



The humanised workplace

Moving on from new ways of working

Article 1 in a series

Shift from new ways of working to humanised workplace during COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic drives profound economic and societal shifts, organisations are reflecting on how to return to the new and adjusted workplace. The solutions need to cover different angles, including corporate culture, the sense of belonging, the future vision on the organisation itself, the link with the stakeholders in the wider ecosystem, and last but not least, the individual preferences and expectations of employees.

Little did we know how this pandemic would change life as we knew it and manifest itself as a 'time machine' to the future of work, workforce and workplace. Changes that many of us predicted would happen over a decade have occurred in a span of weeks. This presents a unique opportunity to reflect on this social and business experiment and rethink the new normal.

We used to talk about new ways of working and although, even before, all organisations had a different way to define this concept, it was often looked at in a fragmented manner, taking incremental steps forward. For some organisations it was about how to design the office space differently to ensure activity-based working, whereas for others it meant evolving to a digital way of working to enable colleagues to work from home under strict conditions.

This is aligned with what we wrote in the prologue of this year's Global Human Capital Trends report, "Looking ahead, much in the same way that we started the decade in uncertainty, we appear to be headed back into a period of uncertainty. Whether this is a hindrance or a push forward, depends on how we approach it."

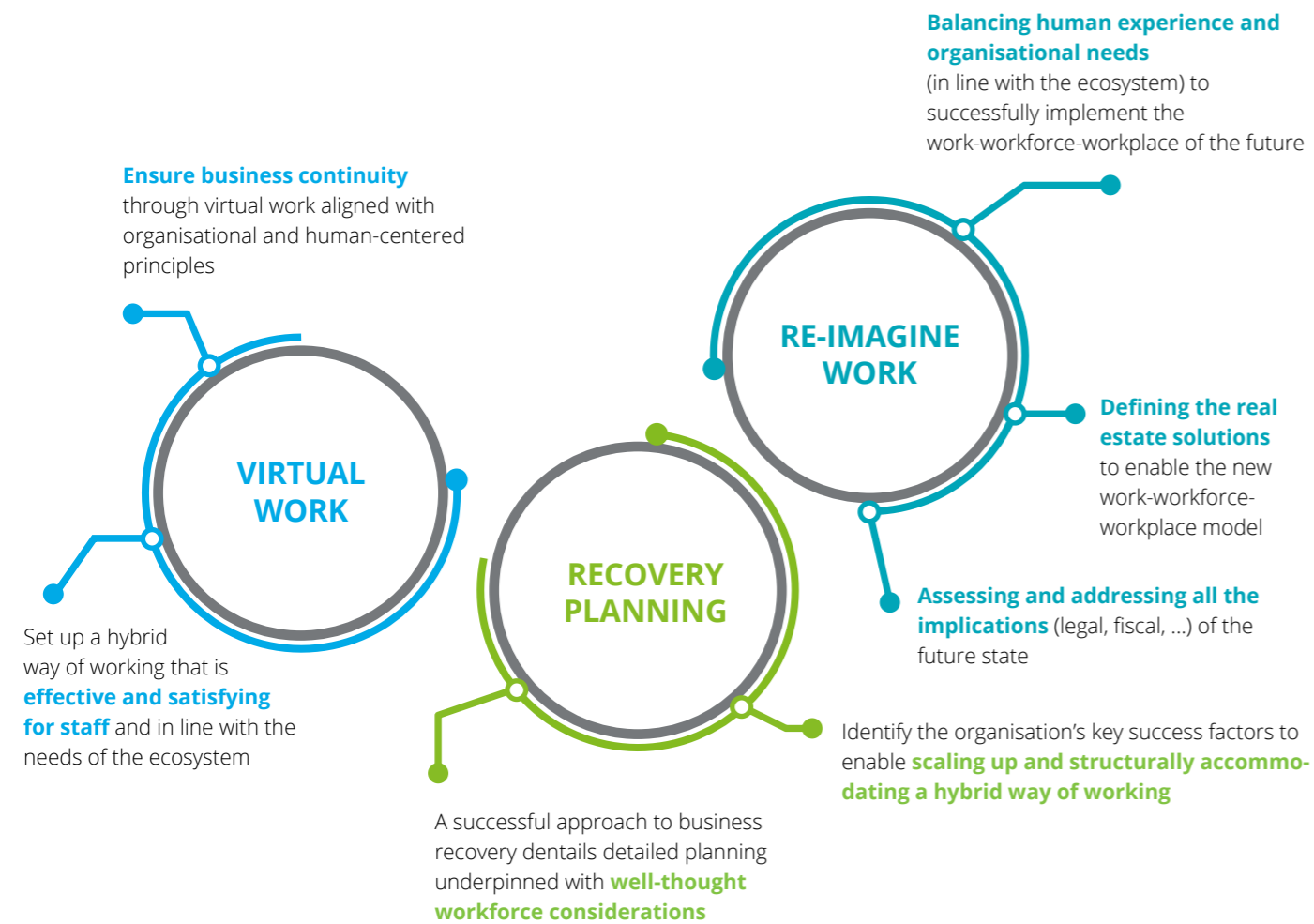
The new reality forces us to think differently. New ways of working, as a term, is obsolete. Instead, we need to think of work, workforce and workplace in a more holistic way and more than ever focus on the human aspect in the organisation. That's why we talk about the humanised workplace, in which workplace means a lot more than just the place we work.

The humanised workplace is something that we know inherently will evolve over time in the aftermath of this pandemic. The impact on people needs to be considered in order to take deliberate decisions on how to navigate the human dimension in the business recovery in the short, medium and long run.

Not one playbook for organisations who embark on this transformation journey

COVID-19 has challenged business leaders a lot, and after initially securing business continuity through virtual work, leaders are now confronted with three areas they need to cover:

1. realising virtual is here to stay, reflecting on how to embed virtual more structurally, and making sure all the basics are right to do so in a high-performing way;
2. understanding and leveraging the key success factors to gradually transition through multiple recovery phases accommodating often a hybrid way of working;
3. re-imagining the end goal, how the future of work will ideally look like in the end.



Past

Over the past months, organisations have experienced a burst of acceleration, fast-forwarding them into working completely remotely and setting the basics right to enable a dynamic and virtual business environment. For some organisations the transition was smooth, for others it was not. For example, even though digital tools were accessible and effective, a deeper trust issue (leading to feelings of a loss of control) emerged for some leaders who were not used to working from a distance.



Near future

In the near future, we will need to adopt a more hybrid perspective wherein virtual work will be blended with onsite presence, restricted by social distancing. This recovery stage should be planned carefully as it brings additional challenges for people. For example, even though going back to the office can be recommended due to the nature of roles and activities, a choice needs to be made to what extent personal preferences will be taken into account at this point. One should be cautious not to solely focus on the immediate re-entry stage as this will not allow organisations to capitalise on all that they have experienced and learned over the past few months.



Future

The last time perspective triggers organisations to rethink the future in the medium and long run.

“If you don’t know where you are, a map won’t help.”

Watts Murphy

There is a shared understanding that these changes are inevitable, though different for each organisation. **There’s no one-size-fits-all solution for all these challenges. There is not one playbook for all organisations due to the different contexts, business operations, and ecosystems starting levels of maturity in these areas, the corporate culture, the international footprint, the mix of generations, etc.** Considering this diversity, different choices might need to be made. The COVID-19 crisis did not just accelerate the digital transformation, but also the evolution to becoming agile organisations, open-minded and ready to throw caution to the wind.

It is pivotal to reflect on the desired end state, the sustainable post-COVID future, and ask ourselves: “Where do we want to end up? What is the ambition we want to strive for?”

Re-imagine work

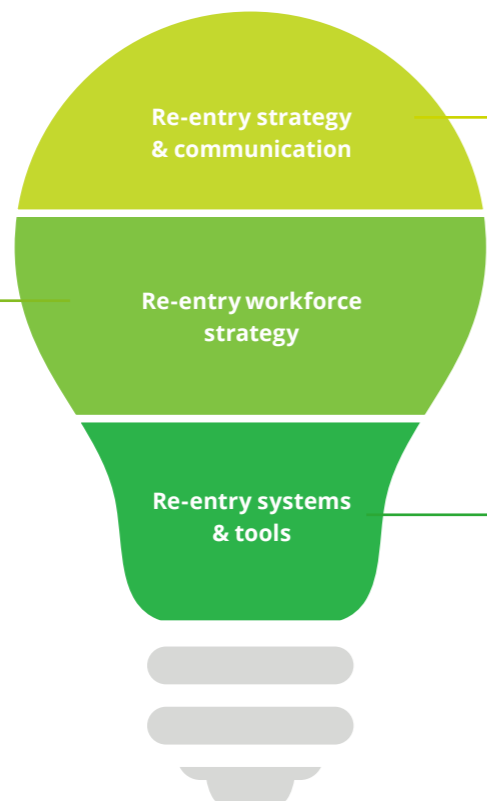
To tackle this in the right way, we need to start at the end, imagining that future of work by shaping the way we see work, workforce and workplace in the future, whilst asking ourselves what we want to keep from the current situation and what we don't want to lose from the past.

- Which changes will we have to make to the fundamental nature of work performed in order to achieve our business goals? How will we ensure alignment with our ecosystem? How will we future-proof our organisation based on the required agility to cope with new challenges in the future?
- How will our talent pool and the skills portfolio of the workforce evolve in the virtual era of digitalisation, automation and which unique human capabilities are important to our business? How will we reskill the workforce to tackle emerging learning needs?
- How will we balance working remotely and being at the office? How will we optimise our office space or office location to ensure it responds to the organisational needs? How and where do we want people to collaborate?

Recovery planning

Having figured out where the organisation wants to go, we need to cover the near and mid-term future of the recovery planning, centralised around the human aspects. A successful approach to business recovery entails detailed planning underpinned with well-thought workforce considerations.

A hybrid way of working creates an environment where anything and everything can be individualised, yet humans desire a sense of belonging to a larger whole. Monitor employee readiness and working preferences to gauge mental health.



As situations will evolve, there's a high need for information sharing and buy-in for how things are happening. Co-workers need to understand the organisation's (new) purpose, led by the entire leadership team. Transparent, coherent and timely communication is a key driver for success.

To ensure an efficient and effective way to recovery, both technical and facility arrangements should be made and run smoothly. For example, an office schedule and circulation plan should be put in place, with facility adaptations, collaboration toolkits, seat reservation system, etc.

Virtual work

Finally, virtual is here to stay. Getting the basics right is a non-negotiable for creating high-performing teams in this virtual and hybrid humanised workplace. A combination of organisational and human-centered principles can help to make the move to workplace models that are effective and satisfying for staff as well as in line with the needs of the ecosystem.



Make the invisible, visible: We need to proactively and explicitly make our work and teams visible to each other. Break the "knowledge is power" idea and cultivate a culture where people recognise that sharing knowledge makes them more, not less, relevant. We need to make time for the informal connections, for listening to what is unsaid.



Balance (a)synchronous communication: Realtime collaboration is our most valuable resource in a virtual environment. We need to find the right mix between synchronous (e.g. video call) and asynchronous communication (not email) where we use other channels—preferably not email—to bring messages to different audiences. Technology is the glue to elevate the human experience in the sense that it helps us bring our messages across in the most convenient, tailored and sometimes even individualised way, but should also avoid that people get overwhelmed..



Leading without seeing: We need to develop a new set of management behaviours to guide teams that are working virtually. A focus on outcomes rather than effort and regular touch points (formal and informal) are key in this respect.



Remote productivity: We must deliberately shift the way we operate and behave to enhance the productivity and value of our remote workers by adopting practices and behaviours that are optimised for virtual experiences. For example, we should not conduct a virtual workshop in the same way as we would have done the live version, but tailor the design and preparation to what fits best with this new virtual context.



Tech first: We need to ensure that remote workers have the right mix of digital platforms and technologies that enable and accelerate individuals and teams to connect, collaborate, and deliver value.



A room with a view: In our personal space, we need to make sure that our physical space enhances our productivity, wellbeing, and is fit for purpose.

Don't miss the boat

Organisations face a choice between entering a post-COVID world that is simply an enhanced version of yesterday or building a new one that is based on a transformation to an agile, adaptable and future-proof organisation. In order to do that right, we need to take into account the different time perspectives and work our way back from defining the end-goal of the recovery to the basics, all of this with the human at the centre. Only in this way, will we be able to truly re-imagine work and create a humanised workplace. The risk of missing the boat right now is never to catch up at all.



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