Designing adaptive
workplaces

How the public sector can capitalize on lessons learned
from COVID-19

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Introduction

"We are not going back … There'll be a portion of our workforce that never comes back to working as we knew it in the past." These are not the words of a CEO from the private sector but those of Air Force Vice Chief of Staff General Stephen W. "Seve" Wilson, discussing the emerging Air Force perspective on remote and virtual work.[1]

Almost a year into the world's massive overnight shift to a virtual work environment, how the public sector thinks about remote/virtual work has fundamentally changed. This forced shift toward a distributed and highly virtualized work environment has demonstrated that people can accomplish work efficiently, effectively, and comfortably even while working remotely. It has shattered the belief that employees can't be as effective when offsite and flipped many previously held workplace orthodoxies in the process.

FIGURE 1

COVID-19 has flipped traditional workplace orthodoxies

Traditional belief	But…
"Work has to be done in the office"	Continuity of operations has been preserved for most government functions
"People won't work as hard from home"	Industry data suggests people are more productive and work more hours at home
"Employee engagement will suffer"	Technology is enabling even greater collaboration and engagement
"We must recruit staff locally, or pay to relocate them to our offices"	Removing geography expands candidate pool and quality, and attractiveness of employers
"Shared facilities reduce overhead costs"	The more remote, the fewer facilities and overhead, driving down infrastructure costs

Source: Deloitte analysis.

In the United States, almost 60% of employees are now working remotely full or part time and about two-thirds of those who have been working remotely would like to continue to do so, according to a recent Gallup poll.[2] The preliminary data shows that productivity and job satisfaction have improved with remote work and the potential for cost savings is real. At the same time, there are indications that loneliness, mental health issues, and the risk of burnout have also increased.[3] It is unclear how much of this is driven by the social isolation brought on by COVID-19, and how much of this is a byproduct of full-time virtual work. Importantly, however, emerging data suggests that proactively addressing employee well-being and engagement can counteract these forces and further enhance productivity.

What changes do we need to make to our work, workforce, workplace for enduring success in the new normal?

These and other issues have raised some fundamental questions that public and private sector organizations are contending with: What should the "new normal" be for our organization after the pandemic? What aspects of virtual work can we incorporate into how we do business to capitalize on the productivity, efficiency, and cost-savings gains? How can we counteract the possible negative aspects of "isolation" or "loneliness" that may dampen the employee experience and negatively impact business results? How should we manage productivity and performance in a world where "management by walking around" no longer works? In other words, what changes do we need

to make to our work, workforce, workplace for enduring success in the new normal?

As leaders begin to look toward the future and decide *where* work will be performed moving forward, the decision should not be considered a binary one where we all go back to the way things were or we all continue with 100% telework. The optimal choice may be something more fluid—an **adaptive workplace** for a workforce that is *able* to work from anywhere but is *empowered* to work from where they're most productive.

To understand how—and why—to design adaptive workplaces, government leaders should reimagine what the term **productivity** means. Economists often define productivity as outputs divided by inputs (e.g., to produce 10 widgets, it takes three people). In this example, increasing productivity requires reducing the number of people it takes to produce widgets. Two common levers for improving productivity are **efficiency** (is work being done in a way that optimizes resources) and **effectiveness** (is work being done in a way that optimizes outcomes). This mechanistic understanding of productivity overlooks a key attribute that impacts both efficiency and effectiveness—**employee engagement**. Emerging data shows that employees who feel engaged in their work are more productive than those who feel less engaged. Organizations that focus on employee engagement see higher levels of productivity, and other benefits such as lower attrition and higher innovation. Conversely, organizations with low engagement see lower productivity and higher levels of attrition and burnout. As the rest of this article suggests, to lock in the advantages of adaptive workplaces while mitigating the challenges, organizations should incorporate this third dimension of productivity— **engagement**—recognizing that people are typically more efficient and effective when they are more engaged in the work they do (figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Defining virtual productivity: Efficiency, effectiveness, and engagement

Efficiency
Are we doing the right
things in the right way?

Effectiveness
Are we producing the
right results?

**Sustained
productivity**

Engagement
Are we empowering our workforce
and sustaining their well-being?

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Adaptive workplaces: The best of both worlds to optimize productivity

WHILE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES are still adjusting to the rapid virtualization of work, emerging data indicates that organizations that employ adaptive workplaces can experience significant organizational and workforce experience benefits. According to a Deloitte study, employee engagement overall tends to be at its highest among employees who work remotely 60–80% of the time.[4] And, according to a Gallup poll, teams with high employee engagement rates are 21% more productive.[5] These findings are supported by Federal Work Life Survey data, which shows that compared to onsite employees, teleworkers are 16% more engaged, 19% more satisfied, and 11% less likely to leave.[6] The majority of supervisors and employees say telework improves performance, morale, health, stress management, and the desire to stay with the organization.[7]
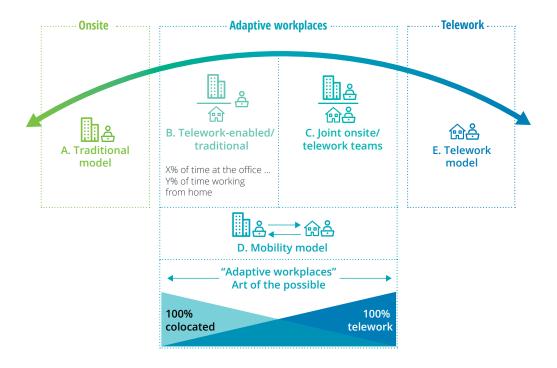
While remote work has its benefits, there are certain jobs and activities that cannot easily or more efficiently be carried out in a virtual manner. For example, conducting on-site audits and inspections, dealing with highly classified information, maintaining facilities and physical infrastructure, work involving the physical movement of products, people, and things, and related activities. Furthermore, as social animals, there is immeasurable value in face-to-face, human interaction and the development of interpersonal relationships that can't easily be achieved in virtual settings.

For these reasons, organizations should look to the future not as a binary choice between onsite or virtual. Instead, they should strive to create fluid, adaptive workplaces where employees and teams are more mobile, shifting as needed across different workplace environments based on the nature of the work, and where they and their teams are most productive.

Adaptive workplaces could become even more attractive in a postpandemic world when situations involving dependent and childcare normalize, and social isolation is minimized.

Adaptive workplaces could become even more attractive in a postpandemic world when situations involving dependent and childcare normalize, and social isolation is minimized. This workforce-centered thinking that empowers employees to voice preferences and provide input on workplace decisions—and ideally work where they are most engaged and effective—can open the door to an entire spectrum of possibilities (figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Adaptive workplaces mean organization leaders engage employees to shape optimal work environments

Source: Deloitte analysis.

An important aspect of adaptive workplaces is that they empower employees to have a say in where they work from, shaping the discussion, shaping the workplace, and ultimately shaping leadership decisions. Co-director of the MIT Institute for Work and Employment Research and MIT professor Erin Kelly says, "When employees have a sense of choice and control over when, how, and where they do their work, it's really valuable for their well-being, their excitement for the job, and their commitment to the company."[8]

Here are some examples of adaptive workplaces: Siemens announced that its employees may work from wherever they feel most productive for two or three days a week. Twitter's employees can work remotely indefinitely. At Deloitte, most professionals and project teams determine the adaptive workplace environment that works best for them and their clients, with no top-down-driven minimum requirement for in-office work. Government agencies such as the Navy, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Labor too are inclined to continue with some degree of telework/remote work and flexibility.[9]

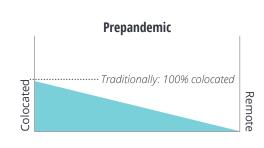# What does an adaptive workplace look like?

ET'S LOOK AT three different sample scenarios that show what adaptive workplaces could mean for different workforce roles:

Scenario 1: The health and human services caseworker

Kate is a human services caseworker at a health and human services (HHS) department. Prior to the pandemic, Kate's job was largely office- and field-based. She would work from the office and travel to clients' homes as needed. In the postpandemic world, Kate works remotely almost 20% of the time doing focused casework and engaging with clients virtually—tasks that don't require her to be in the office. While there isn't a true substitute for face-to-face interactions with her clients and coworkers, Kate has experienced several benefits (such as convenience and greater engagement) of working remotely—not just for herself, but also for her clients.
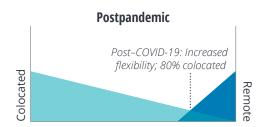
The adaptive workplace opportunity:

- **Reduced stress and better work/life balance:** With the ability to telework/work remotely even for one or two days per week, Kate reports reduced stress and burnout as well as increased productivity and more time to focus on helping families. Kate finds she can be much more responsive to clients when working virtually and saving time on commuting helps engage more clients, while helping her feel energized in client conversations.

- **Continued use of virtual court hearings:** Virtual hearings (via video or audioconference) are helping increase participation since neither Kate nor her clients need to commute or take the workday off to attend such hearings.

- **Virtual touchpoints to augment in-person interactions:** A "little and often" approach to virtual communication with families—whether it be short phone calls or

FIGURE 4a

The adaptive workplaces model for Kate

■ Colocated ■ Remote

Source: Deloitte analysis.

checking in with parents via text—helps Kate build relationships for longer meetings and more intense conversations.[10]
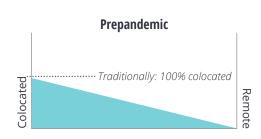
- **Better engagement with young people/teenagers:** Anecdotal evidence suggests that virtual communication channels work particularly well with young people. Kate can see teenagers are engaging more, possibly because they feel more at ease in their own space and are accustomed to using text and video chats to interact with their friends and peers.[11]

Scenario 2: The team player

Juan is part of a digital services team within a state government. Before the pandemic, he worked in a highly collaborative environment, having daily meetings with his teammates. With remote work, Juan enjoys more flexibility and finds he can do more deep, focused work uninterrupted. But he misses the spontaneous interactions and brainstorming with his team—something that often led to the best ideas/solutions. Now he works mostly remotely, going into the office for collaborative and team-based tasks.
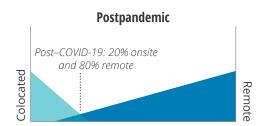
The adaptive workplace opportunity:

- **Identifying collaborative tasks:** To optimize work for everyone, Juan's team decided which work should be done together versus individually. For example, the team agreed that planning activities were best done together but for focused activities such as data analysis, they preferred working alone. By doing this for a host of tasks, Juan could schedule collaborative activities on their team's co-located days.

- **Designing virtual watercooler opportunities:** While there is no substitute for in-person interactions, there are ways to make similar, spontaneous exchanges possible in a virtual setting. Juan and his team use a variety of channels to create opportunities for seamless work between co-located and remote employees. These include:

  - **Virtual coworking:** Similar to friends who study or workout together, Juan and a few members of his team sometimes join a videoconference link while working on their own projects, often in complete silence. This allows Juan and his teammates to

FIGURE 4b

The adaptive workplace model for Juan

■ Colocated ■ Remote

Prepandemic — Colocated / Remote — *Traditionally: 100% colocated*

Postpandemic — Colocated / Remote — *Post–COVID-19: 20% onsite and 80% remote*

Source: Deloitte analysis.

focus on independent work but creates the space for spontaneous conversation and collaboration.

- **Open office hours:** Juan holds open and completely optional office hours for his team once a week where anyone can drop in to chat. The idea is not to have an agenda but encourage unstructured conversations where people can share ideas, feedback, or whatever is on their minds.

- **Virtual watercooler chats:** Juan's team uses chat apps to encourage informal chatter and knowledge sharing virtually.

- **Improved virtual collaboration:** Occasionally, Juan (or one of his colleagues) can't go into the office for collaboration tasks and meetings on co-located days. But that doesn't stop them from participating, thanks to the team's use of online collaboration and whiteboarding tools. The team can brainstorm with sticky notes, vote ideas up or down, and work on shared documents while working remotely.

Scenario 3: The HR leader

Marion is the chief human capital officer (CHCO) for a large investigative federal agency. Before the pandemic, she worked almost exclusively from the agency's office and had a lot of face-to-face interaction with her teams. Now Marion works from the office 50% of the time—primarily for classified work—but spends the remainder working remotely. She has adapted to leading teams and delivering on her agency's mission virtually. She experienced several benefits, including a positive effect on her staff.
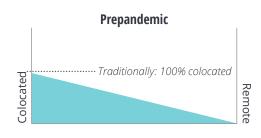
The adaptive workplace opportunity:

- **Access to a wider talent pool:** With virtual working arrangements in place, Marion has been able to hire skilled professionals from across the country without geographic restrictions. She was even able to fill some critical cybersecurity positions with applicants from outside the D.C. area.

- **Investing in training and onboarding:** With distributed teams and limited in-person
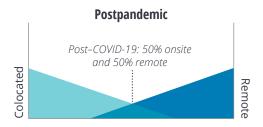
FIGURE 4c

The adaptive workplace model for Marion

■ Colocated   ■ Remote

Source: Deloitte analysis.

interaction opportunities, Marion has made it a priority to focus on onboarding processes for new hires, many of whom will work remotely. This means creating opportunities for mentorship, shadowing, building relationships, as well as knowledge transfer and training. Marion also drops into virtual onboarding sessions and facilitates virtual coffee chats between new hires and other leaders so they can interact. These are more feasible and easier to schedule in a virtual environment.

- **Managing a virtual team:** With limited in-person time with her teams, Marion communicates with them early and often on goals and projects. The use of virtual collaboration tools, shared documents, project-tracking tools, and knowledge libraries allow for real-time transparency and documentation so everyone on the team is always up to date. She uses short one-on-one check-ins to connect with people regularly. Since moving to a hybrid model, Marion has seen a clear improvement in her team's performance as well as higher employee satisfaction overall.

Creating adaptive workplaces: How to get started

HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS go about building adaptive workplaces? To empower the workforce to do their best work and design workplaces that are truly adaptive, there are four dimensions organizations should optimize (figure 5).

Places and spaces: Understand the work people do, and where they're most engaged doing it

Should employees be onsite or offsite? The answer depends on *where they are most productive* performing their job and can vary based on the work type and individual engagement levels.

FIGURE 5

Four aspects to keep in mind while designing adaptive workplaces

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Research suggests that the defining factor in productivity is not whether employees are in an office or not, but whether they are engaged—often a major challenge for employers with remote workforces.[12] This calls for a deliberate review of work and thinking through the location options that drive optimal engagement and productivity. A mobility analysis can help answer these questions and can be used to inform immediate and longer-term workforce and facilities planning. Aided by the use of structured methodologies, organizations

"The success of remote work really depends on the personality traits of the employees and the environments that they're in so we have to have this human environment fit."

— *Dr. Kati Peditto, assistant professor at the US Air Force Academy*

can rapidly assess the work their staff perform to determine the percentage of time they would typically spend across various workspaces.

According to Dr. Kati Peditto, assistant professor in the department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the US Air Force Academy, "The success of remote work really depends on the personality traits of the employees and the environments that they're in so we have to have this human environment fit."[13]

There are several instances from the pandemic of organizations better achieving their mission due to a change in *how* and *where* work is done. For example, some human services social workers report an improvement in the quality of conversations with families in a virtual setting, including fewer distractions from paper shuffling and improved value of work.[14] Whether it's virtual courts, remote caseworker visits, or virtual inspections, looking at the data and evidence on their efficacy can inform decision-making.

In addition to deciding on the location or place of work, another dimension is *optimizing the physical spaces* where work is done. Even before COVID-19, research on how employees used office spaces often shaped workspace design. The pandemic has enabled organizations to pause and rethink their physical workplace strategies. With the increase in hybrid work arrangements, physical offices should adapt to support tasks that are best done there.

According to Eve Edelstein, co-founder of the research-based design consultancy Clinicians for Design, traditional office spaces with their many distractions have not been ideal for individual work. Although it might not work for everyone, she advocates letting offices become team spaces. "Take those rows and rows of desks and turn them into carefully controlled spaces that people feel comfortable being in," she says.[15] Other elements of the physical workplace that often need optimizing focus on employee safety and well-being—better ventilation systems, spaced-out workstations, more sunlight, biophilic design[16] with plants and natural elements, and technology such as voice or sensors that enable touchless interfaces.

Productivity and performance: Look at the science of work behavior

Since the pandemic and even before, remote work and its impact on productivity has been a heavily researched topic. But beyond location choice, there is also significant research on the science of optimizing work behavior and practices to boost performance. For example, a study from Florida State University shows that humans work best during uninterrupted 90-minute intervals but how many typical workdays are organized that way?[17] Batching similar tasks together—emails or phone calls during a designated hour or creating content at once—can work better than multitasking (which can reduce productivity by 40%), but to what extent does the average worker use this technique? Research by Robert Sutton, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University, showed that the most productive meetings contain only five to eight people. Add any more, and the quality of conversation suffers.[18]

"In the area of psychology and management, we're back in the days of alchemy ... There aren't any scientific bones there."
— *Sandy Pentland, MIT Connection Science and Human Dynamics labs*

Supporting science- and data-backed best practices and making them more actionable within the organization is a key aspect of building adaptive workplaces and improving performance. At the

same time data from within the organization on performance management, recruitment, workspace efficiency, retention, employee behaviors, and work habits should be used to assess the organization's feasibility and support of remote, co-located, or hybrid work as well as to inform policy changes.
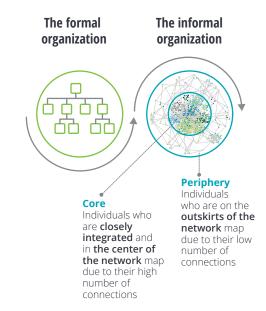
While analyzing changes in workforce behaviors in the months following the COVID-19 outbreak, Microsoft found that meetings became shorter and more frequent—meetings under 30 minutes increased by 22%. This happened organically without any formal guidance, as more workers connected one on one or participated in social calls such as "happy hours" or "trivia." They also found that the number of instant messages (IMs) sent soared—an increase of 115%—particularly among managers who saw IMs as a way to connect with their teams and manage them effectively without in-person contact.[19]

Tools such as organizational network analysis (ONA) can provide insights into less visible but arguably more important informal networks within the organization. ONA examines the structure of social relationships in a group to uncover the informal connections between people (figure 6). It is the science of making visible the key pathways of collaboration and information flow across these networks, beyond the often-hierarchical, formal reporting structures. ONA illuminates how work gets done and who is driving value, where collaboration is breaking down, where talent and expertise can be better leveraged, and where opportunities for diffusion and innovation are being lost.[20]

In designing adaptive workplaces, ONA can help leaders, managers, and workers understand how they work together, identify potential issues, and lead to actions that ensure the continued well-being and productive engagement of the workforce.

FIGURE 6

Organization network analysis can help uncover informal networks

The formal organization

The informal organization

Core
Individuals who are **closely integrated** and in **the center of the network** map due to their high number of connections

Periphery
Individuals who are on the **outskirts of the network** map due to their low number of connections

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Well-being and connection: Listen to your workforce

Data can be a great asset in informing decision-making, but without the context provided by real stories and the experiences of the workforce, valuable insights can get buried in spreadsheets and statistics. The period following the start of the pandemic has been an involuntary, large-scale experiment in remote work and revealed gaps, challenges, and opportunities from a workforce perspective. What challenges do employees face? What is working and what isn't? Pulse your people to get an understanding of the current culture, their feelings toward the future, and what they need to perform their best. Most importantly, give your employees a voice in how or where they work.

Working remotely during the pandemic has led many people to reveal a larger part of their whole selves to their coworkers. From their taste in books to family pictures in the background to appearances from noisy pets and curious toddlers, virtual/video calls have quite literally provided a peek into the lives of those we work with. An individual's personal circumstances impact their well-being and work, so understanding their challenges can be key to adapting the workplace to the new normal.

At the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), chief human capital officer Angie Bailey has been focused on weekly communication with the workforce through blogs, emails, and surveys. She receives (and responds to) thousands of emails sharing real stories and ideas from employees. "We used all of that information, the thousands of emails I've received, as well as the town hall meetings we've had, the reach-outs to our employees to really help think, shape, and form our policies going forward with the workforce," she says. Through these emails, the absence of childcare and school emerged as a theme that was troubling employees. In response, the DHS started virtual family days to help engage kids and make parents feel less burdened. The agency also enhanced flexibility and reevaluated how work
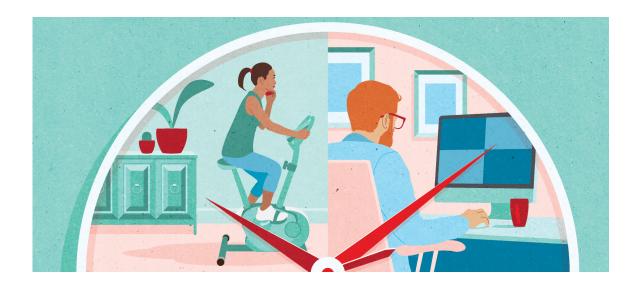
schedules might work. "If you have an 80-hour work week, maybe that 80-hour work week consists of working, you know, from 3–9 at night versus 9–5 in the morning kind of thing," says Bailey.[21]

"This pandemic has made us really rethink how we manage the workforce and what tools we have at our hands to manage the performance of the workforce and interact with one another."

— *Rebecca Ayers, manager of the Office of Personnel Management's USA Performance tool*

Workforce experience: Adapt organizational processes to meet hybrid work needs

In a hybrid setup, systems and processes designed for a purely in-office model (or a purely virtual model)—whether it's performance management

processes, technology, or employee well-being initiatives—might not be as effective. A "lift and shift" approach simply won't work.

The workforce experience must support the workforce in doing their best work—irrespective of their work location. A holistic workforce experience considers multiple dimensions—work, organization, workforce, technology, well-being, and *places* (not simply the office or home).

Consider performance management: One of the challenges of having employees both on and offsite is the perception that those who work from the office have greater visibility and have an advantage in terms of promotions and career opportunities. To unleash the true potential of hybrid work, processes and systems designed to reward behaviors that only apply to an in-person setting need to be adapted to serve the needs of the whole employee—no matter what their location.

More frequent check-ins with supervisors and feedback on a regular cadence rather than annually play a big role when managing a hybrid workforce or where in-person interactions are reduced. At the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), front-line managers convene their staff and virtual teams for weekly "huddles," or 15-minute flash meetings—a way for EPA teams to pivot from their growing to-do lists and instead concentrate on the big picture.[22] "This pandemic has made us really rethink how we manage the workforce and what tools we have at our hands to manage the performance of the workforce and interact with one another. I'm excited to see what comes out of this in terms of how we manage individual behavior and organizational behavior," says Rebecca Ayers, manager of the Office of Personnel Management's USA Performance tool.[23]

Looking ahead

2020 HAS BEEN a turning point for many organizations in how they understand their work, workforce, and workplace. Even the most traditional organizations were forced to embrace ways of working they had never thought possible, only to recognize that their workforce could adapt and thrive in a virtual and/or hybrid workplace. As we look toward the future, people will return to the office, but not to the way things were before the pandemic.

As organizations are faced with future decisions around where their workforce should operate from, they should take into consideration, depending on the nature of the work, where their teams are most productive and engaged. Furthermore, after experiencing the flexibility of working virtually, many may not want to give it up completely. While some employees might find relief in being reunited with their colleagues, others might be struck by inefficiencies when returning to office. Either way, organizations should focus on the creation of more fluid, adaptive workplaces where employees and teams are more agile, shifting as needed across different workplace ecosystems.

There are immediate steps organizations should consider as they work toward transforming into an adaptive workplace:

- Assess and stabilize current telework operations (policies, culture, tools, and collaboration).
- Conduct a mobility analysis and establish expectations and norms around adaptive workplaces.

- Prepare front-line supervisors and managers to lead and manage teams in a hybrid workplace model, and educate staff on how to optimize their workplace experience.
- Pilot new performance management processes, including use of organizational network analysis to ensure the health, engagement, and productivity of your workforce, wherever they are working from.
- Assess your portfolio of virtual collaboration tools and technologies, and stay abreast of the rapidly evolving universe of collaboration apps that are continually improving the virtual work experience.
- Invest in training and communication to help teams adapt to new processes. The organization needs a management core that knows how to lead in a hybrid setup and understands how to set goals and evaluate performance that way.
- Develop a strategy to build teams and relationships (within the organization and outside with external partners, prospective employees, and new customers) that don't depend solely on in-person interactions.
- Communicate successes early on and get buy-in from leaders. Large-scale change takes time to get embedded within the organization, so if changes don't show clear results quickly, there could be less patience for experimentation.

This is an important point in time and the actions taken (or not taken) now will set the stage for the future. Adaptive workplaces can help build a stronger, happier, and more engaged workforce—and that could decide which organizations thrive in the long term.

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23. Ibid.

Acknowledgments

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