

# SHAPING THE NEW NORMAL

Changing working practices for good



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In our daily personal and professional lives, there are dozens of behaviors that we undertake more or less automatically. From our morning commute, to the way we structure and conduct meetings, many of our working practices are guided by these routine behaviors. Occasionally, these working practices are disrupted and new behaviors are established. When these new behaviors are repeated in a consistent context, new working practices can be formed.

This is what is happening right now around the world. COVID-19 is reshaping the way that we socialize, travel, and work. Many of the effects of COVID-19 are, of course, detrimental to the way we live our lives. But the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic also offers a unique opportunity for organizations to recalibrate routines and ways of working. From virtual conferencing, to shifting business models online, many positive new activities have emerged.

But it is important to recognize the likelihood that many of these new ways of working will themselves lapse if we do not actively shape the post-COVID environment that we are starting to enter. In this paper we set out how organizations can actively support the “new normal” by setting out a framework that enables us to both identify the positive new working practices we want to maintain and lay the foundations for their continuation.

## DEVELOPING WORKING PRACTICES

Human beings have two different ways of processing information. We have a “slow” system which requires our active attention, for example when we first learn to drive a car or solve a math problem. And we have a “fast” system that operates automatically, which is at play when you become an accomplished driver or make quick calculations.<sup>1</sup>

To establish routines, humans must make use of both our “fast” and “slow” systems. When matured, routines are carried out using our automatic, “fast” system, without conscious thought or attention. But importantly, routines are consciously developed, rather than innate. These behaviors must be repeated in consistent contexts before they start to develop into new, mature routines. Only after they have been learned in this way do they stick and become automatic responses to our environment. Thus the learning process enables us to move behaviors from our slow, thinking system to our fast, automatic system — at which point they become routines. In organizational settings, we call these routines “working practices”.

This movement from slow to fast thinking explains why certain behaviors seem to be so daunting at first glance. Consider the following example: suppose you start a new job and your new employer requires you to use a different word processing package from your previous employer. At first it is challenging, requiring considerable effort to work out how to undertake the simplest of functions. But over time, these tasks become routinized. At that point, many of the tasks that previously required our active attention become automated and require us to expend relatively little cognitive effort.

The reality is that many of the activities and processes we engage with throughout the working day take the form of these more “automated” working practices. Our daily commute to work; the way that we conduct meetings; the process of managing a project or gathering feedback from our colleagues; how and where we take our lunch breaks. All these are examples of working practices that have developed over time through their repetition in our particular workplace settings. And their development, in general, should be welcomed. It significantly reduces the cognitive effort required of us to undertake our work. In turn, this helps to shape and guide organizational behavior.

But we are all too aware of the fact that there are examples of working practices that we would like to change. And we will also have found that changing these routines can be difficult precisely because they have developed into automatic routines, which have become “sticky” over time. To embed change in these circumstances requires that we pay considerable attention not just to the mechanics of the new practices that we want to see established, but also to the organizational culture within which we want to see them develop and flourish.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanovich, R., & West, K. (2000), “Individual Differences in Reasoning: Implications for the Rationality Debate?”; Kahneman, D. (2011), *Thinking, Fast and Slow*

## **DISRUPTING ESTABLISHED WORKING PRACTICES**

What is unique about the situation that has emerged as a result of COVID-19, however, is that working practices in millions of businesses around the world have been disrupted, more or less overnight, by an external shock. And direct disruption of these routines, or the cues that “trigger” them, can be one of the most powerful ways of changing deeply ingrained behaviors which might otherwise continue to operate on auto-pilot.

One example of the power of this kind of external shock which has been examined in detail by researchers occurred in London in 2014. In February of that year, London tube drivers went on strike, forcing millions of commuters to change their method of transport. Some found that they could get a bus instead of their usual underground train; some people walked or cycled; and some people worked from home.

But what the researchers were really interested in was what happened after the strike had finished, and commuters could once again use the underground. And what they found was that around 5% of these commuters never returned to their original routes. A minority of commuters had discovered that there were superior options available to them, and the cumulative effect of this change in terms of time saved for these commuters far exceeded the time lost in total as a result of the strike to the whole of the London population.

The commuters who switched could, of course, have discovered this alternative path at any point in time, but it was the disruptive event of the strike that forced them to go outside the comfort zone of their existing routine. The disruption brought about by COVID-19 has disrupted the working practices of billions of people around the world on a scale that few of us have experienced outside of wartime. And, like London commuters during the tube strike, we have been forced to adopt new routines.

But the London commuter example holds another important lesson for us. It is that while some people did indeed change their daily commute for good, the vast majority of people did not. Although disruption can momentarily shift our behavior, embedding and maintaining it requires active management and planning as we go back to the “new normal”. Therefore, the question that we ask in this paper is how can we ensure that we maintain the positive behaviors that we have recently adopted as life continues to return to normal, and that we embed them as part of a “new normal” set of routines?

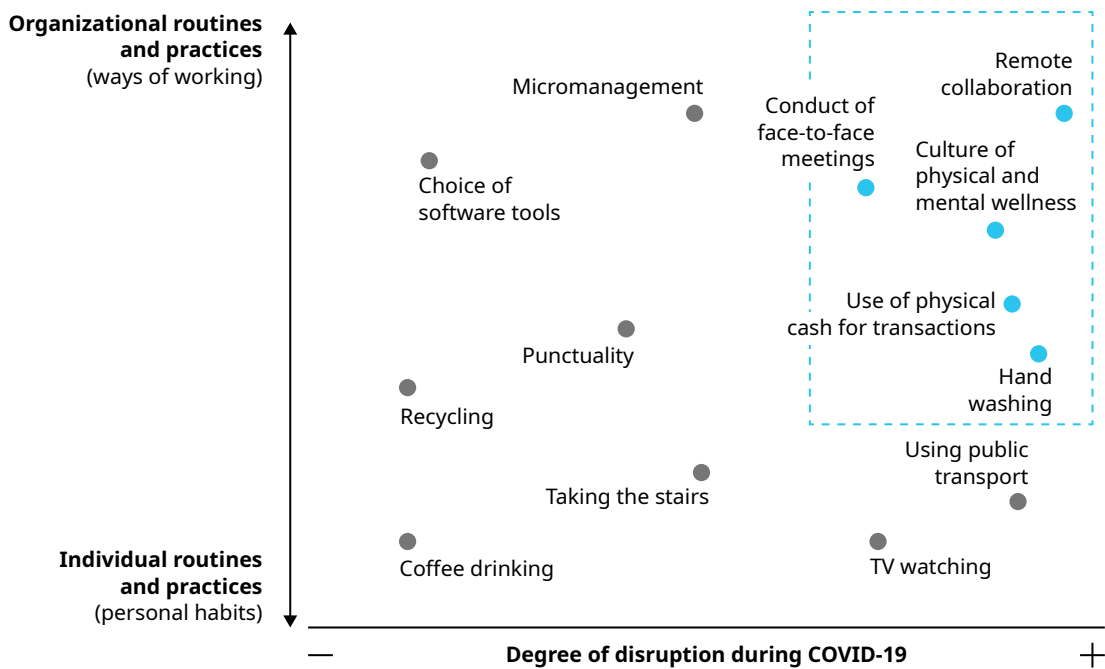
Before we explore this question, we are going to examine five areas of working life that have been disrupted by COVID-19 that we might want to maintain.

## THE EMERGENCE OF NEW WORKING PRACTICES

Our daily lives are guided by countless routine behaviors and practices, any of which could be revisited and challenged at this uniquely disruptive moment in history. For the purposes of this paper, we zoom in on a small subset of practices: Those which are relevant in a workplace context, and which have been particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The scope of this paper's focus is illustrated accordingly in the following framework of routines and practices:

### Exhibit 1. Typical routines and disruptions from the COVID-19 crisis

The blue area represents the focus of this paper.



Source: Oliver Wyman analysis

In adopting this particular focus, our objective is to highlight a few notable opportunities for organizations to undergo a positive cultural and operational shift. By being mindful and observant of these ongoing disruptions, organizations can set themselves on a pathway to long-term improvement in these specific areas of working life. Below we explore five examples of such workplace routines and practices that have been disrupted, and that are ripe for reform in the wake of COVID-19:

- 1. Remote collaboration:** A trend that has been slowly gaining momentum for years as more employers offer remote work, which has been dramatically accelerated during the COVID-19 crisis.
- 2. Conduct of meetings:** In addition to gradually moving towards virtual environments, the size, length and structure of traditional business meetings is rapidly changing.

3. **Physical and mental wellness:** An often-overlooked topic that is highly relevant for employee health and productivity.
4. **Hand washing:** A personal habit that is central to the maintenance of safe workplaces and to prevention of future workplace-based outbreaks.
5. **Use of physical cash:** A sticky trend in many economies that has been forcibly displaced in favor of digital alternatives, with transformative implications for financial services, e-commerce and more.

### The move to virtual forms of communication

Throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, most face-to-face meetings have moved to video conferencing platforms, which have experienced record numbers of users and downloads. For example, one major platform's number of daily users increased to more than 200 million<sup>2</sup> in March 2020 from a previous maximum monthly total of 10 million. The video conferencing app was downloaded 2.13 million times<sup>3</sup> around the world on 23rd March, up from 56,000 a day before the onset of the crisis. Downloads of other conferencing apps experienced similar surges — Thailand recently reported<sup>4</sup> an 828 percent rise in data traffic from one leading video conferencing platform.

This shift to virtual forms of communication has called into question many related organizational routines, such as the frequency of in-person meetings, and the need and frequency of business travel. This disruption is affecting the highest levels of international government, with G20 leaders now holding key discussions online.<sup>5</sup> COVID-19 is also reshaping the landscape of business conferences, a trillion dollar industry<sup>6</sup> before the pandemic. While some companies have opted to postpone such events indefinitely, others are making plans to host them virtually.

Virtual communication solutions not only have the potential to change where we meet, but may also empower groups that have been traditionally under-represented in the workforce. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women participate in the labor force at a rate of just 22 percent<sup>7</sup>, compared to 79 percent for men. The reasons for this are myriad, from a lack of adequate physical office facilities to accommodate female employees, to cultural norms that may discourage some women from seeking employment outside the home. A normalization of remote work via virtual communication tools on a mass scale — something that many may have found implausible or unworkable prior to the experience of working through the COVID-19 lockdown — may render at least some of these obstacles irrelevant.

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2 <https://blog.zoom.us/wordpress/2020/04/01/a-message-to-our-users/>

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/mar/31/zoom-booms-as-demand-for-video-conferencing-tech-grows-in-coronavirus-outbreak>

4 [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/covid19\\_e/ecommerce\\_report\\_e.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/ecommerce_report_e.pdf)

5 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/g20-leaders-video-conference-coronavirus-covid19-pandemic-outbreak/>

6 <https://www.pcma.org/eic-study-business-events-industry-global-gdp-impact-hits-1-5t/>

7 <https://ilostat ilo.org/data/country-profiles/>

In the healthcare industry, remote working solutions may also have the benefit of reducing the strain on national healthcare systems and protecting vulnerable patients from exposure to COVID-19 by enabling remote medical consultations. Some national health authorities, including the Qatari Ministry of Public Health, have launched remote health services<sup>8</sup> in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Telemedicine may represent an opportunity for efficiencies and cost savings that will be of interest to healthcare providers long after the crisis has passed.

### **Restructuring business meetings**

We have previously reviewed the environment in which meetings take place — i.e. virtual or face-to-face. But there is another dimension to the way we meet that has been disrupted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic: the purpose, content, and structure of meetings, which are heavily routinized, are now being thrown into question. Here again, we are seeing both disruption to our previous working practices and new practices emerging in some areas. These include rapid all-staff virtual meetings to kick-off the day; a tendency to have shorter outcome-oriented discussions by phone or video call to problem solve through day; and an end to in-person brainstorming or conferences.

This is one area, however, in which there is not yet an emergent idea about what a new normal could or should be. This implies that it will need more active shaping (discussed in the next section). What is clear, though, is that business professionals around the world are dissatisfied with the way in which meetings have historically operated within their organization. One recent study indicated that 67% of professionals feel that they are required to participate in an excessive volume of unproductive meetings<sup>9</sup>. Other surveys of staff<sup>10</sup> across the world show that meetings are generally perceived to be inefficient ways of managing work, and often lack purpose.

Despite apparently broad agreement that meetings (whether virtual or in-person) are not currently utilized in a particularly efficient manner, they have become a deeply embedded working practice for countless organizations worldwide, presenting tremendous inertia to the development and introduction of more efficient working routines.

As we enter the post-COVID environment, it therefore makes sense for us to consider how we organize meetings to update colleagues, generate new ideas, and take decisions. The research in this area shows that it can start with considering elements as simple as attendance lists and the duration of meetings. In these areas, employees often default to established routines within meetings, for example by following routine scripts, or blocking off a set amount of time (meetings in the United Kingdom and United States invariably last one hour<sup>11</sup>, regardless of variation in the amount of content needing to be discussed). The ubiquitous use of online calendars is likely to have exacerbated these phenomena.

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8 <https://www.moph.gov.qa/english/mediacenter/News/Pages/NewsDetails.aspx?ItemId=115>

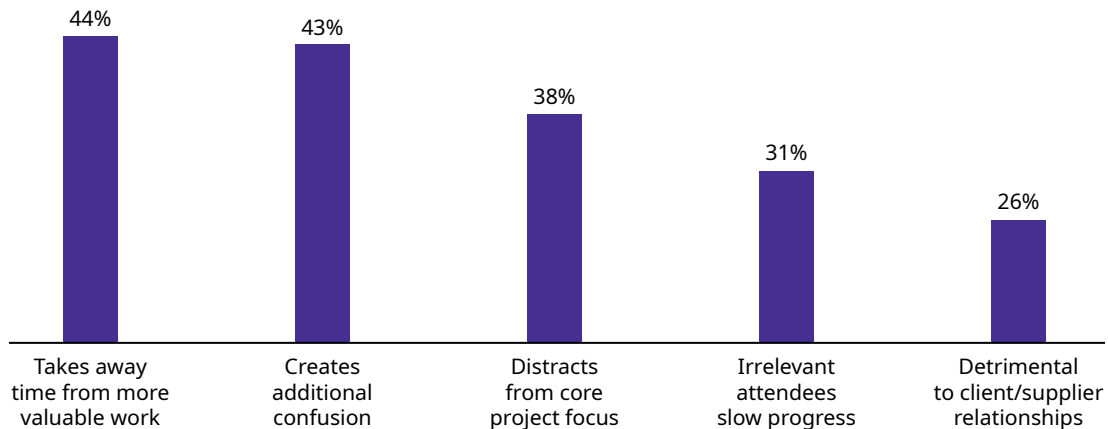
9 <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/17/67percent-of-workers-say-spending-too-much-time-in-meetings-distracts-them.html>

10 <https://en.blog.doodle.com/state-of-meetings-2019/>

11 <https://meeting-report.com/importance-of-meetings/2>

Those organizations that want to go further might consider the research around the structure and purpose of different kinds of meetings, which can impact significantly upon their efficiency and efficacy. A meeting that seeks to generate new ideas, for example, can benefit hugely by encouraging people to generate ideas independently from one another before coming together as a group to discuss and prioritize the ideas that have been generated.

**Exhibit 2. Reported consequences of poorly-organized meetings**



Source: Doodle, 2019 State of Meetings Report

Clearly, there is an opportunity — perhaps overdue — for organizations to re-think if, when, and how they meet. And this might be the case even when COVID-19 has not yet completely reshaped the way that we organize one of the most fundamental ways in which organizations operate.

**Transforming business models and practice**

The disruption caused by COVID-19 has seen accelerations and pivots in business practices that would have previously been deemed impossible within an organization. From the establishment of a hospital in nine days<sup>12</sup> in the United Kingdom, to the development of new ventilators, antibody tests and vaccines, this pandemic may redefine what health leaders believe can be achieved when employees work towards a common goal. But rapid development of new practices has not been confined to health systems alone.

Brick and mortar establishments may have shut their doors during the lockdown, but many countries have witnessed a surge in online business activity. In the US, e-commerce sales jumped 49 percent in April 2020<sup>13</sup>. In Saudi Arabia, a leading supermarket firm recently reported<sup>14</sup> online sales and app installations increasing by 200 percent and 400 percent, respectively. While

12 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52125059>

13 <https://techcrunch.com/2020/05/12/us-e-commerce-sales-jump-49-in-april-led-by-online-grocery/>

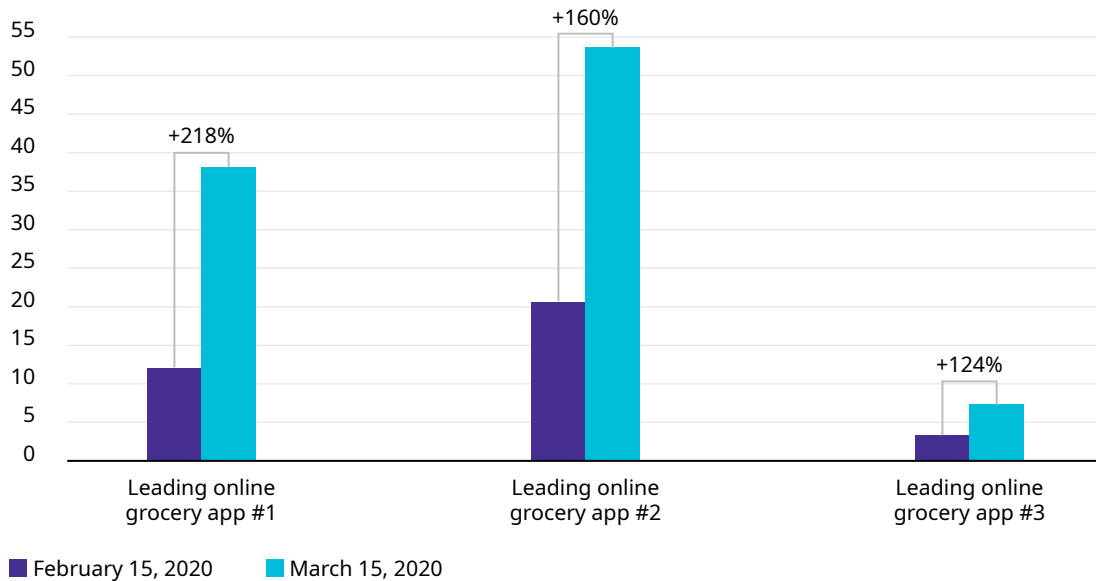
14 <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/news/saudi-arabia-turns-e-commerce-during-covid-19-outbreak> 16



much of this online demand may be met by established players in the e-commerce space, many smaller retailers are entering e-commerce for the first time or rapidly expanding existing online capabilities to remain competitive during the pandemic.

**Exhibit 3. Daily downloads of three leading US online grocery delivery apps**

Downloads in thousands



Source: TechCrunch, "Grocery delivery apps see record downloads amid coronavirus outbreak"

This shift in business models has significant implications for organizational routines, and will require the development of new ways of working that may not have been considered previously. Customer service takes on an entirely new look and feel when moving from in-person to online commerce, for example. The way an organization manages its finances on a day-to-day basis may shift dramatically when it moves from accepting physical cash as its primary means of payment to nearly all electronic payments. And this shift requires organizations to develop a familiarity and comfort with integrating with third-party vendors for key business services like payment processing, delivery services, information technology, and so on. New routines for interfacing with these new business partners will be required to fully integrate their services.

This move towards online sales has also accelerated existing trends towards digital payments<sup>15</sup>. Prior to COVID-19, many countries enjoyed a high rate of digital payments, such as Belgium (93 percent of total payments by value), France (92 percent), Canada (90 percent), the United Kingdom (89 percent) and the United States (80 percent). However, outside of the world's most developed economies, cash remains ubiquitous. Digital payments account for just 36 percent of payments<sup>16</sup> in Saudi Arabia, 31 percent of payments by value in Indonesia and Russia, and just

<sup>15</sup> <https://newsroom.mastercard.com/press-releases/saudi-arabia-steadily-moves-towards-cashless-society-mastercard-study/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.sama.gov.sa/en-US/News/Pages/news26112019.aspx>

seven percent in Egypt. Many of these countries have prioritized moving away from cash as an economic development objective. In Saudi Arabia, the Financial Sector Development Program was recently established and launched partly to support this very move.

The forced move towards electronic transactions during the COVID-19 pandemic may serve as an unexpected accelerator of this widely-shared economic development objective. Although the choice to pay digitally versus with cash rests with the individual, rather than the organization, commercial entities can leverage the momentum created by the COVID-19 pandemic by introducing digital payment options when and where they were not available previously. Similarly, governments with an interest in driving forward this economic development objective might consider how they can further embed these new routines.

### **Personal hygiene**

Hand hygiene is essential for employees in many professions, such as medical professionals, restaurant workers, and grocers. Despite this, pre-COVID-19 rates of hand hygiene compliance in professional settings were surprisingly low in many cases: roughly 40 percent of hospital workers worldwide<sup>17</sup> were estimated to practice adequate hand hygiene, while 62 percent of observed<sup>18</sup> American restaurant workers were found not to have washed their hands after handling raw beef. Meanwhile, the onset of COVID-19 has demonstrated the importance of personal hygiene across entire populations, not just in those professions where it is deemed to be essential good practice.

The spread of COVID-19 appears to be driving a substantial increase in hand-washing across both personal and professional settings: 90 percent of Americans report an increase in handwashing since the outbreak, with 78 percent washing their hands 6 or more times a day (compared to just 37 percent before the coronavirus outbreak<sup>19</sup>). Perhaps most encouragingly, 88 percent of those reporting an increase in hand-washing anticipate maintaining this level of hygiene after the virus has passed. Likewise, new habits around the wearing of face masks are emerging. Social norms around mask-wearing are quickly evolving in some countries such as Qatar, where the government has organized national distribution of masks<sup>20</sup> to citizens.

These new hygiene habits were formed in direct response to COVID-19 and will undoubtedly help to prevent its spread both now and in the future. Of course, maintaining these practices will offer the additional benefit of preventing transmission of a host of other ailments — from the common cold and viral respiratory illnesses, to food poisoning caused by bacterial foodborne pathogens.

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17 <https://ihpi.umich.edu/news/hand-washing-stops-infections-so-why-do-health-care-workers-skip-it>

18 <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/EHSNet/Docs/jfp-ground-beef-handling.pdf>

19 <https://www.bicmagazine.com/departments/hse/vast-majority-of-americans-increase-hand-washing-due-to-coro/>

20 <https://www.iloveqatar.net/coronavirus/govUpdates/surgical-masks-in-doha-amid-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

## Employee wellbeing

At the height of the pandemic, much of the world was subjected to stay-at-home or similar government directives. Feelings of loneliness and anxiety have accordingly been reported at dramatically increased rates<sup>21</sup>. Further, many employees have reported exercising less, increasing alcohol consumption, and eating less healthily since lockdowns started. Employers are quickly recognizing this risk to their employees' wellbeing — and, by extension, to the performance of their organizations.

There are further challenges relating to physical wellbeing that have arisen from the transition to full-time home working. The abrupt nature of this shift means that many employees' new work spaces are somewhat improvised and therefore likely unsuitable for long-term use. For example, a survey of employees<sup>22</sup> conducted during the first two weeks of the lockdown in the United Kingdom reported that there had been a significant increase in musculoskeletal complaints, with more than half of respondents reporting new aches and pains compared to their normal physical condition. Once again, if left unaddressed for a sufficiently long period, these physical ailments have the potential to translate to material reductions in worker productivity and wellbeing.

As a consequence of these emerging risks, 53 percent of United States employers<sup>23</sup> are now offering some sort of emotional or mental health support to employees beyond that which was offered prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Of course, recent widespread lockdown orders are not the only cause of workplace mental health concerns: 18 percent of the American adult population<sup>24</sup> is estimated to suffer some form of anxiety disorder, which is found to be a material hindrance to workplace performance<sup>25</sup>. These wellness initiatives can therefore be expected to retain their relevance beyond the duration of the pandemic.

The devotion of time, attention and financial resources to securing employee wellness may have been given new urgency as a narrow response to a specific problem. Yet this may bring to the surface some of the persistent wellness challenges that employees face on a regular basis that did not receive similar attention prior to the onset of the crisis. Thus, many employers may find that employee wellness initiatives introduced to support coping with COVID-19 may continue to yield benefits after the pandemic has ended.

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21 <https://nypost.com/2020/04/14/study-shows-americans-are-lonelier-than-ever-due-to-coronavirus-lockdown/>

22 <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/ies-working-home-wellbeing-survey>

23 <https://www.businessinsider.com/companies-offering-more-mental-health-benefits-amid-coronavirus-2020-4>

24 <https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>

25 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16122810>

## HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS EMBED NEW WORKING PRACTICES?

The disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique opportunity for organizations to recalibrate the working practices that serve as the cultural foundations of long-term organizational success, which might have otherwise been difficult to achieve. When combining these new working practices with behavioral science, organizations may discover opportunities to enhance productivity, profitability, and employee engagement in the post-COVID-19 world.

Evidence suggests<sup>26</sup> that at least three components need to be in place in order to make a new routine or practice stick. It would therefore be important to incorporate these three elements into a set of principles designed to ensure that we can maintain the new, positive organizational behaviors that have emerged as a response to the COVID-19 crisis, and incorporate them into a “new normal”:

**A cue or trigger.** First, the uptake of new practices is facilitated when it is formulated in response to a particular cue or trigger. In the simplest terms, this might be the calendar invite with a link to video conferencing software that cues or triggers a virtual meeting.

**A routine and reward.** Second is the routine itself. This refers to the routine way that most organizations or individuals have for structuring and running a meeting. It might include everything from how long the meeting might typically last; to how individuals are invited to participate. Research suggests that these routines are more likely to emerge and stick if there is also some kind of acknowledgement or reward attached to their practice.

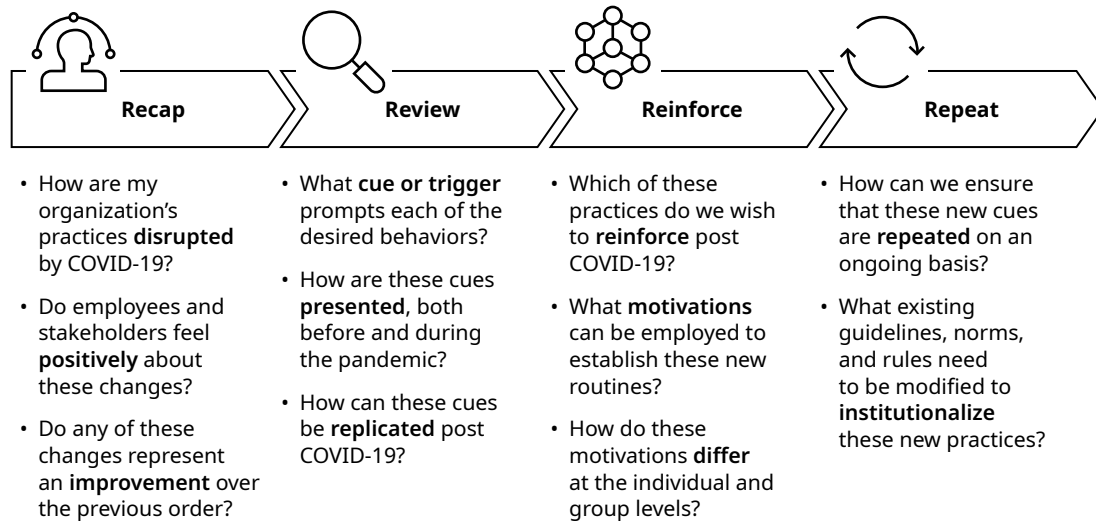
**Repetition.** Finally, and in some respects most importantly, routines need to be repeated in a consistent context in order for them to become embedded over a sustained period of time. It is this repetition that, over time, creates the automatic link between the situation that you encounter and the behavior that you perform.

With these three components in mind, we have set out a framework for embedding new practices that can be applied to any of working practices explored in the previous section — and many others that organizations may have encountered over the past few months and may want to institutionalize. Although the crisis is unlikely to be fully resolved for quite some time, organizations can benefit from beginning to execute this framework today, and continually updating their findings as their employees adapt over time.

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26 Service, O. & Gallagher, R. (2017), Think Small

**Exhibit 4. Framework for embedding new organizational practices**



Source: Oliver Wyman analysis

**RECAP**

**Review new practices**

When disruption is as widespread as it has been under COVID-19, a good starting point is to conduct an audit of new routines, behaviors, and practices among employees. The objective of this audit is to understand the ways in which meaningful changes to working practices and routines have been introduced — and to identify those with the potential to be converted into long-term embedded ways of working.

This should also be an opportunity to gauge employees' views of these new practices. It is highly likely, for example, that some employees will never have worked from home or used virtual forms of communication. And many of these employees will now want to embrace these new practices. But some, of course, may be looking forward to reintroducing pre-COVID routines. Understanding the balance of these views may be key to reinforcing the positive new behaviors in a way that supports staff as organizations exit their lockdown phases. This need not take the form of surveys and questionnaires — where possible, organizations should seek to implement more creative and engaging methods of harvesting employee opinions and encouraging them to adopt new practices. With one large organization<sup>27</sup>, for example, providing electrical engineers with red and yellow football-style referee cards to indicate a colleague's level of performance for a given task proved an effective means of improving peer-learning and performance.

Similarly, this will be a useful moment to reflect on normal ways of work that have been set aside temporarily — business travel, for example — and to determine if any might be ripe for reform. It will be much easier to undertake these changes now that routines have been disrupted than it will be when we return to more normal work routines.

<sup>27</sup> Oliver Wyman client example

## **REVIEW**

### **Review the cues**

New practices are not innate, but learned. As such, it is important to understand the specific cues which trigger the new behaviors that we have identified as being positive and ideally maintained over the long-term. As lockdowns are rolled back around the world, we should seek to preserve or recreate these same cues in order to maintain the positive behaviors that we might wish to see continuing.

For example, during the lockdown, meeting invites will invariably include a link to an online virtual meeting platform. This creates a very clear trigger to the desired behavior of conducting meetings in a virtual setting. Post-lockdown, organizations should consider how to standardize these cues — for example, by having virtual invites included by default for all meetings to all attendees. Doing so will maintain these cues and indicate to employees that it is acceptable to join a meeting virtually, rather than in person. To ensure that these semi-virtual meetings are highly effective, organizations will need to be careful to ensure that virtual participants are engaged as effectively as those that are physically present, to avoid the risk that the conversation is dominated by physical attendees.

More generally, many firms are now conducting daily, online, start-the-day catch ups for staff, in order to maintain connectivity between colleagues. This is helping to trigger employees' participation in virtual meetings, and also creates a positive social norm to indicate that everyone is engaged in these new practices.

In an area like personal hygiene, cues may relate to the physical workplace once employees return. These cues can be as simple as making sure that hand sanitizers are placed in locations that support the desired behaviors and help trigger the necessary action. This might mean, for example, strategically placing them in restrooms and exits to buildings.

## **REINFORCE AND REPEAT**

### **Maintaining good habits at work**

Organizations should ensure that teams that seek to maintain desired routines feel rewarded for doing so. Behavioral science findings suggest that employees may respond more positively to “intrinsic” rewards rather than “extrinsic”, financial incentives. Intrinsic rewards are non-financial benefits that appeal to an individual's desire to do the right thing and/or feel included or acknowledged, and can be highly effective in situations where economic rewards may be deemed inappropriate. For example, the introduction of purple lapel pins for employees who demonstrated good teamwork at a large IT organization<sup>28</sup> successfully helped to increase team collaboration in a predominantly introverted workforce. Eight employees were issued with the pins to “break the ice” in conversations around team collaboration and then issue new pins to those who demonstrated effective team collaboration. Over 300 pins were issued in the first month.

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<sup>28</sup> Oliver Wyman client

Two years later people still wear their pins and purple pin moments are still called out. In the context of post-COVID practices, targeting the group for rewards, rather than the individual, may help to maintain the sense that everyone is in it together and better support organization-wide uptake of new practices.

The same is true for changing practices on the part of customers, such as the move to cashless payment systems and online ordering. Identifying which of these behaviors are beneficial to the business, and rewarding their continuation, will help to reinforce them over the long-term.

If they are to stick, these habits must be repeated in a consistent context over time. Repetition is what helps to create the automatic link between the situation or context and the behavior that you perform.

This means that, if an organization really wants to embed new practices, it cannot be seen as a one-off drill, but rather, an exercise that will take time to become fully established once the lockdown has fully ended. A key element of this will be ensuring that the cues and routines are maintained in consistent times and places, and that they are embedded throughout an organization.

There are no hard and fast rules as to the specific number of times or length of time that a behavior needs to be repeated for it to become an established practice. But when a routine is repeated in response to the same trigger, it is more likely to embed. Therefore, the key is to maintain the triggers and the routines over time, and to monitor how automatic these new behaviors have become. Although different activities require different lengths of time to effectively embed, Oliver Wyman internal analysis suggests that, in organizational settings, it typically takes around 3 months before we start to see the emergence of a genuine working practice.

## **A CALL TO ACTION FOR ORGANIZATIONS**

As different nations move past what might have been the worst of the pandemic, and a new “normal” life is slowly returning. This is therefore a critical moment for organizations that seek to learn from and embed the lessons of the shutdown in their everyday operations. As consumers and employees return to their previous ways of life, they are making conscious decisions every day about whether to embrace tenuous new habits that were formed under lockdown conditions, or to return to the previous well-established work patterns.

For organizations that saw significant disruption during the COVID-19 lockdown, every day that passes without a concerted effort to acknowledge, assess and activate new practices and routines represents a risk of lost opportunity. As we have described in this paper, these new practices can be embedded relatively quickly if repeated in a consistent context, as part of a consistent routine, in response to a recurring trigger. Once these practices become embedded, they can be difficult — and in some cases, nearly impossible — to break.

Therefore, organizations should prioritize taking action before suboptimal, pre-COVID-19 habits are re-established and become difficult to un-stick. In particular, this action should consist of the following four stages:

### **Recap**

Audit and seek to understand new practices that have been established.

### **Review**

Assess the ways in which these new practices are triggered and performed in day to day contexts.

### **Reinforce**

Identify the positive new practices that are targeted for preservation, and create deliberate, explicit opportunities for individuals to execute these habits.

### **Repeat**

Ensure that these practices can be repeated in a consistent context, with enough frequency to establish them as the long-term “new normal”.

For organizations that have already, or are now beginning to, return to normal — this is an absolute near-term priority and speed of action will be a critical success factor in the coming weeks and months. This opportunity will only remain open for a narrow window at the early stages of post-lockdown operations. For organizations that remain subjected to lockdown or partial operations, now is the time to begin taking stock of new opportunities and to devise a concrete routine formation plan that can be set into motion as soon as restrictions are lifted.



Oliver Wyman is a global leader in management consulting that combines deep industry knowledge with specialized expertise in strategy, operations, risk management, and organization transformation.

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