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# Reopening the workplace:
# A resilient leader's guide

**Recovery from COVID-19**

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RESPOND

RECOVER

THRIVE
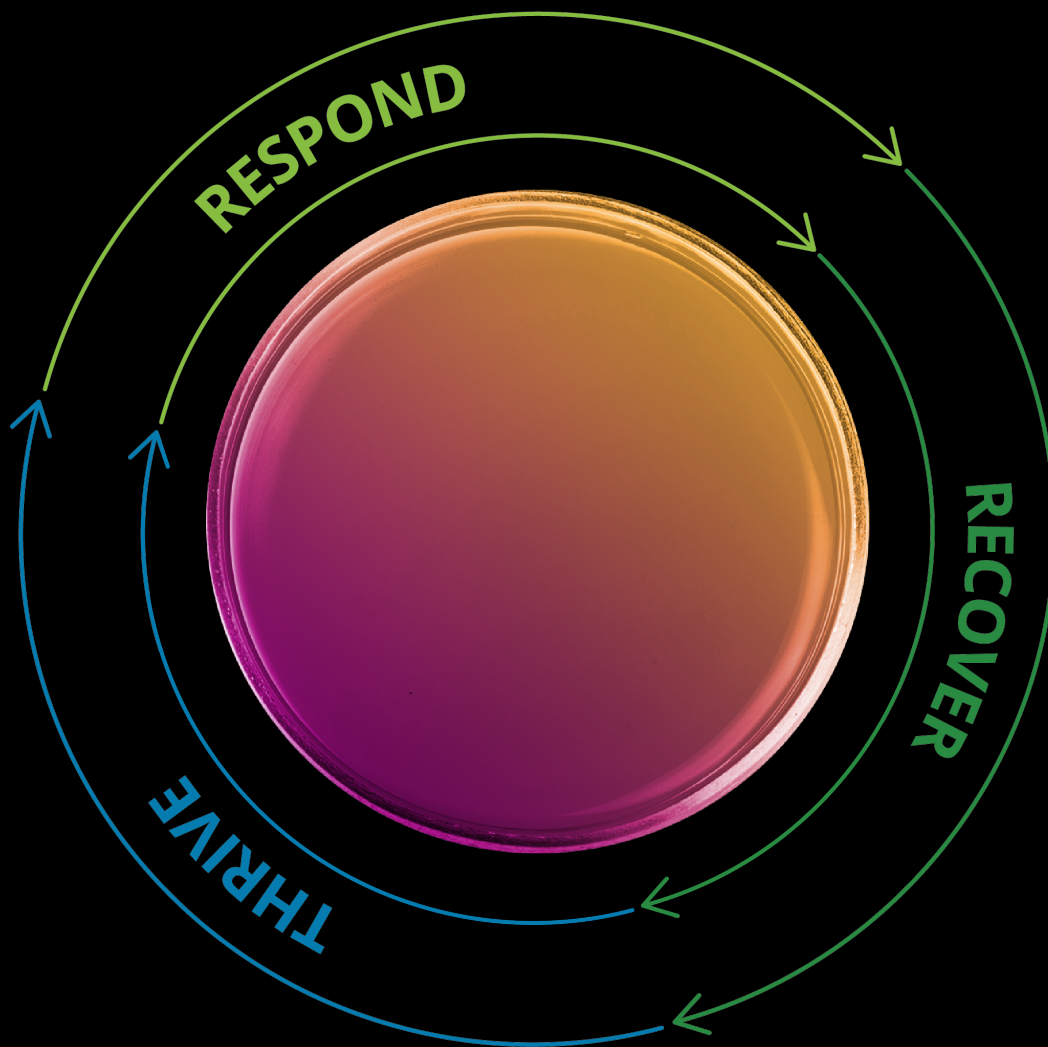
MAKING AN
IMPACT THAT
MATTERS
*since 1845*

As the COVID-19 pandemic radically disrupted work environments, the first priority has been crisis response: emphasizing health and safety, essential services, and the virtualization of work and education.[1]

Resilient leaders pivoting from the Respond to Recover phases—and ultimately to Thrive—are now focusing on reopening and/or restoring the workplace effectively, efficiently, and especially safely. Yet the abundance of "unknown unknowns"— everything from changes in the social contract, to macroeconomic impacts, to local health ordinances, to individual employee preferences or fears of populated work environments—make the challenge seem more like quantum physics than a simple decision calculus.

In our article on Recover, The essence of resilient leadership: Business recovery from COVID-19, we stated that resilience is not a destination, but rather a state of being. Resilience is the capacity to retain character while being formed in the crucible of crisis. Amid such a dynamic environment, it is critical for senior leaders to discern, debate, and decide core strategic questions rather than just defaulting to a checklist-based approach. Resilient leaders recognize that reopening plans are like sealing wax softened by the fire of the crisis, and they reshape the plans as the environment emerges, whereas checklist-based approaches are like brittle, hardened wax that disintegrates under the pressure of the seal.

Therefore, this article encourages senior leadership to reopen the workplace by:

- Evaluating the implications to the organization of **changes in the social contract** with employees

- Answering **core strategic questions** around the work, the workforce, and the workplace, which frame reopening decisions

- Leveraging **important tools** to inform those strategic decisions, including the *Reopen the Workplace Navigator* tool, economic scenarios, and our government response portal[2] for up-to-date laws in more than 100 countries

## The changing social contract

One of the most profound changes in the COVID-19 crisis has been how the social contract has changed, particularly between employers and employees. An implicit contract is based on accepted—and generally unspoken—assumptions about "the way things are." Consider these profound upheavals in that contract:

- The accepted boundaries between work life and home life dissolved as millions of coworkers suddenly "did life together," videoconferencing into each other's home offices, kitchens . . . and sometimes lesson plans.

- The emotional well-being of the workforce has become a greater and much more visible priority, particularly as employees suffer the trauma of loss—including, tragically, the loss of family and friends.

- Biases against working from home are dissolving. For example, one quasi-governmental agency shifted its staff to remote working and discovered that productivity increased despite years of assumptions to the contrary.

- Businesses and governments experienced the downside of job fluidity, wrestling with how to support gig workers, who now make up a large portion of the workforce.

Further, the expectations for safety—physical, emotional, financial, and digital—have profoundly increased across all stakeholder groups, but especially employees, as we discuss in *The essence of resilient leadership*.

## Core strategic questions

Our extensive research has identified three key dimensions for the future of work: the work (the *what*), the workforce (the *who*) and the workplace (the *where*). Although the topic of this paper is reopening the workplace, considerations around the work itself and the workforce are intrinsically linked to reopening decisions. Resilient leaders develop and communicate clear guiding principles on key issues such as these in order to channel the efforts of the team it charters to reopen the workplace.

Questions to consider include:

### How do we plan for the return to the workplace?

- Determine which functions, work, and roles need to return to the workplace to be effective, and which can continue to work remotely. Use rigor in determining those essential to working physically in the workplace, as this enables more effective application of safety measures.

- Assess the type of work teams need to do in person, including the work's duration, as an input to space planning and safety design.

- Provide support to teams working remotely. Define practices and policies for remote teams (considering factors such as working styles, norms, and enabling technology), and deliver training on making home environments and remote working effective.

- Model scenarios that evaluate potential workforce and workplace options with a lens to productivity, cost, safety, and operating conditions.

- Develop a staggered plan to get targeted people back into the workplace.

- Develop and model guidelines for testing, monitoring, space and facilities management, and visitor management geared toward productivity, mental, and psychological safety.

### How do we get people back safely and maintain productivity?

- Monitor the latest guidance on testing, safety, and sanitation plans for near-term reentry, and develop sanitation policies and build up required capabilities to monitor facilities.

- Adjust workplace as needed to provide for appropriate distance and hygienic behaviors, and consider concierge support to augment worker wellness, health, and safety.

- Review and update HR policies, procedures, and programs as required, anticipating scenarios such as work refusals or family situations that make return difficult.

- Understand and comply with government mandates and legal requirements.

- Establish feedback channels to understand workforce concerns and conditions. Assess worker sentiment frequently and transparently address the findings.

- Build a change management and communications plan to drive confidence and motivation in the workforce to return.

- Assess what supplemental technology and tools are needed to support collaboration and task management across on-site and remote team members.

### How do we ensure the organization's continued financial viability?

- Engage in financial modeling to build out various scenarios for workplace reopening and recovery, with an eye to preserving cash/liquidity and ensuring adequate capitalization.

- Continue to evaluate government assistance programs[3] available to fund portions of the reopening efforts.

### Important tools for sealing success
One thing *is* certain: Leadership needs to hold its plans with open hands, not clenched fists. Uncertainties such as epidemiology trends, local ordinances, and public sentiment can all have a material impact on the execution of the best-laid plans—another reason that simple checklists break rather than bend.

The following tools can help resilient leaders engage with these important questions:

- **Deloitte's Reopen the Workplace Navigator**, which is available by consulting with your local Deloitte leader or any of the contacts listed in this article. The Navigator offers detailed guidance on issues including command center structure, compliance with guidelines, employee health and well-being, physical space and ecosystem, workforce and HR strategies, and finance and scenario modeling.

- **A variety of economic scenarios** that include embedded assumptions on epidemiology, society, technology, policy, and the environment. Understanding the range of possible scenarios for the near-term future is critical to a resilient reopening plan

- **Deloitte's government response portal**, which includes a guide to movement restrictions, business reopening criteria, government assistance programs, and other matters across more than 100 countries. Although many of these strategic questions can be answered at a company-wide level, reopening the workplace is also very local: The myriad of local rules introduces multiple constraints into the reopening calculus.

As the answers to these strategic questions become clear, leadership can shape a viable reopening workplan. By keeping its plan malleable enough to accommodate major uncertainties, an organization can seal its success.

1   Deloitte, *Workforce strategies for post COVID-19 recovery: The bridge from responding to the crisis to preparing to thrive in a new normal*, 2020.

2   The Social and Business Impacts section of the portal addresses restrictions on movement restrictions, business reopening criteria, etc.

3   The Tax and Financial section of the portal highlights available government assistance programs.

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