

# State of the Response:

## The Future World of Work



## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred many changes in how people work across organizations and industries. Some of these changes (e.g., limited social gatherings, mandatory face coverings) are likely to be temporary. Others, however, are likely to remain in some capacity for the foreseeable future. The National Safety Council (NSC) launched the [SAFER: Safe Actions for Employee Returns](#) effort to give employers tools and resources to ensure their workplaces are safe for employees, contractors and the public. In addition to providing guidance, NSC wanted to understand how the pandemic is fundamentally changing the way businesses operate and communicate with their workforces and where those changes might lead.

In late summer/early fall 2020, NSC conducted over 30 structured, in-depth interviews with experts in safety, medical health and public health fields. Interviewees were asked for their perspective on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on operations, human resources, mental health, communications, organizational culture, technology and sustainability – as well as key lessons learned and future challenges.

Across a range of industries, respondents highlighted the following as the most impactful changes related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Operations**
  - Moved to remote work arrangements for as many employees as possible
- **Human Resources**
  - Provided flexible work arrangements (e.g., hours, days, scheduling)
- **Stress, Mental Health and Wellbeing**
  - Promoted or increased EAP benefit offerings
- **Communications**
  - Provided regular communication via multiple channels
- **Organizational Culture**
  - Increased focus on safety and health using COVID-19 as a catalyst
- **Technology**
  - Increased use of mobile app software
- **Sustainability**
  - Rethought need for physical space and travel

Among the key lessons learned: Organizations are more agile than previously believed and are able to adapt to challenges, and many have been able to use their pandemic response as an opportunity to break down silos within their organization. Moving forward, organizations need to continue to improve on efficiencies related to training and operations in a remote work environment and be better prepared for infectious disease risks.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how people, organizations and industries work. As the pandemic approaches the one-year mark, many organizations are grappling with how to plan for the future in increasingly uncertain times. With coronavirus cases continuing to rise at alarming rates,<sup>1</sup> organizations have realized the return to “business as usual” is not coming with the dawn of a new year. Many of the challenges employers faced in February and March 2020 are the same challenges they face now: How do businesses continue operations and keep people safe from a virus that spreads easily and sometimes unknowingly?<sup>2</sup>

Employer response to the COVID-19 pandemic has focused mainly on implementing proper workplace controls to help mitigate the spread. In response to the growing need for workplace guidance on safe operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, NSC established the [SAFER: Safe Actions for Employee Returns](#) effort with large and small companies, nonprofits, legal experts, public health professionals, medical professionals and government agency representatives. NSC, through the SAFER initiative, developed guidance and tools that include playbooks, toolkits, assessments and issue papers on a range of COVID-19-related workplace topics.<sup>3</sup>

A previous NSC report<sup>4</sup> highlighted specific best practices employers were putting in place to mitigate COVID-19 risks. Those practices revolved around the core tenets of physical distancing, wearing face coverings and maintaining good personal hygiene. However, many employers have put such solutions in place with an eye to returning to a normal, pre-pandemic operating environment. What organizations are quickly realizing is that the future world of work is going to look fundamentally different, even when the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a top priority.

In many ways the future world of work was already going to look different.<sup>5</sup> Developments in thinking about the workplace – including organizational design (e.g., flexibility, autonomy, work/life balance),<sup>6</sup> technology (e.g., robotics, smart manufacturing, industrial internet of things)<sup>7</sup> and demographic shifts (e.g., diversity and inclusion, aging workforce)<sup>8</sup> – were already in the works, especially for larger, more mature organizations. But the COVID-19 pandemic kicked into high gear these musings – and also opened up opportunities for more types of organizations to adapt to the anticipated challenges. Specifically, NSC wanted to know how the pandemic impacted organizations in the following domains:

- Operations
- Human Resources
- Stress, Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Communications
- Organizational Culture

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-cases-rising-50-states/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/more/masking-science-sars-cov2.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nsc.org/safer>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nsc.org/workplace/safety-topics/safer/state-of-the-response-state-actions-to-address-the>

<sup>5</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.23183>

<sup>6</sup> <https://repub.eur.nl/pub/116984/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nsc.org/worktozero>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/programs/ohe/description.html>

- Technology
- Sustainability

In addition, NSC was interested in documenting the key lessons learned and future growth areas that organizations need to consider to meet the changing world of work head-on – and be successful.

### Methodology

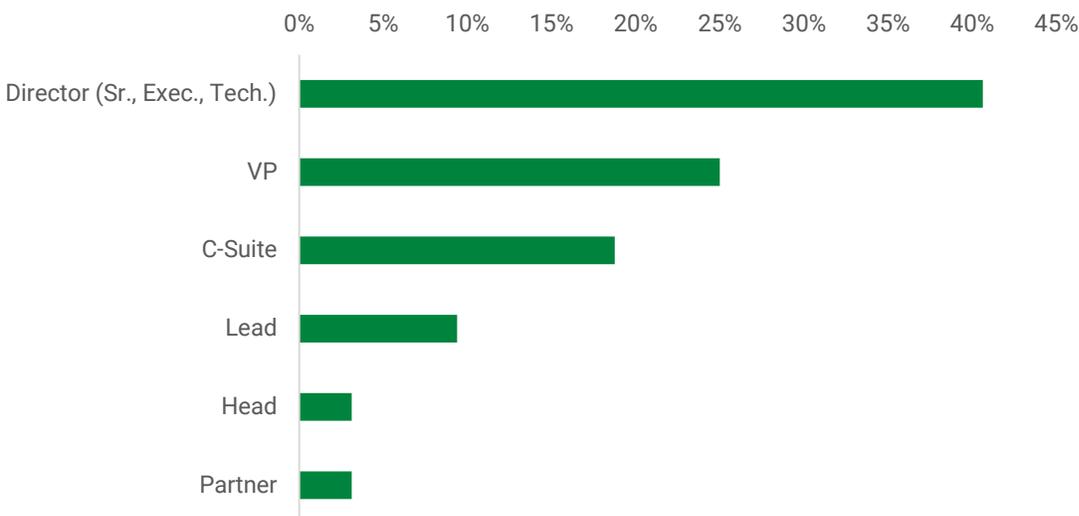
To gain insight into how leaders were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and implementing changes to adjust to the future world of work, NSC conducted structured interviews with 32 experts in safety, medical health and public health fields. All participants were recruited from the National Safety Council *SAFER* Task Force and were well-versed in the impact of the pandemic on their operations and health and safety protocols, and were comfortable sharing their perspectives on lessons learned, emerging issues and future challenges. Data collection took place from August 11 to October 8, 2020.

Interviewees had 22 years of experience on average and represented 13 different industries, with most of the sample coming from the professional, scientific and technical services industries (see Figure 1). Most of the interviewees were at the director level or above in their organization, including a few C-suite executives (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Sample by Industry



Figure 2. Sample by Title



## Results and Discussion

Interviewees were asked for their perspective on what has and has not worked well in their organization or industry, what challenges remain and what the future world of work might look like in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the conversations differed slightly from person to person, the main themes of discussion revolved around COVID-19's impact on operations, human resources, mental health, communications, organizational culture, technology and sustainability. Interviewees also detailed some of the key lessons learned and future challenges related to the changing world of work.

### *Operations Changes and Challenges*

The biggest operational change most organizations made over the past 8-9 months has been shifting to remote and virtual work environments, especially for office workers and non-essential personnel. Over 90% of the interviewees said remote work has been the biggest adjustment to daily operations (see Table 1). Indeed, remote work has led to cascading changes across other aspects of business functions and has forced employers to rethink how they communicate and promote work/life balance (see sections on stress and mental health and communications). Although 100% remote work arrangements may become less common after the COVID-19 pandemic ends, most interviewees said remote work will remain an option for the foreseeable future because many employees have found they can be productive outside traditional work settings.

**Table 1. Top Operations Changes and Challenges**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>% of sample mentioned</b>
Remote work	91%
COVID-19 controls (e.g., distancing, barriers, hygiene, masks)	63%
Stopped or reduced travel	53%
Reduced work or projects	41%
Cleaning and disinfecting	34%
Temperature and symptom screening	31%

The second most frequently mentioned operations adjustment was implementing COVID-19-specific controls in the workplace for employees who either are essential for business operations or are slowly resuming in-person operations. Over 60% of the interviewees mentioned having physical distancing and face covering protocols in place for on-site work, including some who have installed physical barriers such as plexiglass between workstations where physical distancing cannot be adequately maintained. Importantly, most organizations implementing those protocols anticipate them remaining in some form for the near future, especially the enhanced focus on personal hygiene and staying home when feeling sick. Respondents noted one silver lining of the pandemic is that many more people will care about hygiene and feel less pressure to go to work when ill. These practices will be beneficial in the long run.

Stopping or drastically reducing travel rounded out the top three most impactful changes to daily operations for most (50%) of the organizations represented. Organizations have had to figure out ways to conduct business that was assumed could only be done in person.

“Our regional safety support team normally makes visits to the field for training or assessments, planning and customer interface. As a support organization, we have had to do this from a distance, using Zoom.”

**SAFER Task Force member**

Despite the challenges associated with not being able to travel to assess an issue or conduct training, employers’ ability to adapt processes for virtual settings has been a crucial learning curve and one that will likely pay off in the future. Many of the organizations that have stopped or reduced travel do not anticipate business travel returning to pre-pandemic levels, as some of the benefits and capabilities of virtual technology have outweighed the costs associated with frequent business travel.

### ***Human Resources Changes and Challenges***

The most frequently cited impactful change for organizations from a human resources perspective was the creation of flexible work arrangement policies (see Table 2). About 65% of the interviewees said flexible work arrangements have become more the norm as employees

adjusted to the challenges of remote work – which has often included attending to the needs of children who are doing remote learning or younger children without child care arrangements. Therefore, work is not always happening during regular working hours, and employers have had to make adjustments to allow this.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>% of sample mentioned</b>
Flexible work arrangements	65%
Increased paid time off or other benefits	38%
Increased training	27%
Expanded recruitment	15%
Pay or benefit reduction	4%

A significant portion (38%) of the organizations sampled increased paid time off (PTO), salaries for frontline/essential workers or some other benefit for their employees. The increase in PTO in particular was usually to help organizations provide incentive for employees to not come to work if they were feeling ill or had potentially been exposed to the coronavirus. Allowing employees to stay home with pay for the length of time need for isolation or quarantine helped reduce potential spread in the workplace.

Almost 30% of the interviewees said their organization implemented extra training for remote work staff, particularly because many employees did not have experience with setting up their home workspace for sustained ergonomic support. Therefore, many of the trainings focused on how to properly set up a home office (with reminders to take breaks and stretch) but also touched on topics such as staying connected with other workers and teaching managers how to effectively lead in a remote work environment.

Although not a significant portion of the sample, several interviewees said a permanent shift to remote work options allowed them to expand recruitment options. Organizations can potentially recruit better qualified candidates by allowing them to work remotely, even in roles that were typically considered on-site roles (e.g., EHS professionals).

One organization stood out for implementing creative solutions for its workforce from a human resources perspective. This organization adopted a leave-share program in which employees could donate PTO to a shared pool for use by others who were out of work because of halted projects. Therefore, the organization did not have to lay off workers whose primary projects were shut down because of the pandemic. Additionally, it developed a global job-sharing board in which program managers could recruit employees from other locations within the organization who were without work. Because of the opportunities afforded by virtual technology, workers in one part of the organization could work for another part of the organization without having to relocate.

One thing that was extremely clear in the interviews was that most, if not all, of these changes to human resources policies would become permanent. Many of these organizations understand the difficulty of taking back extra benefits once the pandemic is over, especially if employees are productive.

### ***Stress, Mental Health and Wellbeing Changes and Challenges***

All of the interviewees reported that stress and mental health challenges were a significant factor influencing some aspect of their operations. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a significant increase in stress, anxiety and even depression experienced among workers worldwide. Some common themes emerged regarding how employers were handling workers' stress and mental health needs. Most organizations (nearly 70%) focused their efforts on either promoting, making more accessible or increasing their employee assistance program (EAP) benefits (see Table 3). Oftentimes, employees were unaware of their EAP benefits or unsure how to access them, so many of the organizations found that simply moving EAP information front and center on their company intranet or providing, through email or short videos, instructions on how to use EPA benefits helped increase usage.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>% of sample mentioned</b>
Promoting or increasing use of employee assistance programs	68%
Training on mental health awareness	55%
Mindfulness and relaxation	41%
Encouraging taking time off	18%
Fun activities	18%

A majority of the interviewees said their organizations have increased training around mental health and substance use awareness. Not only are employers trying to get employees to be more aware of their own mental health needs, and providing resources to deal with them, they are also trying to train managers and supervisors to notice the signs and symptoms of acute mental health or substance use issues. Remote work and virtual environments have made this more challenging, but organizations are making a concerted effort to bring to light the importance of mental health to further reduce its stigma.

Several organizations are offering more workshops or seminars on relaxation techniques and mindfulness to help employees find new ways to reduce stress and relax. Coupled with encouraging their employees to use their paid time off, organizations are strongly encouraging their managers and supervisors to set examples for their direct reports by prioritizing mental health. Remote work has allowed many workers to actually spend more time in their day working, as many no longer have to deal with commuting or traveling, so organizations are encouraging their leaders to resist that "workaholic" mindset.

One organization went above and beyond by offering wellness and suicide prevention training to its employees and integrating wellness discussions into every safety meeting. Additionally, it established dedicated wellness groups to push out information on how to identify signs and symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression as well as how to access EAP resources. It also was able to incorporate yoga and other mindfulness sessions into both its virtual and on-site operations to give employees dedicated time for rest and relaxation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, all of the organizations understand that stress and mental health resourcing will be a critical piece of the organizational puzzle moving forward as more is learned about the relationship between wellbeing and job performance/satisfaction. Increasingly, organizations are stressing the importance of employee self-care and devoting significant resources to addressing workplace stress. This is something the pandemic may have spurred and is here to stay.

**Communications Changes and Challenges**

From a communications perspective, nearly all of the interviewees said how their organization communicates with the workforce has changed drastically. The changes are centered around not only adjusting to virtual platforms and digital formats, but also changing the frequency and cadence of how information is disseminated. Almost 90% of the interviewees said newsletters, emails and town hall meetings are used to disseminate critical safety information – especially as it relates to the pandemic (see Table 4). At the beginning of the pandemic, these communications would go out daily or several times a week, but most organizations have stabilized their communication schedules and are able to quickly adapt strategies based on need.

**Table 4. Top Communications Changes and Challenges**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>% of sample mentioned</b>
Regular communication via newsletters, emails, town halls	87%
Leadership-driven, consistent messaging	50%
Increased use of digital platforms	20%
Micro-learning	20%
Social media	17%

Just as important as the mode and frequency of communication is consistency. About half of the interviewees mentioned the importance of having communication that is consistent but not overwhelming. Several recalled experiences of employees feeling like they had “information overload” and did not know where to get the most up-to-date, relevant information. Therefore, finding ways to streamline messaging has been critical.

One way organizations have been able to create streamlined, consistent communication is through leadership. Many hosted town halls where its CEO provided important updates about what the organization was doing, what had changed or stayed the same, and what employees needed to know moving forward. Interviewees noted improving communication strategies not only helps ensure employees have correct information, it also goes a long way toward keeping workers from feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

Several interviewees said disseminating information in chunks is a key strategy, especially for virtual environments where employees must sift through large amounts of digital information. Specific tools include short (less than three minutes) videos to provide quick updates about changes in policies or procedures. One organization produced a video that provided a virtual walk-through on what the office was going to look like when workers eventually returned – a more effective method than providing a written description.

### **Organizational Culture Changes and Challenges**

More mature safety organizations were able to more seamlessly integrate COVID-19 into their risk assessment and mitigation process (see Table 5). The key: Mature safety organizations know how to deal with risk and can add necessary controls and change their operations to deal with new risk.

**Table 5. Top Organizational Culture Changes and Challenges**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>% of sample mentioned</b>
Top-down increase in safety and health focus	52%
Bottom-up increase in safety and health focus	48%
Increased leadership buy-in	19%
COVID-19 as one of many risks	14%
Increased client expectations	5%

Many of the interviewees reported the pandemic helped spotlight workplace health and safety and provided motivation for employees to care about health and safety in a larger sense. Therefore, the increased focus on safety and health came from more of a bottom-up perspective where the specific intensity of focus on health and safety risks associated with the pandemic bled over into thinking about health and safety risks in general. Many organizations experienced decreased OSHA recordable rates and near miss reporting as a result of a greater focus on health and safety due to the pandemic. However, a number of organizations found that the focus on pandemic-related risks sometimes took attention and focus away from traditional day-to-day risks.

Almost 20% of the interviewees said the pandemic has created an opportunity for leadership to support safety in other aspects of the organization. For example, clients, customers and supply chains may have increased expectations about what companies need to do to keep their workers safe. The airline industry has had to go out of its way not only to make the flying process safe, but also to make sure it is considered safe by customers who likely will not use its services if certain protocols (e.g., spacing, cleaning) have not been put in place. Several interviewees believe reputational risks related to safety and health are going to be more

prevalent moving forward –particularly risks connected to the global supply chain (e.g., mitigating forced labor).<sup>9</sup>

“Safety has become an operating norm or requirement for lots of companies, and organizations have shifted to prevention strategies. There will be a big focus on cascading safety and health requirements down the supply chain.”

**SAFER Task Force member**

### Technology Changes and Challenges

The most frequently cited technology-related impact of the pandemic was the uptick in the use of mobile apps (see Table 6). About 40% of the interviewees said they are using mobile app technology to conduct symptom screening for their employees. Using an app, employees attest to not having COVID-19-related symptoms before leaving for work. Additionally, some of the apps are connected to entry systems in office buildings and can disable the ID badge of any employee who fails a screening. Some mobile app software aids contact tracing and even physical distancing by signaling users if they come within a certain distance of another employee who has tested positive.

**Table 6. Top Technology Changes and Challenges**

Topic	% of sample mentioned
Mobile apps for symptom screening or contact tracing	41%
AR and computer vision	35%
UV-C filters, ionizing filters, foggers	35%
Automated temperature screening	24%

About 35% of the interviewees mentioned augmented reality (AR) and computer vision technology as helpful tools for handling some audits, inspections and general maintenance feedback while adhering to physical distancing and remote work protocols. One interviewee’s organization is trying to use AR cameras and other technology to conduct virtual inspections and connect to a handful of people via social media platforms to review inspection footage. Remote camera technologies can also help troubleshoot problems without having to send maintenance crews into the field to diagnose and remedy problem situations.

Several organizations have invested in technology related to cleaning and disinfecting – such as UV-C disinfectant lighting filters or ionizing air filters – for their facilities. Despite some trepidation about the overall effectiveness of air filtration systems for reducing the spread of the coronavirus, many organizations believed it was worth an initial investment to make sure their on-site environments are as clean as possible. Similarly, many organizations invested in automated thermal scanning devices that scan employee and visitor temperatures upon entry to screen out potentially sick individuals. Still, interviewees were unsure about the effectiveness of

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.thecampbellinstitute.org/modern-slavery-a-hidden-sustainability-risk-in-supply-chains-and-how-to-manage-it/>

these mitigation techniques, especially because so much of the spread of COVID-19 occurs between asymptomatic individuals.<sup>10</sup>

“We’ve developed technology where we can use any kind of camera and integrate procedures, checklists, forms, permits, etc. along with two-way video surveillance so that a field worker can virtually talk to a safety person to discuss issues.”  
**SAFER Task Force member**

**Sustainability Changes and Challenges**

The pandemic has made some employers rethink, or begin to rethink, their physical and carbon footprints (see Table 7). About half of the interviewees said their organizations were considering reducing office space, not renewing leases or even selling property. Many employers have realized the organization is working effectively in a remote setting and no longer needs thousands of square feet of office space. Some organizations that are going to retain a physical office space presence are considering reservation or hoteling types of systems, in which employees reserve desk space when they need it rather than having dedicated offices or cubicles.

<b>Table 7. Top Sustainability Changes and Challenges</b>	
<b>Topic</b>	<b>% of sample mentioned</b>
Rethinking need for physical space	50%
Permanently reducing business travel	50%
Reducing waste	14%

About half of the interviewees also said their organizations would be permanently reducing business-related travel, as many have realized they no longer need to take costly (from an environmental footprint perspective) flights on a regular basis to meet with clients or attend meetings when virtual arrangements have worked well for so many months. Although interviewees reported fewer set-in-stone plans regarding sustainability, serious discussions are taking place in many organizations on how to turn the pandemic into a catalyst for reducing carbon emissions.

**Lessons Learned**

The biggest lesson learned for the interviewees was the realization that they are agile and able to quickly pivot operations. Because every organization had some component of its workforce that had to abruptly switch to remote work on short notice, leadership within many of these organizations were concerned that things would fall through the cracks. **However, most organizations did not miss a beat during the transition into remote work environments -- and in some cases have become even more productive.** Oftentimes, organizations are reluctant to

<sup>10</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32632012/>

make wholesale organizational changes because of fears about reduced productivity. But the COVID-19 pandemic has taught many employers that their organizations are much nimbler than previously believed.

Another key observation was that the pandemic forced organizations to operate as a whole much more than they had in the past. Many organizations quickly break down into siloed functions over time, and these patterns become difficult to break. The pandemic “ripped off the Band-Aid” by compelling employees to work collectively to come up with creative solutions to problems that affected multiple functions. **Employers were pleased with how the pandemic helped to break down silos within their organizations and helped get everyone on the same page to adjust operations and keep everyone working and as safe and healthy as possible.**

### **Growth Areas**

One of the biggest areas of needed growth identified was creating efficiencies in training and operations for a virtual environment. Many organizations have discovered they can conduct essential parts of their operations in a virtual environment. But just because businesses can operate virtually does not mean they are doing it well. Most of the interviewees acknowledged that pandemic risks are not going away anytime soon and, even if they were, workers are going to expect and demand virtual options. **Therefore, it behooves employers to dedicate serious resources to making their virtual environment processes more efficient and effective.**

Another major realization for the organizations that participated in interviews for this report was that most were not well prepared for infectious disease risks. The biological side of risk, while always present, had not been a prominent consideration for many safety and health professionals. **Although pandemics do not happen frequently, organizations need pandemic response emergency plans that are as frequently reviewed, digested and scrutinized as fire, earthquake and other crisis plans.**

The pandemic has also brought to light inequities that exist in the workforce. At the beginning of the pandemic, the workforce was divided into two general classes: essential workers and non-essential workers. For the most part, non-essential workers could work from home, while essential workers have had to bear the brunt of COVID-19 exposure risks. However, employers are recognizing the toll it can potentially take on employees to expose one segment of their workforce to more risk than another segment. Even employees who can work remotely face staggering differences in the availability of resources to work efficiently and healthfully from home. For example, some employees may not have a dedicated space for a home workstation or sufficient internet bandwidth for video conference calls – particularly if they have to share it with family members. **Organizations that intend to make remote work a permanent fixture should ensure remote and onsite employees are equally resourced and supported.**

### **Implications**

Based on findings from this report, dialogues with business leaders and member benchmarking, NSC created a framework for organizations to serve as a starting point for organizations looking to navigate the future world of work. This framework consists of three pillars of influence – work modalities, worker expectation and work enablers – along with 12 contributing factors.



### **Work Modalities**

This pillar involves the changes organizations have seen over the past year with respect to the ways in which work is performed. Elements within this pillar are largely related to the physical work environment and scheduling, but do cross over with elements of the other two pillars, as the way in which work gets done influences both the tools to do it and the perceptions of it.

#### **Remote Work**

Organizations have overwhelmingly switched to remote work where feasible, with some already acknowledging the traditional work environment may not be necessary for many such workers in the future. Major exceptions include services deemed essential or those industries where remote work is not technically possible, such as manufacturing. This major change in work modality is expected to continue even into the first several quarters of 2021 as vaccines become available.

#### **Flexible Schedules**

Whether work occurs remotely or in-person, almost every organization has made major changes to scheduling. Remotely, this has been necessary to account for family or personal commitments; in-person, it has been a key mitigation to protect “pods” of workers or enable physical distancing protocols. Work now occurs when it is safe and/or convenient to do so, and organizations have seen generally good results with respect to productivity despite the potential challenges in play.

#### **Reduced Occupancy**

Adherence to physical distancing and remote work policies have led to both office buildings and production facility occupancy reductions across most organizations. In some cases, this is near-total (e.g. for organizations in knowledge/technology sectors); in others, it is partial based on organizational need or risk appetite. The macroeconomic implications of this are still unclear, but given the drivers behind it, workspace needs are likely to be lower for many months to come.

#### **Travel & External Engagement**

Non-essential business travel has been virtually non-existent since the early days of the pandemic, and most organizations have redefined what they deem “essential” business travel given the risks both human and productivity in nature. At the same time, ease of virtual communication has created new avenues for meaningful external engagement, with colleagues across the globe engaging in decision-making that would have once been unthinkable outside in-person meetings.

**Worker Expectations**

This pillar involves the changes organizations have seen over the past year with respect to the comfort levels, risk appetites, wants and needs of employees and contractors. Elements within this pillar span what would typically be communications, environmental, health and safety, and human resources responsibilities, but in many cases reflect a broader cultural shift.

**Consistent Communication**

The need for clear, consistent, cross-channel communication has never been greater than during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations have undertaken massive efforts to effectively share new policies and procedures ranging from the physical work environment to benefits changes, with changes sometimes occurring on a daily basis. Coupled with demographic preferences around communication, many employees now see this level of communication as the norm.

**Stress & Mental Health**

Much has been written about the ways in which the pandemic has exacerbated existing stress, fatigue, mental health and substance misuse problems – and created new ones. Many employers have responded with a focus on these issues, either strengthening existing programs or rapidly developing them if not in place. The end of the pandemic will not mean the end of such challenges, and employee understanding of the value of these services has permanently changed.

**Benefits & Access**

Benefit expansion and increased access to existing benefit elements such as EAPs has been common across many organizations over the past year. This has included enhanced sick leave and bereavement policies, “essential worker” pay increases, and telemedicine/telecounseling. When organizations strengthen benefits plans, normalization occurs quickly, and it will be exceedingly difficult for employers to pull back on additions made in 2020.

**Visible Actions**

Although COVID-19 is invisible, the actions organizations have taken to address the risk it poses have been anything but. From physical distancing signage to third-party “deep cleaning,” employers have found highly visible ways to mitigate risk and build trust with workers, customers and the public. The direct line of sight to these actions, as well as those taken related to social justice and equity issues, has been critical and will remain so in the months to come.

**Work Enablers**

This pillar involves the changes organizations have seen over the past year with respect to major leverage points and tools that have proven successful in mitigating many of the challenges posed by the pandemic. Elements within this pillar include a blend of support functions, work styles and tools to perform work effectively in the changed environment.

**Safety & Health**

12 months ago, the average person didn’t know the meaning of the acronym “PPE.” Now, Personal Protective Equipment is common language, and the importance of the safety

and health function in the workplace is clearer than ever. Strong safety systems have enabled countless organizations to maintain operations and remain productive while effectively addressing issues as they arise. While this has always been the case, safety and health will remain front and center going forward.

### **Cross-functional Teams**

Since March, “working in a silo” has been a thing of the past for many employees. As the crisis shifted priorities, organizations were forced into staff reductions or furloughs, and the pace of work changed dramatically, workers found themselves wearing many hats, often with colleagues from different and complementary functions. While at first this was challenging and unexpected for many, organizations have since seen the value of these agile, multi-disciplinary teams.

### **Mobile & Video Technology**

It almost goes without saying that a major enabling factor for workplaces around the globe has been increased utilization of mobile and video technologies such as Zoom. However, it is worth noting employers have been fortunate that the technological capabilities and user acceptance of these platforms were in perfect position to make for a smooth transition on such a massive scale – which offers some lessons for continued use of these and other technologies.

### **Automation, Wearables & More**

Organizations in many sectors have been in the midst of a digital transformation in the years prior to COVID-19, and the pandemic has accelerated this trend enormously. The ability to leverage robotics, wearables, AR/VR and other key technologies has proven to be a key success factor for many organizations, and has made it clear that these enabling tools are not just a flash in the pan or “shiny object” to chase.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people, organizations and industries work. From remote and virtual environments to revamped communication strategies to increased awareness of stress, mental health and wellbeing, the future world of work is going to look very different. Although many of the changes the pandemic helped to spur into action were already in motion, the need to rethink how we work and live has made these adjustments more urgent.