

The business of the future: distributed, diverse and digital first.

2020 Future of Work research.

We commissioned two rounds of research by Longitude, an FT company, to identify trends in the future of work, innovation and technology. In total, over 1,100 executives from a wide range of industries across Europe, the Americas, and Asia Pacific responded. These surveys offer a rare opportunity to understand attitudes toward the Future of Work before the COVID-19 pandemic, how those plans fared as businesses faced restrictions and the impact on strategy for the future.

As part of this research we created a Future of Work Index which scores companies on their preparedness. The top 20% of companies in the index, we call the Pioneers, had seen significantly greater growth over the previous three years and were much more positive about the future. This series of blogs look at the differences between this group and the bottom 20%, the Late-movers, on a wide range of factors, including technology priorities, leadership and talent management.

When we began our research at the start of 2020, we expected to find that the workforce trends that we had seen rise over the last decade – such as remote working, diversity and the gig economy – were accelerating. Little did we know how rapid that acceleration would become over the next few months.

After completing a second survey in May, we found that the COVID-19 pandemic had forced the hand of many enterprises. Working practices that they had previously been trialling or adopting on a limited basis, were deployed on a widespread scale. The roadblocks that once held back new ways of working – budget constraints, concerns about the customer, user acceptance – vanished almost overnight. Necessity drove rapid adoption of everything from remote working to two-factor authentication, ecommerce to new working hours.

Adopting these new ways of working may not have been planned or even welcomed by many. But it has provided us with a glimpse of the business of the future. One that is distributed, diverse and digital first.

Distributed

The crisis may have allowed many to fulfil their dream of working in their pyjamas, but remote working was a trend long before COVID-19. In our first survey, a third (34%) of respondents said that their staff would mainly work remotely in the future. But to highlight just how much the lockdown had changed things, over two-thirds (68%) of those that answered our second survey said that more of their staff would work from home than before the pandemic.

As companies scrambled to keep their teams working during the COVID-19 crisis, many discovered that they were ill-prepared for the new arrangements. Nearly half (42%) of respondents said their networks had been unable to support a rapid, large-scale shift to home working. And about three-quarters (74%) said the crisis had shown the importance of enhancing their remote-working capabilities.

Most respondents had already begun to protect themselves from this happening again. Nearly two-thirds (62%) said they planned to boost investment in core network technologies once the effects of the crisis had eased. Over half also expected to spend more on 5G.

Establishing a flexible workforce that can work from anywhere has benefits away from a pandemic too – in terms of both agility and exploiting new opportunities. Two-thirds (68%) of respondents to our second survey said the ability to reallocate employees to where their skills were most needed was more integral to their business strategies since the crisis. And 70% said the same of being able to respond rapidly to new market opportunities.

More from our Future of Work series.

Research report



Read the full Future of Work report for more details of this research. [Find out more](#)

Webinar series



Watch our series of Future of Work webinars. [Find out more](#)

Diverse

A team of people all from the same background and with similar experiences can lead to a very blinkered view of the world. And that's not the best recipe for innovation.

The leading organisations recognise this – 80% of respondents felt that workforce diversity was important to the success of their business strategies. The pandemic seemingly increased this importance in the mind of business leaders. Nearly two-thirds (60%) of respondents felt the ability to create business advantage from greater workforce diversity was more important than before the COVID-19 crisis began.

But there's another kind of diversity too. Prior to lockdown, organisations expected part-time staff to account for an average of 25% of their future workforce and contract workers would account for an average of 22%. But our later survey revealed that around half (49%) of respondents expected to participate more actively in the gig economy after the pandemic in order to gain quick access to part-time and temporary workers.

The gig economy has negative connotations for many, and there are certainly many examples of abuse. But there are members of the workforce that like the flexibility it offers. Three-quarters of respondents said that they would strive to improve the wellbeing of employees in the future. If that philosophy, along with equality and fair conditions, is applied to this group then this model can be a net positive for both employer and worker.

Digital first

Many of the changes that we have seen over the COVID-19 pandemic and expect to see continue after it are far from new. The wheels of change were already in motion well before the crisis. But many businesses have found some positives in adversity and learnt three things: more flexible working can work; they weren't as resilient as they'd thought; the ability to scale – both up and down, is key to taking disruption in your stride.

Digital transformation is key to addressing all of these challenges. Even senior leaders that were resistant to switching to new working models have had to accept that it can work. But systems and processes have to adapt to make these new ways a part of how things are done long term. To operationalise the changes that companies have had to adopt. Like the user that thinks that their automated backup is all fine, until they need to restore something, many businesses realise that their systems and even their business models weren't as resilient as they'd thought. This has forced many to reconsider. Over three fifths (61%) of respondents said the crisis had highlighted weaknesses in their business strategy and operations.

For years, companies have been trying to build infrastructure that could scale as their business does. But what most had in mind was networks and compute resources that could grow as their business did. During the pandemic, many were faced with the challenge of scaling down resources to save money. Some wanted to completely repurpose their networks – as offices lay empty and the number of remote workers soared. Again, many found that they weren't in as good a position as they'd thought.

The pandemic has driven the change. But many organisations are realising that the benefits of changing the way they work – instilling agility, diversity and digital capabilities – can be long-lasting, and put them in better shape for the future.

Read our Future of Work report to find out more about how organisations have adapted their workforces in 2020 and are now preparing for what comes next.