

COVID-19 INSIGHTS SERIES

Five Key Learnings

From the Front Lines to Healthcare
and Workplace Transformation

JULY 2020



In 2020, as COVID-19 spread across the globe, everything about the way we live and work changed.

Workplaces quickly became virtual, cities dispersed, and a “new normal” began to take hold. For older adults, who are known to be at the greatest risk for infection, the data paints a stark reality. Adults over 80 experience death at five times the global average.¹ In the US, 8 out of 10 deaths have been in adults 65 years of age or older.² The impacts of COVID-19 on older adults extend beyond physical health. Nearly one-third of Baby Boomers say confidence in their ability to retire has declined compared to one-quarter of all workers.³

As societies around the world gradually reopen and as we consider the long-term impacts of COVID-19, we must identify and leverage our immediate learnings from the crisis and apply those to other related critical areas of need, including our approaches to healthy aging and the silver economy.

1. United Nations, “Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons,” May 2020 <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Policy-Brief-The-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Older-Persons.pdf>

2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) – Older Adults,” 2019 <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>

3. Transamerica Institute, “Retirement Security Amid COVID-19: The Outlook of Three Generations 20th Annual Transamerica Retirement Survey of Workers,” May 2020 https://transamericacenter.org/docs/default-source/retirement-survey-of-workers/tcrs2020_sr_retirement_security_amid_covid-19.pdf

About the GCOA COVID-19 Insights Series

In an effort to spark dialogue and spur new solutions-oriented thinking, the [Global Coalition on Aging \(GCOA\)](#) launched the COVID-19 Insights Series in April 2020.

In total, GCOA convened four virtual meetings throughout the months of April and May and conducted a member survey. Each meeting brought together GCOA's [members and advisors](#) from Asia, Europe, and North America and from across sectors—ranging from financial services to home care and from pharmaceuticals to technology. Focusing on two areas that have evolved rapidly in recent months, healthcare transformation and the “new normal” in the workplace, the virtual meetings sought to illuminate new areas of opportunity brought about by the crisis that have implications on the future of healthy aging and the silver economy.

Candid, insightful, and strategic, the conversations centered on how business leaders and other key global influencers were experiencing, responding to, and emerging from the COVID-19 crisis.

“GCOA members recognize the one thing that COVID-19 has not changed is the mega-trend of aging as a principal fact of 21st-century global society. It is through this lens that GCOA's COVID-19 Insights aim to help guide our “older world” to healthy and active aging, economic growth—and to provide a roadmap for business leaders everywhere.”

*Michael W. Hodin,
CEO, Global Coalition on Aging*



Five Key Learnings at the Intersection of COVID-19 and Population Aging

The following five lessons from the pandemic stand out as key insights that GCOA members and advisors uncovered as a roadmap for action. As we continue to incorporate these learnings into the fight against COVID-19, we must also leverage them to lead the transformation of our healthcare systems and workplaces for healthier and more productive aging societies everywhere.

1. Support Innovation to Accelerate Industry-Led Solutions

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Collaboration is essential to enabling technology solutions, such as telehealth. And, it's gratifying to see how policy makers, regulators, health systems, patients, and technology providers have been working together during the pandemic to advance a new way of healthcare delivery.

*Claire Celeste Carnes,
Strategic Marketing Director,
Health & Life Sciences,
Intel Corporation*

Across every sector—from medicine to food service and from elder care to childhood education—adaptability and innovation have been imperatives to meet the demands brought by the COVID-19 crisis. For instance, in the case of telehealth and telemedicine and in vaccines and therapeutics, smart decision-making, relaxed regulations, openness to collaboration, new incentives, and a willingness to leverage basic infrastructure have been drivers toward building an overarching commitment to rapid solutions that address the crisis. The role of business across every sector is more essential than ever and must be supported with policies that promote innovation and creativity as we address COVID now and beyond.

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TELEHEALTH AND TELEMEDICINE

Since COVID, there has been a rapid, massive shift towards the adoption of [telehealth and telemedicine](#). A London-based general practitioner remarked, “We’re basically witnessing 10 years of change in one week. It used to be that 95 percent of patient contact was face-to-face: You go to see your doctor, as it has been for decades, centuries. But that has changed completely.”⁴ Research suggests there could be more than [1 billion](#) telehealth visits in 2020 in the US alone. Further, [remote](#) patient monitoring, if widely adopted, could usher in a [new era of medicine](#) that far outlasts COVID—provided we continue to support innovation.

VACCINES AND THERAPEUTICS

As we eagerly await the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, we must remember that continued innovation is needed both now and after the pandemic in the vaccine, [antibiotic](#), and other therapeutic spaces. Given the important role innovation plays in vaccine development, the COVID crisis offers an opportunity to [shift public perceptions](#), increase awareness of the full potential of vaccines, and increase overall support for vaccines.

4. New York Times, “Telemedicine Arrives in the U.K.: ‘10 Years of Change in One Week,’” April 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/04/world/europe/telemedicine-uk-coronavirus.html>

2. Reimagine the Future of Work

“Both employers and employees are focused on the topic of wellness from a holistic perspective—physical, mental and financial wellness. I would add a new dimension illuminated during the pandemic—social wellness. Our research on Financial Life Benefits shows that the opportunity to socially connect with colleagues, friends and family also contributes to improved overall wellness.”

*Surya Kolluri,
Managing Director, Thought Leadership,
Retirement & Personal Wealth
Solutions (RPWS), Bank of America*

Employers are now actors in the public health arena, playing important roles in healthcare for their employees—for example, through employer-sponsored benefits, wellness programs, and paid time off policies. Employers’ investments in their employees impact the physical and mental health and overall productivity of their employees. Traditional healthcare is now expanded well beyond hospitals and doctors’ offices due in large measure to digital infrastructure operating in new rapid and scalable ways. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic is bringing unprecedented opportunities to transform the way we live and work. As part of the COVID-19 Insights Series, GCOA conducted a survey of leaders from our member companies that addressed individuals’ thoughts and attitudes on work during and emerging from the pandemic. Here’s what we learned:

TEAM ENGAGEMENT

While 38% of survey respondents said team morale is very or somewhat higher than average during the COVID pandemic, 25% said morale is lower than average. And yet, productivity was viewed to be on the rise during the pandemic, with a full three-quarters of survey respondents saying current team productivity is somewhat or very high compared to average.

HEALTHY AGING IN THE WORKPLACE

Our survey found that ageism has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with 44% of respondents indicating that tensions between the generations have widened during the crisis. Benefits to meet the needs of older workers, such as wellness benefits and financial tools, are therefore expected to decline, according to 63% of respondents. And, half said they do not expect employers to do more to accommodate multi-generational workplaces.

Further, stressors put on the “sandwich generation,” those employees balancing work with both childcare and eldercare responsibilities, and stigma related to mental health have been illuminated but are far from remedied. An overwhelming 88% of survey respondents said it is extremely important that conversations on how best to support the “sandwich generation” continue beyond the pandemic. While mental health has gained attention during the pandemic, 80% of survey respondents said employers’ attention to mental health will only change nominally post-COVID and the issue will remain stigmatized.

COMMUNICATIONS THAT MATTER

Good communications are always essential for workplace engagement and productivity, but they play an even more critical role in an uncertain time and during a largely work-from-home situation. Our survey found that providing tools for success in how to adapt to the new workplace paradigm and opportunities to engage with team members were seen as most valuable types of communications. And, with respect to the characteristics that make for an effective communicator, empathy by far rose to the top at 94%, with transparency as also seen as highly valuable by three-quarters of our members.

“BACK TO NORMAL”

Virtual meetings will continue but there is optimism to reunite in person. More than two-thirds of survey respondents (69%) said hybrid meetings—a combination of virtual and in-person—will be the norm for business travel and team meetings one year from now. Nevertheless, a majority expects their teams will be back together in-person or in the office before the end of 2020.

3. Turn the Unintended Health Consequences of COVID-19 Into Lessons for Improving Healthcare Delivery

Non-COVID [health conditions](#)—especially chronic diseases—are frequently being under-addressed or altogether ignored, leading to worsened conditions, undetected symptoms, and inadequate treatment regimens. From age-related macular degeneration (AMD) to fragility fractures, patients’ ability to access in-person, disease-modifying treatment options has all but disappeared. Symptoms of heart failure and other cardiovascular conditions go untreated, giving rise to a surge in CVD deaths during the pandemic. People with Alzheimer’s disease, especially those living in institutional care, suffer alone and isolated. Inattention to proper nutrition and a rise in sedentary lifestyles for many chart an uncertain path for healthy aging. And, vaccines against vaccine-preventable diseases for both old and young remain shelved until routine doctor visits resume. Such unintended health consequences of COVID-19 must be urgently addressed as the full impact has yet to be understood or appreciated. As health systems examine these consequences, there is an opportunity to re-evaluate and enhance existing healthcare frameworks and ask new questions, such as, how can health systems strengthen our preparedness for a future in which chronic diseases must be monitored and treated—during a pandemic and in “normal” times?

4. Recognize the Expanding Need for Elder Caregiving as Essential Work

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During COVID, many of us have experienced intense social isolation for the very first time. But for so many older adults, this is what they experience every single day. The human connection we provide is sometimes their only lifeline.

*Jisella Dolan,
Chief Global Advocacy Officer,
Home Instead Senior Care*

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Caregivers have increasingly played an essential role in daily living for older adults, such as monitoring the chronic conditions listed above and combatting social isolation. Unsurprisingly, since the pandemic, the demand for home care has risen sharply.⁵ Increasingly caregivers are being recognized as performing **essential work**, similar to that of a family doctor, and it is equally important that after the pandemic, caregiving continues to be recognized for its essential role in our healthcare ecosystem and to alleviate health and economic burdens across society.

5. Promote Global Collaboration to Combat Ageism

At a moment of crisis, efforts to promote cooperation across the globe and among international leaders on the front lines are more important than ever. While COVID-19 has negatively increased tensions between older and younger generations and set back ongoing global progress toward combatting ageism, 2020 is the launch of the UN/WHO **Decade of Healthy Ageing** and an opportunity to redouble efforts to promote healthy aging and increased functional ability across the life course. Amidst and on the heels of this pandemic, now is the time to unify in support of public policies that enable healthy aging for today's older populations and the generations to come.

5. The Wall Street Journal, "Demand for In-Home Care Rises During Coronavirus," April 2020
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/demand-for-in-home-care-rises-during-coronavirus-11588003076>

GCOA proposes that these five action items are instrumental to continuing to maximize healthy aging around the globe. Support for innovation, a reimagined workplace, more effective healthcare systems, a reframed definition of healthcare to include caregiving, and increased global collaboration to respect health at all ages are all key lessons from COVID-19.

GCOA invites other leaders across business, government, academia, non-profits and global institutions to commit to these five actions as well.



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