

## **2021 HUMAN CAPITAL TRENDS: INNOVATING WITH INTENT**

### **A PUBLIC SECTOR PERSPECTIVE**

One morning in March 2020, employees from an unnamed federal agency woke up to a series of emails from their Department leadership informing them that much of the workplace was temporarily shifting to hybrid or virtual work due to the pandemic. Over the next few hours and days, more information slowly trickled in about how to request the appropriate technology to complete specific tasks from home, access virtual desktops, complete the appropriate telework forms, and utilize specific platforms for virtual meetings. HR, IT, and other organizational functions were immediately overwhelmed by a slew of inquiries and requests. Supervisors had to figure out new ways to communicate with their teams in the face of ambiguity and find new ways of working to ensure that their team could accomplish Mission critical work. The result was a tumultuous period where employees adjusted to their changed conditions: dialing into virtual meetings, setting up new working spaces, managing childcare, co-working with family or roommates, and modifying their workload.



**SURVIVAL: DOING WHAT IS  
NECESSARY TO SUCCEED  
TODAY: LIMITING NEGATIVE  
IMPACTS TO THE  
WORKFORCE AND  
ORGANIZATION CAUSED BY  
EXTERNAL FORCES**

At the onset of the pandemic, these transitions and changes were focused on “survival”: delivering Mission critical services to citizens without delay or lapse. Organizations that focused on survival accepted the new constraints put on them by a changing external landscape and focused on what was necessary to succeed in the moment. Innovation occurred out of necessity as public sector organizations rapidly revolutionized how they worked and operated, such as adopting new technology platforms, cultural norms, and acknowledging burnout. Technological and organizational advancements were accelerated by the need to adjust to the realities of working in a pandemic and prioritized so that organizations could continue to achieve their Mission.

In a world of perpetual disruption, the survival mindset limits organizations to the status quo. As the world returns to a “new normal”, innovation does not have to be a response to external forces, but can instead be an active and intentional effort to deliver Mission critical services in a more optimal manner. Organizations that view the new environment as a launchpad to reimagine how they can work in ways that were previously not possible can focus on “thriving”: optimizing efficiency, increasing their impact, and improving the employee experience.

**THRIVING: HARNESSING  
OUTSIDE FORCES AND  
INTERNAL INNOVATION  
TO RETHINK AND IMPROVE  
ON THE STATUS QUO**

Over the past year, leaders have shed their traditional thinking about the relationship between the organization and the workforce. COVID-19 has demonstrated that creating a talent experience that allows employees to protect their wellbeing, focus on meaningful work, and take ownership of their professional growth does not detract from agency objectives and priorities, but instead creates a more engaged and successful workforce that is better able to deliver. A people-centric workplace environment can be achieved without sacrificing efficiency or effectiveness. When leaders view their workers not as resources, but as humans with individual goals, choices, and preferences, they are able to engage with their workforce in an elevated way that mutually benefits the employees and the organization. This shift requires public sector organizations to approach every question, every issue, and every decision from an employee experience angle first in order to achieve Mission success and impact. Innovating with an eye on the human experience allows

organizations to meet and surpass their objectives as their employees achieve their individual goals.

**MAKING THE SHIFT FROM “SURVIVE” TO “THRIVE” DEPENDS ON AN ORGANIZATION BECOMING DISTINCTLY HUMAN AT ITS CORE—A DIFFERENT WAY OF BEING THAT APPROACHES EVERY QUESTION, EVERY ISSUE, AND EVERY DECISION FROM AN EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE ANGLE FIRST.**

The world has changed, and so has our approach to analyzing and thinking about the forces that impact organizations. As the public sector makes the shift from survive to thrive, leaders must focus on crafting a positive employee experience and harnessing human strengths that enable the broader organization to flourish. In our 11<sup>th</sup> year of conducting the largest study into the trends that affect the workplace, we have narrowed the focus to understanding what characteristics can support organizations in their shift from survive to thrive. This year, we are revisiting 5 critical trends from our 2020 report that merit continued exploration and evaluation based on the lessons learned from the pandemic and how they are impacting public sector organizations in today's environment. These five were intentionally selected as different lenses of examining the human experience of working in the public sector; by addressing these five trends in particular, organizations can bring out the human strengths that make thriving possible:



**Designing work for well-being: the end of work/life balance.** Integrating employees' physical, mental, financial, and social health into the design of work itself rather than addressing wellbeing with adjacent programs.



**Superteams: How work happens.** Creating teams that use technology to enhance natural human ways of working.



**Beyond reskilling: Unleashing worker potential.** Capitalizing on employee agency and choice as the means to drive learning, adaptability, and impact.



**Governing workforce strategies: Setting new directions for work and the workforce.** Developing and acting on forward-looking insights using real-time data.



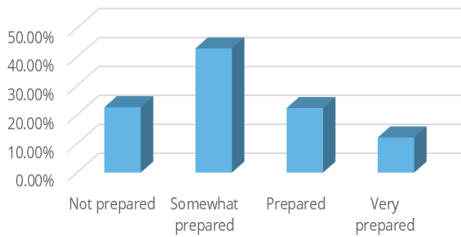
**A memo to HR: Accelerating the shift to re-architecting work.** Shifting HR's role from standardizing and enforcing workforce policies to a new responsibility of re-architecting work across the enterprise.

While each of these Trends can stand on their own, organizations that are able to innovate across multiple Trends may see a multiplier effect for their workforce and agency outcomes.

# Public sector perspective survey responses:

In years past, many public sector organizations focused primarily on Mission delivery while staying within budget and maintaining compliance, leaving optimizing the employee experience and investing in the future of employees as a back-burner priority. Enhancing all elements of the employee experience has now become an important key consideration for many organizations based on lessons learned from the pandemic: leaders are now seeing that a positive employee experience translates to increased resilience that allows organizations to better respond to disruptive forces.

How Prepared Was Your Organization for COVID-19?



Respondents of this year's Global Human Capital Trends Survey overwhelmingly indicated that they were not prepared for the impacts of COVID-19. The pandemic served as a catalyst for many public sector organizations to rapidly innovate in order to respond to the changing work environment. As most workers transitioned to a remote or virtual setting and the daily routine of public sector work was entirely disrupted, new challenges arose that jeopardized Mission delivery; burnout, isolation, virtual communication, and technology challenges all became critical components of the employee experience. These obstacles created an opportunity for organizations to engineer a new talent experience by thinking outside of the constraints of how things had previously been done.

Addressing these new needs and challenges requires looking at the human experience from different angles. Survey responses consistently highlighted well-being as a critical priority for employees, with burnout impacting morale, productivity, and overall retention. Automating the dirty, dull, and dangerous tasks can reduce monotony and allows employees to focus on strategic and meaningful work that provides them with purpose, and frees up employees to learn more valuable skills that enable them to shape their professional trajectory in accordance with their personal goals. Expanding workforce analytics to include those personal preferences, goals, and choices allows organizations to be proactive in creating a desirable employee experience and to accommodate their workforce in a strategic manner instead of remaining reactive. Armed with these insights, HR is equipped to take a front seat in driving their organizations towards positive change as an advisor and leader.

Factors to Make Remote and Virtual Work Sustainable

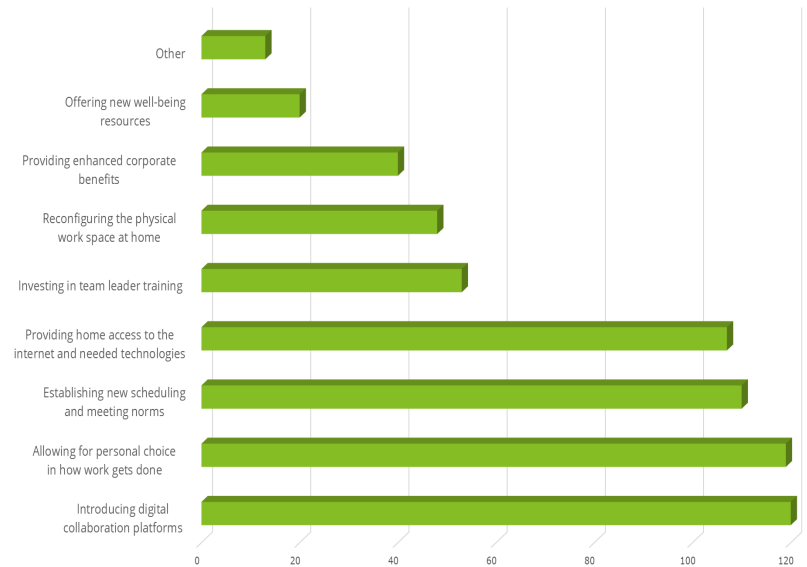


Figure 2. Source: Global Human Capital Trends Survey

How Can Organizations Achieve Future Workforce Transformation?

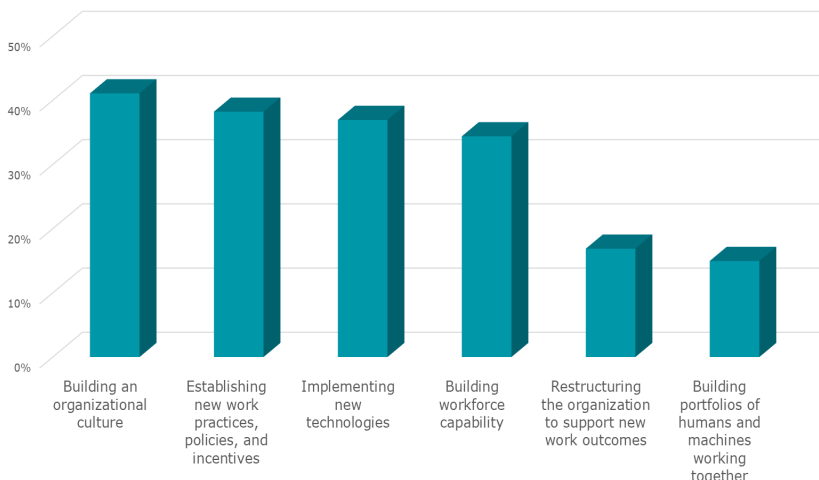


Figure 3. Source: Global Human Capital Trends Survey

As organizations look to the future, the importance of investing in a human-centered employee experience, and the increased use of technology and innovative work practices will continue to be at the forefront of decision making. Employee expectations of work and the workplace have evolved significantly over the past year. As organizations' focus shifts to ensuring employees satisfactions and providing workers with the tools to work in a changing environment, the power balance has shifted to empower the workforce. By accommodating employee preferences, organizations reap the benefits of more engaged employees that are focusing on higher value work and are working where and when they are most productive. Without investment in the employee experience and flexible work practices, the future of work will again look like it was before the

COVID-19 pandemic; static and only surviving rather than thriving.

# Designing work for well-being: the end of work/life balance



## Our 2021 perspective

In previous years, the Human Capital trends focused on how leading organizations were enabling a work/life balance that allowed employees to separate work from their personal lives. COVID-19 forced a blurring of the lines between work and life; employees work at home and live at work. The mingling of personal and professional lives has highlighted to leaders that employee performance is inherently connected to personal circumstances; workers who can

### From surviving to thriving

As work has shifted to virtual and hybrid models, leaders began seeing dramatic increases of burnout and mental exhaustion. The focus on well-being became front and center. HR functions have moved past just providing access to an Employee Assistance Programs to establishing well-being programs that solicit employee input and have material impact on where, when and how people work as well as connect socially with one another.

Well-being is unique to each individual; incorporating employee perspectives enables organizations to customize their offering to suit the needs of their workforce.

modify their work hours around childcare needs, or take protected leave to take care of sick family members are ultimately more successful and productive than those who must juggle competing responsibilities. Well-being has moved to the forefront of many organizations' priorities as protecting employees' health and alleviating stress became critical to achieving an organization's Mission. Work and life, health, safety, and well-being became inseparable. Recognizing the inextricable link among well-being, work, and personal lives has led more organizations to design well-being into work itself so that both workers and the organization can thrive.

Organizations looking to build out comprehensive well-being programs should consider simultaneously implementing offerings across three levels: individual, team, and organization. On the individual level, employees should be empowered to set their own boundaries, communicate their well-being needs, and participate in the development of well-being

policies and practices. Team leads should focus on connecting people with each other to unleash their collective capabilities to create an environment in which the team can perform at its best. Finally, leaders have a responsibility across their organizations to not only to invest in and promote well-being, but also to prioritize well-being. Doing so will benefit the organization by creating an engaged and successful workforce and attracting and retaining top talent to help meet Mission needs.

### Trends data:

Overall, respondents within the public sector held favorable opinions on the new remote/work from home environment, with 74% of respondents saying that the remote / virtual work practices currently have a positive impact on well-being. 52% of public sector employees agreed that the changes their organization put into place during the COVID-19 pandemic empowered workers to more successfully integrate the demands of their personal and professional lives.

### What this means for public sector organizations

As leaders and organization's view of well-being evolves beyond work/life balance, so too expands the definition of well-being. An employee experience that focuses on well-being focuses on cultural, relational, operational, physical, and now virtual aspects. Building new social behaviors and cultural norms, helping colleagues build strong and supportive relationships, creating policies and programs that reinforce the importance of well-being, designing the physical workspace to facilitate well-being, and now implementing new technologies and virtual workspaces and programming can all help create a work environment that gives employees the tools they need to build resilience in the face of disruption.

### Trend in action

A Federal Health agency facing issues with staff burnout, mental health, and turnover had disparate programs and benefits in place to support their staff, but no holistic framework around employee well-being. As such, the agency hoped to address COVID-19 needs around the new challenges of "living at work" while also building a well-being program to reduce staff burnout, boost excitement to work at the agency, and empower staff with an environment in which they can succeed. To accomplish these goals, they analyzed the current state of employee well-being and overall employee experience through an all-staff well-being survey and focus groups and built an employee-centric well-being program through a series of design sprints. The all-staff survey yielded at 67% response rate, and in combination with focus groups, they were able to identify 100+ potential ideas to inform design sprints for the short, medium, and long-term to carry them through. every stage of working and living through the pandemic.

# Superteams: how work happens



## Our 2021 perspective

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many public sector organizations accelerated incorporating technology into their team structure as a survival strategy to enable adaptability and speed. Leaders can use what they have learned to construct superteams that pair people with technology to re-architect work in more human ways and accomplish more

### From surviving to thriving:

Organizations must shift the lens through which they view technology: focusing on the transformative potential to elevate the impact it can have on work, rather than enabling for the work already done. Use technology to design work in ways that allow humans to perform at their best: working collaboratively in teams, breaking down silos to work across functions and businesses, creating knowledge, learning in the flow of work, and personalizing and humanizing the work experience.

together. Superteams ensure that the right workforce type (human or technology) gets properly allocated to critical tasks: by using digital technology to unburden the human workforce of dirty, dangerous, and dull tasks, leaders enable the workforce to focus on meaningful, high-impact work that requires human insight to solve problems, think strategically, and build interpersonal relationships. When teams dedicate people to focus on the innately human work and relegate automatable work to technology, organizations can both improve the employee experience by allowing people to focus on interesting and meaningful work, while increasing overall productivity and depth of insights.

As public sector organizations take strides in advancing their technology landscapes - including implementing robotics and Artificial Intelligence - these changes must be introduced in a manner that complements the employee experience. These hybrid teams must be led by human

intelligence, critical thinking, and nuanced decision-making, and also include a spectrum of technical support that manages tasks, analytics, or workflow in tandem with the human element. As technology is implemented, organizations must focus not only on driving efficiency, but improving employee experience.

## Trends data:

Across the global public sector, the answers that garnered the highest percentage of responses to the survey question above all focused on the creating an environment for the employee to be successful as well as integrating technology into their professional lives to enable a positive employee experience. The combination of a positive employee experience and increased use of technology help to ensure the virtual environment can continue to be a positive for organizations.



## What this means for public sector organizations

Public Sector organizations are thinking through the continual evolution of automation, and how new technology can be infused into work. The existence of superteams raises critical questions for leadership: how does work get completed, how can people and technology work together to optimize outputs, and how does the employee experience get reshaped to focus on high value strategic work?

Superteams have yet to take hold as a widespread organizational strategy within the public sector, in part because many organizations still tend to view technology as a tool and enabler rather than as a team member and collaborator. Public sector leaders must shift their thinking to view new advancements in technology as a way to augment human capabilities instead of purely a substitution for manual labor. With each implementation, leaders should consider how the existing team can modify their work to focus on the strategic and decision-making elements that will round out the transactional work that was automated. The use of technology and people is not an "either-or" choice but a "both-and" partnership.

## Trend in action

The USDA Farm Services Agency (FSA) Farm Loan Programs (FLP) supports farmers and ranchers across the U.S. and its territories in obtaining farm loans to buy property or support operations. COVID-19 disruption and market volatility pose challenges to today's farmers and ranchers, and FLP loan officers need to spend less time completing administrative activities so they can focus on advising borrowers and completing analytical tasks. To alleviate administrative workload for FLP's over 1,200 employees, a team of field and national office staff created three automations, or "bots", nicknamed Penny, Joy, and Jerry, to complete loan making and loan servicing tasks.

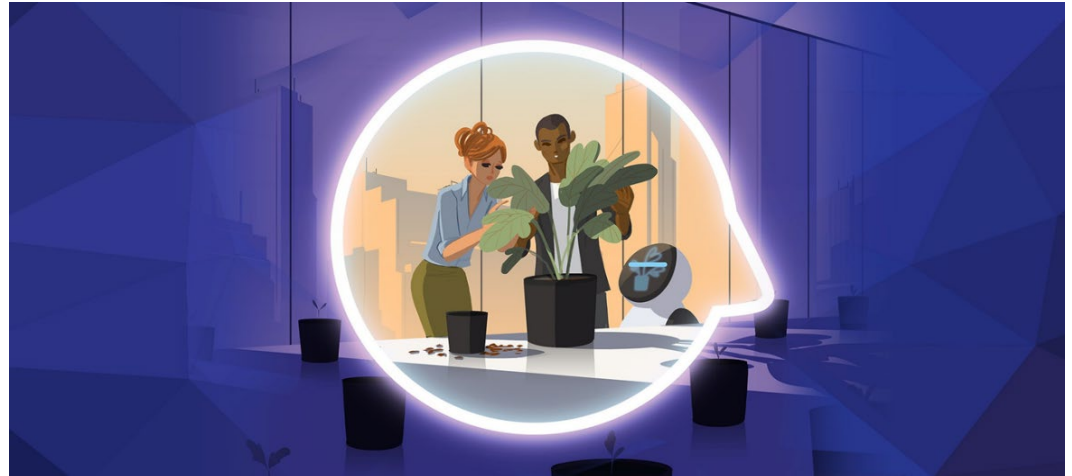
Since their deployment in 2020, these bots are returning thousands of hours annually to employees to focus more on customers. The bots have automated 7,000+ Promissory Note forms, 8,000+ Notification of Loan Approval and Borrower Responsibilities letters, and 8,000+ Notice of Complete Application letters. These bots reduce errors, provide auditability, eliminate the need for peer review, and return valuable time to loan officers.

# Beyond reskilling: unleashing worker potential

## Our 2021 perspective

With the disruption of COVID-19 and the shift to virtual work, many organizations have started to evolve their understanding of workforce potential. As transactional tasks are automated, employees are freed up to focus on more strategic work that requires additional or specialized skillsets, like data analytics, technology development and configuration, or high-touch customer service. Leaders have

found that empowering their employees and managers to choose how and when they learn new skills builds organizational resilience and allows teams to fill critical gaps as they continually modernize and grow. The shift to a Talent Marketplace leads to higher employee engagement and retention while bringing innovation into Mission delivery. Successful reskilling efforts are dependent on a modern approach to training and development. The future of learning entails a wider variety of learning options, from micro-learning modules to immersive externships, in-person classrooms to self-taught exercises, traditional curriculums to virtual reality programs. Employees can create the path that works for their unique and individual needs, allowing them to choose not only which skills they acquire, but how and when they learn. Offering a wide array of choices empowers the workforce on an individual level, but also helps the organization fill critical gaps and remain agile and adaptive as they embrace the future of work and build the resilience needed to navigate future disruption.



### From surviving to thriving

The traditional model of reskilling has failed to consider the dynamic nature of work and worker potential. Organizations that empower workers to explore their interests and passions and match those interests with organizational needs will be better able to address quickly changing priorities. Public sector organizations will need to move beyond reactively responding to Mission changes. Instead the focus must shift to providing diverse opportunities to unlock workforce potential, better preparing their organization for future change.

## Trends data:

The emphasis on unlocking the employee's potential is demonstrated by 34% of the respondents choosing building workforce capability through upskilling, reskilling, and mobility as one important action that they are willing to take to transform work. This highlights the workers' desires to determine their own path forward by using the tools given to them by their organizations.

## What this means for public sector organizations

When the pandemic first hit, many organizations did not have the capacity or time to thoroughly draft skills requirements or analyze where new or enhanced skills were needed from their workers. Instead, decisions had to be made on a moment's notice, with workers gaining more autonomy in choosing how they wanted to be redeployed and where they could add value.

At this stage of recovery, public sector organizations are still considering how they can equip their employees for the future of work, with many of the tactical conversations around reskilling and workforce potential still on the horizon. As organizations begin their return to work efforts, defining a clear vision of their current and future workforce will be the essential first step to identifying where upskilling and reskilling will be most impactful for their employees and their Mission critical work.

### Trend in action

The Army Contracting Enterprise and its uniquely qualified workforce are critical to Army readiness and face challenges in the retention of top talent, incentivizing people to continuously re-learn/re-skill, and engaging their workforce in a productive way.

The vision of Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army (Procurement) is to modernize the Contracting Workforce's Talent Management Program, including proving the concept of a Career Mapping Tool that integrates data from Army systems of record, leverages innovative assessments, and utilizes AI and machine learning to provide recommended career paths and development opportunities to employees. A successful program allows the Contracting Enterprise to acquire and retain top contracting talent, increases employee engagement, enables data-informed succession planning and decision-making, and empowers employees to craft their own work experiences and opportunities.

# Governing workforce strategies: setting new directions for work and the workforce

## Our 2021 perspective

The disruption caused by COVID-19 highlighted the limitations of workforce strategies that rely exclusively on traditional metrics to describe the current breakdown of their organization. For too long, workforce analytics have focused exclusively on static attributes of the workforce (age, experience level, gender) without any dedicated effort to understand the preferences and needs of individual workers. This became abundantly clear as leaders had to gather anecdotes or guess what their workforce needed to be successful in the face of a changing workplace.

The pandemic has prompted many organizations to think more strategically about how to cultivate a resilient, agile, adaptable organization that can withstand a variety of situations in the long-term, as opposed to simply planning for likely, incremental events in the near-term. Organizations relying on real-time workforce data for insights better understand how to align both worker and organizational behavior with an organization's Mission delivery framework. Return to work is one lens that opens up opportunities for public sector organizations to rethink and consider the benefits of other data elements worth capturing and analyzing. This includes employee preferences as to how work can be rearchitected and the workforce can be upskilled to insulate the organization from future disruption. To continue evolving to become truly agile, resilient organizations, agencies can use predictive workforce analytics and proactively plan for changing technology, Mission requirements, fiscal constraints and other potential disruptors.



## From surviving to thriving

Many Public sector organizations can utilize metrics and measurements to understand the current state of their workforce. However, for these organizations to thrive, they must be able to access and act on real-time, forward-looking workforce insights to support better, faster decisions based on an understanding of what their workforce is capable of in the future.

## Trends data:

Identifying likely, incremental events and creating business continuity plans received a high percentage of responses (46.25%) when thinking about public sector organizations' current preparedness, however, lack of readiness (40%) and too many competing priorities (39%) are the main barriers preventing the transformation of the workforce in public sector organizations, highlighting the need to separate the preparedness for a situation like COVID-19, and preparedness for workforce transformation.

## What this means for public sector organizations

Many organizations are reassessing how work and the workplace can be redesigned using powerful data analytics to identify gaps and develop proactive solutions to account for the full talent lifecycle and consider employee preferences across a broad spectrum of choices. These real-time workforce analytics not only enable effective management, balancing workforce preferences with leadership's expectations to complete Mission-critical work but can also forecast future talent needs.

The eminent return to work accelerates the need to have more diverse workforce data that allows for greater flexibility and adaptive workplace strategies. Public sector organizations must invest in the creation of a technological foundation that will enable them to collect and visualize a broader set of data. Leaders must leverage data analytics to broaden their definition of success beyond basic Mission goals to include the elements of the overall employee experience, including engagement metrics and employee satisfaction. Rather than leadership requesting that their employees plan their life around work, leaders should use data and workforce preferences to create an adaptive culture where the workforce can plan work around their life to promote well-being.

## Trend in action

A large pharmaceutical company required public health data on COVID-19 to support their return-to-work policies. The company built an agent-based simulation model that produced predictive results and provided insights on a by-county level. The predictive modeling improved metrics to limit unnecessary exposure to COVID-19 for each workforce.

The predictive model allows the company to make decisions up to three weeks in advance of its existing methodology and reduces disruption to needed business operations.

# A memo to HR: accelerating the shift to re-architecting work

## Our 2021 perspective

COVID-19 required many organizations to rapidly adapt and create new policies and procedures ranging from technology implementation to social distancing procedures. As organizations emerge from the pandemic, HR has an opportunity to capitalize on its heightened status and expand its reach to assume the role of leading the re-architecture of work and the establishment of the adaptive workplace – the new normal.

The HR agenda must become one with the Mission agenda. This shift away from the traditional role of transaction processing and compliance enforcement creates an opportunity for HR organizations to work in a way that enables the entire enterprise. Historically, the lack of investment in HR has left many organizations ill-prepared to modernize and led to stymied performance across people and processes. Organizations need to invest in and support their HR functions to drive transformative efforts across the enterprise - allowing for more resilient organizations, empowered workers, and better organizational results.



## From surviving to thriving

HR can no longer function as a separate entity and needs to immerse itself within the business processes to shift thinking from output to outcome. This shift is necessary to reorient HR functions Mission and mindset towards shaping future enterprise success and reimagining the workforce and workplace accordingly.

## Trends data:

The emphasis on employee health and well-being continues throughout the enterprise. A combined 69% (Strongly agree – 17% and Agree – 52%) agreed that the changes their organization put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic empowered workers to more successfully integrate the demands of their personal and professional lives.

## Trend in action

To respond to an increasingly competitive talent market and increase their ability to sustainably attract and retain employees, an HR Division within a large retirement system in Texas created a formal Employee Value Proposition (EVP) by investigating the employee experience through a competitor analysis and in depth collection of stakeholder input, rooted in Human Centered Design principles.

The team refocused their efforts and began defining themselves as “more than your traditional HR,” taking on the work and creative solutions to define aspects of the employee experience and organization that touch every part of their work. The team created the EVP with the future of total rewards in mind to highlight the unique values of their workplace and help define and differentiate them as an employer – which has helped make their workplace a consistently recognized top workplace in Austin, Texas.

## What this means for public sector organizations

There are two types of Public Sector organizations – those that have constrained their HR functions to operate on a solely transactional basis, and those that have realized you cannot talk about the employee experience without understanding how that experience impacts the Mission. The latter reflects the shift of an organization that understands how to become outcome driven, while the former is finding comfort in the status quo.

Organizations should begin re-evaluating their HR structure and internal ability to align HR functions to the high impact business areas. Reprioritizing the work and effort HR applies to transactional processes and restructuring traditional functions to better align work and the workforce is critical to the success of HR becoming the epicenter of the enterprise and allows HR teams to drive the analysis, strategy, and decision-making that will provide HR leadership with the insights necessary to advise other business leaders. This involves challenging basic assumptions about HR's role and creating space for HR leaders to advise on any key decisions that impact the employee experience.



# Surviving to thriving in a post-COVID world

When the events of 2020 created a dramatic shift in how work gets done, it became clear that preparedness for the unexpected depends on an organization's management of its work and its workforce. Equipping employees with the skills and tools needed to thrive in any environment increases resilience and allows organizations to deliver their Mission in the face of major disruption. 2020's global crises have had profound impacts on employees, with organizations making sweeping changes to what, where, how, and by whom work was done. Employees' ability to navigate these disruptions demonstrates that, when it comes to preparing for unknown futures, organizations have an imperative to structure work and support their employees in ways that enable them to rise to the challenges that disruption may bring.

To enable employees to navigate such disruption, organizations must be focused on the employee experience, as examined through multiple lenses. Leadership must infuse well-being into the structure of work, allowing employees to weigh in on the flexibility and programming that will empower them and make them successful. This includes restructuring teams to include new technologies that automate transactional work, allowing workers to focus on meaningful tasks that provide higher value to the organization and increase employee engagement. As automation frees employees from monotonous tasks, incentivizing them to learn new skills creates an agile and adaptable workforce that is prepared to meet the challenges posed by modernization. Armed with these insights, HR can take a front seat in driving their organizations into the future. To play that role, HR must be enabled by proactive workforce analytics focused around understanding employee preferences.

Putting people at the heart of an organization's decisions about work and the workforce pays off in the ability to better stay ahead of disruption. To do so, public sector leaders should prioritize the employee experience, infusing that priority in all decisions they make that impacts work and the workforce in terms. In doing so, public sector organizations will find themselves with a resilient and engaged workforce that is equipped to handle whatever challenges and disruptions the future holds.

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## What do I do now?

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