

Executive Insights: The Indelible Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic – How Do Leaders and Managers Deal with This New Reality

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Abstract

This interview article examines and describes some of the lasting and indelible influences and effects of the recent COVID-19 pandemic on work life and organizations. It also identifies some practical solutions and advice for leaders and managers to deal with those pandemic effects. This article uses two in-depth interviews with April Armstrong, the CEO of AHA Insight, a change management executive consultant who has advised and worked with many organizations (including The White House, the Department of Defense, and many Fortune 500 companies) and led the evaluation of Exercise Top Officials, a whole-of-government training and research program administered by the Department of Homeland Security and its National Level Exercise Program to prepare for a range of catastrophic disaster scenarios, including a viral pandemic.

Introduction

While it may seem like an eternity has passed, the COVID-19 pandemic has only affected us for the past three years.^{1,2,3} With the pandemic and its ensuing disruption, organizations, leaders, and workers have all had to adjust to this new reality. Life has changed, and so too has work life. Some of these are likely indelible changes, which have created challenges for organizations, leaders, and employees that will linger for a long time to come. These challenges include issues about work modalities and continuously evolving

scientific public health guidelines conflicting with individually held personal views. People in any workplace have different kinds of health concerns, most of which employers and colleagues may know nothing about. Navigating these challenges can prove quite complex; therefore, it certainly behooves organizational leaders and managers to start figuring out ways by which they can deal with this new reality.

COVID-19 has caused many disruptions to the global business environment, such as disruptions in the supply chain, remote work, online sales, travel and tourism, the decline in consumer spending, international trade, and shifts in consumer behavior. As a result, companies had to adapt rapidly or suffer the consequences. For example, during the start of the pandemic, McDonald's quickly shifted to a drive-thru, take-out, and delivery model to comply with social distancing measures and lockdowns. The company also had to implement new employee safety protocols, such as temperature checks and face masks. They also had to ensure their employees were trained with new procedures, such as contactless payments and curbside pickup. This required a quick shift in their business model and distribution channels and significant investments in technology and employee training to ensure a safe and smooth transition. Sears, on the other hand, had been struggling financially for several years before the pandemic, and the sudden shift to online shopping and lockdowns further accelerated the decline of brick-and-mortar retail stores. Sears needed help to shift its business model to adapt to these changes quickly, and as a result, it filed for bankruptcy in 2020 and closed many of its stores. Nordstrom, a Seattle-based retailer with more than 300 stores across the US, announced at the beginning of March, 2023, that they would be shutting down 13 stores and that 2500 employees would lose their jobs; they also exited the Canadian market after 9 years of operating in Canada, citing high operating costs and coronavirus pandemic as the reasons why the company reached this decision.⁴

April Armstrong, the CEO of AHA Insight, provided us with some helpful and practical advice for leaders and managers and shared her perspective both during the zenith as well as the ebbing of the pandemic. She has advised and worked with many organizations, large and small (e.g., The White House, Department of Defense, several Fortune 500 firms, non-profit firms, etc.). She has also helped facilitate some of the nation's most significant paradigm shifts, including national preparedness and response to catastrophic disasters, the rise of autonomous and connected vehicles, and several extensive organizational change initiatives. Her expertise spans thirty years of advising national security, homeland security, and transportation sector leaders, and much more in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks. In addition, throughout the entirety of the COVID-19 pandemic, she has been

involved in helping many organizations navigate their way effectively through the pandemic. We believe that this in-depth interview paper helps us in offering practical and grounded advice for businesses and their leaders.

This article presents some key takeaways from our interviews with April Armstrong. Some selections from our discussion have been reproduced (lightly edited) in this paper, to provide the reader with a clear idea of what was related during these conversations.

Conversation with April Armstrong

How did you get involved with working with helping organizations through the COVID-19 pandemic?

After 9/11, I was invited to be the lead evaluator for what at the time was the nation's most extensive catastrophic disaster preparedness research and training program, "*Exercise Top Officials*," which featured (among others) a viral pandemic scenario. Mandated by Congress, and sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security, Department of State, The White House, and the Homeland Security Council, the purpose of this counter-terrorism program was to improve the nation's capacity to manage complex/extreme terrorism events. The fear of bioterrorism, and specifically a pandemic, was quite serious in the aftermath of 9/11, and that scenario featured prominently throughout that exercise series. As the lead evaluator, I had a front-row seat to some of how our nation might respond if we were ever faced with something like this.

Because, unlike a regular training program, or even a theoretical type of exercise, this was a "live play" full-scale simulation. While scenario-driven with some key "injects" to trigger response, it was not a scripted exercise. Top government officials from the White House through governors and mayors, Heads of departments and agencies at the federal, state, local, tribal and levels as well as nonprofit organizations such as the Red Cross and private sector participants, experimented with what a response would look like to discover where we could improve together in order to help shape national policy and procedures. We observed every aspect of the response and created a detailed reconstruction of events to learn what plans and policies worked, which ones didn't work as well as leaders hoped and where we had no plan or policy in place and might need one should our country ever face any of the terrible scenarios.

The findings from that research underpinned the National Response Framework, which guides a coordinated national response by federal, state and local officials to any number of catastrophic scenarios and helped inform

the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza. I ended up subsequently evaluating cabinet level tabletop policy exercises to look even more deeply at national policy implications of catastrophic disaster scenarios.

Once the Framework was in place, I changed gears and moved into helping executives prepare for other large-scale strategic transformational changes, such as helping leaders lay the groundwork for connected vehicles in our transportation system, and information technology modernization within various sectors.

It seemed unimaginable then to many that our country could face something like a pandemic at the scale we saw in 2020. Even in the artificiality of a large-scale exercise, emergency decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, interagency communications and managing emergency public information proved to be significant challenges.

In February 2020, I noticed that the Department of Defense activated its campaign plan for pandemics. That got my attention, and I started watching this very closely. By early March, 2020, it was apparent that *this was the big one*. It was happening.

I immediately began immersing myself; needless to say, in every journal article, everything coming out about COVID-19. As a viral pandemic, the preparedness and response playbooks for the coronavirus pandemic, were likely to be very similar to those we had studied with pandemic influenza scenarios. So, that's how I got very involved in advising organizations during this pandemic, to help them navigate the tremendous uncertainty and confusing guidance, minimize risks of harm to people and their organizations, and then help them proactively transition smoothly to what would inevitably become a “new normal.”

What has changed in the work context, due to this pandemic? And, will these changes be temporary or permanent changes?

I think that virtualized work is here to stay in many sectors. I think that's one major shift that will not be changing back. We're certainly seeing this in both the corporate and government workspaces. I think it will not be like a toggle, i.e., an on or an off. It's really going to be more like a “dimmer switch,” and a permanent hybrid model. Organizations will continue this to the extent it makes sense and benefits them. On the bright side, we're seeing tremendous expansiveness and a change in the dominant paradigm, which dates back to the industrial era, when people went to a physical plant or factory. They worked a set number of hours and then they blew the “Fred Flintstone” whistle, and they came home and they spent their evenings with

The Indelible Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic

their families, right? We are seeing that dramatically change. And I think that's a positive development.

This malleability in many sectors is a shift that had already been well underway, albeit moving slowly. I think the pandemic has really accelerated that shift. I think the concept of the consumer “convenience” economy, with industries including food and grocery delivery services, curbside pickups with retail, etc. are here to stay. Consumers have long wanted that convenience, but it's expensive and hard for businesses to upend these major established business models, especially when they are rooted in brick and mortar. The early phases of the pandemic forced these changes though, flipping these business models at a time when vaccines and therapeutics did not yet exist, and protective N-95 respirator masks and KN-95 type masks that protect the wearer were not widely available for the public.

Physical distancing measures and source-control masking policies (e.g., requiring people to wear masks of any type to block person-to-person viral transmission, including just cloth face coverings) were unfortunately necessary because the virus you can see coming doesn't become a pandemic. Most people are likely to avoid that person having the coughing and sneezing fit, right? It's pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic spread that allows a virus to reach pandemic proportions in the first place, because people don't see it coming. It's a lot of people socializing at close range with people who look just fine and have no idea they have anything contagious (but do), that exponentializes vectors of transmission.

As hard as that was for businesses, those that were able to make that pivot to virtual interactions and contactless transactions were the fortunate ones, because they survived and are poised to now thrive. The changes they made will pay dividends going forward. That is business resilience.

And what we're discovering is, customers like that. They value that flexibility, for the sake of convenience, as well as public health and safety.

I still predict and believe that we will settle into a hybrid work environment. Even the Department of Defense (DoD), made unprecedented shifts to hybrid work. We see now more flexible working arrangements. It is impressive what I witnessed in terms of speed and precision of these shifts. In the case of the DoD's pivot, their workforce which felt that they did not only survive the pandemic but their workforce even thrived.⁵

Certainly, many sectors that never had this luxury. The hospitality sector was hammered and many people were suddenly out of work and without a paycheck. People in our health and medical sectors worked tirelessly throughout, some at great risk to their health or that of loved ones, as did our critical infrastructure workers such as grocery and transit operators, who kept our country moving in ways most people didn't see or appreciate. These

people never got to work from home and with the nature of their work, never will.

From what I have seen, some leaders like Elon Musk, and other pockets such as major banks in the financial sector are pushing for return-to-office (RTO), and it seems that the pressures keep increasing. But we will see much more flexibility. On balance, workplace flexibility will not go away. Hybrid, flexible work is likely to remain where you see it, because it makes sense. It was coming anyway, the pandemic just accelerated it. Employees may need to negotiate their specific arrangements case-by-case.

Is this trend towards virtualization of work and added flexibility beneficial for workers, especially workers with families?

We could say broadly that this whole issue affects family balance. Whether it's caring for aging parents or young children or one's own health challenges, the pandemic heightened people's sense of priority around health and this is likely to persist. This has long been deserving of attention, right? That "caring" was always there, it just never had a voice or a seat at the table until the pandemic.

We do need to consider though, if is it really balanced. Or is it really more of a fusion type of thing? This has certainly risen in prominence as more women have entered the workforce and have ascended into more demanding positions, executive positions, for example; and, now they're in positions where they can look at those policies and change some of those things.

These changes benefit employers as well, though. There is a lot of research that shows that employees who feel well-treated are highly engaged and very hard for competitors to lure away. There are all kinds of costs associated with undesired turnover (when high performers leave an organization) that don't show up on a spreadsheet. The post-pandemic new normal is broadcasting an invitation to companies to move away from transactional relationships with employees and towards more reciprocal relationships, in ways that employees feel cared for. Care for the well-being of your employees and their families is a high payoff area we know employees value. Companies that heed this invitation and take the long view will be rewarded.

Why have companies lagged in terms of making their workplaces more caring for their employees?

There has just never been enough urgency to really make these changes happen at scale, because it is moving a mountain of inertia of decades of "how

The Indelible Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic

it's been." The pandemic has brought about this convergence of forces that influence what we're seeing and of necessity, we saw a seemingly instantaneous shift to working from home for many office workers. We also saw what I call, *great compassion*.

We saw a universal sort of blanket of compassion, I think, for the most part, around acknowledging that people actually have lives outside of their work as we see the kids and pets coming into the meeting camera, right? This idea that it doesn't matter how, where, and even when you get the work done, as long as you're delivering the result, is really getting traction. Sometimes that does require in-person meetings or collaboration and of course, flexibility and virtualization do not apply in the same way for essential workers in certain industries (be it healthcare, hospitality, grocery store, or transportation workers). My hope, and my belief, is that even in those industries, we're seeing more flexibility. We're seeing more flexibility in human resources (HR) policies that are giving even those folks more space and choices and flexibility, and acknowledgment of their well-being, where these may not have existed at that level pre-pandemic.

How are organizations from industries that are struggling due to the pandemic (e.g. tourism and hospitality, for instance) going to bounce back?

Well, I think, big behemoths like Disney World and other global tourism/hospitality brands will recover, even if for some, it's going to be a very long-term recovery. 'A lot of smaller businesses did not survive the pandemic. I think one of the hardest hit industries was tourism and hospitality, and that really breaks my heart, but we are seeing signs of recovery, in many cases even a booming recovery. One of the opportunities in tourism is that now people really want to get out and have adventures. There was a record demand for passport renewals this year.

Many industries will be forever altered and organizations will need to innovate their way back to regain market and relevance. And I think the innovations are going to be for the better. But not every sector has recovered, and inflation has of course been a significant and sticky challenge.

There could be another pandemic coming in the future, right? It's not far-fetched. In a global world, with high-density interpersonal contact, we can predict with reasonable certainty that any highly transmissible, not immediately lethal, virus for which there is no vaccine or cure may reach pandemic proportions.

And so, the hope is that all the protocols we've learned, including the power of highly protective masks available to all who want them; as well as

things we've learned technologically and pharmaceutically, etc. through this pandemic are not just one-off things that we throw out the door. Rather these are, in fact, valuable investments in the future, so that we're able to weather future pandemics, with greater ease and far less disruption and loss of life and livelihoods.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities, but these are not unique to coronaviruses, and so businesses are going to continue to need to continue to prioritize flexibility, resilience, preparedness, and yes, innovation.

You know, I think one of the opportunities in tourism is going to be that now people have discovered the wonders outside their doorstep. The CEO of Delta recently affirmed to CEO Alan Murray and editor-at-large Michael Lev-Ram on *Fortune's* Leadership Next podcast in June 2023 that demand for travel is "really, really strong," noting they estimate the value of that pent-up demand to exceed normal demand by as much as \$300 billion. So, I don't think that it's irretrievable from an industry sector standpoint. I do think it's going to be a very long-term recovery for some in those industries. And I do think they will be permanently altered.

What would your advice be for leaders of small to medium-sized businesses in the industry?

At the start of the pandemic, the most important advice I offered small to medium-sized businesses was to make "Customer Safety" their number one priority. If a customer sensed that their health and safety was not the business' number one priority, that small business was in danger of closing down, because a huge segment of their customer base might feel that a core emotional need we all have – trust—was being violated. As customers became more educated and as protective measures eventually became available to the general public, first through home tests, and then vaccines and therapeutics, and eventually, protective masks (e.g., N-95 respirators and KN-95 "earloop" masks) a primary emotional-core need that customers wanted to see honored became autonomy. Many people then wanted the freedom to protect themselves however they wanted, at whatever level they wanted based on their risk assessment.

The world opened up – faster than some might like, and more slowly than others might have liked. Public health measures, the aim of which was to protect public health and societal infrastructure from being overwhelmed, seemingly vanished overnight. Public message strategies that emphasized protecting *others*, shifted to what I call the "you do you" approach.

The Indelible Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Some people celebrated this shift, and others felt abandoned, afraid and vulnerable; especially people with compromised immune systems or other conditions that could place them at serious risk for what remains a potentially very serious disease.

Suddenly, it was left to everybody to do whatever worked for them. Businesses quickly followed suit. Like it or not, people no longer looked to the government or businesses to keep them safe from coronavirus, but they did want to see whatever posture they chose to be respected and *supported* - and they still do.

People now have key tools (such as N95 respirator masks and other protective masks) and more education and awareness around how viruses spread than ever before and are now empowered to make informed decisions about their health on their own personal risk tolerance. Those core values of trust and autonomy are now intertwined.

Small things businesses can do to convey that they are an environment that supports personal choices around health and safety include:

- ✓ Ensure employees adhere to health and safety protocols;
- ✓ Support flexible work arrangements where possible;
- ✓ Demonstrate support for a range of risk tolerance levels such as making hand sanitizer available and making meetings and workplaces “masks optional,” as a subtle invitational nod to people who may still choose to don a protective mask in close contact situations as a risk mitigation measure;
- ✓ Make protective masks available on premises, either for sale or at no charge;
- ✓ Mention optional health and safety protocols in meeting communications to create a space of allowance for protective measures people may choose to follow.

These are just a few additional ways businesses can actively support diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, in this case for people who have a wide range of health and medical conditions or needs.

How can companies persuade employees to take the COVID-19 vaccine?

It is in the organization's interest to help reinforce desired health and safety protocols in the early phases of a pandemic because your business rests genuinely in the hands of your employees. It's not whether or not your salesperson is friendly to the customer - it's literally whether or not your salesperson could unknowingly infect the customer or kick off a chain of

infection that kills someone five levels of contact away from that salesperson's interaction.

And when, like in early 2020, you are looking at a novel virus that can be extremely dangerous and even deadly – for which there is no vaccine, therapeutic, or cure – businesses have the chance to take customer care to new levels early by training staff in basic communal health and hygiene protocols to help minimize transmission, at least while they are in their spaces, and keep people safe until vaccines and therapeutics can be brought to bear.

And so, it's actually incredibly important that your employees are up on public health guidelines, and that they're meeting or exceeding them, and that they're doing it voluntarily and correctly. The employer has a vested interest in making sure that their employees have these good habits and updated protocols are ingrained in the employee in the workforce.

How can companies help overcome vaccine hesitance?

Vaccine hesitancy can generally be overcome in time when people perceive that the benefits outweigh the risks (both the vaccine or the alternate choice of not getting the vaccine) and when both the benefits and risks are sufficiently compelling for people to be motivated to take action. People must perceive the information they receive to be accurate, credible, and as being free of agenda. What doesn't work is pushing people ridiculing people or minimizing people's concerns. It is important to acknowledge people's concerns as valid and then help them reframe what might be a disproportionate and overly narrow framing of potential risks in one area (e.g., risks of getting the vaccines) that may not be at least as acknowledging of the potentially serious and now globally well-documented actual risks with alternate scenarios, such as complications that can arise from a COVID-19 infection in the near- or long-term for people with certain medical conditions that can place them at higher risk.

Vaccine adoption follows closely to the well-documented curve associated with the diffusion of innovation. There are early adopters who will be first in line and there are people who will want to see what happens first with those people. And then, there will be late adopters who want to wait and see larger population studies over time, but will then get it, and then there will be people who will never get the vaccine. Coercive influence tactics such as mandates do work, but they come at a high cost in terms of goodwill and long-term voluntary cooperation.

I advise organizations to create a climate where people showing up in an office feel fully empowered and supported to protect themselves however

The Indelible Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic

they choose to from transmission of any airborne virus without fear of ridicule or exclusion. I urge organizations to support tools of voluntary physical distancing (e.g., book a larger conference room than you might otherwise need), choices to don a protective mask such as an N95 respirator mask or KN-95 mask for close contact situations, and offer virtual meetings where feasible to give people maximum flexibility and autonomy.

Do you predict a resurgence of COVID-19?

I'm not a public health researcher or epidemiologist, so I am not qualified to make any such predictions, but following their research course, there is always a concern of waning immunity, course, there is always a concern of waning immunity, or a more virulent vaccine- or therapeutic-evasive variant emerging one day. It should not cause another public health crisis at the level we saw in 2020, and here's why. The very good news is that we have so many tools available now that we didn't in 2020. Unfortunately, everybody is now educated on viral pandemics, not just pandemic researchers.

People are now empowered and equipped to protect themselves from the start. We have many levers now that we didn't have then that people can immediately pull for themselves. For example, high quality, protective masks (e.g., N-95 respirators and KN-95) that protect the *wearer*; the choice to use mutual "source-control" masking strategies in targeted settings (e.g., such as transportation systems) to protect the vulnerable around us; or when someone who has been exposed or infected wishes to protect others around them (e.g., much like how surgeons wear surgical masks to protect you from anything they may be carrying when they are performing surgery on you). People know that physical distancing can help offset risk; and that crowded, dense spaces are at higher risk than open spaces for something like coronavirus where aerosolized droplets can remain suspended in the air and accumulate. People are aware of the importance of hand hygiene and cough/sneeze etiquette as simple measures that protect us against a range of pathogens. And of course, we have effective vaccines and therapeutics, and the science has advanced significantly in these areas. We should not ever have a pandemic like we did in early 2020 ever again. Organizations now know this.

Even if a new airborne viral threat were to emerge, we could likely continue business as usual, knowing and feeling confident that high-quality protective masks will help us. I don't think we will ever see something as we saw across the planet, a total shutdown like that. Just like many Asian countries, we can mask up and keep going. People have become comfortable

with it here now. I don't worry about future viruses, but I believe organizations are wise to continue doing scenario planning.

COVID hopefully was a wake-up call. You have to do preparedness planning and follow through. If you remember what happened with the hospitals early on, the ones that did well had the gear on hand and awareness of protocols they could immediately institute to protect their people. They didn't just plan – they prepared, and they stayed prepared. Those who were not prepared, who did not have emergency supplies such as N-95 respirator protective masks on hand and could not get them by then were devastated and their healthcare workers were subjected daily to extreme risk. There are other relatively easy things organizations could be putting in place as well to avert the worst in any future such scenario such improved ventilation and filtration in air handling systems, maintaining emergency stockpiles on-hand and remaining agile with protective measure policies.

What sort of paradigm shift are we seeing now in 2023 that companies are all pushing for RTO and not WFH?

When we talked earlier, I predicted that we will settle into a hybrid work environment. Even parts of the DoD made an unprecedented and swift shift to hybrid work with more flexible working arrangements that are proving to be enduring. I believe we will see more pressure for RTO especially in some sectors such as the financial sector. But we will see much more flexibility. Hybridization of the workplace is staying.

Discussion and Conclusion

As discussed early on in the article, and through our conversation with Ms. Armstrong, COVID-19 has had an indelible influence on organizations and work life. One aspect of work life that is pretty difficult now to go back on, is the expectation that office workers need to be present at a physical location Monday - Friday from 8 am to 5 pm. With the increasing virtualization and flexibility being offered, it seems important that organizational leaders and managers continue to think through such issues and consider what flexibility they can offer their workers. One factor that is driving the “Great Resignation” today, is that individuals are quitting companies that don't offer them good work-life balance or that are stringently inflexible.^{6,7} The lack of flexibility can seriously stymie organizational efforts to retain their employees.

For leadership and HR managers in general this type of decision is not an easy one. Not all agree of course where we some have been in strong opposition. It is hard to train and prepare amazing individuals to become

The Indelible Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic

future leaders remotely. It is also hard for managers to argue with high confidence that working remotely can produce amazing results since historically, overall a long period of time, what we know, is that the old model works and produces results, though the emergence of artificial intelligence and machine learning will bring new pressures to bear on these old models, and opportunities for organizations to adapt.

There are many examples around to show how some leaders are reacting. Elon Musk recently as X's new owner (Formerly Twitter) banned employees from working at home. Other leaders in banking (e.g., Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase) for instance might follow his lead as well. It is a complex problem that top managers and HR professionals struggle with. Working from home is relatively new and we don't have much evidence that it can give us the same results we had when people showed up to a physical office to work. With inflation worsening, top managers might feel more power when it comes to asking their employees to return to work.⁸

Many workers have embraced working from home and the flexibility that comes with it. However, it is essential to be aware that there might be many legal ramifications, and workplace pitfalls might be abundant if one is not cautious.⁹ Therefore, our advice for first-time remote workers is to be extra careful, from analyzing their contracts to sitting down with professionals (e.g., lawyers) to fully understand what they need to do and what they should be aware of. For instance, just because you work at home does not mean that workplace policies do not apply at home, or employers might decide to reclassify your job as an independent contractor job instead of having to pay benefits and entitlements, taxes could also change since you might have to pay the taxes based on the city and state that you moved to and gets much more complex as people choose to bounce around. You must ask and check about noncompete and nondisclosure agreements and their terms.¹⁰

Organizations that are struggling during the pandemic absolutely must innovate. If they do not innovate, they may cease to exist altogether. Likewise, it is valuable to understand the dynamics of diffusion of innovation, when it comes to influencing people to embrace changes that something like a pandemic can suddenly require. Leaders must certainly bring forward the spirit of innovation, but employees must also play their part in it. This is where offering flexibility to employees can be an instrumental factor. Necessity is termed the mother of invention, so this pandemic could be a parental figure for necessary innovation to occur.

Additionally, vaccine hesitancy, which appears to be driven by an increasingly paranoid populace, guided by fake news, should be tackled by leaders.^{11,12} They need to keep up and be informed about the latest public health guidelines with the express purpose of keeping customers and

employees safe. Their safety is paramount and is one factor that can directly affect whether or not the company survives and thrives, despite a pandemic. Therefore, organizations should do their part in ensuring safety guidelines and protocols are always scrupulously followed.

In conclusion, while the effects of the pandemic will be long-lasting, the aftermath of it need not be all gloomy. There are pathways forward that will help individuals achieve better work-life balance, which may help companies become more innovative. As the old saying goes, when life gives you lemons, you turn it into lemonade – in our case, when life gives you a pandemic, perhaps we could turn it into a pioneering act of innovation.

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The Indelible Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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