

A photograph of an office environment with several people working at desks. In the foreground, a woman with long dark hair is wearing a green patterned face mask and looking at a laptop. To her right, a man with dark curly hair is seen from the back, also working. In the background, another man is leaning over a desk, and a woman is talking on a headset. The image is partially obscured by a large red geometric shape on the left and bottom, and a dark grey semi-transparent overlay on the right.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR WORK

It's a story stranger than fiction. Overnight, the COVID-19 pandemic redefined what it means to "go to work." Millions of workers around the world traded their conference room meetings and office commutes for video calls and a spot on the couch. Masks became the new uniform and hygiene hypervigilance the new mandate for those who needed to stay on the frontlines. For many, modified operations created new or additional job duties, some of which required learning new skills.

A month of this strange dystopia turned into two, then three, then four and before we knew it nearly a year had flown by. The story of work amid a pandemic isn't over yet. But when the dust finally settles, what's next? Which of the changes adopted out of necessity will recede with the virus, and which will endure?

The answer is simpler than you might think: The changes that will stand the test of time are those that made businesses and their people more resilient in the face of adversity. Because while the pandemic may be a once-in-a-lifetime Black Swan event, the rate of disruption is accelerating. The resilience traits businesses needed to fuel their recovery—greater speed, transparency, flexibility, collaboration and creativity—will be no less essential even when the pandemic is long behind us. Companies that continue to adapt their organizations to embrace and enhance these traits will unlock more revenue at higher margins and in shorter timeframes.

So forget about going back to how things were. Reimagine not what work could look like, but what it *should* look like in a post-pandemic world in which the way we work, where we work and even why we work has been forever altered.

What's next for work, and what should you do about it?

We break down the trends in three categories:



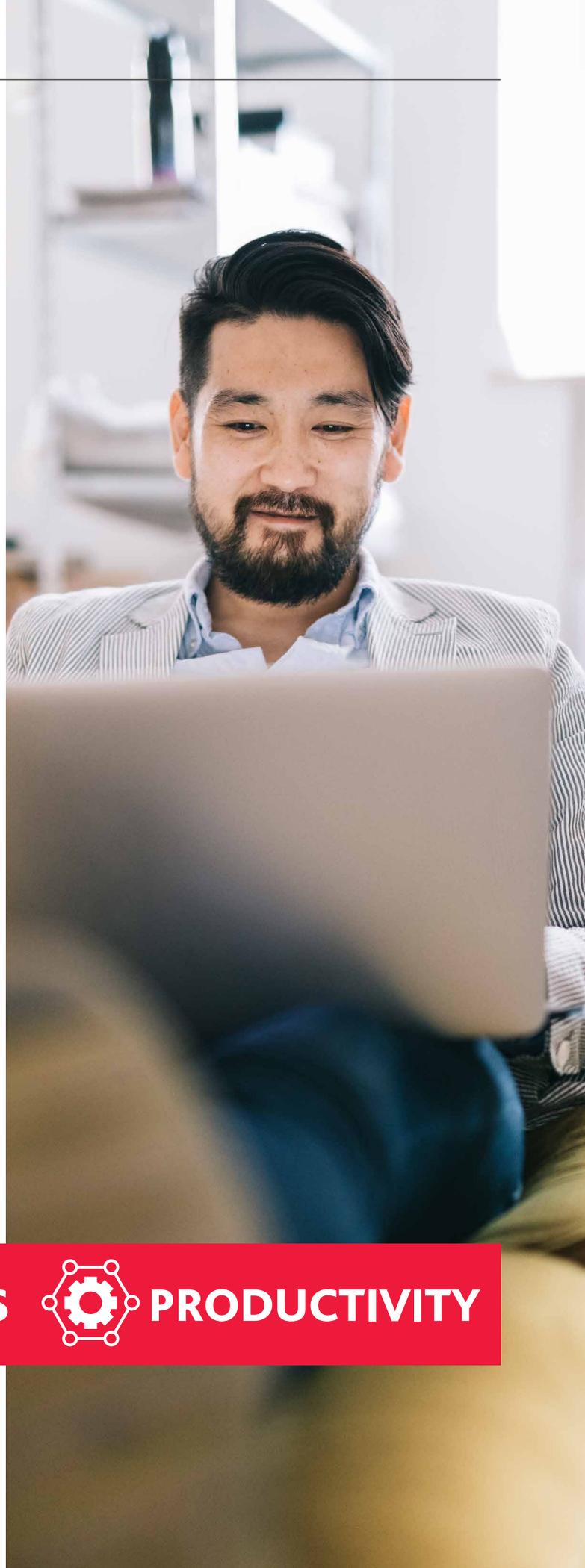
PEOPLE



PLACES



PRODUCTIVITY





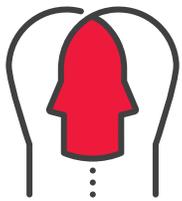
PEOPLE

The story at the heart of the pandemic is one of human resilience—people adapting to their new circumstances and continuing to perform despite personal and professional hardship. The businesses that have prevailed through the coronavirus recession have done so on the strength of their people. At the start of the crisis, the workforce was forced to adapt; now organizations must adapt to their workforce.

TREND #1: THE EMPATHETIC LEADER

The pressures of COVID-19 placed higher demands on executives to become better leaders—more decisive in the face of unpredictability, more inspiring amid fear and confusion, and more compassionate with anxious and fatigued employees. Leaders were given windows into their employees' personal lives in a way that they never previously had. With that came the expectation that they would expose more of their own true selves. Executives had to walk a tightrope between showing up authentically and exuding calm and confidence under pressure. More than ever, employees needed their leadership to have all the answers. This crash course in effective leadership brought five longstanding traits into sharper focus:

5 TRAITS OF GREAT LEADERS



EMPATHY

understanding employees' unique experiences and their hopes, dreams, fears and motivations



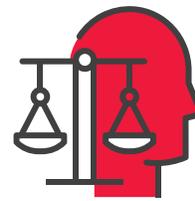
AUTHENTICITY

building real relationships and a culture of openness and honesty



AGILITY

incorporating new ideas, strategies and perspectives for new challenges



INTEGRITY

aligning business goals with a higher common purpose



COURAGE

challenging the status quo and make bold moves amid uncertainty

WHAT'S NEXT: While these leadership traits have become crucial in crisis, they will continue to define effective leadership when it abates. Employees' standards for what good leadership looks like will be higher when the pressure is off. To capitalize on emerging opportunities, leaders will need to be agile learners, comfortable in ambiguity, and fearless in the pursuit of purpose and necessary change. And to make these pivots possible, they will need to continue to build trust and create a shared sense of purpose at every level of the organization.



TREND #2: THE SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS EMPLOYEE

The socially conscious employee isn't a COVID-19 phenomenon. Changing worldviews on issues like climate change, human rights and equality, amplified by social media, have given rise to a generation of workers with a greater sense of civic responsibility in both their personal and professional lives. At the same time, increasing polarization is fueling passionate—and sometimes divergent—viewpoints in the workplace on the role businesses should play on everything from climate change to politics to racial injustice. By and large, people want to work for organizations that not only embrace their views but take a stand for them.

The existential threat of COVID-19 as well as increased awareness and advocacy around racial inequality have magnified the importance of getting more out of work than a paycheck. Faced with their own mortality and isolated from people they love, many workers are questioning what they do and why they do it. Doing well at work isn't enough anymore; they want to do well by doing good. Taking a risk on a career switch or heading back to school feels less perilous after living through a global pandemic. If they look for meaning in their work and come up short, they may be out the door as soon as the job market recovers.

WHAT'S NEXT: The search for meaning in work is a tale as old as time, but the fulcrum between meaning and money has shifted. Ethical business practices are now a baseline expectation; leaders shouldn't expect employees to stick around if their integrity is in question. The new standard is business with an authentic higher purpose. For a growing number of employees, purpose trumps personal profit.



“

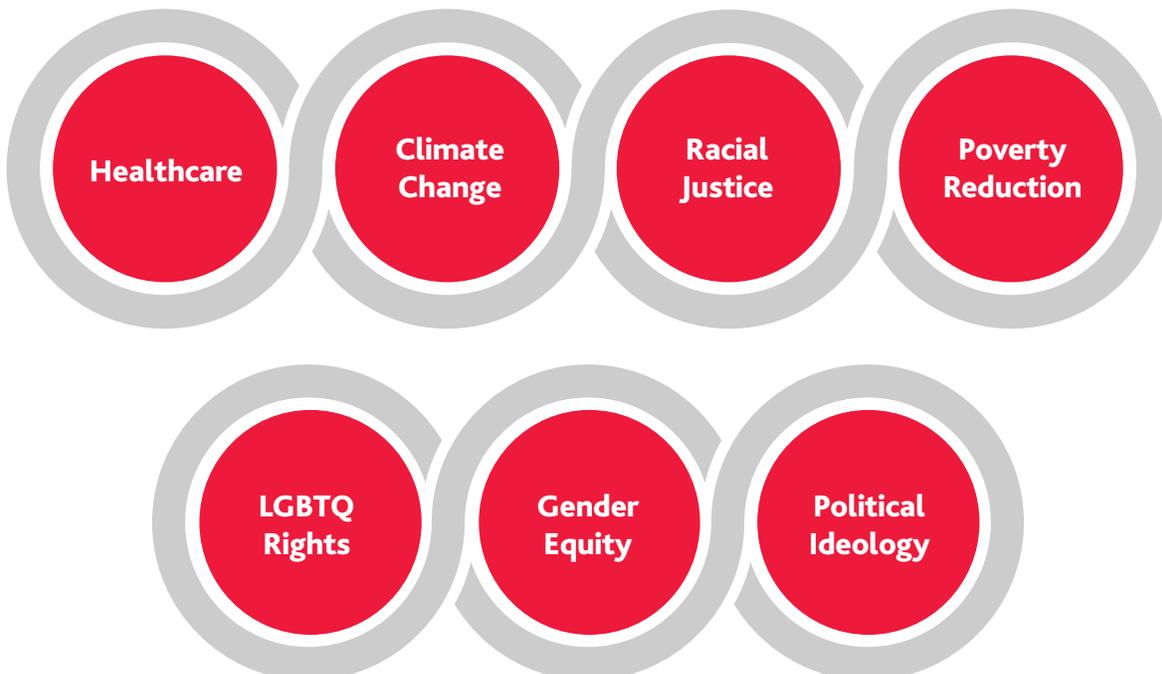
Your employees want to change the world. Our job, as leaders, is to give them the permission, perspective and pathways to do it.



CATHY MOY
BDO Chief People Officer

”

SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS CAUSES IN 2021 & BEYOND



TREND #3: THE DIVERSITY IMPERATIVE

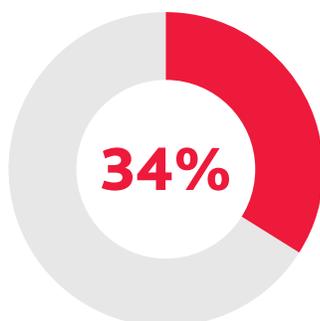
The range of issues that the socially conscious employee cares about is vast and varied, but few, if any, have more momentum behind them than social injustice. Before 2020, diversity in the workplace was a nebulous goal that for many businesses lacked urgency. The tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others have laid bare the systemic racism and structural inequalities Black, Indigenous and people of color face. It's not just employees; customers, vendors and investors expect real change. Real change takes real work.

COVID-19 has also led to major setbacks for gender diversity, particularly in senior leadership roles, as the outsized burden at home has forced hundreds of thousands of women—[865,000 in September alone](#)—to leave the workforce or scale back their careers. Time will prove out that the businesses that showed greater empathy and provided more flexibility to working parents received a return on that investment—lower turnover, higher productivity, and greater goodwill from investors.

Countless studies show diversity in the workplace makes good business sense: Diverse companies outperform their more homogenous peers. However, those performance gains are tempered without proactive measures to combat biased perceptions and pressure to conform. In short, diversifying your talent pipeline isn't going far enough.

WHAT'S NEXT:

Expect renewed focus and investment in diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) initiatives. In the past, the "E" and "I" of DE&I programs have been overshadowed by the "D." More businesses are recognizing that increasing workforce diversity does not in and of itself create an equitable and inclusive culture that elevates diverse voices. As companies continue to evolve their hiring practices, they will need to give equal attention to breaking down the structural barriers preventing career progression and the cultural barriers stymieing the absorption of new perspectives and ideas.

BY THE NUMBERS: THE BUSINESS CASE FOR DIVERSITY

greater shareholder returns
with higher female representation
in senior management



15x
more sales revenue with
high levels of racial diversity

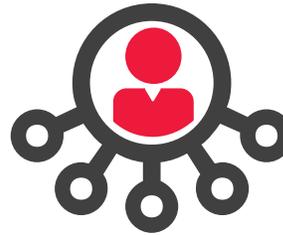


higher EBIT margins
with above-average
total diversity

TREND #4: SKILLS DISRUPTION

The skills employees need to successfully perform their jobs today may not be the skills they need tomorrow. As business models change and technology adoption accelerates, the pace and scale of skills disruption is shifting with it. COVID-19 has fast-tracked the rate of technology integration, creating what the World Economic Forum (WEF) calls a “double-disruption scenario” for workers. According to the WEF’s October 2020 [study on the future of jobs](#), 44% of the core job skills required today will change by 2025. A [study from IBM](#) indicates that COVID-19 has also exacerbated the existing skills gap.

Over the next five years, digital adoption and automation are expected to create more jobs than they destroy—an estimated 97 million new roles compared to 85 million job displacements for a net gain of 12 million, the WEF’s study found. However, many of those new jobs require skills that are in scarce supply, either because they are in an emerging field or because of fierce competition, or both. Expertise in blockchain technology, for example, is currently in high demand, but the talent pool is miniscule. Though the preponderance of hard-to-find skills are STEM-related, there will still be need—and competition—for top-notch talent with project management, critical thinking, communication and creative skills. The only way for businesses to acquire all the skills they need will be to build them up internally.



44%
of the **core job skills**
required today will
change **by 2025**

WHAT'S NEXT: Businesses will get serious about upskilling and reskilling, with a focus on digital fluency. Old-school learning and development programs will become multiplatform universities, offering a mix of job-specific training and courseware from companies that specialize in corporate learning. Curriculums will be tailored based on current workforce capabilities and anticipated capability gaps, and customizable based on preferred learning modalities and individual interests.



PROFILE OF A MODEL EMPLOYEE / NEXT-GEN SKILLS

WHAT WILL BE THE MOST IN-DEMAND SKILLS AND QUALITIES FOR EMPLOYEES IN THE FUTURE?

2020/2021*		2025**	
Hard Skills	Soft Skills	Hard Skills	Soft Skills
Blockchain	Creativity	Data science	Learning agility
Cloud computing	Persuasion	Artificial intelligence	Creativity
Analytical reasoning	Collaboration	Process automation	Critical thinking
Artificial intelligence	Adaptability	Robotics engineering	Change management
UX design	Emotional intelligence	Embedded software development	Emotional intelligence
Business analysis	Communication	Decentralized application development	Communication
Affiliate marketing	Business leadership	Database handling	Persuasion
Sales		Project management	Business leadership
Scientific computing		Digital marketing	Time management
Video production		Sales	

*Research from LinkedIn and BDO analysis

**Research from WEF and BDO analysis

PLACES

COVID-19 gave rise to a new “shut-in” economy where, at the height of the pandemic, almost twice as many employees were working from home full-time as those working on business premises, according to [Stanford research](#). But what happens when social distancing becomes a distant memory? Should you stay or should you go?

TREND #1: THE REMOTE OFFICE

For a large part of the working population, the pandemic has proven that many organizations are able to function—and in many cases, function quite well—working remotely. [Research](#) from the University of Chicago's Becker Friedman Institute indicates that nearly 40% of all U.S. jobs can be performed effectively from home. The stigma of remote work is virtually gone. Allowing employees to work-from-home permanently is becoming increasingly common, with companies like Twitter and Slack leading the charge.

The remote option can provide significant benefits to both the employee and employer. For employees, remote work means no long commutes, greater work/life balance (at least in theory), and flexibility to work from anywhere—closer to family, a beach house, or even a new country. For employers, remote work means higher employee retention, lower costs and access to a wider pool of talent across state and international borders. But it isn't a panacea: It comes with a host of new challenges, from keeping employees engaged, to facilitating the level of collaboration that happens naturally with face-to-face interaction, to [navigating the tax and equity compensation implications](#). Without intervention, remote work may also increase socioeconomic inequality. Workers who can afford to set up a private office at home, for example, are likely to be more productive than those who need to share a room or work from their bedrooms.

Many states and countries have rules that look at where employees are performing work for a company, which could create nexus or “ties” to that state or country for the company. Too many ties and the company will have to pay corporate tax in that state. Many governments relaxed their nexus rules during the pandemic, but these measures are only temporary.

Learn more about the post-COVID-19 future of global mobility in our three-part series:

- ▶ [Part 1](#)
Remote workforce
- ▶ [Part 2](#)
Supply chain diversification
- ▶ [Part 3](#)
Business cost reduction

WHAT'S NEXT: Remote work is here to stay. According to the Atlanta Fed/Chicago Booth/Stanford [Survey of Business Uncertainty](#), the share of work-from-home days is expected to triple after the pandemic ends compared to the share of days before the pandemic. The share of full-time remote workers is also expected to increase, from 3.4% of the workforce in 2019 to over 10% post-pandemic. However, allowing all employees who theoretically can work remote full-time to do so is unlikely to become the norm. Most organizations will shift to a hybrid model where some employees are on-premises and others are remote.



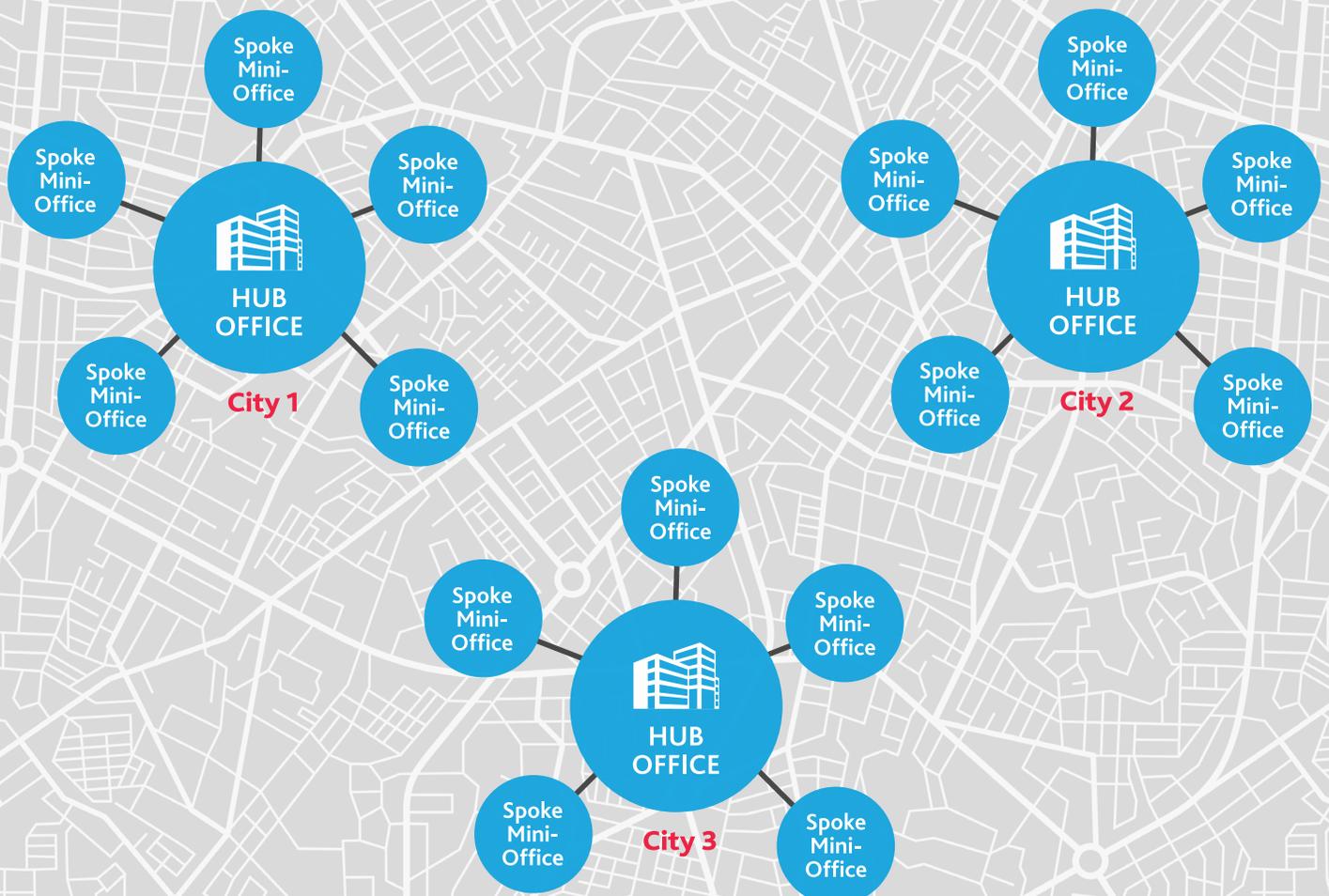
TREND #2: RETHINKING THE OFFICE FOOTPRINT

While more businesses are offering up full-time remote options, only a small minority are considering going all-remote. But nearly all are reevaluating their physical office footprints, factoring in real estate costs and expected changes in space utilization. Commercial real estate costs are actually lower than they've been in years, particularly in high-cost-of-living urban centers. However, continuing to spend a sizable portion of the budget on an asset that hasn't been used for the better part of a year is a tough pill to swallow. Companies still see the value of having physical space, but they're not sure they need so much of it, especially with fewer employees coming back to the office, or at least all at the same time. Some businesses are also thinking about ditching their expensive city lease for a lower-cost location.

While cost is a driving factor in rethinking the office footprint, the biggest determinant of space needs is where companies fall on the spectrum between all-remote and all on-premise work. Some positions simply can't be done away from the office. The prospect of never setting foot in the office again

may appeal to a segment of the workforce, but just as many if not more crave in-person interaction and are itching to get back—though they don't necessarily want to go in five days a week. The best workplace strategy is the one that offers the most flexibility and choice, at the lowest possible cost.

WHAT'S NEXT: The hub-and-spoke model will become the new open office. Companies will maintain a central office that serves as a cultural hub, but it will be much smaller than traditional corporate headquarters, meant to support a fraction of the total workforce. Even smaller satellite "spoke" offices—half a floor in size, or a co-working space—will offer areas to work for specific teams or company functions. In the process of making this shift, companies will have to better justify office space—what actual work needs to be performed in a specific office location and why.



SMART OFFICE SETUP

**TREND #3: THE SMART(ER) OFFICE**

If the physical office isn't dead, what will the post-pandemic version look like? Enabled by technology, it will be smarter and more connected than we left it. On the heels of the smart home, the smart office—powered by Internet-connected devices and sensors—has been gaining steam over the last few years, primarily in the form of smart lighting, temperature control and motion sensors to reduce energy consumption. While greater energy efficiency (and the cost savings that come with it) will continue to drive adoption, health, hygiene and worker safety concerns are now inspiring many of the latest office innovations.

Some of these new smart applications are coming from essential businesses that needed to stay open during the pandemic. To protect their workers, they implemented pre-entry wellness screenings using digital applications and authorized building access using biometric technology. Given that the release of a vaccine is unlikely to eradicate COVID-19 completely, contactless health screenings and biometrics will remain part of the pre-entry process for the foreseeable future.

While these measures may be necessary, the monitoring and collection of data on health symptoms does create [new privacy and security risks](#). Companies will need to make sure they take a privacy-by-design approach to architecting these workplace solutions.

WHAT'S NEXT: Increased deployment of sensors and IoT platforms will not only help ensure workforce safety but also generate new efficiencies and intelligence in the workplace. As more companies shift to a hub-and-spoke model, scheduling technology will become essential, helping employees find empty meeting rooms or quiet places to do work. Facility management software will also be deployed to monitor and optimize space utilization. A smarter workplace will also translate into more personalization, where employees can program their standing desks to automatically shift between preset height settings and adjust lighting and temperature to their preferred setting—at any office, at any location.



TREND #4: THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Having your own personal temperature setting might seem like a small gesture, but in aggregate, small gestures that improve the employee experience can amount to a lot. Providing an exceptional workplace experience is a competitive advantage. It creates engaged employees, wins over (and retains) top talent, and demonstrates a care factor that delivers reputational benefits with investors and customers.

What's changing in how we define an exceptional workplace experience is how we view employees. Many businesses are taking a more holistic view of employee wellness that includes psychological wellbeing in addition to physical and fiscal health. The new focus on mental health is influencing both office amenities and office design. [Studies](#) show that thoughtful workplace design can positively impact mental health outcomes. For example, greater exposure to natural light not only reduces eye strain and headaches, but it's also a proven mood booster. On the amenities side, emerging initiatives include built-in mental health hours and onsite access to mental health counselors.

The biggest change to what constitutes an exceptional workplace experience is our newfound realization of the importance of sanitization. Pre-COVID cleaning methods won't pass muster even after the pandemic abates. Cue the adoption of antimicrobial treatments and self-cleaning solutions, touchless elevator buttons, garbage disposals and faucets, UVC disinfection lights and autonomous cleaning robots. Making these sanitation efforts highly visible to employees can help them feel more comfortable in the office.

WHAT'S NEXT: For the last decade, businesses have invested in improving the omnichannel customer experience. In the next decade, they will invest in creating a seamless omnichannel employee experience as well. With a hybrid workforce, organizations will need to bring the workplace to the employee, providing access to the same level of support and amenities wherever work is performed.




THE WORKPLACE OF TOMORROW

COVID may be the catalyst of workplace transformation, but it shouldn't be the driver. Though the pandemic may feel like the never-ending story, it will end, and theoretically, companies could go back to a version of the traditional office model that preceded it. But with rare exception, that would be a wasteful mistake. The pandemic has forced suboptimal changes, to be sure, but it has also revealed inefficiencies in the old model, and opportunities to reinvent the office as a strategic driver of value in a new one. The right workplace strategy will incorporate the lessons learned from the pandemic, but more importantly, it will reflect the way the work itself is performed and support goals for improved performance, from facilitating greater collaboration to attracting new talent to boosting productivity.

The workplace of tomorrow is less a physical space than it is a construct of company culture. And your culture is ultimately what makes or breaks your business strategy. Think about the culture you need to achieve your strategic goals—and then create a work environment that reflects and reinforces those attributes.



WAYNE BERSON
BDO CEO





PRODUCTIVITY

The net impact of the pandemic on productivity is unclear. On the one hand, more teleworking and greater use of digital solutions should have yielded new efficiencies. On the other hand, pandemic-related stress and unavoidable distractions at home have inhibited employee output. This next period will be critical to ensure the changes to work made in crisis don't harm long-term innovation efforts or productivity levels.

TREND #1: THE DIGITAL LEAP

Prior to the pandemic, a paradigm shift towards digitization and servitization of the economy was already underway. But COVID-19 has **moved the timeline up** for many of these disruptive digital trends by as much as five years, forcing businesses to transform or trail behind. Even organizations that embraced digital solutions before the pandemic have had to accelerate their plans for digital transformation for a world that is becoming digital-first. Everything from internal workflows to customer interfaces must be optimized for a digital environment.

What may not be intuitive in making the leap to digital-first is that technology should come second to people. After all, digital innovations only have value if people actually use them. To fully realize the ROI of their digital investments, organizations must give equal weight to enabling the people using the technology. Reaping the rewards of digital transformation thus hinges entirely on convincing, engaging and empowering people to adopt new digital behaviors. The businesses that have been most successful (so far) in driving behavior change are those that have instituted formal change management programs and extensive training.

WHAT'S NEXT: Even in the digital age, people—not data, not tools, not machines—will continue to be businesses' most valuable resource. But technology will augment what people are capable of, enabling them to do their work faster and better. By the same token, human ingenuity and critical thinking will transform the way technology is used, powering new practical applications and innovative business models. Organizations that focus on the marriage of people and technology will create more value for their customers than those that focus on upgrading their technology alone.



“

The most transformative technology initiatives go beyond introducing efficiencies; they empower people to think more strategically and solve new problems. But technology isn't magic—you can't just push a button and expect immediate change, especially if intended users it haven't had a seat at the table. The more you can make technological innovation a participative process, the faster you will see meaningful progress.



STEVE FERRARA
BDO Chief Operating Officer

”



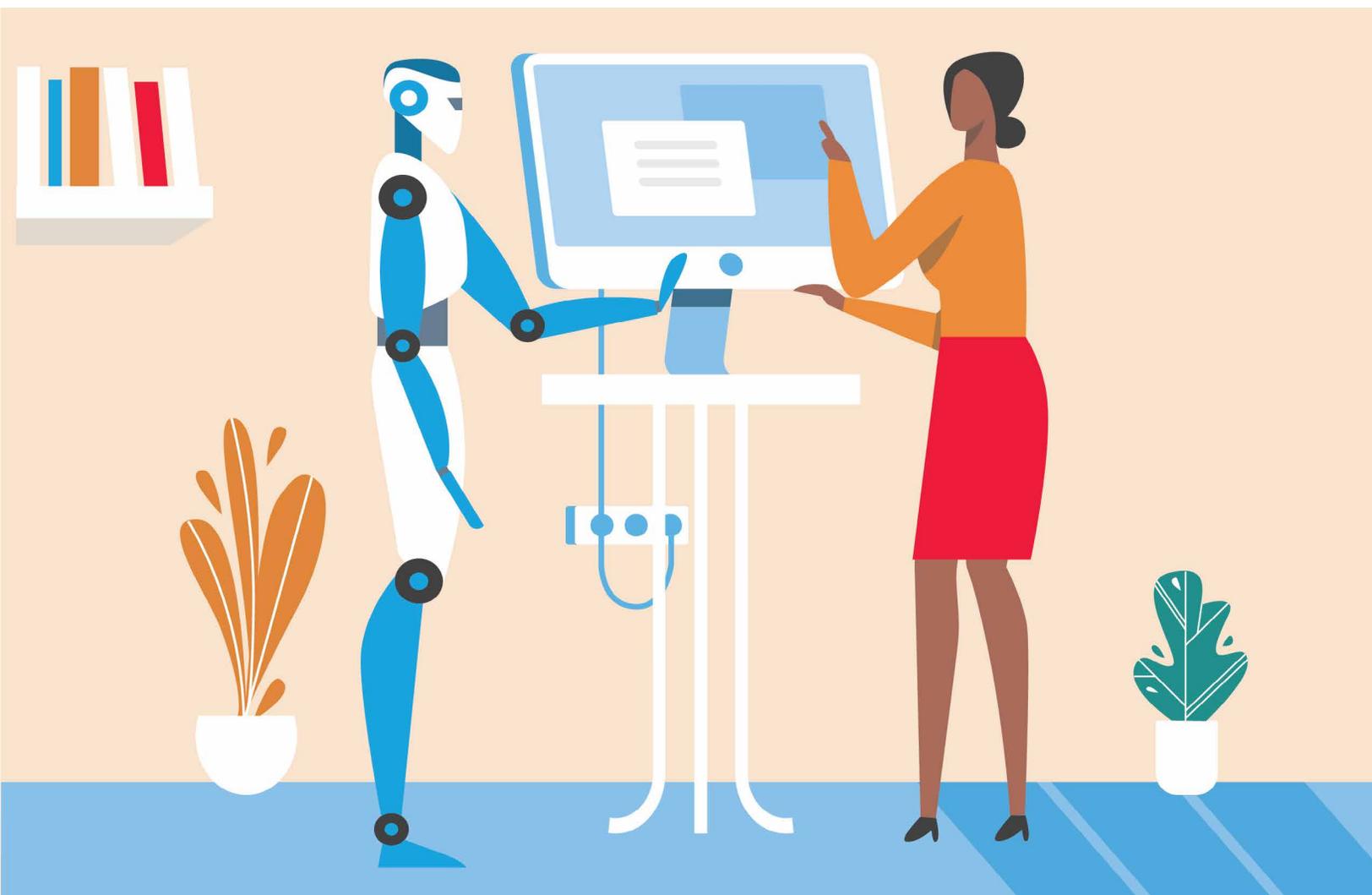
TREND #2: REIMAGINING HOW WORK GETS DONE

While we have just begun to scratch the surface of [what AI and automation can do](#), we already see the dramatic impact they have had on how work is performed. Automation was displacing jobs before the pandemic, but like so many other digital trends, the coronavirus sped things up, as companies scrambled to find a way to perform jobs that previously required humans to work together in close contact. The robots that have taken over don't need salaries, don't get fatigued or sick, and can do the same job at inhuman speed. These substitutions will likely become permanent.

However, in more cases than not, automation, AI and other emerging technologies take over specific job tasks, not entire roles. For example, lawyers working on a case used to have to comb through mountains of potential evidence manually. Now there are tools that can review the evidence and extract the most relevant insights for them. But those tools can't conduct a negotiation or argue on a client's behalf in court.

To succeed in the digital economy of tomorrow, companies need to operate at the speed of digital. They need to do more, and they need to do it faster, without sacrificing profits or overworking employees. The only way to meet those lofty goals is to digitize and automate.

WHAT'S NEXT: Businesses will be scrutinized on their approach to AI and automation—and called to account if they don't treat their employees with empathy. Organizations have an ethical obligation to think through the impact of technology deployment on their workforce and make every effort to preserve jobs. That will entail assessing the speed and severity of displacement in advance and providing reskilling programs for those most affected.





TREND #3: PEOPLE ANALYTICS

As businesses hit accelerate on their digital reinvention, it comes as no surprise that HR is also getting the digital treatment. Central to the transformation of HR is making better use of people data, from how much time they spend on specific tasks to what their work patterns are to how they're compensated. Organizations are using people analytics to gauge productivity levels, assess current capabilities and critical gaps, track fluctuations in capacity, and optimize resource planning and scheduling. More sophisticated analytics deployments have integrated external data sources for a more holistic view. By harnessing people data, HR departments and organizations at large are unlocking new and better ways of managing, motivating, and measuring the effectiveness of their workforce.

WHAT'S NEXT:



There is a delicate balance between leveraging AI and analytics to optimize the workforce and crossing the proverbial line. The widespread adoption of people analytics will raise new ethical questions about what level of monitoring is appropriate and what data that could be collected shouldn't be. Organizations will also need to keep in mind that while the numbers may tell a story, people are more than numbers. When making decisions about people, you can't go by the data alone.

TREND #4: FLEXIBLE RESOURCING

The digitization of work may be the primary enabler of increased efficiency and output, but true agility requires rethinking organizational systems and structures. During the crisis, organizations designed for agility had a clear performance advantage, and were better positioned to make rapid decisions under pressure and pivot to higher value activities.

The secret sauce of agile organizations has enough ingredients to fill an entire recipe book, but the practice that gained the most traction during the pandemic is flexible resourcing. Many companies experienced unseasonal demand surges they were understaffed for, while many more faced sharp demand slumps that left them with excess capacity. But some companies considering layoffs or furloughs had critical positions unfilled or unexpected outages. Agile organizations encouraged role mobility through cross-training and were able to redeploy resources where they were most needed.

WHAT'S NEXT: Flexible resourcing and role mobility will become permanent features of the organization rather than strategies solely deployed in a crisis or shortage. High-performing individuals will “drop in” to different areas of the business where they can provide immediate value. Project-based teams will be created to tackle cross-functional initiatives and pilot programs. “This isn't my job” will be banned from the cultural lexicon.

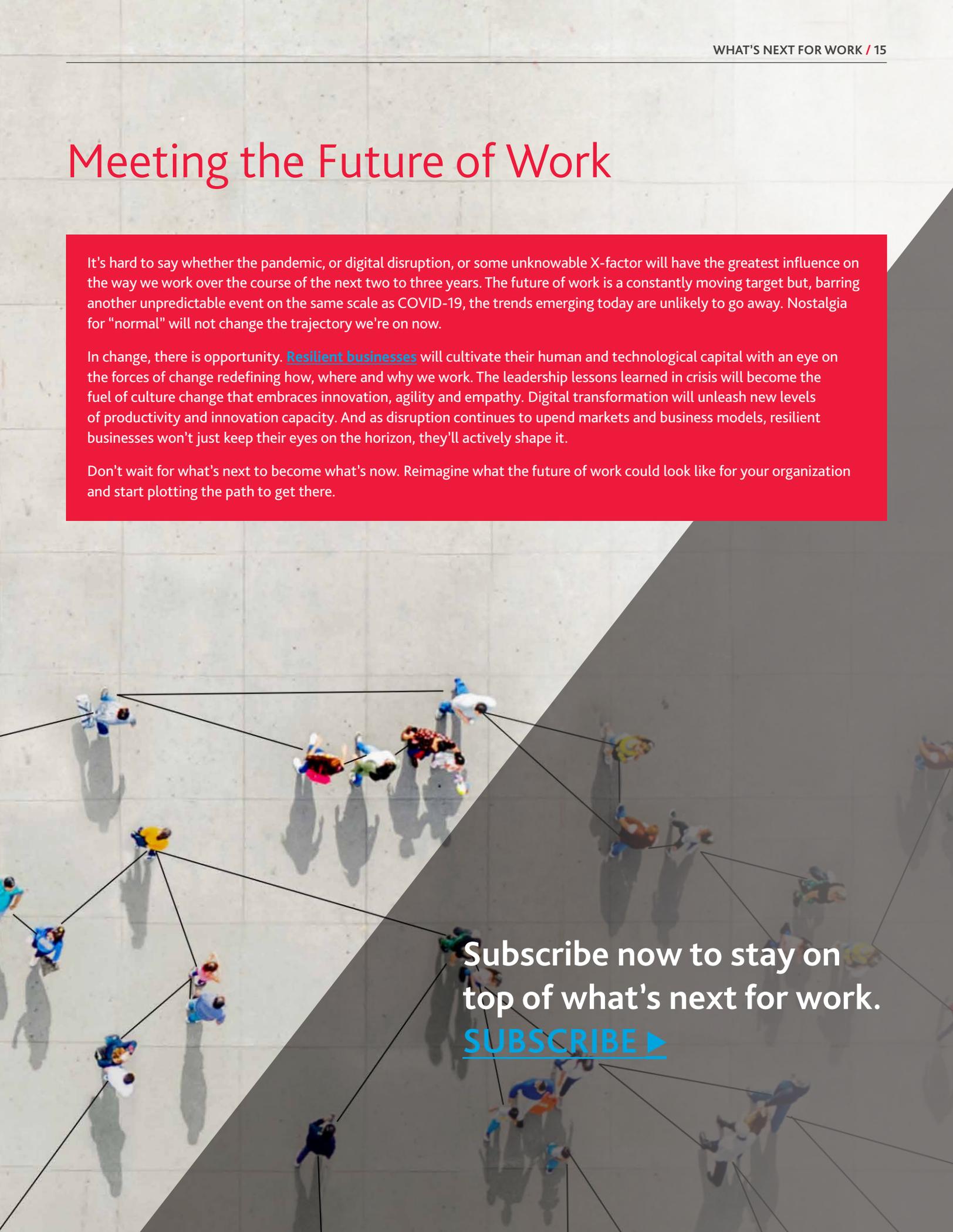


Meeting the Future of Work

It's hard to say whether the pandemic, or digital disruption, or some unknowable X-factor will have the greatest influence on the way we work over the course of the next two to three years. The future of work is a constantly moving target but, barring another unpredictable event on the same scale as COVID-19, the trends emerging today are unlikely to go away. Nostalgia for "normal" will not change the trajectory we're on now.

In change, there is opportunity. [Resilient businesses](#) will cultivate their human and technological capital with an eye on the forces of change redefining how, where and why we work. The leadership lessons learned in crisis will become the fuel of culture change that embraces innovation, agility and empathy. Digital transformation will unleash new levels of productivity and innovation capacity. And as disruption continues to upend markets and business models, resilient businesses won't just keep their eyes on the horizon, they'll actively shape it.

Don't wait for what's next to become what's now. Reimagine what the future of work could look like for your organization and start plotting the path to get there.



Subscribe now to stay on
top of what's next for work.

[SUBSCRIBE](#) ►



People who know, know BDO.