



Employers' Role in the COVID-19 Environment:

# WINNING

IN THE VASTLY CHANGED  
WORLD OF WORK

# Foreword

In 2020, every facet of life changed: from healthcare and school to shopping, travel, and work itself. Not since the 20th-century Great Depression and World War II has there been as transformative of an event as the COVID-19 pandemic. While we are unlikely to understand the full effects of COVID-19 for years to come, early insights and data indicators are proving useful in recognizing the character and scope of shifts that COVID-19 is bringing to societal institutions and society itself. In many cases, these shifts had already been in motion, but have been revealed more starkly and accelerated by this disease.

As the world population ages, and with the number of persons aged 60 or over projected to more than double to 2 billion by mid-century,<sup>1</sup> the expectation of a long life has become more common. But, as older people are more at risk of dying or suffering serious illness as a result of COVID-19, this pandemic stands to exacerbate the societal challenges already inherent in an aging society. For employers large and small, the world of work has vastly changed, and with that comes new roles and responsibilities for employers, not only for their employees, but for all stakeholders for whom they are the critical link to economic activity.

Employers, in particular, have a unique role at the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic's public health effects and its economic impacts. An employer's role in today's complex workplace ecosystem is more important than ever and requires new, creative, and responsive decision making. Even as we are emerging from the pandemic—at different rates around the world—it is not too early to begin a thoughtful and open dialogue about the role of employers and how they communicate with their employees about the impact COVID-19 is having not only on employees themselves, but also on their families, communities, customers, and overall society.

The Global Coalition on Aging (GCOA) offers some initial ideas and questions about how employers can effectively navigate this challenging time. While we recognize there are still more questions than answers, we offer this white paper as a thought piece—as a contribution to the dialogue—which might help guide the conversation on the evolving role of employers during these turbulent times and provide insights as to how they can reshape a more positive and optimistic post-pandemic future. Moreover, we draw a number of our insights on the basis of the aging megatrend, which had already been transforming the structure of society, with those of traditional retirement age set to outnumber those of traditional working age for the first time in history.

We have organized this white paper in three areas: how employers can step up to their new role as stewards of public health; how employers can continue to reframe and reimagine work and retirement within the broader changes in the world of work; and how employers can best lead while engendering trust. At the end of this white paper, we suggest ways in which employers might have long-lasting impact on their value, trusted relationships with stakeholders, and positive engagement with their employees. The lens of healthier and more active aging—not least prompted by the launch of the WHO-led Decade of Healthy Ageing and the linkage of “the Decade” to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), themselves driving parallel change even pre-COVID-19—has led many to acknowledge the need for a “new social contract.”



## SECTION 1:

# Employers' Role as Stewards of Public Health

For the last 10 years, leading employers have been gradually assuming the role as stewards of public health with respect to 21st-century societal shifts brought about by population aging and longevity. As employee needs have evolved, financial planning services have increased in importance, elder care-giving has joined childcare as a top benefit demand, and employers have engaged more fully in health and wellness promotion.

Employers are transcending their traditional role of providing employees with a paycheck by helping them balance other life priorities, prepare for retirement, and proactively encouraging healthier lifestyles and more active lives now and into older age.

Between March and May 2020, employers were improvising to respond to the new realities by establishing rules regarding working at home versus on site, customer service, social distancing, and travel as a way of balancing health and economic priorities. But then in May 2020, the CDC and other leading global health bodies highlighted the responsibilities of employers seeking to resume normal or phased business operations within the context of public health concerns. These included:

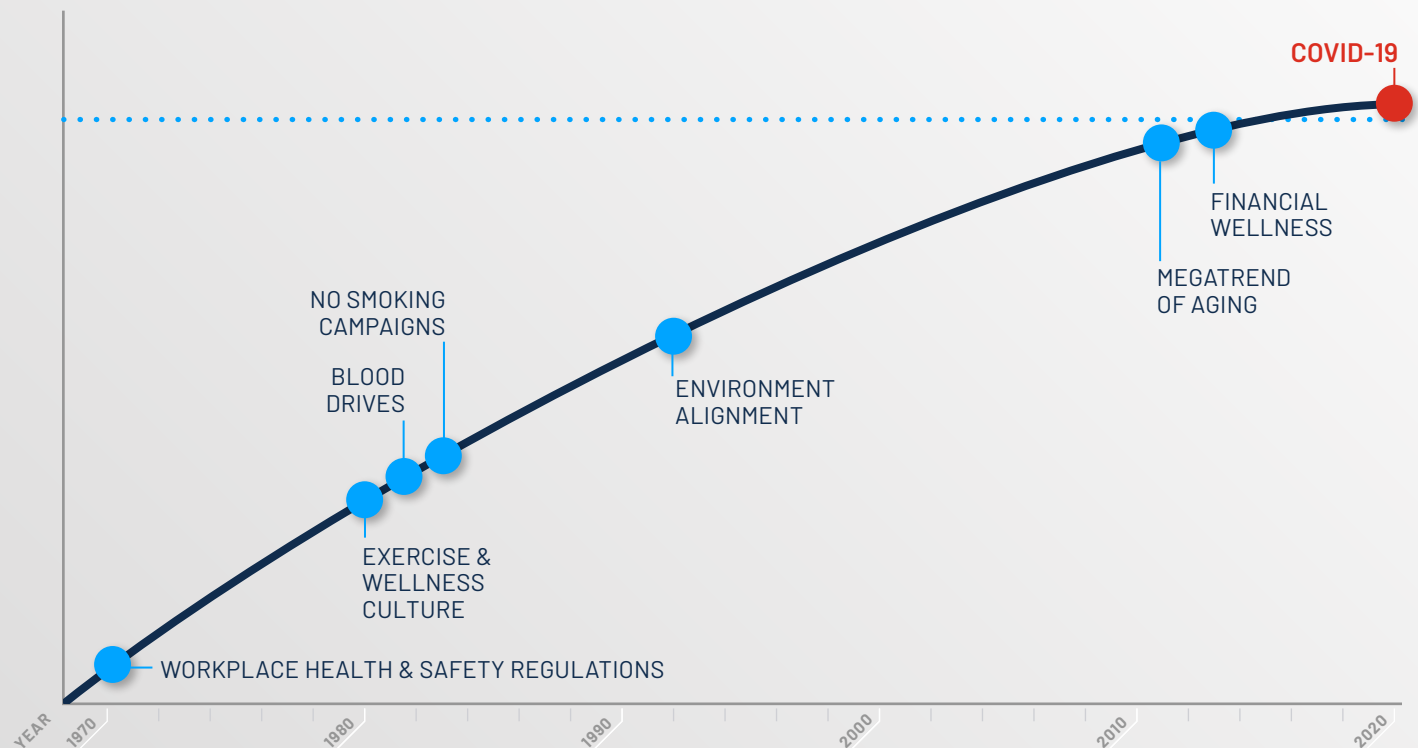
- Conducting daily health checks
- Assessing hazards in the workplace
- Encouraging employees to wear cloth face coverings in the workplace
- Implementing policies and practices for social distancing
- Improving building ventilation systems
- Outlining the engineering controls, administrative controls, and personal protective equipment (PPE) that employers may use to help prevent the spread of COVID-19<sup>2</sup>

These protocols are now well-known and often reassessed as we celebrate each phase in the re-emergence post-COVID. But, the critical insight here is that employers quickly took on—and now are continuing—responsibilities to ensure public health—for their employees, customers, communities and associated stakeholders.

In April 2020, the Business Roundtable, the preeminent body of American CEOs, also stressed the importance of employers' role in navigating COVID-19, stating, "Americans need to know that policymakers and employers are prioritizing their safety. A successful recovery strategy must give Americans confidence that they can safely return to work and public spaces. This means reopening at the right time, as guided by public health officials."<sup>3</sup> Now in the later phases of the pandemic, the employer's role is increasingly



## Employers' Evolving Role in Public Health: COVID-19 Accelerates and Transforms



consequential if we are to get everyone back to work. This is why the employer's role in COVID-19 vaccination has become so paramount, as we will further explore below.

Indeed, even before COVID-19, employers already had responsibility for the health and safety of their employees within the workplace. It is now evident that COVID-19 has elevated that role to such a different degree from earlier engagements as to render it a difference in kind. This change is reflected above, which shows the evolving continuum for employers' role in public health, leading up to the current transformative shift (see figure above).

While employers have measured other health and wellness issues and interventions in terms of their impact on worker engagement and productivity, COVID-19 establishes public health as intimately linked to the fundamental nature of business and work. It has become increasingly clear that the pandemic elevated and brought public health to the very center of life and work. This requires understanding the changing environment and strengthening focus on workplace well-being, which in turn leads to increased productivity. For example, as a result of the increase in remote work arrangements during the pandemic, 55 percent of workers surveyed by Morning Consult reported the quality of their work actually increased.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, the survey found that a majority of those same workers felt disconnected from their co-workers, and 44 percent said they experienced increased isolation and loneliness compared to before the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Garen Staglin, co-founder and chairman of One Mind at Work, a nonprofit dedicated to promoting brain health, recently told *Forbes* that “employers are confronting a number of complex factors that threaten to cause or exacerbate mental health challenges in the workplace. Employees continue to struggle with the direct threat of COVID-19.”<sup>6</sup> An employer-led response to solve this challenge is necessary, according to Staglin.

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-Business Roundtable

The designation of employers as “stewards of public health” may at first seem removed from actions in which employers have traditionally been engaged. Yet, in addition to their recent focus on health and wellness, there are other examples over recent decades where employers have responded to changing norms due to external societal, political, or cultural circumstances. Consider how societal change has informed employer actions on topics as varied as gender and diversity, digital technology, and climate change—issues that have become part of many companies’ corporate values and culture.

As with other parallel journeys, we can start the dialogue surrounding COVID-19 by posing questions around some key issues.



### **Building internal expertise and capabilities.**

How will employers balance employee demands and employer needs, given the plethora of health, medical, and scientific information already overwhelming and even confusing us? Will employers bring this expertise into their organizations in the form of dedicated personnel with backgrounds and expertise in public health? Will employers hire a Chief Public Health Officer, just as employers have evolved to now have Chief Technology, Diversity, or Sustainability Officers? Moreover, we are seeing business leaders making decisions linked explicitly to vaccination, a role previously reserved for public health officials.

### **Beyond status quo.**

If we already know the basics about keeping employees safe at work, what are next-level steps employers could take? The G100, a preeminent consortium of leading corporate executives, created a Task Force Plan for Phase One of Returning to the Workplace<sup>7</sup> and in it, recommended health safety measures such as social distancing, infection screening, workplace cleaning and disinfection, and altered travel policies. How could this plan evolve into larger efforts, such as supporting education and communication around the value of vaccination, or perhaps will some want to go even further to encourage vaccine uptake among employees to protect against the spread of COVID-19?

### **Wellness and prevention.**

If employers have been promoting, encouraging, and enabling wellness over the past two to three decades, does COVID-19 catapult these actions and squarely place them at the center of workplace culture? If through technology we have the capability to build in health and wellness monitoring and early detection capabilities, does COVID-19 change the impetus for doing so?

Further, do lessons about the COVID-19 vaccine also teach us about how adult immunization—for influenza, pneumococcal pneumonia, shingles, for example—can be excellent prevention tools that must in our post-COVID world assume the same level of attention as we have always given to childhood immunization? The employer role, especially for those headquartered in OECD countries, should be to enable a healthier aging for all its stakeholders.

It should not be surprising that three of the largest employers—Amazon, JP Morgan Chase, and Berkshire Hathaway—created Haven for their employees' health. And even when the venture was shut down, JP Morgan Chase decided to keep a version of it going through the creation of their own Morgan Health.

It is equally unsurprising that Bank of America, which has been a leader in this space for a decade has among other steps sought it a valued step to bring a gerontologist on staff to help them think about, understand, and invest in their business planning for an "aging society" from which their client base evolves. Truly leading in this space, Bank of America has linked financial wellness and health, connecting planning for healthy aging to their core business of financial planning.

### **Attention to mental health.**

In what new ways might employers become more active stewards of their employees' health—for example, through enhanced services for mental health, a category of illness that is exacerbated by the pandemic and could have serious impacts on employee health, morale, and productivity? How will employers support essential workers, who do not have the ability to work remotely, deal with worries and stress because they have to work in situations where they are at a higher risk of being exposed to COVID-19?



### **Trusted source of health information.**

How and to what degree should information be provided to ensure that employers are seen as a trusted source in helpful and value-added ways? What determines company policy versus mere advice and guidance? How can employers protect themselves in offering advice and guidance so as not to be construed as providing medical advice?

### **Immunization policy and education.**

As a central piece of public health stewardship and prevention, vaccines have and will continue to be critical in the fight against infectious disease across society. Even during COVID-19—a pandemic that literally shut down the world—vaccines are still met with hesitation. Yet, we see the employer playing a larger role than might otherwise be expected. This role now goes beyond providing education about the benefits of COVID-19 vaccines to, increasingly, mandating all to “get vaccinated.” It is axiomatic that any workplace policy involving a sensitive health matter like vaccines must be based on facts and tailored to each workplace (e.g., type of work, level of employee engagement with the public and vulnerable groups, and proportion of in-person work to remote work). It is also increasingly evident that “getting vaccinated” to protect against COVID-19 is not only positive for the workplace, but a social good recognized as essential to re-engaging in economic activity.

So, how will employers capture the most reliable sources of information, convey their vaccination policies, and address situations in which the safety of the workplace might be threatened? Beyond developing a well-informed policy and educating their employees, a growing number are going much further to become part of an employer alliance that provides education and communication on the value of immunization. No doubt this will be carried beyond the current pandemic to other prevention strategies for communicable and non-communicable diseases that are profoundly a part of an aging society in which all workplaces are now operating.

Could or should employers schedule immunization days or even cover the cost of immunizations for their employees? In “Why Businesses Must Help Build Trust in a COVID-19 Vaccine,” the Harvard Business Review makes a strong case for the involvement of employers as stewards for COVID-19 vaccine acceptance. Whether an employer mandates vaccines or advocates for acceptance, at the very minimum, the employer has a role—perhaps even a responsibility—to educate employees on the public health benefits of a vaccine—for the health of its employees, their families, and their work communities.

The article appeared before any COVID-19 vaccine was authorized as safe and effective, but the authors were nevertheless prescient: “[E]ven before a vaccine is approved, national and state leaders must engage a network of champions to locally communicate effectively with the public about risks, benefits, allocation and targeting [which ensures the most at-risk populations are protected], and availability. This is where the business community can play an important role...The business community should advise, partner, and invest in the development and deployment of technologies to measure and verify vaccine coverage: the estimated percentage of people around the world who have received specific vaccines.”<sup>8</sup>

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—Harvard Business Review

## CASE STUDY

### Blood Drives: Saving Lives While Building Camaraderie



The first blood bank opened in 1937, just in time for the arrival of World War II. In the years and decades that followed, giving blood became a patriotic gesture and a civic duty to help one's fellow man.<sup>9</sup> Employers began hosting blood drives as an inexpensive and efficient way to save lives.<sup>10</sup> The widely adopted corporate blood drive

is considered a major beneficiary of corporate social responsibility programs, a great way to build camaraderie and boost morale, and an important contributor to the nation's blood supply. Employers might consider the corporate blood drive paradigm as a model for COVID-19 immunization drives in the future.



## SECTION II:

# Workplace and Workforce Transformation

Through the megatrend of aging, we have already experienced workplace and workforce changes, including phased retirement, working more flexibly (including remotely), balancing childcare and elder care responsibilities, the realities of a multi-generational workforce, and ongoing efforts to employ older workers. Many of these trends are already accelerating at rapid speeds in the COVID-19 era, and some have already been normalized.

The challenge of this new COVID-19 lens is identifying and acknowledging those changes that will have ongoing impact. Leading employers in a pandemic era need to focus on approaches to managing, building upon, benefiting from, and perhaps even accelerating these changes further in order to retain and attract the best talent. Doing so will go a long way toward building credibility, loyalty, and trust, as well as growing their brands as employers of choice. This is especially critical as the virtual workplace expands, which means all employers will be competing much more widely for the best talent.

Recognizing the profound and structural impact of changes in the world of work, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published *The Future of Work* in 2019, which describes the current state of affairs and suggests important changes:

“The world of work is changing. Technological progress, globalisation and ageing populations are re-shaping the labour market. At the same time, new organisational business models and evolving worker preferences are contributing to the emergence of new forms of work.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet due to the complexity of these changes, employers and their employees are not necessarily on the same page when it comes to implementation. In addition, the OECD report was published before the COVID-19 pandemic had impact on—and in many ways brought urgency to—much of employers’ previous planning.

There are also important differences between employer actions and employee needs. Research shows that more than 70 percent of “pre-retirees” 50 and older want to work beyond traditional retirement age.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, that aspiration is not always possible. And, during the pandemic, older workers have been more likely to be out of work than mid-career workers.<sup>13</sup> Are employers unaware of the desires of their employees to have a phased transition into retirement, or is this approach misaligned with employer needs? And, how will the pandemic change employees’ needs and desires and employers’ actions regarding workplace longevity?

The literature reveals perhaps as many questions as answers, but the following concepts provide some guidance for “best employer” considerations.

### ➤ **A workplace without boundaries.**

Given that where we work and how we work online are at the center of the changing workforce due to the pandemic, how do employers define the confines of the new workplace? How do we plan for both the short- and long-term? What have we learned about the ways in which virtual work can impact employee morale, productivity and innovation in various types of workforces? How do employers foster a sense of community among employees, responding to employees' desires and demands, with physical distancing required for the foreseeable future?

### ➤ **Supporting mental health.**

In this virtual work world, how can employers help alleviate mental health crises given the global economic loss due to mental disorders could reach \$16 trillion by 2030, according to the Lancet Commission on global mental health and sustainable development?<sup>14</sup>

### ➤ **Talent retention and recruitment.**

What does the virtual workplace suggest for retaining and recruiting the best talent? As many jobs can now be done from anywhere at any time, the pool of talent will grow exponentially. What do those changes look like in terms of the competition, and what does that mean for employers' recruitment and hiring practices? How will recruitment strategies change for those jobs that cannot be done remotely?

### ➤ **Fostering inclusion and diversity.**

How can employers ensure diversity in their workforces and reap the benefits of a varied and inclusive workforce—particularly in light of the disproportional impacts of COVID-19 on minority communities? How can employers leverage a multi-generational workforce that is increasingly growing older—and increasingly wants to work differently and more flexibly—to their benefit?

### ➤ **Matching benefits to the needs of the virtual workforce.**

How do employers reframe benefits to meet the changing needs of their remote employees, who may be interacting differently with their teams? How might benefits such as childcare, elder care, and tools to make the day-to-day management of these responsibilities become more efficient? How can employers support increased flexibility and provide enhanced retirement and financial planning in light of COVID-19? How will employers design healthcare plans, which may also require flexibility and portability as employees are no longer tied to specific locations?



### > **Fostering skills development.**

How can employers help workers enhance skills within their own organizations and teach them skills that will transfer to other jobs should they have to leave the company? How will skills development programs create loyalty among an employee base that can now be location agnostic?

### > **Access to hardware and broadband for new working norms.**

If working remotely is central to the very fabric of our new workforce culture, COVID-19 has unalterably changed the landscape and reframed the dynamic. What responsibility do employers have to ensure all employees have the tools they need to be successful and productive, especially with respect to technology and easy, inexpensive, and reliable broadband access? Do leading employers add to their benefits package by paying for the upgrade to broadband as people continue to work from home?

## CASE STUDY

### **SAS: Program for Furloughed Employees Leads to a Win-Win-Win During the Pandemic**

The SAS logo, consisting of the letters "SAS" in a white, serif font, set against a dark blue square background.

During the pandemic, companies with displaced workforces can search out opportunities for interim work, through training and matching programs, which can also teach important skills for the future. For example, in Sweden, over 1,000 laid-off SAS airline workers were offered the

opportunity for fast-track healthcare training as hospital and nursing home assistants.<sup>15</sup> SAS is leveraging the opportunity to do the right thing, and in the process, to be seen as an employer of choice, even if the training provided points employees toward a different career path.



## SECTION III:

# Building Trust and Leadership

As employers move forward during this continued time of uncertainty, considering tough questions like these will guide them in the decision-making that will exemplify their most important and reinforcing role as leaders. As Warren Buffett famously said, “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.” With forethought and intention, companies can seize this moment to make lasting changes in their corporate culture that demonstrate their leadership role for their employees and their families and within the wider society.

If there were ever a moment to do things differently, it is during the sort of transformational crisis in which

we now find ourselves. To do things differently—effectively—requires building trust, with a three-part governance approach that is particularly applicable: operating, partnering, and communicating differently—specifically in this order (see figure below). While communications during this time are essential, they must be built on solid and respected operations, which are in turn validated externally through genuine partnerships.

Since it appears that this crisis will be ongoing—perhaps for several years—employees will continue to value clear and authentic communication from senior leaders more than ever. And, effective communication is dependent on the messenger as much as the

## Aligning Interests Around Trust



SOURCE: Global Coalition on Aging

message. Leaders should be visible. Employers, as public faces within their communities, must recognize that employees, customers, and stakeholders are paying attention to their actions and words in ways that are both new and different.

**In this context, we suggest the following focal areas to guide employers in enacting change.**



### **Creating a culture of trust.**

What is the set of actions at the intersection of business interests and external societal obligations that employers can take to build trust with their employees?



### **Working to becoming an employer of choice.**

Building trust among employees through being a steward of public health and adapting the workplace environment and benefits is surely a start. Employers will also have to establish themselves as a valued and trusted partner of the society in which they operate. What balance can be achieved between traditional insular employer roles and the connection to the broader society, since both roles will be necessary as workplace norms change?



### **Communication as part of senior executives' core skill set.**

Employers need to evaluate if their leaders have the skills, capabilities, and personalities to communicate in effective and trustworthy ways consistently over a long period. How do leading employers select, train, and enable senior leaders to communicate as a central part of management of the business? How should employers communicate in trustworthy and clear ways that reflect the leadership employees demand in these challenging times? And, what does effective communication with employees look like? How do employers achieve genuine relationships with community and government leaders?



### **Demonstrating action and leadership at the intersection of COVID-19 and aging.**

Because the older adult population has been so disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, the Global Coalition on Aging has focused on five key questions to guide leadership decisions during and emerging from the pandemic and is calling on employers to think boldly as we manage this—and prepare for the next—global crisis:

1. What roles can employers play in supporting innovation to accelerate industry-led solutions, such as telehealth, telemedicine, vaccines, and new COVID-19 therapies?
2. Should employers lead in reimagining the future of work, and how?
3. What can employers learn from the unintended health consequences of COVID-19—poor monitoring of chronic health conditions, missed diagnoses due to avoidance of medical facilities, inability to gain access to essential medicines, social isolation and loneliness—to support health during the pandemic and beyond?
4. How does the expanded need for elder caregiving as an essential component of healthcare delivery, illuminated during the pandemic, help employers recognize the demands on employees at home and therefore inform future benefits that may be needed?
5. What is the role of employers in combating ageism, which has been rampant throughout the pandemic?<sup>16</sup>

Emerging as a leader of an organization, in a community, or across society will require rapidly adapting to our new COVID-19 environment and thoughtfully executing upon strategies to maximize the health—and therefore overall potential—of all workers.



**SECTION IV:**

# Conclusions and Ideas to Take Forward

We end by suggesting seven action-oriented themes for all employers to consider as we fully enter the next phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**1. Public health role.**

Employers should elevate public health as a central feature of their culture and embed it into management. Just as so many companies have created the Chief Diversity or Chief Technology Officer, now is the moment to create the Chief Public Health Officer, who will have the right expertise and ask the right questions to advance the changes needed for success in the 21st-century aging world. COVID-19 and the launch of the Decade of Healthy Ageing make such a step important, useful, socially responsible, and in any business's self-interest.

**2. COVID-19 vaccination education programs.**

Valued, successful, and thoughtful employers will be active and engaged on their employees getting COVID-19 vaccinated. Such an employer will also then apply this to other prevention and wellness strategies to keep public health as a central driver of their value proposition.

**3. Childcare, elder care, financial planning, and other essential benefits.**

These employer benefits had already emerged as part of the new social contract prompted by the trends of longevity and population aging. In a COVID-19 work environment, employers will need to continue to offer health, welfare, and retirement benefits, and increase focus on solutions for caregiving and financial wellness, which will take on heightened importance.

**4. Approaches to employee engagement and recruitment.**

COVID-19 makes it imperative for employers to develop new approaches to virtual hiring, onboarding, and skill and competency enhancement, to prepare for the virtual, multi-generational, and diverse workforce of the future. The reality is that in the new virtual world, where new opportunities for global jobs are only as far away as your home office, employers must have and be able to articulate a clear, compelling, and enticing value proposition unlike ever before.

## **5. Listening to employees' wants and needs.**

Without regular and constant physical presence in many workplaces, employers will need to more actively seek out employees' perceptions and concerns.

## **6. Partnerships and communications linked to core operations.**

Executive decision making cannot happen in a bubble; transparency will be a hallmark of effective virtual workplaces. Working toward enhanced employer communications, building and engendering trust, and devising ways to maintain and measure employee engagement must be designed in the context of a global pandemic.

## **7. Leadership skills.**

It's not just business acumen that is required for success in the changing workplace. Effective and trustworthy communications during a sustained crisis is part of today's COVID-19 environment. Employers need a bench of senior leaders ready to take on new crises and support and align their employees in the process. How long it lasts and what endures from it is a central question for employers themselves.

Clearly, the fallout from COVID-19 will have lasting and even permanent effects on our work lives—everything from where we work, to how we work, to how we recruit and retain new talent in this virtual world, to how we communicate within our work communities. These changes are already prompting forward-thinking employers to reconsider their role in the context of public health and the safety of their employees. Employers who fail to step up and address the health of their employees and public health amid the new realities stand to fall behind in the intense competition for talent. Further, they also stand to miss out on this seminal moment to lead our workforce into the 21st century.

Indeed, this requires a new social contract in which policymakers, industry, employers, and individuals in almost every job and profession must embrace new concepts of work and the workplace. GCOA and our partners will continue to focus on these issues, helping to challenge the employer community at the forefront of pandemic response to successfully navigate—and win—in the vastly changed world of work.



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## About the Global Coalition on Aging

The Global Coalition on Aging aims to reshape how global leaders approach and prepare for the 21st century's profound shift in population aging. GCOA uniquely brings together global corporations across industry sectors with common strategic interests in aging populations, a comprehensive and systemic understanding of aging, and an optimistic view of its impact. Through research, public policy analysis, advocacy, and strategic communications, GCOA is advancing innovative solutions and working to ensure global aging is a path to health, productivity and economic growth.

For more information, visit  
[www.globalcoalitiononaging.com](http://www.globalcoalitiononaging.com).

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