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ABCN honoured on the 2021 AFR BOSS Most Innovative Companies List

The Australian Business and Community Network (ABCN) is incredibly proud to be recognised as one of Australia and New Zealand's Most Innovative Companies. The prestigious [annual list, published by The Australian Financial Review and BOSS magazine today](#), named ABCN as one of the top 10 most innovative organisations in Government, Education and Not-for-Profits.

The support and collaboration of ABCN's network of member companies to enable our innovation was – and continues to be – critical to our success.

'As soon as COVID-19 hit, we sought to understand from our partner schools what students in disadvantaged communities needed,' ABCN CEO Allegra Spender said. 'The willingness of our member companies to leave no stone unturned in helping us to support our high-needs students was incomparable.'

ABCN's submission, *Careers Virtual Mentoring (for Students at High-needs Schools)*, outlined our innovative, rapid response to the fallout of the pandemic, which immediately exposed Australia's educational digital divide. Working closely with our schools, ABCN used a design-thinking approach to innovate in two key ways:

- › rapidly transforming our mentoring programs from predominantly in-person delivery to flexible, virtual delivery across multiple platforms nationwide.
- › harnessing the power of our member companies to donate data and devices to students with limited or no digital access.

Between April 2020 and June 2021, ABCN created eight virtual mentoring programs and delivered 364 sessions online, connecting 5,631 high school students to mentors.

ABCN member companies have donated laptops to almost 2,000 students lacking appropriate devices, while Optus has donated data plans to more than a thousand students lacking adequate internet access.

Our digital transformation meant that we could keep mentors and students connected even during lockdowns, so crucial for maintaining wellbeing and optimism during turbulent times. As one Victorian student said during the long Melbourne lockdown: 'Thank you so much for converting the program online and allowing us to participate in this amazing experience despite the current circumstances with COVID-19. I feel very grateful to my wonderful mentor, and all the staff who made this possible.'

ABCN now delivers programs in-person, virtually to students in class or to students at home during remote learning. Digital delivery also provides volunteer mentors with opportunities to remain engaged while working remotely. Our transformation has also enabled us to expand our reach to disadvantaged communities outside metropolitan areas, including to regional, remote and increased numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (see backgrounder on page 2).

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EXAMPLES OF OUR INNOVATIONS

ABCN has been developing our digital capabilities since 2019. A snapshot of initiatives developed since COVID-19 hit include:

> [The Empower program](#) is emblematic of ABCN's approach to innovation over the past 18 months. Developed as a direct result of COVID-19, it is our first program designed for pure digital delivery. *Empower* aims to equip students with the confidence, behaviours and mindsets needed to prepare for the rapidly changing world of work, with a focus on practical strategies for developing resilience and wellbeing.

> [GOALS for First Nations students](#) is a customised version of our flagship GOALS program, which focuses on the importance of setting goals and continuing Year 9 students' education to Year 12 and beyond. This digital version has been tailored as part of a three-year project to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with input from the NSW Department of Education and specialist educators.

> [Program delivery to Regional, Rural and Remote \(RRR\)](#) areas has been made possible through the rapid digitisation of ABCN's program offering. This three-year project aims to support RRR students by connecting them with inspiring mentors from our member companies, exposing them to a wider range of industries and employers than they would normally have access to.

ABOUT ABCN

The [Australian Business Community Network \(ABCN\)](#) is a purpose-led, not-for-profit organisation that brings businesses and schools together to address educational disadvantage. Established in 2005, ABCN is a national network of more than 40 member companies and 200 partner schools that, together, deliver [mentoring programs](#) to students. The schools we work with are located in low socio-economic status communities. Our structured, fully facilitated mentoring programs connect students with volunteer mentors to develop students' confidence, skills and aspirations to prepare them for the changing world of work. More than 200,000 students and 50,000 corporate volunteers have participated in our mentoring and other initiatives since inception.

ABOUT THE AFR BOSS MOST INNOVATIVE COMPANIES LIST

Previously known as the *BRW* Most Innovative Companies list and now in its ninth year, this list ranks the most innovative organisations in Australia and New Zealand, by industry. In 2021, the list comprised 10 industry lists, compiled from more than 700 nominations. The only national list of its kind, it is created by Inventium, Australia's leading innovation consultancy. Submissions were rigorously assessed by Inventium and a panel of industry experts. Judges looked at how valuable the problem is that the innovation is solving, the quality and uniqueness of the solution, the level of impact and the ability to sustain the innovation.

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