



Trending Insights

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The CHRO's guide to workforce re-entry

Rethinking the workplace

IBM Institute for
Business Value



Experts on this topic



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With over 30 years' experience leading teams to solve complex operational problems, Charlie Goldwasser is passionate about helping people and organizations think differently and achieve their aspirations. A cross-functional leader and motivator who fosters a collaborative environment, his experience spans multiple industries including automotive, chemicals, consumer products, energy, entertainment, financial services, healthcare, life sciences, metals, retail, technology, and utilities. He is a frequent speaker and writer on issues of leadership and organizational change.

“Everything we do before a pandemic will seem alarmist. Everything we do after a pandemic will seem inadequate. This is the dilemma we face, but it should not stop us from doing what we can to prepare.”

Michael O. Leavitt, former Secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services, in 2007¹

Key takeaways

Reopening is the opportunity to reconsider

Rethink what work really needs to be done where, and how overall workflows can be made smarter.

Data can drive insight—but make sure it's protected

Make data-based decisions for each phase of your reopening, but protect employee data the same way you do customer data—and make sure your HR policies are up to the task.

Reshape your workforce for resilience and adaptability

Earn employee trust by listening and caring for their concerns, then give them the right tools to build a culture in which they can learn, grow, and adapt to changed circumstances.

Crisis mode yields to a different normal

Viewed through the lens of COVID-19, Michael Leavitt's quote from 2007 now seems clairvoyant. The global pandemic has taken too many lives and decimated economies and livelihoods. It has also disrupted traditional thinking about where and how we work. Now, as we emerge from crisis response mode, organizations around the world are “reopening” to a new and very different normal—whether they have been completely shut down or only partially disrupted by COVID-19.

There is much we don't yet know about how our work environments will look and feel when we move beyond this pandemic. One thing is certain: We will not be returning to business as usual. We will be working differently, whether we're in an office building, a retail location, medical facility, factory, farmer's market, or home office.²

Many executives are now preparing the workplace and the workforce for safe operations during a “Wave 1” re-entry, while others are already midstream in that return to work (see Figure 1, “Expected scenarios for IBM's return to workplace by wave”). They all must monitor and protect the physical and mental health of their workers, implement appropriate testing measures, reconfigure facilities, provide protective equipment, and gain support from suppliers and others in the organization's operational ecosystem. CHROs have never been in a more essential position. They must augment their traditional focus on people with equal attention to the technology necessary to accelerate reentry and enable long-term success—the ability of the company to not just survive but thrive in the different normal.

Using data, decide who really needs to work in an office location and who doesn't.

In this special report, we offer three steps for talent leaders to help their organizations emerge stronger by working safe and working smart.

- 1. Look around** as you plan for re-entry: Rethink roles, workflows, teams, and new requirements to enable agility and flexibility for a different normal.
- 2. Look inside** to see how insights from data can help: Review how you collect and protect employee data and use it to monitor your reopening progress; create flexible new policies and practices as needed.
- 3. Look ahead** as you prepare for a new future: Reimagine how you can enable a resilient workforce that is prepared in terms of technical, professional, and personal support and align workforce strategy and capabilities with business priorities.

Look around: Plan a re-entry that enables agility and flexibility

As the voice of the workforce, HR should first define what types of work and roles are needed in the office location—versus which can continue to be performed virtually. Prior to the pandemic, we may have had set ideas on which roles were “essential” to operate in an office. Now is the time to re-examine those perspectives and make recommendations that will enable agility and flexibility for the different normal we are returning to. Using data collected before or during the recent work-from-home period on productivity and engagement, decide who really needs to work in an office location and who doesn't.

Figure 1

Expected scenarios for IBM's return to workplace by wave

Wave 0	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Situation:</i> Onset of COVID-19 cases – Stay-at-home orders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Situation:</i> COVID-19 cases decelerate, flattening the curve – Many jurisdictions require masks – Stay-at-home orders begin to lift with phased economic reopening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Situation:</i> Scaling of testing/contact tracing – Advances in treatment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Situation:</i> Continued improvement in testing/tracing/treatment/healthcare capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Only IBM employees performing essential work onsite if cannot be performed remotely – 95% of IBM employees working from home – Availability of medical benefits enhancement and additional paid time off – Increasingly stringent travel restrictions – March – April 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – IBM protocols: masks required and 2 meters/6 feet of social distancing – Work from home continues for most. IBMers who should experience substantial productivity or innovation benefits on site return. Client-facing professionals return aligned with client readiness to receive them on site – Very stringent travel restrictions – May - June (TBD), local market dependent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – IBM protocols: masks required and 2 meters/6 feet social distancing – Work from home continues for most. Additional IBMers return. Client-facing professionals return aligned with client readiness to receive them on site – Travel restrictions vary based on local conditions – Timing: dependent upon assessment of local conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – IBM protocols: masks required (as needed) and 2 meters/6 feet social distancing – Most IBMers return. Some work on site regularly; others remain remote, only returning as needed – Client-facing professionals return aligned with client readiness to receive them on site – Increased flexibility for travel – Timing: dependent upon assessment of local conditions

HR leaders now have a unique opportunity to accelerate the implementation of technology-enabled work process improvements as offices reopen (see sidebar on page 4, “Questions to ask when streamlining work”). As Josh Bersin notes in his article, *The big reset: Making sense of the Coronavirus*, leaders now have the right—and the mandate—to fix things. He calls it “doing better with less.”³

Leaders should use this period of exploration to look for opportunities to automate wherever possible, which can reduce the amount of work that needs to be done on-site and also keep human workers safe.⁴ As examples, Walmart is now deploying robots to scrub floors, and fast-food chain McDonald’s has begun testing robotic arms for cooking or serving, in order to maintain physical distancing.⁵

They should also examine what data they’ll need to collect to meet the new requirements of a safe workplace, how they will collect it, and the implications this has for their HR policies and privacy concerns. And now is the time to begin exploring how to tap artificial intelligence (AI) to keep the returning workforce informed, prepared and protected with personalized, meaningful updates.

Who should return?

You’ll want to be sure to evaluate the following as part of your decision process of which locations can reopen and to what extent:

- Which activities need to be performed in a facility
- Which employees possess the right skills to make them candidates for returning to an office location
- Opportunities to combine roles
- Insights into which teams and employees are ready and willing to come back
- The potential impact of all these dramatic changes on your workforce, customers, and the organization’s brand.

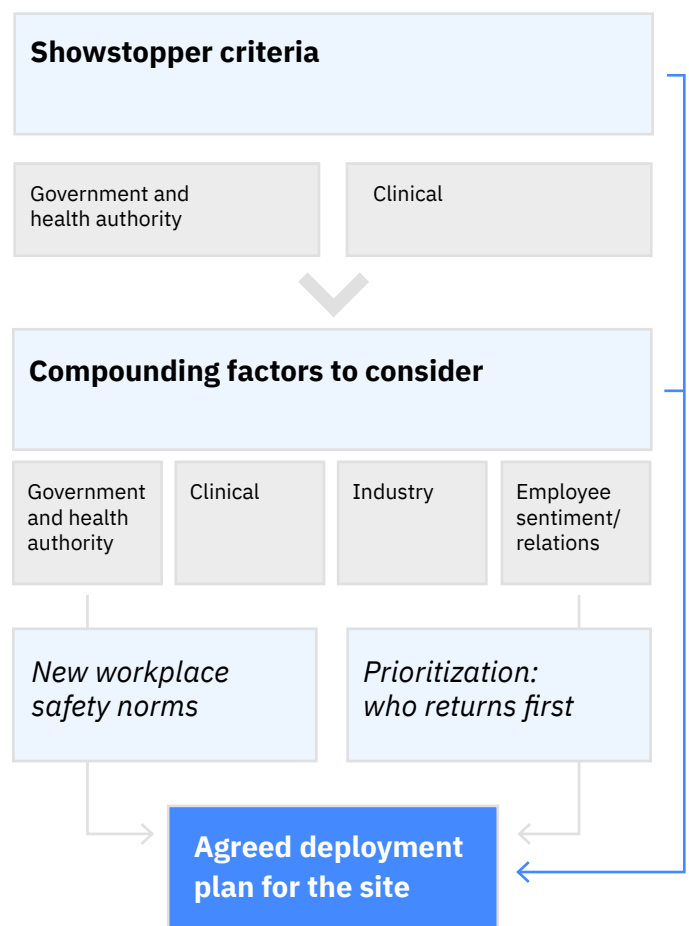
Before making final decisions, consider any external guidance on reopening, including governmental distancing guidelines, health and safety protocols, and local restrictions that may further influence how and when certain employees return. Some facilities may need to reduce their capacity usage, vulnerable employees may have special requirements, and many may be affected by school and daycare shutdowns (see Figure 2, “Site planning for waves of return to work”).

CHROs and their teams must also pay close attention to new roles that surfaced rapidly during the crisis. These new jobs may need to be redefined for the long term to better align with company policies, and to allow more structured resourcing in the future.

Consider the telehealth sector in Canada, which—in a very short timeframe—saw a massive increase in the hiring of new clinicians, such as social workers.⁶ With telemedicine gaining rapid acceptance during the pandemic, it’s likely to remain a viable healthcare option, even when physicians’ offices reopen. CHROs in that field will play an important role in guiding how telemedicine evolves, which capabilities are persistent and need to scale up, and which were primarily needed during crisis response mode.

Figure 2

Site planning for waves of return to work



Questions to ask when streamlining work

- Which work activities and processes have been significantly altered as a result of the pandemic?
- Are the changes good, bad, or neutral? How can you accelerate scaling the good and mitigate the bad?
- What improvements from remote work should become permanent?
- How have work priorities shifted? What's more important now, and what now has less value to the business?

Look inside: Properly protect data for insights on reopening

Talent leaders can help minimize health risk to individuals during reopening by bringing the right employee and HR data to inform executive decisions. They can also monitor insights about worker health and safety while remaining the chief custodians of employee privacy and security. CHROs, therefore, must be alert to any new ways in which employee personal and health data is being collected, tracked, and used.

Of course, protecting that information is only part of the responsibility. Maintaining their employees' trust is also critical. In the US, only one in four employees say they trust their employers to make informed and ethical decisions about returning to the workplace that balance economic implications with individual health and well-being.⁷

Employees also need to know how their personally identifiable information (PII) is being collected and protected by the organization. So HR leaders will have to be sure to provide satisfying answers to natural employee questions, such as what personal information is being gathered from my online activity, smart facility sensors, mobile devices, and entry/exit screening programs? How is that data being used? How is my privacy being protected?

One way to protect and support employees and earn their trust is to use a virtual command center to track, trace, and provide resources on medical and social company benefits. Many may also choose a secure and privately enabled opt-in model that allows employees to have a voice in how their data is used.

Valuable insights from data

Once CHROs and other executives have determined how data will be collected and protected, they should use it to bring robust and detailed information to executive discussions on returning to the workplace. Traditional, time-boxed data sources are no longer good enough—leaders should tap newer technologies that enable real-time collection and reporting.

CHROs will need to balance the pressures of the enterprise to return to productivity with the expectations of the employees to feel comfortable and safe in returning at all.

AI acting on real-time data can offer insights on workforce readiness, local outbreak status, contact tracing efforts, and public health recommendations that can be turned into action quickly.

HR should work with IT to develop an on-demand dashboard that displays all of these important topics, using both internal and external data across the enterprise ecosystem. That dashboard can help leaders make informed decisions about worker health and safety, culture shifts, or role changes.

In addition to monitoring employee sentiment and productivity, new metrics will help companies maintain an adequate supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks and hand sanitizer, where required. Locally, HR should also monitor data regarding facility cleaning routines, implementation and upkeep of workplace distancing tools like physical barriers and ventilation adjustments, and business partner entry agreements.

Look inside: Revamp policies and practices for the different normal

HR executives have already been moving quickly to modify and sometimes even create new policies on the fly to address COVID-19 realities. For most organizations, existing HR policies have undergone inspection and significant revision. For instance, many expanded plans for sick or compassionate leave to support the health of front-line workers. Others had to quickly enable rapid location shutdowns, support remote working, or manage mass furloughs.

As companies reopen, HR will be heavily involved in recommending and implementing new policies and procedures that establish and maintain safe working environments. CHROs will need to balance the pressures of the enterprise to return to productivity with the expectations of the employees to feel comfortable and safe in returning at all. Indeed, when asked what they believe employers should have in place in order to return to normal work operations, many feel strongly that their employers should take broad and active measures to protect them from exposure to the virus, and provide flexibility for them to support their mental health and well-being.⁸

Adding to the challenge, protocols will likely vary widely across geographies, business units, and even company sites. HR will have to comply with regulatory requirements at national, regional and local levels that may change rapidly or over time. HR leaders should also work with business and line leaders to review and refine requirements for partners and vendors who access the workplace.

Then, as the transition to this different normal continues, CHROs and regional HR leaders should expect to repeat this exercise many times, across the spectrum of the HR function. Benefits, leaves, work arrangements, space allocation, hiring, and travel are all candidates for review, informed by data and guided by company culture.

Look ahead: A resilient workforce enables a resilient business

The impact of COVID-19 on employees will be long-lasting. Employees who continue to work remotely may feel isolated, while others must balance work and childcare due to school and daycare closures. Most know someone who has had compromised health or experienced a loss, and many report their primary concern is their own safety and that of their family.⁹ Indeed, a recent survey by HR Executive Online revealed that 69 percent of employees say this is the most stressful time of their careers.¹⁰

Of concern, however, is a disconnect between employees and their employers. Research indicates only 14 percent of employers are worried about mental health. And in a recent roundtable of CHROs led by IBM and Josh Bersin, participants cited the wellness and mental health of employees as the number one concern they hadn't yet determined how to address.

Hema: Targeted training and flexible staffing¹¹

In China, when Alibaba's grocery store retail chain Hema faced massive workforce shortages during the pandemic, it introduced an innovative employee-sharing program that could provide work to thousands of out-of-work employees. With targeted training and well-considered job placement, Hema says it's hired 3,000 new workers from 40 different companies. Among the organizations who benefited: restaurant chains and catering companies that were able to lower their labor costs by loaning out their workers temporarily.

For re-entry efforts to be successful and sustainable, it's imperative that CHROs and their peers across the C-suite prioritize the well-being of the workforce throughout the transition period and beyond. For many organizations, this means establishing or enhancing wellness and assistance programs for both remote and returning workers. Most CHROs will have data on their specific workforce issues that can be invaluable in determining which support programs will have the most value as we move through pandemic recovery.

For example, examine what enhancements can be made to employee assistance programs (EAPs) to cover issues for both on-site and remote staff. Making changes based on what employees need most during this particular time in recovery can help them cope with the stresses of ongoing disruption and will help build trust in the organization.

Of course, it will be critical that the return to work also quickly serves the most immediate needs of the business. The company may face long-term cost issues, need to explore and expand new growth opportunities, and revive markets previously relied on that have suffered. So the look to the future also includes aligning workgroups and skills with business strategy for the initial phases of return and for the return to growth that the company anticipates.

Building workforce agility

As worksites reopen, leaders should focus on building flexibility and resilience. This involves two critical components. First, apply the right technologies to support rapid and clear communication, skills building, and expertise sharing across the enterprise.

Pre-pandemic, some organizations had already begun shifting their training and skills building programs to become digital and highly personalized. Now, as they reevaluate learning opportunities deployed broadly across a physical and remote enterprise, those virtual, immersive experiences are more important than ever. HR leaders must consider how employees will continue to gain skills during the transition back to the workplace and into the future (see sidebar on page 6, "Hema: Targeted training and flexible staffing"). On-demand training that covers technical skills, professional development, and personal support can enable agility and resilience.

CHROs will be writing the book on what the workforce of the future will look like.

But technology alone is insufficient. True business resiliency requires a culture that supports and encourages it, an adaptable workforce culture suited for an entirely new business landscape. Broadly applying agile methods and other new ways of working across the organization helps stimulate such a culture. It also requires an agile leadership that encourages experimentation, iteration and rapid response to changing marketplace needs.

Second, since culture emerges from the beliefs, values, and behaviors of an organization, leaders will want to reexamine them—with the full involvement of employees—in the light of the new need for resilience and adaptability.

Given the rate at which employees will have to manage ongoing change as organizations begin to reopen office locations, leaders also need fresh thinking on how best to keep employees informed and up-to-date. Open and transparent two-way communication with employees, with viable opportunities to provide feedback, is more essential than ever. Leaders need to remain continually aware of how their people are doing.

Beyond personal connections, multi-channel methods can help reach the entire workforce. Pulse surveys and monitoring social media channels can help assess employee sentiment to address issues as they arise. Virtual assistants can help deliver the latest workplace information any time of the day or night easily and quickly, while simultaneously easing the volume of calls into contact centers.

The road ahead

CHROs face the challenges-and opportunities—of their careers in these unprecedented times. Their companies need them as never before to help chart a path back to growth, with a workforce kept safe and productive in remarkable new circumstances. And employees need them so they can feel safe, valued and protected—and be productive and adaptable. But CHROs also have the rare opportunity—and mandate—to help the company rethink how it operates, how work flows, and how it serves its customers. Above all, CHROs right now will be writing the book on what the workforce of the future will look like.

Look at your lists

Starting on the next page, we offer practical checklists to use in planning your Wave 1 workforce activities. Used by IBM, they may also help your organization as you think through the various important aspects associated with preparing your workforce for whatever comes next.

Readiness checklist: Wave 1

Step 1: Is your site ready to open?

Government and health authority	Comments
<p><i>Critical showstoppers</i></p> <p>Has the local, regional, state, and/or national government canceled mandatory “stay home” orders previously in effect? If so, when? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Has the government allowed businesses to reopen their premises? Is it only a subset or all businesses? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p><i>Additional questions</i></p> <p>Does your location have a dependency on public transportation? If so, are transportation restrictions still in effect, such as public transportation (trains, subways, buses)? If so, what temporary actions need to be deployed to get IBMers to their work location, if any? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Are local schools, camps, daycares or childcare closed or impacted? If so, what temporary actions need to be deployed to enable IBMers to be able to return to their work location, if any? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Does the local, regional, state, and/or national government or health authority require advance approval of “return to work” by location? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Does the local, regional, state, and/or national government or health authority require health screening or PPE (e.g. temperature checks, masks)? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Does IBM have any reporting requirements to the local, regional, state, and/or national government or health authority? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Clinical</p> <p>Doubling rate: Are the number of confirmed cases doubling in 15 days or more (i.e., every 15 days or less frequently)? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Fatality: Are the number of new daily deaths below 100 in the relevant area (e.g., in a small country, or in a state/province within a larger country)? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	

Readiness checklist: Wave 1

Step 1 (continued): Is your site ready to open?

Industry	Comments
<p>Are other local companies (including clients) in the region returning to work? If so, who?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Are IBM's clients served by the region/site requesting in-person meetings?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Are other local companies that are co-located with IBM offices returning to work? If so, are the building and co-located companies following appropriate safety norms in common areas (e.g., elevators)?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Employee sentiment and employee relations</p>	
<p>What has the impact of COVID-19 been to the local IBM population/community?</p>	
<p>What is employee sentiment about continuing to work from home vs return to the workplace? e.g. are employees expressing a need to get back to the workplace, or concerns about doing so (e.g., health concerns, physical safety concerns, family care concerns)?</p>	
<p>In collaboration with Labor Relations, have you ensured that the return to work plans and standards are handled as required by local labor processes (e.g. with employee representatives, works councils)? Provide more detail.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Does your location have a dependency on public transportation? If so, are transportation restrictions still in effect, such as public transportation (trains, subways, buses)? What government or local actions can be deployed to ensure employees are and feel safe? (Input from CMT, Government & Regulatory Affairs) Provide more detail.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p>Are the hours of operation for local, essential merchants (e.g. grocery stores, pharmacies) back to normal or will IBMers have difficulty fulfilling their needs if they return to work? (Input from CMT, Government & Regulatory Affairs) Provide more detail.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	

Readiness checklist: Wave 1

Step 2: What do you need to keep employees safe at your site?

Health screening standards	Comments
Has the site deployed at-home health self-screening to returning employees? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
If on-site screening is required, does site have trained screeners, thermometers and mask supply for screeners? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Has a visitor screening process been set up? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Does site have 30 days of masks available upfront and access to ongoing 30-day supply? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Social distancing measures	
<i>Have social distancing guidelines for site have been adhered to, including the following?</i>	
Agile desks <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Meeting rooms <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Collaborative seating <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Common areas <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Building services	
<i>Have building services been upgraded, including:</i>	
Facility management <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Cleaning services <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Hygiene <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Food safety <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Ventilation <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Transport <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Communications and change management	
Are communication plans and roll out to employees on new health and safety protocols completed? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

Readiness checklist: Wave 1

Step 3: Have you determined who needs to be returning in Wave 1?

IBMers returning to IBM Site	Comments
Will the individual/teams be materially more effective collaborating in the workplace while maintaining social distancing and PPE norms or are teams better off collaborating on WebEx/Mural/Slack/Box? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Why is this the case (e.g. access to IT infrastructure, equipment, network capacity)? How is it measured (e.g. productivity)?	
How important is the increase in effectiveness from returning to the workplace on 2Q outcomes (e.g. revenue, signings)? Why does the individual/team need to return now?	
What is the business impact if the individual/team continues to work virtually?	

IBMers returning to client sites Have IBM account leaders reviewed the IBM Health/Safety protocols with their client counterpart(s)? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Has the need/benefit for IBMers to return to the client site been assessed, using the questions outlined in the practical guide? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Has an agreement been made with the client on what data and information IBM will/will not share with clients? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Has an agreement been made with the client on permitting IBM employees to opt out of returning to the client site in case of individual health considerations? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

Related IBM reports

“Reworking work: IBM’s post-pandemic workforce strategy”

There is much we don’t yet know about the future work environment as we move through and beyond this pandemic; here is IBM’s plan.

<https://www.ibm.com/blogs/policy/reworking-work>

“Beyond the Lockdown: How IBM is planning to enable safety and productivity in the workplace”

At IBM, we have had the privilege of enabling many employees in their time of need, while planning for what lies ahead for our clients and our own teams.

<https://www.ibm.com/downloads/cas/LRDOMOYJ>

“COVID-19 Action Guide: Beyond the Great Lockdown”

Focusing on business imperatives can help organizations build strategies to address new challenges in the wake of COVID-19. This special report provides seven key imperatives that will be useful for executive teams.

<https://www.ibm.com/downloads/cas/BMWXZBRX>

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