



Executive Networks



# Back2Better Executive Summary

How the Chief HR Officers of the World's Largest  
Companies are Preparing for the Post-COVID Era



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During the Spring and Summer of 2020, Executive Networks gathered the top Human Resources leaders from some of the world's largest companies to build the foundation for a better tomorrow. Under the banner of Back2Better, a term coined by Roche's Chief People Officer and study contributor Cris Wilbur, and with noted Future of Work researcher Dr. John Boudreau at the helm, a group of industry-diverse senior human resources leaders of very large, global organizations formed the Back2Better Steering Committee.

Employing the Delphi technique, Boudreau and Executive Networks CEO Mike Dulworth led a series of conversations among Steering Committee members, and then shared the output with the 40 other Chief Human Resources Officers of large global companies who make up the membership of Executive Networks' Human Resources Roundtable Group. Their input from June, July and August of 2020 forms much of the data underpinning the report summarized herein.

[Click here for the Back2Better September 2020 white paper.](#)

The Back2Better initiative continues in the Fall of 2020 with a comprehensive survey of the Global 1000 based on the five sections of this paper and a [year-long weekly webinar series](#) led by [Thinkers50](#) featuring top business, leadership and management thought-leaders weighing in on their vision of Back2Better.

#### **Members of the Back2Better Steering Committee:**

**Fiona Cicconi, EVP, HR,  
AstraZeneca**

**Michael Fraccaro, Chief People  
Officer, Mastercard**

**Emma Hardaker-Jones, Group  
HR Director, Legal & General**

**Hein Knaapen, Executive  
Director, EN; former CHRO, ING**

**Mauricio Machado, VP, Total  
Rewards, Cargill**

**Amanda Manzoni, CHRO, Ansell**

**Ronald Shellekens, EVP & CHRO,  
PepsiCo**

**Cris Wilbur, Chief People Officer,  
Roche**

**"We've learned in this crisis that it was often artificial boundaries and hierarchy that restrained us from doing our best work."**

***Cris Wilbur, CHRO, Roche***



***Dr. John Boudreau***



***Mike Dulworth***



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# Key questions and themes

CHROs are the heroes of the COVID crisis just as CFOs were the heroes of last decade's financial crisis. CHROs report days filled with valuable tasks aimed at managing the immediate crisis.

Yet, as Boudreau points out in the [report](#), there is a paradox: It is precisely during the crisis that HR must actively identify how to harvest today's excitement, capitalize on the attention and authority that HR has earned and use that excitement, attention and authority to create what will sustain beyond the crisis. Now is when HR can draw attention to the key lessons and insist that the organization establish the frameworks, values, decision rules and working relationships that will allow today's lessons to be sustained.

Boudreau focused his research with the study's CHRO on four central questions:

- 1. What are the new and important lessons being learned and experienced now, due to the crisis?**

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- 2. Which of those lessons should sustain after the crisis?**

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- 3. Which sustainable lessons will be challenging due to inertia, ignorance, or other factors that push to snap back to before ... or worse?**

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- 4. For the challenging lessons, what are the pivotal and essential actions to take now, while the crisis provides motivation, attention and awareness, to avoid missing the window for change?**

The questions were applied to the five themes of the report: **The Pandemic and the Economy, The Organization of the Future, Leadership of the Future, Workplace & Work of the Future and The Worker of the Future.**

The CHRO research cohort developed metaphors such as “identifying the new and powerful green shoots that have begun to grow through the sunlight and environment of this crisis and avoid trampling them in our rush to return to normal.” And the idea of “soft realities,” or “organizational changes forced by COVID that have produced positive outcomes but will require real effort to maintain post-COVID.”

# The Pandemic and the Economy

The traditional measures and concepts of organizational success were insufficient to prepare many organizations for this crisis, yet it will be tempting to return to those metrics once the crisis has passed. Participating CHROs repeatedly cited the danger of attempting to rebuild what cannot be rebuilt, or to emphasize cost-cutting to boost short-term returns.

For the Back2Better CHROs, outlooks vary along industry lines. The path of the post-pandemic recovery remains as unknowable as COVID-19's trajectory into 2021. "Public sentiment continues to prioritize health and wellbeing over economic recovery," said a U.K.-based Global CHRO. The industries most impacted by the crisis will each have their own recovery trajectories, some leading the return to growth while others lag behind with permanent damage.

A financial services chief human resources officer encapsulated the questions he and his peers raised about COVID-19 and the economy: "Will we enter an extended recession with increased income inequality? Or will the economy bounce back quickly as governments and companies collaborate for the greater good? Will governments gain trust and credibility as they respond to the crisis? Or will they become more isolationist as they attempt to control the crisis within their own borders? And what will high levels of global unemployment mean for future growth?"

*We're all in the same storm, but we're clearly not all in the same boat.*

**- North America-based Manufacturing CHRO**

**"As leaders in large organizations we have a social responsibility to get the economy going and to make it sustainable in light of future pandemics. We cannot rely on governments to do this for us. We have watched governments struggle to make good decisions to outline a path for economic recovery."**

*Europe-based  
Financial Industry  
CHRO*



## Leadership of the Future

It certainly was not obvious prior, but the act of forcing senior leaders to stay away from workers has brought the two parties closer together.

“Leadership is coming across as more connected and authentic than it was in the past and this is something we want to carry forward,” explained a financial services CHRO based in North America.

“Public access to leadership has completely flattened the social construct of the organization,” he said.

**“People will judge companies by their leaders’ decisions during the COVID-19 crisis.”**

**Europe-based Food Company**

Back2Better CHROs uniformly report that webcam meetings, informal town halls and other means of frequent, direct and open communication have humanized senior leaders—revealing them as parents, pet-owners and “normal people” who are also worried that their loved ones will be exposed to COVID-19. [The report](#) details the study's CHRO's conclusions on the rising importance of line leaders, new social contracts, “wartime” vs. “peacetime” leadership and the changing employee value proposition.

## Work & Workplace of the Future

A global financial services organization embarked upon a workplace transformation project in late 2019 focused on activity-based facility design. Original plans called for up to a third of the company’s workers to move to flexible working arrangements. Proposals being discussed now have revised that number to 75%. As the company's CHRO put it, “We’ve covered five years worth of trends in a few months. We’ve proven we can work effectively in a flexible environment.”

Offices being re-configured now for safety and social distancing will likely be re-configured again once the COVID-19 risk subsides, but in new ways that enhance those activities best accomplished by groups of people working together.

The home office versus factory floor divide predates the pandemic, but the contrasts are “sharper now,” reports a European-based manufacturing CHRO. Office space remains important and workers desire to be back among colleagues as well as their clients. Colleagues miss the impromptu corridor conversations that spark collaboration. Companies still value their physical spaces as catalysts of culture and innovation and conductors of client engagement.



## The Worker of the Future

When office workers went remote, some leaders feared that productivity would plummet. The distractions of home would wreak havoc on workdays, they thought. Yet, many companies say productivity has remained at pre-pandemic levels or even improved. Without commutes, restaurant lunches or coffees breaks, many workers—especially those without childcare obligations—are getting more done.

While higher unemployment likely means more contractors and gig workers in some industries, the CHROs in the Back2Better research cohort predict that workers will have less appetite for such roles than before—especially in markets where healthcare is tied to employment. They anticipate that this will give well-run, stable companies new opportunities to recruit talent that would have previously gone to start-ups or struck out on their own.

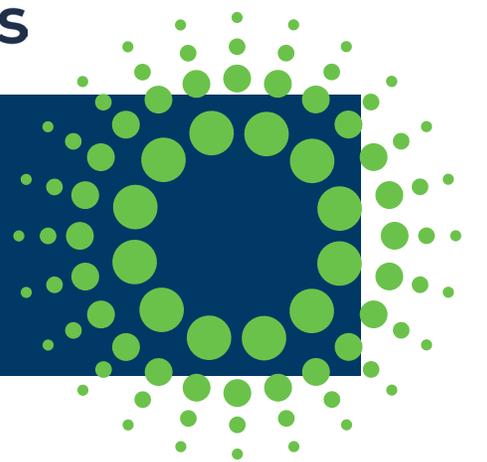
The study's CHROs believe that leaders should capitalize on the crisis-induced awareness of the full humanity of the workforce to institutionalize systems that take into account that more holistic view of the worker.

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As HR executive Victoria Livingstone (HSBC, Vodafone, Cisco) puts it in her conclusion in the full report, it is clear that even once the virus is eliminated, the economy and the nature of work will never go back to “normal.” Instead, there will be a series of new “normal” contexts that will continue to evolve at pace.

To achieve a future that truly is Back2Better, HR leaders must work collectively to ensure that today’s lessons are sustained. This will require strong leadership from CHROs and buy in from their c-suite peers. Moreover, CHROs and other HR leaders must dedicate the time to collaborate beyond their organizations’ walls, learn from peers across industries, share the lessons they are sustaining and how they are doing so. [To access the Back2Better White Paper, click here.](#)

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