

The COVID-19 journey

Few events throughout A.G. Coombs' 75-year history have challenged the status quo like the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the challenges experienced by staff personally, and the Group as a whole, A.G. Coombs has led from the front as the building services industry navigates a new kind of normal.

Amidst the news reports of Australia's devastating bushfire season in the summer of 2019/20, news of a different threat was emerging from further afield with the first signs of the COVID-19 pandemic.

By February 2020, this potential threat was receiving critical analysis by A.G. Coombs management as it traded knowledge and gained an international perspective from colleagues within its Global Peer Group.

Planning immediately commenced on the company's OH&S response, with existing systems enhanced to manage the health risks while maintaining essential services. Meanwhile, A.G. Coombs Projects discovered the depth of government preparations when it was briefed on the refurbishment of the former Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre into a COVID-19-specific healthcare facility.

The COVID-19 pandemic had officially arrived in Australia.

In the weeks and months that followed, Australians would be challenged like never before as state and federal governments placed a variety of restrictions on business activity, social interaction and movement.

At the forefront of the A.G. Coombs response to COVID-19 has been the health, safety and job security of its people, and maintaining the essential services critical to the ongoing operation of its clients' properties and facilities.

Vital to this was the work conducted by the A.G. Coombs Workplace Health and Safety team. Utilising new and existing technology, a daily COVID-19 questionnaire was implemented and became mandatory for all staff - whether located on site, in the office or working from home.

"Understanding our people's health in real-time has been critical to the management of our response, and maintaining our safe presence at client sites around Australia," says Luke Snell, A.G. Coombs Workplace Health and Safety Manager.

COVID-safe plans were progressively implemented in compliance with both government and client requirements, while technology provided full visibility of the movement patterns of staff working on sites around the country.

Out in the field, A.G. Coombs technicians navigated the complexity of restricted site access and maintained building services operations and services by working collaboratively with clients. Site-based check-in systems and adherence to COVID-safe plans quickly became business-as-usual.

"Ours is an industry already familiar with the management of health and safety on site," says Gareth Whitfield, A.G. Coombs Servicing



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General Manager. "COVID-19 added an unprecedented level of complexity and volume to this management, but we have been equal to the task."

"The company's response, from our technicians in the field through to the industry leadership reflected in our COVID-19 Advisory Notes, has given clients the confidence to support us in continuing our vital work."

Often working in isolation in near-empty buildings and across what have, at times, been deserted cities has presented both challenges and opportunities for A.G. Coombs' Service and Projects teams. While some works were interrupted, others were brought forward to take advantage of the low occupancy levels of commercial office buildings.

"Maintaining client relationships during this time has been important, and in many cases we have become the eyes and ears for our clients on site," says Travis Gunn, A.G. Coombs Service Technician.

Scalable labour strategies also allowed A.G. Coombs to shift some of its workforce from construction sites to offsite prefabrication in controlled, COVID-safe environments.

Relocated to a secure facility in Port Melbourne, the National Customer Service Centre (NCSC) has fulfilled its important customer-focused function unabated.

Split into two isolated teams, the NCSC has logged in excess of 10,000 service calls since the pandemic began while maintaining the important interface between property and facility management clients and A.G. Coombs technicians, and our trusted service providers Australia-wide.

"Adaptation and agility is part of our DNA at A.G. Coombs," says Jodi Whelan, National Customer Service Centre Manager.

"Early mobilisation in response to COVID-19 ensured that we have kept our people safe and allowed us to adapt our service delivery

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model to maintain the high level of client service the company is known for."

While the affects of the pandemic may be significant for many businesses, A.G. Coombs has recognised that some impacts will result in positive, permanent changes that will be of long-lasting benefit to the business and its people.

"A.G. Coombs is a strong, well-managed business with an ingrained change-management philosophy," says A.G. Coombs (Projects) General Manager, Mark Mitchell.

"Throughout 2020, our people have demonstrated their capability to be agile and adapt to the circumstances that have presented themselves. This ability to handle the pace of change in the coming months and years will ensure A.G. Coombs continues to lead the building services industry from the front" **be**