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MARTIN BARRAUD/GETTY IMAGES

The outbreak of Covid-19 has forced organizations into perhaps the most significant social experiment of the future of work in action, with work from home and social distancing policies radically changing the way we work and interact. But the impact on work is far more profound than just changing *where* people work; it is also fundamentally altering *what* work is performed and *how* we perform it.

Many workers are doing tasks they never could have imagined a few weeks ago — sometimes in ways they wouldn't have thought of. Employees in [apparel companies](#) like Brooks Brothers and New

Balance are now producing surgical masks and gowns, while [Tesla, Ford, and General Motors](#) have retooled their factories to [produce ventilators from car parts](#) after [idling their automotive plants](#) due to plummeting consumer demand.

With jobs at the heart of how work gets done, leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to reimagine them by rearranging work and having employees take on different responsibilities to better respond to the evolving needs of their organizations, customers, and employees. We propose three ways to shift work, talent, and skills to where and when they are needed most, thereby building the organizational resilience and agility necessary to navigate uncertain times and rebound with strength when the economy recovers.

1. Make work portable across the organization.

Given the current situation with Covid-19, it's more important than ever to move people to the most mission critical work as fast and efficiently as possible. As part of its coronavirus crisis response, for example, [Bank of America](#) is temporarily converting more than 3,000 employees from across the bank into positions intended to field an onslaught of calls from consumer and small business customers.

By breaking out of rigid job constraints, the right talent and work can be matched to solve evolving business challenges in real time. Networks of teams empowered to operate outside of existing organizational hierarchy and bureaucratic structures are a critical capability to reacting quickly in times of crisis.

Many organizations, such as Allianz Global Investors and [Cisco](#), have already set up internal project marketplaces that break down work into tasks and projects that can be matched with people from anywhere in the organization with relevant skills and availability. These marketplaces can enable people who suddenly find themselves bereft of their normal job tasks to quickly and easily find different work using their core or adjacent skills where their contributions make a difference.

Using such marketplaces, organizations can also quickly backfill a sick employee, add extra team members to mission-critical projects, and cope with sudden hiring freezes. One hiring manager faced with a freeze recently split an intended new hire position into five part-time experiences for existing employees — thereby giving employees new opportunities to learn and grow while also enabling him to meet his business goals.

Deconstructing jobs into component tasks also makes it easier to see which tasks can be performed by workers working remotely or in other geographic locations. Leaders can bundle adjacent tasks that allow for remote work into new jobs, and port the tasks that require on-site work into other, fewer jobs — thereby limiting the amount of work that must be performed in the office or on-site.

2. Accelerate automation.

For certain types of work, automation can increase reliability, improve safety and well being, and handle sudden spikes in demand. In fact, automation isn't a job-killer in today's economic environment, it is becoming a mandatory capability to deal with a crisis.

Many [utility companies](#) have expanded their use of automation software in recent weeks to allow workers to operate, monitor, and control systems remotely, thereby reducing the risk of human exposure to the virus and enabling utilities to run smoothly without service disruptions.

To handle increased call volume, others have [increased their use of automation in call centers](#). Automation can speed up response times and free agents from transactional tasks so that they can focus on [responding with the empathy and emotional intelligence](#) that customers need now more than ever.

3. Share employees in cross-industry talent exchanges.

As leaders, we must all ask ourselves: How can we tap into the broader ecosystem of talent to build the resilience of both organizations and people during these challenging times? One innovative response is to develop a cross-industry talent exchange, temporarily moving employees without work due to the crisis (e.g., airlines, hospitality) to those organizations that have an excess of work (e.g., health, logistics, some retail stores). This avoids the frictional and reputational costs associated with letting people go while supporting workers in developing new skills and networks.

For example, supermarket [Kroger is temporarily borrowing furloughed employees](#) for 30 days from Sysco Corporation, a wholesale food distributor to restaurants that has been hit hard by the coronavirus.

Months earlier in China, companies also creatively started [sharing employees](#), moving employees without work from organizations like restaurants and lending them to others that have had a spike in demand like Hema, Alibaba's retail grocery chain known for its fast grocery food delivery. More than 3,000 new employees from more than 40 companies in different sectors have joined Hema's employee sharing plan.

In these arrangements, the companies receiving employees define which skills they're looking for. They then work with the companies sharing their employees to define the length of the exchange as well as the implications for pay, benefits, and insurance.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic is a difficult time, it can also be a time of unprecedented creativity. Reimagining jobs around the constraints of today's challenging business environment may accelerate the future of work and open up new and innovative ways in how, where, and by whom work gets done. Ultimately, this can help us build greater resilience and efficiency in our organizations, and help people live healthier, more sustainable lives.

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