Harvard Business Review | Spotlight Series

Talent

Rebuilding Your Workforce

Spotlight
REBUILDING YOUR WORKFORCE

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Future-Proofing Your Organization

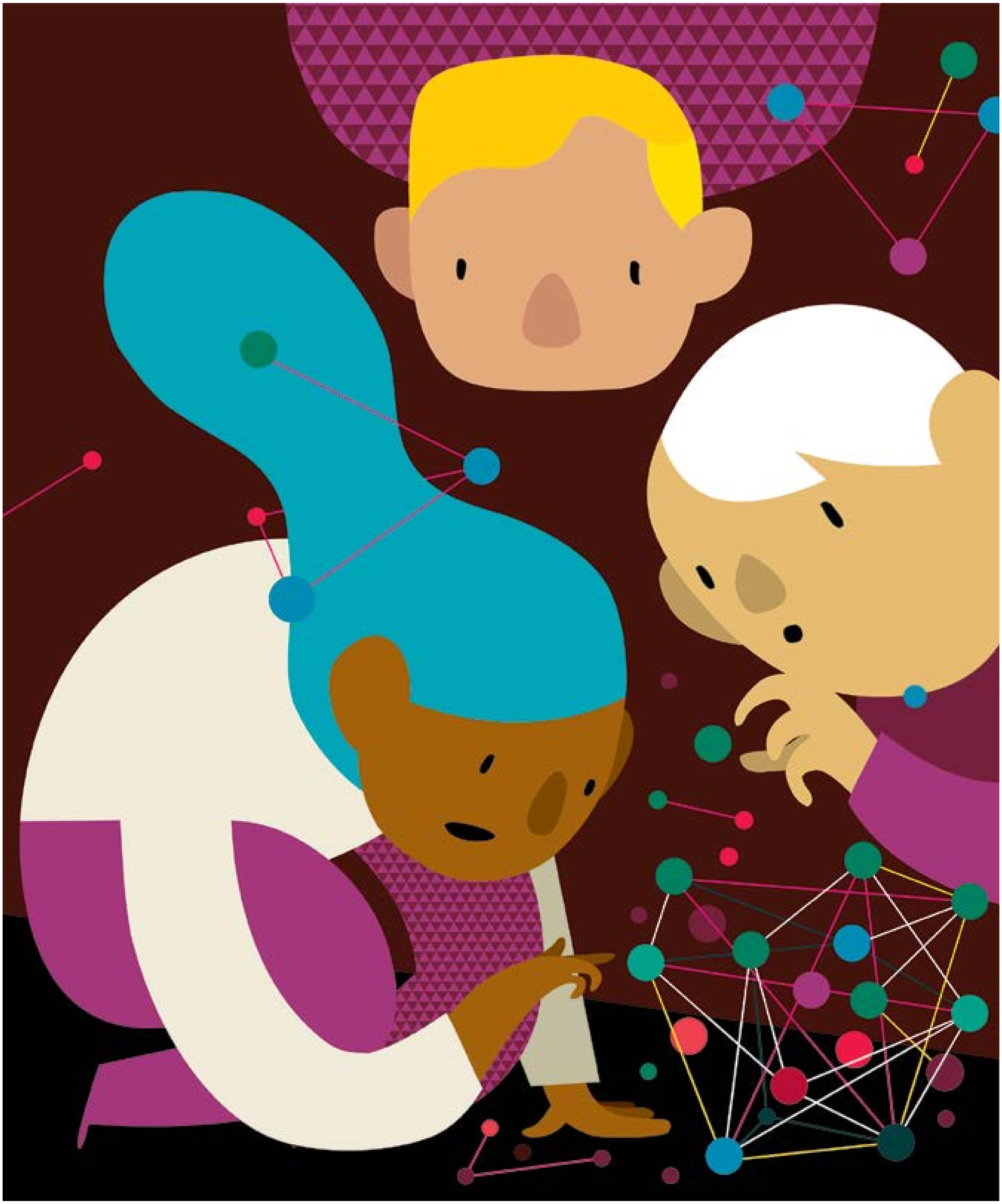
Prepare your team to stay ahead in the post-pandemic world.

TECHNOLOGY WAS ALREADY changing the nature of work before Covid-19 took hold. Innovations were redefining the basis of competition in most industries and, consequently, the talent companies need to win over the long term. The pandemic sidelined the efforts of most companies to address these challenges and close critical capability gaps. Many had to lay off 15% or more of their workforce. Covid-19 required that the search for new talent—with new capabilities—take a back seat to economic survival.

But as businesses rebuild in the aftermath of the global pandemic, those that take the opportunity to remake and future-proof their workforce will pull far ahead of rivals. Even before working from home became widespread, digital technology was transforming how and where work gets done and how many people are needed to do it. Consumer products companies, to take just one example, have traditionally employed hundreds of people to monitor purchases and inventory to ensure that the right products get to the right places at the right time. Predictive analytics—fueled by real-time point-of-sale, manufacturing, and logistics data—is changing that, reducing the number of employees required for the work, changing the skills they need to be successful in their new, technology-enabled roles, and allowing more and more of them to work remotely.

So how should companies rebuild? In the following pages we draw on research by Bain & Company involving more than 300 large companies worldwide and every facet of the global economy, from manufacturing to retail to health care to technology. Half of those companies are headquartered in North America or Western Europe and the rest in South America, Asia Pacific, the Middle East, or Africa. We have identified a select group of the companies that are already building technology-enabled workforces. No matter their sector or geography, they all seem to adhere to six practices in the course of assembling and managing their teams. In the following pages we offer those practices for companies to follow as they regroup and reorganize for the inevitable recovery.

Illustrations by **ALEX EBEN MEYER**



Spotlight

REBUILDING YOUR WORKFORCE

1 Think Ahead When Defining Business-Critical Roles

Not all jobs are equally important. Research by Bain and others indicates that fewer than 5% of an organization's roles account for more than 95% of its ability to execute on its strategy and deliver results. But which 5%? As we emerge from a pandemic that has challenged assumptions about working productively, companies need to rethink which skills will be most important in an increasingly tech-enabled future, develop them in the current workforce, and actively recruit for them.

Smart companies began to do that even before Covid struck. Woodside Energy, a leading Australian natural gas producer, is one. When the recently retired Peter Coleman became CEO, in 2011, the company was a typical LNG producer with huge, multibillion-dollar projects and complex onshore and offshore operations. Coleman and his team recognized that Woodside's ability to navigate the challenges of the future would partly depend on enhancing its conventional technologies with data-driven breakthroughs.

To test the impact of big data science and digitization on the company's strategy and competitiveness, Woodside started with its energy-production operations. Like most other oil and gas producers, it had relied on seasoned engineers to oversee each asset. When issues arose, the engineers developed mitigation plans that were based on their personal experience and informed by the data collected from their sites. They played a business-critical role at Woodside.

The advent of new sensor technology, combined with access to low-cost computing power and big data analytics, meant that the company's asset operators could make better and faster decisions by using a broader range of more-accessible data sources and data science expertise. Accordingly, Woodside began experimenting with advanced analytics and machine learning across its offshore and onshore operations, using a combination of internally built and market-sourced solutions. The workforce started using AI-enabled tools—incorporating Woodside's 30-plus years of production experience across all its sites—to identify ways of improving safety and productivity.

Integrating technology into ways of working meant that the definition of "critical skills" at Woodside expanded. Data scientists, along with experienced asset operators and engineers, had become crucial to the company's success. Starting in 2015, Woodside established a dedicated team of data scientists. The team now focuses on seeding data science and other digital skills throughout the organization using a range of new tools and platforms. The company recruits data scientists from the best Australian and international universities who work with and learn from Woodside's operationally seasoned team members.

Woodside's rethinking of business-critical skills has contributed to a growing perception of the company as an innovator in oil and gas. As other companies emerge from the pandemic, they should take a leaf from its book and think about the capabilities that will be critical in tomorrow's world—not today's.

2 Redefine What Great Looks Like

Traditional employee-assessment approaches work well when the jobs people will be asked to perform in the future are largely the same as the ones they (or others in the organization) are doing today. But those approaches break down if the nature of that work

IDEA IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM
Even before working from home became widespread, digital technology was transforming how and where work gets done and how many people are needed to do it.

THE OPPORTUNITY
In the aftermath of the pandemic, companies can rebuild a workforce that is better equipped for an economy in which routine and repeatable tasks are increasingly machine-enabled.

THE SOLUTION
Drawing on research by Bain & Company involving more than 300 large firms worldwide in every facet of the global economy, the authors identify six practices for companies to follow as they regroup and reorganize for the inevitable recovery.

> More than 60% of a company's future roles can be filled by current employees, assuming that adequate programs are in place.

changes, causing companies to struggle to identify candidates who can take on the new tasks. Like our assumptions about which capabilities are mission-critical, our assumptions about what success looks like must change in the wake of the pandemic.

Fortunately, new tools and techniques that utilize people analytics and behavioral science can help companies define "what great looks like" in a particular role and identify employees who already have the needed skills or could develop them with training. This allows companies to devise talent development and recruiting strategies to help meet their needs.

One such approach was pioneered by the Chemistry Group, a UK-based people analytics organization that helps businesses craft robust job descriptions for new roles—descriptions that include not only basic responsibilities but also the traits, behaviors, and skills each role demands. By rigorously defining what great looks like, companies establish a benchmark against which they can recruit—both internally and externally.

A leading mobile-phone operator has applied Chemistry's tools and approach with great success. Responding to changes in the smartphone market, the company's leaders saw that they needed to shift the retail operating model from pushing equipment sales to emphasizing customer intimacy and service. To achieve this transformation they encouraged employees to adopt new mindsets and behaviors through training and coaching.

The mobile operator also created a new role in each of its retail stores focused on enhancing the customer experience. Using behavioral testing and survey data, leaders developed a profile for what great would look like in that role. The company then assessed its 22,000 employees to discover critical capability gaps. The result was a list of employees with the potential to succeed in the job, and training modules were designed to help get them ready quickly.

The company has also developed interactive recruiting tools to screen more than 10,000 job applicants a month for this role without human involvement. Using an online program, candidates respond to a series of scenarios they'd be likely to encounter. Improved recruitment has enabled store managers to spend less time supervising and mentoring, permitting them to serve customers on the floor. These initiatives have helped save more than $7 million in operating costs and have garnered positive feedback from 85% to 93% of customers surveyed.

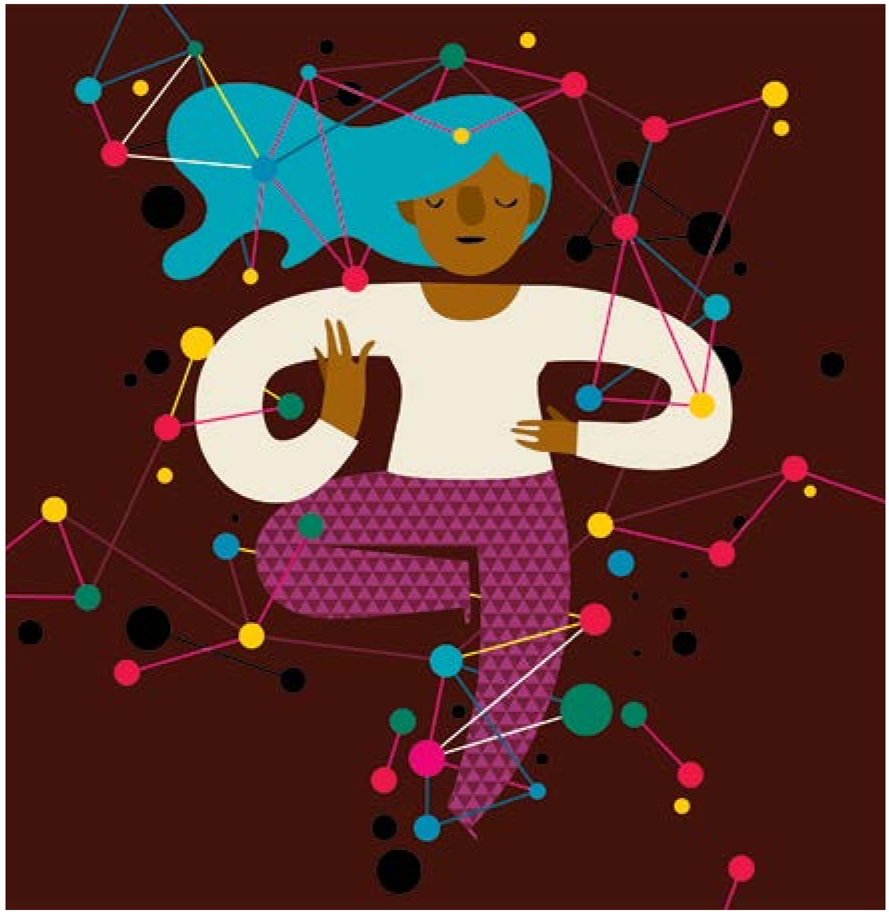
Coming out of the pandemic, companies will find that what people do and how success is defined must change. They'll need to recruit people who are comfortable with the new normal. Smart companies will leverage technology now to help them figure out how.

3 Don't Cut Back on Management Development

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has temporarily loosened labor markets in some areas, many jobs in software engineering, digital design, and data science remain challenging to fill. Accordingly, the best companies look to management development, often supported by technology, for reskilling their current workforces and filling at least some of their capability gaps with existing employees.

The good news is that reskilling done well does help. In our experience, more than 60% of a company's future roles can be filled by current employees, assuming that adequate programs are in place. Reskilling is also cheaper than the "fire and hire" model for filling new business-critical roles. For one thing, the direct costs of severance associated with workforce reductions can be substantial—as can damage to the morale of remaining team members. And recruiting new talent can be expensive, particularly for high-demand sectors such as data science, digital marketing, and software engineering.

Guardian, one of the largest mutual life insurers in the United States, provides an example. Like many other companies, it is undergoing a broad digital transformation focused on modernizing technology, data, and processes to improve performance and support a customer-centric culture. Deanna Mulligan, Guardian's CEO until October 2020, and her team knew that to be successful, the company had to extract the maximum possible value from its treasure trove of data. So they broke down historical data silos at the company and created an integrated data lake. Converting that raw data into usable customer insights required many more data scientists than the company had or could realistically recruit. To fill the gap Guardian has looked to its actuaries, moving them into broader data science positions and training them in a number of essential new skills, such as predictive analytics.



Similarly, Guardian recognized that it needed to shift far more of its marketing energy and talent from traditional avenues to digital channels. The company used assessment tools to identify the members of its existing marketing organization with the greatest potential to succeed in digital marketing roles and then invested in training programs to provide them with the knowledge and skills to thrive in those new positions.

In times of crisis it's tempting for companies to slash training and development budgets. But that's not a smart move. The pandemic will, if anything, speed up the obsolescence rate of professional skills, and it will be easier to teach old dogs new tricks than to find new dogs who are already trained.

Which brings us to the next practice.

4 Tech Up the HR Function

Companies that rely on large workforces will need to change the way they manage employees. This will be even truer for the dispersed workforces that have become common during the pandemic. From an HR perspective, a model that relies too heavily on frequent human interaction will not be cost-effective.

Ping An provides a glimpse into the future of HR. Founded in 1988, Ping An (Chinese for "peace and safety") is China's largest insurer, with premium revenues close to $100 billion and a market value of more than $180 billion. It relies on nearly 1.5 million agents to build trust with the company's policyholders and sell its array of insurance and financial products, which means that the company has to hire thousands of new agents each year. To accomplish that, Ping An utilizes big data and artificial intelligence in its recruiting and management development efforts.

To identify the characteristics of top performers, Ping An collects and analyzes data on its existing agents (including performance data, customer visit records, and training information) and combines it with the views of outside experts regarding the importance to each agent's productivity of career ambition, customer network, adaptability, and sales ability. This information fuels AI-enabled interviews that generate questions and check candidates' responses against an answer pool to determine the best matches on the characteristics that matter most.

Using new technology and big data, Ping An has significantly improved its ability to identify, recruit, and retain great talent at a dramatically lower cost. For example, the company has increased its 13-month retained-agent ratio to 95% while cutting close to $90 million in costs—and keeping pace with the staggering demand for new agents.

Every company can do more in this area. As businesses acquire more and more data on employees and contractors—regarding each person's skills, performance, potential, and ability to learn new skills and take on new roles—people analytics will be applied across the spectrum of HR activities. Technology will enable companies to do a far better job of recruiting, deploying, developing, and retaining talent, at a lower cost. We know of no company that is fully exploiting the workforce information it has. Most organizations have barely scratched the surface.

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5 Get People to Engage with Tech

Companies and workers everywhere are increasingly engaging with AI-enabled processes like Ping An's recruitment system. This trend will only accelerate after the pandemic, as more and more people transact and work in the virtual world. Unfortunately, few companies—or employees—manage engagement with technology in a coordinated way, so employees become suspicious of it, and the technology underperforms management's expectations.

That's a pity, because when people and tech work together, everyone benefits. USAA, a leading provider of financial products and services to current and former members of the military and their families, provides a case in point. Within USAA's insurance operations, member service representatives handle more than 5 million claims each year, managing all aspects of the process. Providing the very best customer service means making claims processing more convenient, faster, more accurate, and less costly for USAA members. Accordingly, USAA leaders have taken steps to ensure that service representatives are supported by machine-learning algorithms that use artificial intelligence to more accurately and efficiently estimate the extent of vehicle or property damage.

In deploying these AI-enabled tools, USAA's technology team has collaborated closely with the company's service representatives. The team relies on them to "train" its AI model—ensuring that the model learns to "think" like an experienced USAA rep. The company's loss adjusters use the model in estimating customers' insurable losses, but they can also make in-the-field adjustments to its estimates with an explanation, which feeds back to the AI so that the model can be continually updated and improved. Finally, machines are directly taking on lower-value tasks such as fraud detection and prevention, allowing claims teams to focus more deeply on connecting with and providing guidance to USAA members who are negotiating the claims system, which can often be a trying process. This kind of work is more satisfying for people and better leverages their capabilities.

The results are clear. Thanks to USAA's integrated approach to developing and deploying AI-enabled tools and the people who use them, the company has remained a leader in both customer and employee loyalty. In 2020 it received top marks among life insurers from J.D. Power. And in characterizing the results of a 2018 study of USAA by the customer research organization Raddon, one newsletter dubbed the company "the most beloved financial brand on earth." That year Great Place to Work recognized USAA as one of its best workplaces on the basis of employee advocacy. As important, USAA expanded its market share in insurance and financial services with military personnel and their families from 63% in 2010 to 75% in 2019.

6 Figure Out What Tomorrow's Stars Want from You

Even without the pandemic, tomorrow's managers would have been looking for a workplace value proposition very different from what enticed workers 10 or even five years ago. By 2030 Millennials will make up 75% of the workforce, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This generation wants it all: flexible schedules, diversity in the workplace, engagement, autonomy, and a meaningful connection with their employers. But with the trauma of Covid-19 fresh in our minds, we have all rediscovered the importance of meaningful jobs, supportive colleagues, and flexible employers.

For an idea of what companies will need to do to attract and retain talent in the future, take a look at ServiceNow, a $3.5 billion enterprise software and services company based in Santa Clara, California. Unlike many of its Silicon Valley rivals, ServiceNow does not rely on workplace trappings such as fancy offices and a gourmet cafeteria offering free lunches and bottomless lattes. Instead the company focuses on the factors that are most critical to retaining and inspiring employees: a culture of inclusion, a workplace that makes getting things done fast and easy, and top-notch rewards for people who "stay hungry and humble."

In 2017 the company's then-CEO, John Donahoe (a former CEO of Bain), and his team set out to transform ServiceNow from a technology- and engineering-centric organization to a people- and customer-centric one. They started by rebranding the company, both externally and internally, as an organization dedicated to "making the world of work, work better for people."

Pat Wadors, who was ServiceNow's chief talent officer until mid-2020, and Alan Marks, the company's chief marketing and communications officer, joined forces to present the company's new proposition to employees and potential recruits. They discovered that in addition to great compensation, tomorrow's workers crave a deep connection to their employer and its purpose. They want to be part of an organization that is doing something worthwhile, such as making work easier for everyone. They want to feel a sense of inclusion and belonging—to be part of a culture that encourages all employees to bring their very best selves to their jobs, every day.

Accordingly, ServiceNow has built a culture of diversity and has taken dramatic steps to foster inclusion in the workplace. This distinguishes it from other tech companies, many of which view diversity as a "hiring issue" rather than a cornerstone of their talent strategy.

ServiceNow also discovered that prospective employees aren't much different from the company's customers, in that they want the company to work better for them. So it deployed many of its own products internally—an effort leadership calls Now on Now—to make onboarding and routine administrative activities easier and faster. The company's people processes are human-centered and growth- and development-focused. "People are treated like adults," one employee told us. "Not a lot of clutter gets in the way of getting things done." Finally, ServiceNow's liberal work-from-home and personal leave practices make it easier for employees to work when and where they want, supporting a culture of productivity, not "face time." These practices proved particularly valuable in the midst of the pandemic.

ServiceNow's unique approach has not gone unnoticed. When Glassdoor surveyed current and former employees of the company, 69% of respondents indicated that they would recommend ServiceNow to family members or friends as a place to work—a level of employee advocacy that puts the company in the top 5% of employers globally.

TECHNOLOGY IS FUNDAMENTALLY changing the nature of work. But the approach that most companies take to workforce planning and HR management hasn't changed much at all over the past two decades. As companies rebuild their workforces in the aftermath of Covid-19, they must move into the digital age. Talent planning and management must become more strategic, more holistic, more rigorous, and more data-driven. Organizations that rebuild following traditional analog processes will be outpaced by more-prescient competitors. Given how much time it will take to build a winning talent pool, companies must begin future-proofing their organizations today.

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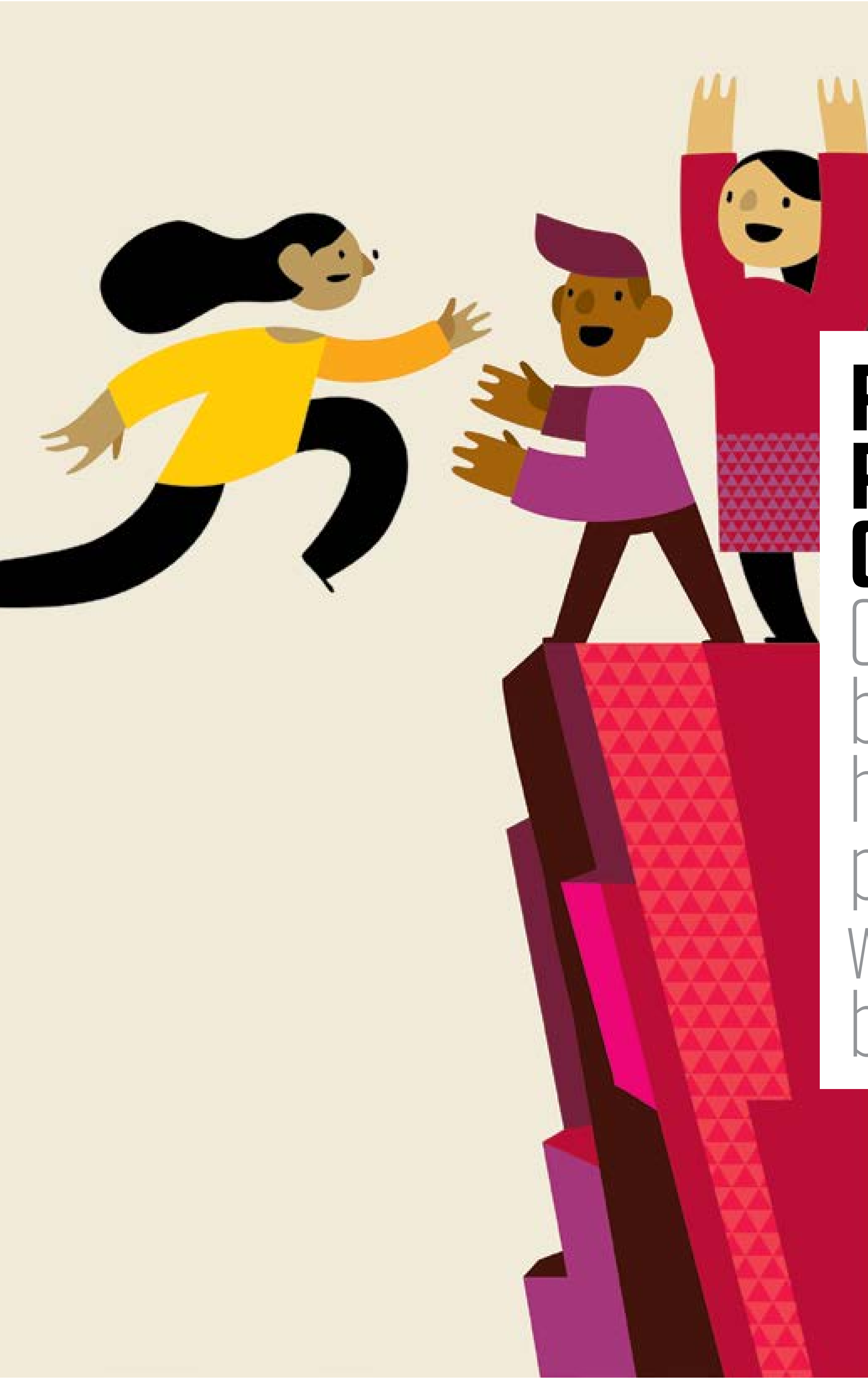

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Return-to-Work Programs Come of Age

Companies can benefit from hiring mid-career professionals who've taken a break.

DURING THE PAST few years Amazon has been experimenting with programs to recruit mid-career professionals who've spent a few years away from the workforce. Like most other companies, the online retailer started out small, hiring a few dozen people at a time in pilot cohorts. But in June 2021 Amazon made a stunning announcement: It would expand its return-to-work initiative by hiring 1,000 returning professionals—

According to research by ManpowerGroup, 57% of male and 74% of female Millennials anticipate taking a career break for childcare, eldercare, or to support a partner in a job.

an order of magnitude larger than any other company's program. Each participant would be given coaching and mentoring as part of the paid 16-week program, with potential to land a permanent position at its conclusion. "We've formed a dedicated team that recruits specifically for professionals who are restarting their careers," says Alex Mooney, Amazon's senior diversity talent acquisition program manager. And instead of looking skeptically at résumé gaps or skills that may need refreshing, Amazon's recruiters are directed to focus on each candidate's potential.

Although the size of Amazon's initiative is unprecedented, return-to-work programs are not new: The first of them originated nearly 20 years ago. I've been working with them for almost that long, after resuming my career as a financial analyst at an investment firm following an 11-year break for childrearing. (Harvard Business School did a case on my reentry to the workforce.) I wrote a book on returning to work in 2007 and have written about it for HBR since 2012. My company runs training programs and produces conferences on relaunching, which allows me to both influence these programs and observe how they have evolved—and to identify the best practices that help them succeed.

The recession triggered by the pandemic has made the need for these programs especially acute. The downturn has been remarkably sector-specific: Even as many businesses closed and others downsized, companies in tech, finance, e-commerce, and other industries experienced record growth, which created demand for certain types of talent. At the same time, in the United States, research by the National Women's Law Center indicates that roughly 1.79 million women and 1.75 million men have left the labor force entirely since February 2020, many of them to care for family members when schools and other support systems closed. This population is expected to resume full-time work, although over what time period is still unclear.

Even before pandemic-related career disruptions, return-to-work programs were becoming an important way for companies to hire professionals. According to research by ManpowerGroup, 57% of male and 74% of female Millennials anticipate taking a career break for childcare, eldercare, or to support a partner in a job—a much higher rate than was true for prior generations. Return-to-work programs not only provide a source of talent but also send a powerful signal to employees at all life stages and those who left the company to take a career break: This company recognizes that careers needn't be linear and normalizes the idea that professionals may leave for a time for personal reasons.

In this article I offer a brief history of how these programs have evolved, classify the types that companies offer, and detail best practices that can help participants and employers achieve their shared goal: Increasing the number of professionals who move on from a career break to succeed in a new role.

Bias Built on a Myth

Return-to-work professionals are educated, have great work experience, offer a mature professionalism, and are at a relatively stable stage of life. Because they were employed in the past, they understand how to work in teams and with differing personalities, and they've navigated tight deadlines and high-pressure situations. They don't need to learn basic skills that entry-level employees often lack. They have cost-effective, easily accessible means to update skills or learn new ones through online courses (many of which are free), certificate or credentialing programs, and even additional degree programs. As predominantly female, this talent pool is of particular interest to companies focused on gender diversity.

All those attributes may seem obvious now, but for decades the idea that professionals on hiatus could resume their careers was inconceivable. An employee who left the workforce for an extended period would have outdated skills and diminished drive—or so it was thought. But in the early 2000s the male-dominated finance sector faced an urgent and now-familiar problem: As women advanced in their careers, more left the workforce, until the shortage of female talent in the mid-to-senior ranks became acute. In response, Wall Street drove the resulting innovation, starting with Lehman Brothers and UBS in 2005–2006. In 2008 Goldman Sachs and the consumer food products company Sara Lee offered the first corporate "returnships," with Sara Lee's led by its visionary then-CEO Brenda Barnes (deceased since 2017), whose own career had been interrupted.

Companies running these early programs recognized that the bias against mid-career job hunters was built on a myth. People who've interrupted their careers don't show less drive; in fact, many crave a return to paid employment. Often the biggest obstacle they face is a weakened sense of self from being professionally disconnected for an extended period in a society where identity is largely rooted in what someone does for work. That's one reason that relaunching is different from a regular job search: People who've taken a career break need to build back confidence, reinvigorate their networks, figure out what they want to do all over again, and then upskill or reskill—all on top of what a job search normally entails.

Over the past five years the urgency around both talent acquisition and diverse hiring pools has led to a sharp increase in the number of companies offering return-to-work programs. Roughly a third of the *Fortune* 50 now have them in-house for mid-career professionals. Since 2015 the STEM Reentry Task Force, led by the Society of Women Engineers and my company, has worked with 34 leading U.S. employers to establish their return-to-work programs and continues to train groups of program managers annually.

The need for top STEM talent and the interest in hiring women in technology have been major motivations to tap this talent pool; Facebook, IBM, Oracle, Apple, and other tech giants have active programs. It makes sense that the largest companies, which have the greatest hiring needs, are the most likely to run such programs. Among the *Fortune* 500 companies, fewer than 10% currently have one; meanwhile, return-to-work programming is only beginning to emerge in the public sector. Thus the potential for the concept to grow is enormous.

Program Design

These programs come in all shapes and sizes, and companies should determine the length of the program, the size of participant pools, the times of year offered, the lines of business and managers involved, and locations according to what works best for them. The programs generally fall into two categories: *returnships* and *direct hire*.

Returnships. Most companies bring relaunchers in as a cohort, the way they bring in college interns in the summer. Cohort size typically ranges from five to 25 participants, although some companies have recently increased the number of participants in each cohort or the number of cohorts per year. Programs may last from eight weeks to nine months, with 12, 16, or 24 weeks being typical. Normally they don't take place in the summer, to avoid conflicting with the company's college internship programs, families' childcare needs, or vacations. Some returnship programs have moved to a "rolling admissions" format in which participants start at different times and form a loose cohort or class. In this format programming is primarily online and self-paced, and participants have occasional opportunities to gather with those who have "graduated" and been hired as employees.

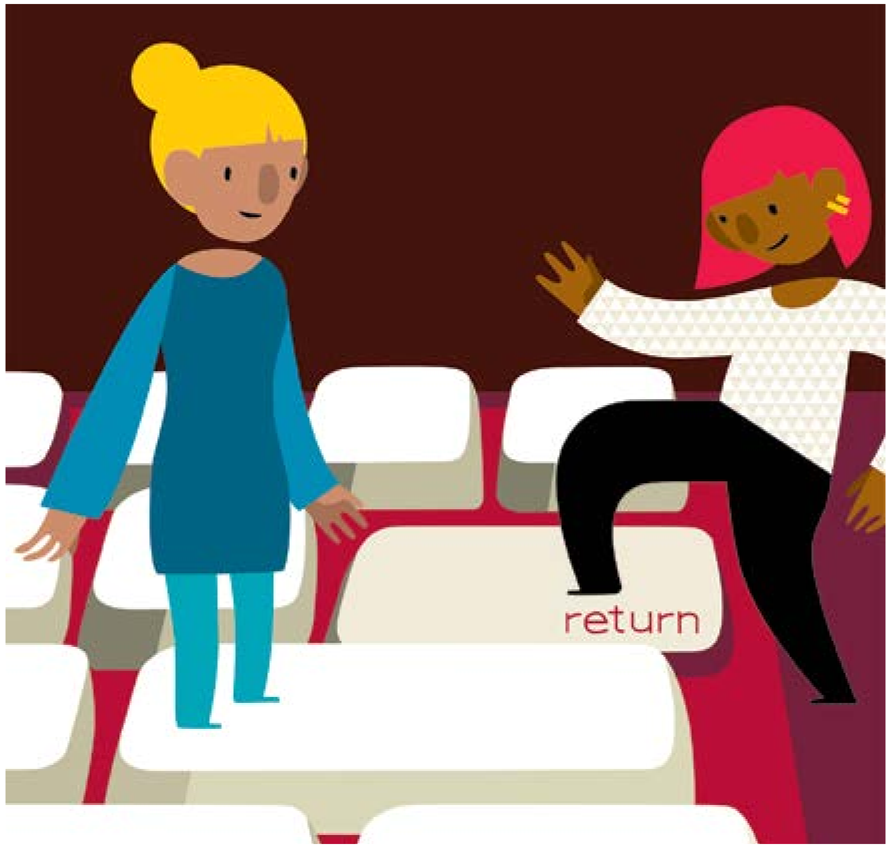
Returnship participants are given customized onboarding and orientation sessions, professional development, technical training, and exposure to senior leadership. Usually each "relauncher" is assigned a mentor and a buddy for additional support. As for actual work performed during the returnship, companies typically use one of two formats:

→ ***Project-based.*** The earliest returnships gave participants a short-term project, and the focus was on evaluating each person's performance, with high performers usually receiving an offer of permanent employment. But this format created a challenge: Absent a perfect match between participants and available full-time positions at the close of the program, some qualified participants could not be placed.

→ ***Role-based.*** To address that problem, some companies began recruiting program candidates for current open positions or those planned for the future, with the expectation that candidates who performed well during the program would move permanently into those roles.

Returnship compensation is closely linked to whether the participant is taking a specific role or is doing a project in an area where hiring is active. Payment may be on a prorated salary, stipend, or hourly basis. A best practice for determining returnship compensation is to look at the salary band for each role, pick a number toward the lower end, and prorate for the number of weeks in the program. If a participant converts to employee status at the end of the returnship, adjustments can be made according to factors an employer might typically consider for an offer: education level, work experience, geographic location, and so forth. That ensures room to adjust upward if appropriate.

When distinguishing among returnships, one phrase is especially



important: "Intent to hire." This indicates that the program is not like a student internship, with only the *possibility* of a permanent job offer at the end. Instead the company assumes that barring poor performance, the participant will convert to permanent status after completion of the program. That encourages everyone—recruiters, managers, and teams—to hire, onboard, and integrate participants just as they would ordinary full-time hires. Thus managers and teams are more likely to invest time and effort in developing relaunchers than they would be if they viewed them as contractors or temporary workers "dropped in" for a few weeks. On average, more than 80% of participants convert to full-time employees.

Direct hire. A less-common type of return-to-work program is the direct-hire model, whereby companies hire participants as full-time employees right from the start, with no trial period. Transitional support is provided through one-on-one coaching, online learning, and mentoring, since participants typically don't start at the same time or as a cohort. One variation on this is the new Oracle Career Relaunch program, in which participants are hired as employees and start on the same day as a single cohort, benefiting from 12 weeks of supplemental programming as they begin their new roles.

Dell Career ReStart launched in 2018 as direct hire, and Ford Re-Entry, Boeing Return Flight, and P&G STEM ReLaunch changed over to direct hire after starting as returnships and experiencing high conversion rates in their initial cohorts or observing high rates in the programs of peer companies. As career breaks become perceived as normal, and as companies become comfortable offering permanent roles to people with gaps on their résumés, more organizations may migrate to the direct hire model or adopt it at the outset.

To be eligible for either a returnship or a direct-hire program, participants must generally have had a career break of at least two years and prior work experience of at least three years, although companies often require five to seven years of experience (and sometimes more). Some programs, such as Ford Re-Entry and Amazon's, include "underemployed" as part of their eligibility criteria. Oracle, Amazon, IBM, and Raytheon Technologies have lowered their career-break minimum from two years to one to include people who left work during the pandemic. The minimum break for Deloitte Encore is now just six months; for Accenture Return to Work it is 18 months.

For employers running global programs, local laws and regulations may dictate program length. For example, Australia requires a six-month minimum. China's labor laws require a one-year work contract. Canada, Brazil, and others have mandatory probation periods for all new employees that are sometimes used in lieu of returnships.

Training

Training, both for relaunchers and for employees who interact with them, from the first interview to the last day of the program, is one of the hallmarks of a successful program.

For recruiters, managers, and other company stakeholders. After concluding a pilot program, companies frequently comment that they should have devoted more resources to training their managers. This training focuses on demographic information about the

> Program orientation sessions cover topics such as goal setting, technology challenges, dealing with "impostor syndrome," and how to network inside the organization.

pool of relaunchers, what their résumés and LinkedIn profiles look like, and how to talk during interviews about career breaks and past volunteer and paid experiences. It also involves adjusting the interview process to avoid missing out on high-potential candidates, discussions of level and compensation, how an "intent to hire" mindset affects manager-and-team relationships, and the importance of familiarity with the program and what happens at the end of it. For example, recruiters and managers must ensure that they convey respect for mid-career professionals during interviews. (Some interviewees report that recruiters sound like they're reading from a script used for recent graduates applying for entry-level positions, which can feel demeaning.)

For relaunchers. Participants arrive with excitement, questions, and, frequently, great uncertainty as they embark on this new chapter in their lives. Topics covered at the orientation session include goal setting, normalizing concerns, "new elevator pitches," technology challenges, when to ask a question, confidence building, dealing with "impostor syndrome," how to network inside the organization, and how to engage with managers and teams.

The midpoint and the end of the program provide opportunities for relaunchers to take stock of where they are in their transition back to work and how much they have evolved since the first day. Meeting as a cohort with an expert facilitator (from outside the company) at those junctures provides a safe space where they can be honest and vulnerable without worrying about the effect on their performance evaluation or relationship with their manager or team. They can review goals set at the program's start, celebrate successes, voice concerns, troubleshoot, and course-correct together. This is also a time to prep for midterm and end-of-term evaluations by rehearsing how to respond to positive or negative feedback. The end-of-term session focuses on "life after relaunch," whether participants will continue at the company or move on to a position (or a search for one) somewhere else.

For manager cohorts. Just as relaunchers benefit from being in a cohort, so do managers, especially if this is their first time participating in a return-to-work program. It is especially important that they meet before conducting midterm evaluations and before the "conversion decision" (whether to make a permanent hire). Managers need to understand the evaluation process, the timeline for decision-making, how to handle conversations about level and compensation, and how to give positive or negative feedback to participants. Other topics might be setting goals and expectations for relaunchers and specific situations in which managers might benefit from peer feedback.

Eight Steps to Success

After working with leading employers in a broad range of industries to build and expand their return-to-work programs, I can recommend eight best practices that every company hoping to hire relaunchers should keep in mind.

Identify an executive champion. Return-to-work programs don't necessarily conform to all the practices a company uses to hire its other employees. It is essential to have buy-in at the senior level and an executive champion to evangelize about the concept and run interference during the program launch. This person often pilots the program in his or her line of business, working directly with mid-level managers to provide budget and other assistance to get the pilot off the ground—and, crucially, to support full-time positions for relaunchers when the program ends.

Designate a program manager. The program manager (PM) owns the program and is the center of all internal and external activity around it. As programs grow and scale up nationally and globally, the PM can ensure consistency across business lines or manage variations that may arise from countries' differing regulations. It's vital to establish a succession plan for program ownership in case the PM takes another role or leaves the company. Programs that lack strong leadership, are managed by committee, or have no solid succession plan in place may languish or close. For a savvy manager seeking to make a mark, proposing a return-to-work program and taking a leadership role in implementing it presents a rare opportunity to build one from scratch with senior-level visibility.

Banish the word "intern." Treat program participants like the seasoned professionals they are. Although returnships share obvious characteristics with student internships, participants should never be made to feel that they are in the same category as interns. Using a classification such as "fellow," "returner," or "relauncher" makes a big difference in terms of optics and increases the odds that participants will immediately be treated as members of the team.

Use cohorts. A strength of most returnship programs is the opportunity for participants to be part of a group that is going through the training and experiencing the readjustment to a work environment together. From the company's standpoint, cohorts make training easier and more efficient. And participants report that being part of a cohort is the best aspect of their return-to-work program. Having one another to share resources, ask questions, and get reassurance significantly eases the transition and creates bonds that may last for years. Additionally, the cohort members have an instant network of contacts within the organization. One difficulty with this structure is that managers must coordinate start dates for "their" participants with the start date of the cohort, which may fall at a less than optimal time for a manager's business unit—especially if the program is offered only once or twice a year. Starting cohorts more frequently can solve this problem, affording managers greater timing flexibility.

Give the program a name and a website. Phil Anderson, who created return-to-work programs at Moody's and the Depository Trust & Clearing Corporation, says that branding is important. (Disclosure: Anderson is on the board of my company.) "Name the program—it makes it real," he says. Giving it a dedicated landing page on the company website creates visibility and a focal point for program activity. (For examples of well-done landing pages, see those of Merck, Oracle, Johnson & Johnson, IBM, Morgan Stanley, Facebook, Credit Suisse, and Raytheon Technologies.)

Use the program to engage with company alumni. Some companies refer to high-performing employees who left for a career break as "regrettable losses." Most lose track of them after they leave. But some, such as consulting firms, systematically track departing employees, partly because they may be potential clients. (See "Turn Departing Employees into Loyal Alumni," HBR, March–April 2021.) Companies should target their alumni for participation in their return-to-work programs, because they are already known internally, they understand company culture, and they may be more inclined to come back to a familiar place than to look elsewhere. Make sure your company identifies in exit interviews who is taking a career break and tracks that person carefully so that employer and employee will be top of mind to each other when the former employee wants to return to work.

Leverage employee referrals. A strong internal campaign to educate employees about the program can create word of mouth and drive referrals, which are often the top source of candidates. Some companies include return-to-work referrals in their paid referral programs. Current employees who relaunched and people with a personal connection to someone who did so can be critical allies (as well as managers, speakers, and mentors) for a program.

Highlight success stories. Relaunchers at the most senior levels, inside and outside a company, can provide powerful examples of career paths following a break. Jacqueline Welch, the CHRO of the New York Times Company, is a relauncher, having taken four years off earlier in her career, and she regularly talks about her nonlinear career path. (Disclosure: Welch is on the board of my company.) Similarly, Annette Rippert, a mother of five who took an eight-year break from Accenture, returned in 2012 and is now group chief executive for Accenture's strategy and consulting business. She tells her story when promoting Accenture's return-to-work program.

THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC has changed perceptions about the way people work. Managers have come to recognize that working remotely can be more productive than working in an office. Companies that would not have considered recruiting, hiring, and onboarding an employee without an in-person meeting had to immediately start doing just that—and many will continue to do so. Companies should reexamine their attitudes toward relaunchers as well. Return-to-work programs provide access to a high-quality, diverse talent pool while simultaneously signaling to current employees and alumni that their company is forward-thinking and employee-centric. These programs have grown dramatically over the past 20 years, and many more companies can benefit from launching one.

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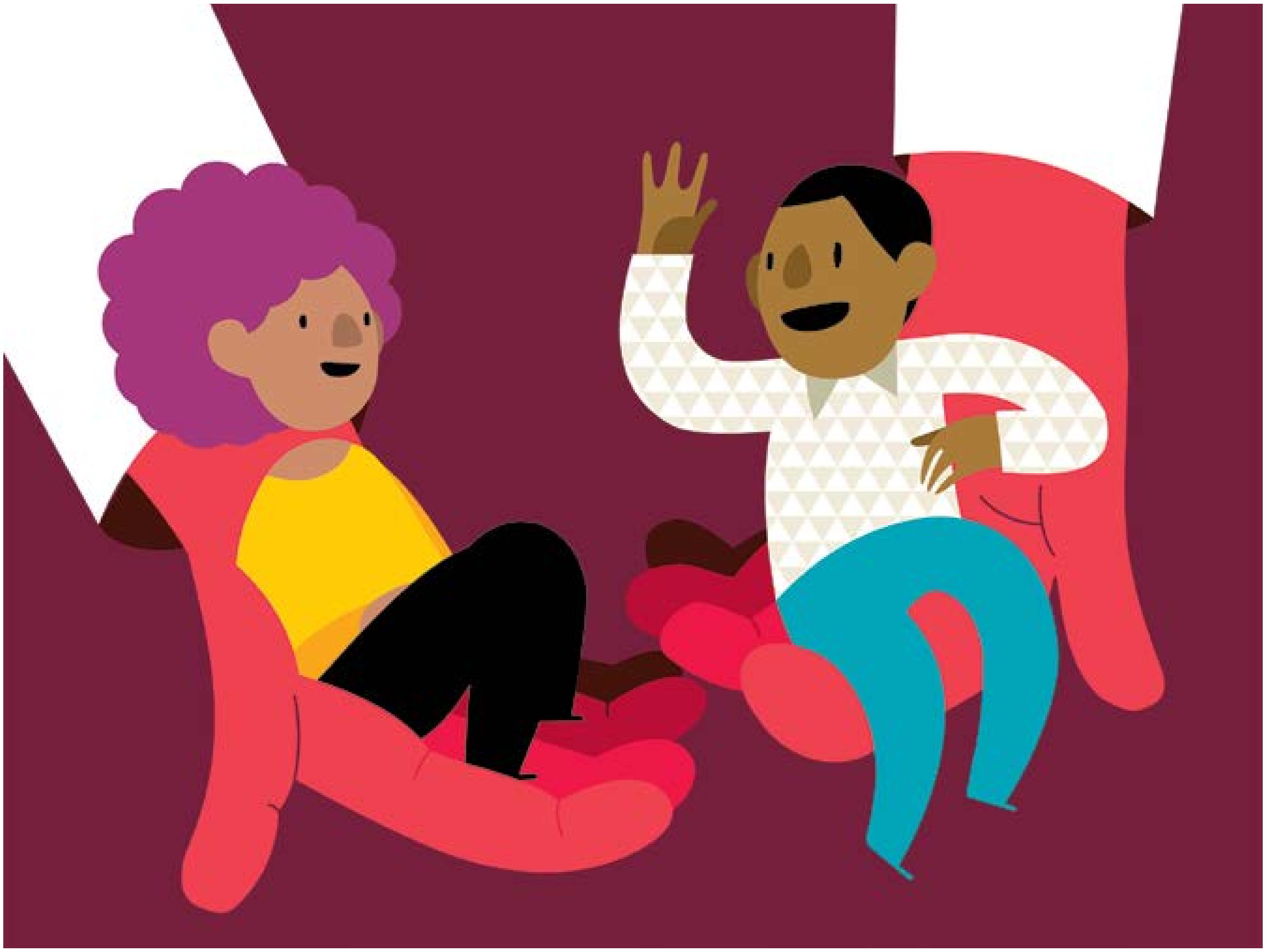

Elevate Employees, Don't Eliminate Them

Unlock value by connecting them with customers.

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A TRAUMATIC DISCONTINUITY like the Covid-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to reconnect on fresh terms—with families, friends, coworkers, and even ourselves. For businesses this moment provides a chance to reimagine the role employees play in customer service. Even before the pandemic, technology was increasingly making it possible for employers to automate interactions with customers; thus many managers will instinctively look for ways to eliminate jobs. Indeed, the last major global shock—the 2008 recession—led to what economists call a "jobless recovery," as companies found that they could get by with fewer employees.

Simply the knowledge that an employee is readily available and willing to help can increase customer confidence, satisfaction, trust, and long-term loyalty.

Taking that approach now would be a mistake. To be sure, some efficiencies will lead to the elimination of certain roles. But most managers should focus on elevating employees, not eliminating them—on changing their jobs to unlock more value by allowing them to have deeper and more-meaningful connections with customers in the moments that count.

In an article titled "Operational Transparency" (HBR, March–April 2019), I explained how showing the work that employees do for customers can lead to higher customer satisfaction, loyalty, and willingness to pay. The fundamental driver of this effect is the power of connection. When customers see how employees are working to solve their problems, they place greater value on that work.

From this insight and related research, I have developed a post-pandemic playbook for employers centered on five key pieces of advice:

- Create the conditions for employees to connect with customers when it matters most.
- Help employees make more of these meaningful connections by shifting the boundaries of their work.
- Find ways for customers to lend a hand, which they will gladly do if employees have created a meaningful connection with them. That will lead to further efficiencies.
- Ensure that employees can see the impact of their work on the lives of their customers, which will make their work more rewarding and engaging.
- Invest some of the value created by employees' redesigned roles in increased compensation and improved scheduling—which can make their jobs more sustainable and realize further value.

The most obvious application of this playbook is in sectors where interactions between customers and employees are routine. But recent experience reveals that the potential for employees to foster connections with customers is far greater than we might have imagined. For example, during the pandemic many people came to know the mail carriers and sanitation workers who served their homes, just as they had previously done with hairdressers, bartenders, baristas, and other service workers. Indeed, in sectors where interactions have historically been the most transactional, the gains for organizations that enable their employees to connect when it counts stand to be especially dramatic.

Connecting When It Counts

When people perceive that a lot is riding on an interaction—that their physical, emotional, social, psychological, or economic well-being may be at risk in some way—it is a moment of truth for the organization, because the experiences customers have will define or redefine how they perceive it and engage with it going forward. Leaving customers to fend for themselves can make them less confident in their choices, less trusting of the company overall, and less likely to remain loyal. When employees are well positioned to respond to customers' emergent needs, they can create breakthrough value by reframing the service their employer provides and differentiating the business from its competitors.

This effect is so powerful that customers need not necessarily even engage with an employee for benefits to arise. Simply the knowledge that someone is readily available and willing to help can make a profound difference, increasing customer confidence, satisfaction, trust, and long-term loyalty. For example, in one field experiment I conducted with Michelle Shell of Boston University, customers who applied for a loan and proactively received a text from their loan officer with an invitation to phone if they had any questions were 16% more likely to move forward with the loan (if approved) than customers who received no such invitation—even if they never actually accepted it.

Service is the business of people helping people, and people are born with the tools to help one another. Empathy enables us to understand how others are feeling and tailor our responses accordingly. Indeed, many organizations screen job candidates for empathy, attention to detail, and service-mindedness. Yet after people with these qualities are hired, the design of their jobs may prevent them from doing what they would otherwise do well naturally. They may lack the time, the resources, the motivation, or the discretion to make connections. Addressing those problems can unlock considerable value for customers, companies, and even employees themselves.

Shifting the Boundaries of the Job

How can leaders create the conditions for more-meaningful connections? Paradoxically, the best place to start is precisely at the point where technology or some other intervention could take over an activity. Instead of asking, Can I eliminate this employee?, ask, Can I tailor this job to eliminate routinized, dead-end encounters with customers and allow the employee to respond fluidly to their needs while developing a bond with them, however briefly?

For example, Amazon Go opened its first full-scale supermarket in Seattle—after nearly 10 years of incubating and piloting the concept in smaller formats—just as the pandemic was taking hold. At the store visual-imaging technology tracks items as they're taken from shelves, so customers can bag as they shop and walk out when they're finished; their accounts are charged automatically. The most visibly laborious part of shopping excursions—checkout—has been automated away.

Yet Amazon Go still relies quite heavily on employees. They're just not behind a cash register. They're out on the floor, available to assist shoppers and chip away at a perennial pain point in grocery stores: finding what the customer seeks. Clad in bright orange uniforms, employees restock shelves and tidy displays while explaining the store's technology to shoppers and offering guidance about products.

As people learn how to shop in Amazon Go stores, and as Amazon figures out how to automate restocking, the company may move to a lighter staffing model. But an alternative and differentiating path would be to elevate the employees, enabling those in particular departments to create even more value for customers by accumulating specialized product knowledge and taking on an increasingly consultative and relational role. Honing their expertise through customer interactions, domain specialists might, for example, be able to share advice about wine pairings or recommend popular and nutritious school-lunch items for fifth-graders. Perhaps Amazon could support these elevated employees by connecting them with its recommendation engine or arming them with the technology to help customers place Prime delivery orders of items not carried in the store—above-and-beyond experiences that would play to the company's strengths.

Giving employees time and space to double down on the tasks humans are best equipped to handle—connecting with other humans, using empathy to understand problems and ingenuity to solve them—could enable them to create considerably more value than they did in their original roles. If their jobs become more relational, employees will need training and systems to support their development, resources and discretion to facilitate graceful responses to unanticipated customer queries, and a means to channel ideas and feedback to leadership about how to enhance their roles and the company's offerings even further.

There are other ways to help employees connect in the moments that count. In some cases cross-training can create slack by enabling coworkers to cover one another on routine assignments when customers require attention. In other cases work can be shifted to supply chain partners, as when manufacturers apply price tags to products or distributors place inventory on the selling floor. To be sure, leading companies have long prioritized frontline encounters. But the constraints imposed by the pandemic have forced us to question conventional wisdom about how work is best accomplished.

Sometimes, through a thoughtful redesign, tasks can be eliminated altogether. The company Getaway, which rents out tiny cabins in the woods, has done away with many fixtures of the traditional hospitality business: It has no front desk, no concierge, no turn-down service, no room service, and no housekeeping during the guests' stay. The model is designed to let people feel that they're walking into their own cabin in the woods. When they arrive, they use a key code to access a meticulously clean space. A "cabinkeeper" will have left a handwritten, personalized note, along with a "s'more kit" or some other amenity, to make guests feel welcome.

Getaway aims to minimize customer-employee interactions so that guests can share meaningful moments with each other and unplug in nature. However, every cabin has a landline for reaching staffers immediately with questions or if help is needed. The company's customer service model treats each guest like a dear friend staying in a private home. Team members use guests' first names, make things happen quickly, and add a personal touch whenever possible. Stripping away unnecessary tasks allows Getaway employees to create an emotional connection with guests when doing so really matters.

Letting Customers Lend a Hand

My research has found that giving employees the ability to respond fluidly to customer needs can increase trust in an organization and deepen customers' relationships with it. And when the effort employees are making to help is visible, customers appreciate and value their service more and often feel an urge to reciprocate. Indeed, they will take on some of the work themselves as long as three conditions are met: They know *how* they can help; they are *able* to help, and they believe that their helping is *important*.

This insight does not give license to dump work on customers. Rather, it's about recognizing the human capacity and desire to be helpful in contributing to shared goals. Moving away from the default assumption of zero engagement by the customer can have a dramatically positive effect. At Getaway, for example, the cards on which cabinkeepers write their personalized notes have a line at the bottom that says, "You'd make our day by doing your dishes or tidying up before you go." The majority of Getaway's guests clean up after themselves, making it easier for cabinkeepers to excel in their roles.

In another example, when the city of Boston began showing residents images of the work its employees were doing to respond to their service requests (such as cleaning graffiti and fixing potholes), Ethan Porter of George Washington University, Michael Norton of Harvard Business School, and I found that those residents became more engaged with the city, submitting 60% more service requests. With more residents reporting problems, the city could allocate fewer workers to finding them and more workers to solving them.

Letting customers lend a hand isn't just more efficient; often it enhances their experiences. We feel better about ourselves when we're able to contribute, and our contributions can serve as low-cost ways to customize service outcomes. Involving Boston residents in submitting service requests, for example, gave them a voice in which problems the city addressed first. A stake in the outcome can also increase investment in it. Research conducted by Michael Norton with Daniel Mochon of Tulane University and Dan Ariely of Duke University has shown that when customers lend their own efforts to a service outcome, they value it significantly more. The researchers named this phenomenon the IKEA effect, after the popular furniture retailer that leaves assembly to the customer.

For example, the company Zameer Kassam Fine Jewelry designs bespoke jewelry, two-thirds of which is engagement rings. The company employs a high-touch process through which employees learn the details of each couple's love story in order to create a one-of-a-kind piece just for them. Of course, any bespoke product requires intensive customer interaction, but Kassam and his team ask for a higher level of client participation than is typical in a luxury service experience. After completing an introductory call, a tutorial about diamonds, and an in-depth interview to learn the details of the couple's relationship, Kassam and his team of "storytellers" (client-facing representatives) have more than enough information to design the piece of jewelry. But they add a step—assigning the client "homework." For example, the client might be asked to find and share a text exchange from a pivotal moment in the relationship or a photograph of a spoon that reminds the client's intended of her or his childhood.

The homework assignment is unique, chosen by the storyteller to help the designers better understand the central details of the couple's story, and often clients delight in spending hours on it. Their contributions inform each ring's design, but they also enhance the experience and investment in the ring itself, because the client played a role in its creation. Kassam believes that the homework assignment is critical to the company's collaborative process and helps motivate more than 90% of clients to move forward with their projects.

Demonstrating Employees' Impact

Elevating employees so that they can better connect with their customers gives them a clearer view of the impact their work is having. In our research my colleagues and I have found that this can make work feel more meaningful and appreciated, increasing satisfaction and engagement. However, enabling that view often requires deliberate action. For example, the final step in the Zameer Kassam Fine Jewelry process is the "private celebration." After a ring has been purchased and the question has been popped, Kassam's team invites the couple to come to the design studio together. The partner expects simply to meet the ring's designer. Kassam explains, "What they don't know is that we will surprise them with all the details of the process, including the notes of their love story that we've now rewritten

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in our special way. I can guarantee you, most people have never heard the words their partner who loves them will say when they are not there. When we share these special words—often reciting quotes—it's the most beautiful, emotional moment. We are enabling love to the nth degree."

Kassam's entire client-facing team attends these private celebrations. It's a chance for employees to reconnect around the organization's purpose and to experience firsthand the impact of the work they do. In addition to creating an extraordinary experience for clients, this peak event of every customer engagement provides joy and a sense of purpose for employees, filling them with even more enthusiasm and dedication for the next project.

Making the Work Sustainable

This playbook, centered on forging more-meaningful connections between customers and employees, can help organizations become more profitable through higher prices, better word of mouth, increased loyalty, further purchases and cross-selling, and sales growth. Some of that value should go toward making the roles of employees who are creating it sustainable.

Increasing compensation and improving scheduling are two levers that leaders can pull. This is not about accepting inflated overhead; it's about making an investment that will have a return. (The MIT professor Zeynep Ton has written in these pages about ways to improve the experience of frontline workers.) When employees are struggling financially, it can hinder their ability to focus on their work. Research conducted by Anandi Mani of the University of Oxford, Sendhil Mullainathan of the University of Chicago, Eldar Shafir of Princeton University, and Jiaying Zhao of the University of British Columbia found that being preoccupied with financial concerns can reduce a person's cognitive capacity more than would going a full night without sleep. Work by Mullainathan, Supreet Kaur of Berkeley, Suanna Oh of the Paris School of Economics, and Frank Schilbach of MIT has found that when employees aren't worried about their finances, they are more productive and make fewer on-the-job mistakes. Providing sufficient pay and hours can free them to focus on their work.

Erratic schedules are another hidden drag on performance. At many companies schedules may fluctuate from week to week, changing on short notice and making it difficult for employees and their families to maintain healthy relationships and negotiate childcare, coursework, and other obligations outside the job. In a 35-week field experiment conducted in partnership with Gap in the United States, a team of researchers, including Saravanan Kesavan of the University of North Carolina, Susan Lambert of the University of Chicago, Joan Williams of the University of California, and Pradeep Pendem of the University of Oregon, found that sales increased 7% when employees were offered stable and predictable schedules. Analysis revealed that the effect was driven by better execution in the stores: Employees exerted more effort under the new schedules and had an easier time adhering to them. The initiative, which included 28 stores, cost $31,200 and brought in $2.9 million in incremental sales.

Companies that reveal their sustainable employment practices to customers can reap additional rewards. In a recent field experiment, Basak Kalkanci of Georgia Tech and I partnered with Alta Gracia—an apparel manufacturer that pays a living wage to its workers in the Dominican Republic—and a U.S.-based retailer that sells Alta Gracia's products. We used video kiosks on the sales floor to show customers various messages about the company. Customers shopping during videos about Alta Gracia's living wage for its workers were 19% more likely to buy its products than customers shopping while a traditional marketing video was playing. Making the work sustainable can create more value for customers and employees while increasing the company's attractiveness to both groups.

HUMANS ARE SOCIAL animals. By driving us into isolation, the pandemic has reminded us of our hunger for meaningful human interaction. As this playbook makes clear, a single insight—that customers and employees should be able to engage like humans—holds tremendous value in the post-pandemic world.

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