here for now that there are questions on whether Web 3.0 is or will be truly decentralised and distributed in ownership given that there are many projects of Web 3.0 that are backed by venture capital. And there are questions of how we define Web 3.0 and whether it can deliver on its vision of decentralisation and distributed ownership of the web through decentralised platforms and protocols. This means that the forms and substance of access and inclusion in Web 3.0 needs to be critically interrogated, including the metaverse.

NEW NORMAL OF BLENDED REALITIES AND IDENTITIES

The blend of workspaces can afford us the possibilities of different experiences and ways of crafting who we are and the roles and work we do. That is, it offers the potential of hybridity, of different and blended realities and identities. One could suggest though that is not a unidirectional relationship. These very realities and identities can also shape and inform the nature of the blended workspaces. We need to be also mindful how these blended workspaces can limit an individual's realities and identities – as previously noted consider access, inclusion, and the digital divide. Thus, there are complex relationships between the blended spaces and the physical, augmented, and virtual realities and identities. The below diagram provides a heuristic framework for deliberating on these complex relationships and how the HR practitioner needs to expand how they view the physical and digital workspaces and the realities and identities therein. They need to also expand on how they view employee experience, engagement, and lifecycle, and how working, teaming, and collaborating takes form and can be facilitated within and across the different physical and digital spaces. Taking a further step, as previously noted, the HR practitioner needs to critically examine how the blended workspaces affords and influences how employees craft their work, job, engagement, roles, identities, learning and development, and career paths through these workspaces. For example, there are questions raised on how remote working or working from home has impacted colleagues from learning from each other through observation and 'learning by osmosis' (or peer and informal learning (Jones, 2021)).



Source: Vantage Lab (2022)

CONCLUSION

The new normal of blended workspaces, the metaverse, and Web 3.0, and the realities and identities therein, presents both opportunities and challenges for organisations and HR practitioners. This includes potential ethical dilemmas, including the blurring of boundaries, corporate surveillance and control, and the unintended consequences of hybridity. The first step is for HR practitioners to understand the stories or narratives we are crafting of this new normal, and how we are using terms such as hybrid and blended and how we think or imagine the blended workspaces, realities, and identities are evolving. To return to the earlier quotation from the film, *Matrix Resurrections*, we need to pause and always ask ourselves, “maybe this isn’t the story we think it is.”

This fact sheet was written by:

Dr Ajay Jivan:

SABPP Head of Research and Assurance,
Director at Vantage Lab,
and Clinical Psychologist



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