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From survive to thrive:
The future of work in a
post-pandemic world



At the start of the pandemic, we outlined three key phases that resilient leaders would have to navigate in leading their organizations through the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Respond:** How an organization deals with the present situation and manages continuity
- **Recover:** How an organization learns and emerges stronger
- **Thrive:** How an organization prepares for and shapes the “new normal”

Most organizations’ first priority was **respond**—making key decisions and changes that focused on health, safety, essential services, and the virtualization of work.

As organizations emerged from the **respond** phase and transitioned into **recover**, organizational leaders began assessing their current situation and taking key steps to plan for the future, adjusting their perspective based on this evolving new normal in a world of perpetual disruption.

In **recover**, we encouraged leaders to take five key actions—reflect, recommit, reengage, rethink, and reboot—to begin planning and strengthening their position in the market.

The **respond** and **recover** phases delivered mixed outcomes: uplifts in workforce productivity and engagement against a backdrop of well-being challenges and increased anxiety—all accompanied by a near-constant stream of shifting social and cultural currents.

As we’ve entered 2021, it’s time to look forward. While leaders continue to **respond** to and **recover** from new challenges, we must proactively define what the “new normal” could mean for work, the workforce, and the workplace. Now is the time for organizations and leaders to navigate to **thrive**.

What’s clear is that thriving in the future will not mean the absence of challenges and disruptions. Rather, it means adapting, adjusting, prioritizing, and creating resilience to manage through instability. Thriving means not only planning for the [return to work in the future of work](#) but embracing the new insights and capabilities that COVID-19 has accelerated to reimagine the future altogether.

It's not the future we envisioned

Starting the shift toward thriving first requires an honest reflection on the outcomes of the acceleration to the future of work that we have experienced over the past year.

Let's start with the upside. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen organizations and workers rise to the occasion—unveiling human potential at its best. Whether it's individuals more freely adopting remote or virtual work, seeking out new ways to collaborate, being more deliberate about what work is essential and what work outcomes matter most, or leveraging the power of technology in new and different ways, working differently and challenging the orthodoxies of the past define the new era we've entered.

However, we've also seen several unintended consequences. The deterioration of worker well-being, increased anxiety¹ and isolation, and the loss of a sense of belonging have been recurring themes across enterprises.² We have created an environment where we want to do more with less. The average workday has lengthened by 48.5 minutes,³ with 13% more meetings each day, leading to increasing rates of burnout.⁴ Fifty-seven percent of mothers and 32% of fathers of children younger than 18 report that their mental health has deteriorated during the pandemic.⁵ And the impacts on women have been profound: Studies show that nearly 60% of jobs lost in the United States due to COVID-19 were held by women,⁶ and mothers in the United Kingdom were 47% more likely to have lost their jobs than fathers during the pandemic.⁷

Why is this important?

According to [Deloitte's 2020 Human Capital Trends report](#), 96% of respondents said well-being was a responsibility of organizations. But 79% of respondents say that well-being is not designed or integrated into the workplace itself.

These unintended consequences should not come as a surprise. They are logical outcomes of the same flawed thinking that has been happening in the future of work for decades.

Throughout the technology evolutions that have shaped the modern workplace, from the invention of the steam engine to the personal computer to the smartphone, we have designed work without regard to the worker. Work has been the sum of a series of tasks and activities, grouped into processes and measured by output, organized in an assembly line, and automated by machines.

With the onset of the fourth industrial revolution and the development of smart machines and cognitive technologies, we started to do the same thing that we have always done. We implemented software to complete routine tasks, generated enormous amounts of data, and pushed human workers to keep up with robots on the factory floor. But we failed to create new value by unleashing human ingenuity, focusing on efficiency rather than reimagining the nature of work and what humans are capable of achieving.

Highlighting the importance of humans in work, one global retailer recently ended its contract with the robotics company that provided shelf-scanning machines to its stores. This was a significant reversal from its former plans to expand deployment of the robots from 500 to 1,000 stores. The retailer plans to replace the robots with human workers, putting work at the center and focusing on factors such as the exception handling and fine motor skills that the work requires.

We shifted and untethered the workforce to support the freelance and gig economy without fundamentally rethinking how to connect workers to the organization, to its purpose, and to human relationships. We have focused on the digital experience, but underestimated the various factors that build a compelling workforce experience: well-being, a sense of belonging, and a desirable workplace environment where workers can contribute their full potential.⁸

We have moved workers to virtual work models and asked them to collaborate with increasingly global and virtual teams. However, we have not embraced the opportunity to redesign the physical and digital workplace or the organizational structures and leadership capabilities required to optimize individual and team potential in a flexible work environment.

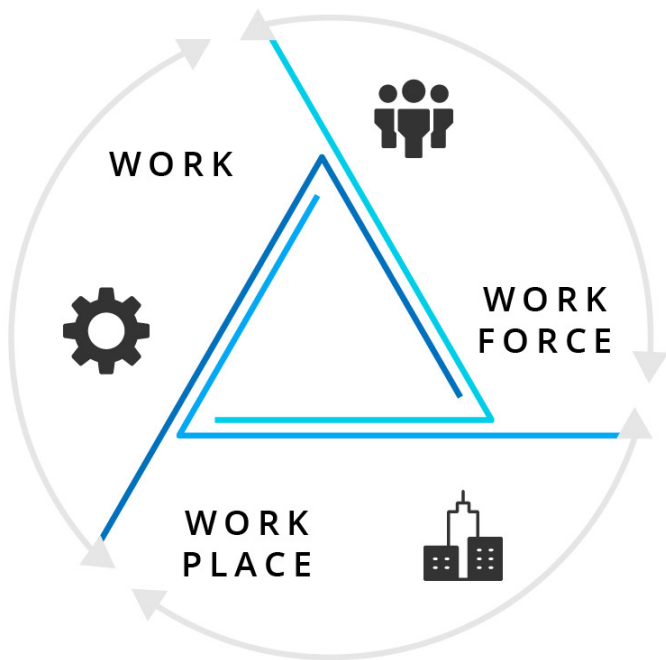
And many of us have responded to the pandemic as if it was a "passing storm,"⁹ executing as if there is an end in sight with an expectation of reverting to business as usual once the crisis is over. We have been slow to recognize the foundational shifts the pandemic has produced and to take the actions required to create long-term resilience.

The difference now is that we have a chance to make a change. We have the opportunity to hit the reset button to reimagine norms and assumptions in ways that were not possible before. We can realign the nature of work, the workforce, and the workplace to build resilience for the long haul. We have the opportunity to thrive.

We should take the time to step back and consider: If organizations have been forced to accelerate to the future of work because of the constraints of COVID-19, what choices can we make once the constraints come off? Is the future of work we've seen over the past 10 months the same one we want for the next 10 years?

With that focus, it's time to shift the thinking from continued recovery to thriving. Where do we want to go? How quickly? And how will we get there?

Figure 1



WORK

- ✓ Activities 🏆 Value of Work
- 🎯 Outcomes of Work

WORKFORCE

- 🧑 Skills 👤 Jobs
- 👤 Human Capabilities 👤 Talent Operations

WORKPLACE

- 📱 Technology 🌐 Culture
- 📍 Geographic Location 🏢 Physical Design
- 📶 Digital Collaboration

A human approach

Since we began writing about the future of work, we have framed it in terms of three deeply interconnected dimensions: work (the what), the workforce (the who), and the workplace (the where) (figure 1). However, the effects of the pandemic have helped us recognize that there is a missing piece in this framework. Where many have focused on the technological implications of these dimensions, we believe the focus should be on designing a future of work that is essentially human. As one very well-known technology CEO recently told us, “We’re in a truly human moment.”¹⁰ And it is because of that missing human dimension that the unintended consequences of the pandemic have emerged, creating this moment of opportunity to course-correct and humanize the future of work.

Humanizing the future of work is not about putting people ahead of machines. Instead, it’s about creating an environment where organizations can optimize human potential

in today’s technology-driven world. It is about empowering workers with agency and choice over what they do, unleashing their interests and passions to organizational strategy and needs. Humanizing the future of work will require leaders to:

- 1. Set the enterprise mindset:** Drive the importance of humanizing the future of work as a strategic priority at the enterprise level. This requires focused and strategic coordination and collaboration in and around the entire enterprise. It means engaging leaders across functions who hold accountability for the work and its outcomes to create clarity of purpose—including alignment around the mission of the organization, what it delivers, and why it exists.
- 2. Recognize that the biggest motivator for humans is work itself:** Formulate a vision for the future by putting work at the center and defining the new future work outcomes you want to achieve. Then get

people inspired and energized about those work outcomes. This means focusing on the way in which work drives human connection, innovation, and creativity. Envision and pursue the new value you can release through humans working productively with technology.

- 3. Reorient from past performance to future potential:** Focus on human potential as the largest and most valuable asset that an organization has, and drive the future of work vision and strategy through the art of the possible. Potential is one of the three attributes that we discussed in our [2020 Global Human Capital Trends](#) report that must be infused across all three dimensions of work, the workforce, and the workplace in order to place humans squarely back at the center.

Ultimately, humanizing the future of work means shifting from concept to action. We see three significant shifts for work, the workforce, and the workplace, as outlined below:

From concept to action
WORK→RE-ARCHITECT

The shift: From process to flow

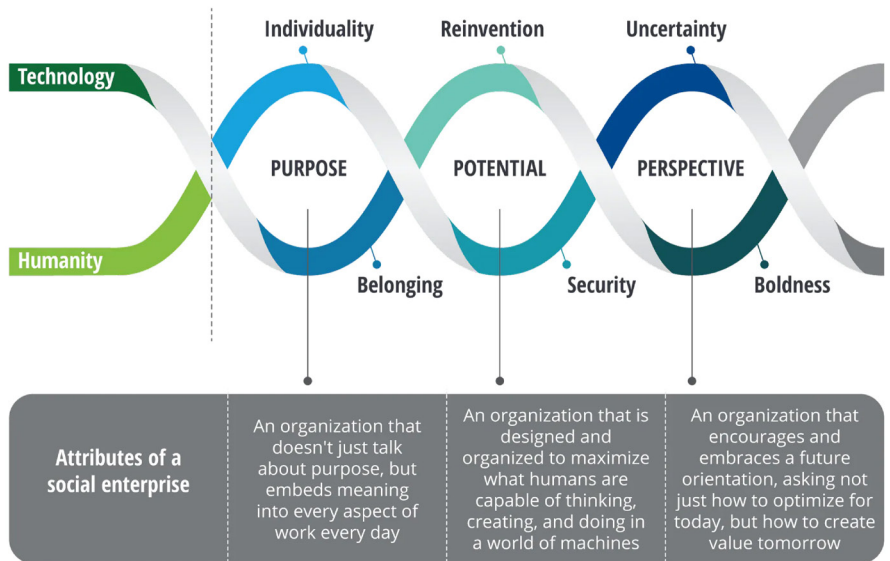
As we've examined the "work" dimension over the past decade, our focus has largely been on technology and how it can disrupt processes and automate routine tasks. As a result, we have been using outdated models, searching for efficiencies and process optimization opportunities without looking at the underlying principles of what work is and how it gets done.

When we design the future of work without addressing the work itself, we miss the opportunity to unlock real value—for customers, the organization, the workforce, and society at large. Work is not just a series of steps or outputs. Work is what motivates and inspires people. Work is the center point for creativity and innovation. Work conveys purpose and meaning and builds human connection, bringing people together to get things done. Today, work is increasingly owned by a network of teams, building and owning the entire value chain of creation. And, if done right, it is the source of productivity and bottom-line results.

Our [2021 Global Human Capital Trends survey](#) validated this shift in how business executives are considering the topic of work. Sixty-one percent of those executives reported that they are focusing on work reimagining going forward, as opposed to 29% before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In re-architecting work, we must start by acknowledging that humans don't work the same way machines do. Humans work in a more fluid manner, responding through movement, momentum, creativity, and exploration, often changing course and tactics to achieve new outcomes and make possible new aspirations. How can organizations re-architect work to unlock

Figure 2



Source: Deloitte analysis

human potential by aligning with how humans actually think and engage—rather than optimizing a robotic process flow?

How to get started

Good architects put the "why" of a building front and center in their design. Re-architecting work means doing the same thing: starting with our future vision and future work outcomes, as well as the value and meaning we seek to achieve. We can re-architect work by:

- Defining future work aspirations and outcomes by challenging leadership and the workforce to think about the art of the possible for what human potential can achieve
- Understanding the broad set of technology capabilities that exist to transform work and applying them to enable and elevate human capabilities
- Thinking past process optimization by placing work outcomes at the center and focusing on unlocking the flow of work

WORKFORCE→UNLEASH THE WORKFORCE

The shift: From structure to capabilities and potential

In defining the workforce as a key dimension in the future of work, we largely emphasized changes to who can do the work, with technological advancements enabling new models for interaction between organizations, workers, and customers. Over the course of the past few decades, the workforce has become increasingly unleashed and broadly disrupted, with a slow shift away from the traditional employer-employee relationship. On the demand side, employers have been rethinking what roles can be transitioned to a virtual or hybrid model, as well as a rapid increase in job postings for freelancer positions. On the supply side, an increasing percentage of workers want work that is geographically flexible and provide opportunities beyond a stated job description. We are unlikely to go back to a time when most talent was constrained by the old models of our organizations—nor should we want to. However, it is also clear that the current model is not yet unleashing human potential, given the high level of

uncertainty and diminished sense of trust in organizations. The key to success going forward is tethering the unleashed workforce to the organizational mission. By building a sense of connection, both to the work itself and to the larger organizational ecosystem, workers will accelerate and enhance their ability to contribute their full potential in a meaningful way to the overall organizational objective.

The need to enable workers to fulfill their potential is clear. [Our 2021 Global Human Capital Trends survey](#) found that executives believe that the number-one factor in being prepared to thrive in a world of perpetual disruption is the ability for workers to adapt, reskill, and assume new roles. Yet only 17% of those executives believe their workforce is ready to do so.

How can organizations know the true capabilities and potential of their workforce beyond the bullets of their job description? How do they build and augment their workforce's capabilities through technology, all while encouraging their workforce's energy and motivation to do meaningful work?

How to get started

Unleashing the workforce means challenging how we think about the workforce itself. As the pandemic has highlighted, workers are more than the work that they do; they are humans with stories, drive, and limitless potential for flexibility. With this mindset, we need to look beyond the skills for which individuals were hired and instead focus on the workforce's potential, capabilities, motivation, and capacities. We can unleash the workforce by:

- Building a strategy for accessing the capabilities required to achieve future work outcomes from across a broader talent ecosystem
- Harnessing technology to help identify and unleash human potential within and beyond the organization (such as by building an internal opportunity marketplace)

- Curating personalized and elevated experiences that give workers the opportunity to contribute their full potential and develop in the flow of work—and in the flow of life

WORKPLACE→ADAPT THE WORKPLACE

The shift: From physical workplace to organization and culture

When we first defined the workplace as a key dimension in the future of work, we challenged organizations to consider where the work could be done and what physical environment (including technology and design) would make the workplace most conducive to delivering the work outcomes desired. As COVID-19 has now made clear, the workplace is not limited to the physical building, plant, or office. It also includes the broader environment that workers operate in—their home environments as well as their work environments—and even the spaces and coffee shops in between.

But we need to go even further. We need to recognize that the workplace also includes the organization's design, processes, tools, policies, and ways of working, as well as the ways in which leaders develop and foster culture through expectations around how to collaborate, engage, and relate to each other. Successfully achieving such a workplace depends on viewing the organization as both a structural construct that needs to be engineered for efficiency and a social construct that needs to be nurtured to bring out the best in people.

Expanding the way we think about the workplace does not mean we should ignore or underestimate the important, intangible goods cultivated in a physical setting—collaboration, connection, social interaction, creative collision, innovation, social bonding, and lifelong learning. Rather, it creates the opportunity to rethink the workplace as “phy-gital”—integrating the best of physical space with digital practice while embracing constant change.

To create a new workplace experience that supports these new behaviors and a growing virtual work ecosystem, adaptability is imperative. How do we rethink the workplace to become more adaptable when work and the workforce are no longer restricted to a physical structure?

The trend for marketplace adoption accelerated as COVID-19 impacted both the supply and demand sides of talent, triggering a need for greater agility around workforce deployment and talent preservation. Consumer goods company Unilever, used its internal talent marketplace, FLEX Experiences, to redeploy more than 8,000 employees during the pandemic and 300,000 hours of employee work.¹¹

How to get started

To embrace adaptability in the workplace, we must build a nuanced understanding of the workforce's preferences, as well as the environments in which they are working—from their homes and commutes to their leaders, teams, work patterns, and the collaboration platforms they use. Only then can we create a work environment that will optimize their potential and contribution, empowering all workers with the tools, technologies, and culture to execute and grow. We can adapt the workplace by:

- Redesigning the physical and digital environment with a focus on collaboration and the role of the physical workplace as a destination for innovation, networking, and culture-building
- Focusing on leadership capabilities, ensuring leaders create a culture of trust and confidence that provides the sense of belonging and safety where the entire workforce can thrive
- Prioritizing well-being in a meaningful way through bold shifts in how work gets done, recognizing the shifts in work patterns and preferences accelerated by COVID-19

So, WTF (what's the future)?

It is imperative to recognize that redefining the human dimension of work is not a destination. It is a way of transforming and evolving with a strategic focus on work and the organization's purpose, meaning, and value.

By shifting the way we think about work, the workforce, and workplaces—and by focusing on re-architecting work, unleashing human potential, and adapting the workplace environment—organizations can build resilience, capitalize on their ability to evolve with dynamic stability, and start to thrive. This evolution is a continuous process, without a single point of entry. Each organization will face its own set of challenges and opportunities to accelerate forward. But the destination is clear: a future designed around the human dimension of work, one that promises to unleash the energy and endless possibilities of human potential and, in turn, create lasting value for workers, their organizations, and society at large.

Becoming truly adaptable rests on four key pillars

1. Simplify the organizational architecture to remove unintended complexity and drive focus. Create a network of teams, remove silos, flatten the organization, simplify the collaboration and decision-making processes to allow for agile responses to external and internal forces.

2. Design everything around "experience," from the organizational structure to the physical workplace, as well as around a clear sense of the outcomes you are driving. This will enable you to focus the design of both the organization and the workplace to support that shared work.

3. Be human-centered by treating employees as the "customer" of the operating model and working environment, emphasizing employee needs and preferences in both the physical and digital realm.

4. Transcend organizational boundaries to better sense what is around the corner. The workplace no longer ends at the exit of the office; it is infused into the physical and digital fabric of the current and potential workforce, customers, and ecosystem. By being open to new possibilities and taking their heads off the page, organizations can anticipate future needs and opportunities.



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