

FEATURE

How to Build Workforce Resilience Before the Next Crisis Hits

August 5, 2025 | Nancy Mann Jackson



After weathering the COVID-19 pandemic, continuous change has become the new normal for most workplaces. Seven in 10 employees (72%) reported that their organization has gone through disruption in the past year, according to [Gallup - \(https://www.gallup.com/workplace/657629/post-pandemic-workplace-experiment-continues.aspx\)](https://www.gallup.com/workplace/657629/post-pandemic-workplace-experiment-continues.aspx).

Despite having recent history with managing a crisis, many workplaces are unprepared to face another one. In a 2024 [survey - \(https://www.fusionrm.com/blogs/american-and-international-companies-preparing-for-emergencies/#:~:text=In%20America%2C%20most%20organizations%20have,potential%20tech%20failure%20\(50%25\).\)](https://www.fusionrm.com/blogs/american-and-international-companies-preparing-for-emergencies/#:~:text=In%20America%2C%20most%20organizations%20have,potential%20tech%20failure%20(50%25).) from risk management firm Fusion of 1,000 employees around the world, 28% of U.S. employees and 23% of international employees said their employers are not prepared for another disruption. When asked about their company's biggest weaknesses in crisis preparation, employees ranked the top three weaknesses as:

- Inadequate training for staff (29%).
- Insufficient communication during a crisis (26%).
- Low awareness or buy-in from employees (25%).

As natural disasters become more common, economic and geopolitical uncertainty continues, and [public health concerns persist - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/benefits-compensation/covid-flu-surge-2024-how-should-employers-respond\)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/benefits-compensation/covid-flu-surge-2024-how-should-employers-respond), organizational leaders can't afford to become complacent. Rather than assuming the pandemic was a once-in-a-lifetime event and attempting to return to business as usual, workplace leaders should instead consider the lessons learned and build responsive strategies to become better prepared for the next crisis. Experts said having an [emergency management plan - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/managing-emergency-disaster\)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/managing-emergency-disaster) in place in case of another pandemic can also soften the blow of other kinds of disasters.

“Flexibility can’t just be a buzzword,” said Leslie Bostic, senior vice president of human resources at insurance company Amalgamated Life. “Organizations talk often about being nimble, but the pandemic proved that it’s not enough to say it, you have to live it.”

In early 2020, as COVID-19 spread rapidly around the world, life changed drastically, perhaps nowhere more than at work. The pandemic was a global stress test that revealed deep weaknesses in workforce strategy. It exposed brittle workforce systems, rigid hierarchies, underdeveloped communication protocols, and a lack of adaptability in people practices. But it also forced innovation at speed: Remote work, flexible scheduling, mental health support, and real-time upskilling all became mission-critical. The [World Health Organization - \(https://www.who.int/news/item/05-02-2025-the-changing-face-of-pandemic-risk-how-we-need-to-adapt-protect-and-connect\)](https://www.who.int/news/item/05-02-2025-the-changing-face-of-pandemic-risk-how-we-need-to-adapt-protect-and-connect) warned that preparedness for another pandemic is critical, and now, leaders must apply those hard-won lessons to build a more resilient, responsive organization.

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Pandemic Revelations

The pandemic exposed the fact that most organizations lacked the infrastructure, technology, leadership skills and workplace policies to flexibly adapt at speed. Many workplaces had limited or nonexistent crisis management plans, “which led organizations to be more reactive and slower to respond to employee needs,” said Kimerle Campbell, director of people and change at consulting firm Protiviti.

Infrastructure gaps were immediate. For many organizations, there was no plan for maintaining operations without workers being in the same physical space. That led to life-threatening conditions for some essential workers and warehouse and manufacturing employees, as well as difficult transitions for those eligible to work remotely. When a worker responsible for a critical function was sick or inaccessible, many organizations did not have backups to cover for them.

“While business continuity plans were in place, like backup office sites where employees could relocate, those plans assumed [they were] working from other corporate locations, not from home,” Bostic said. “There was no real infrastructure to support remote work at scale, and that proved particularly challenging for functions that relied heavily on paper-intensive processes.”

Technology strategies were misaligned. Workplaces were widely unprepared for the logistics of a dispersed workforce. In some organizations, running payroll, invoicing customers, and handling other tasks that could have been managed safely from a distance required in-person work due to a lack of access to tools and systems. Most organizations’ tech “strategy was built around physical workspaces, shared infrastructure, and in-person continuity, not decentralized, home-based setups,” Bostic said. That inadequate technology limited employees’ ability to work efficiently in new remote locations and to get the employee services they needed when working onsite.

Rigid policies compounded the problem. The pandemic also revealed a lack of [flexible work policies - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/managing-flexible-work-arrangements\)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/managing-flexible-work-arrangements). Inflexible or inadequate paid-sick-leave policies forced essential workers to choose between going to work sick — potentially putting others in danger — or losing income. Organizations that had rigid policies and a lack of flexible work options had more difficulty shifting to new ways of working during the pandemic, and that led to the inconsistent application of policies, Campbell said.

Leadership readiness was lacking. Prior to the pandemic, office environments, C-suite leaders, and physical branding embodied the company in the eyes of most employees. When office-based employees switched to remote work, managers became the focal point. It became clear that organizations had not focused on developing managers, who “became the face of most companies to their employees,” Campbell continued.

Managers may not have been prepared for the spotlight, but they were abruptly elevated to the role of the [employer's voice, brand, and culture in action - \(https://www.shrm.org/enterprise-solutions/insights/how-empowered-managers-build-stronger-workplace-cultures\)](https://www.shrm.org/enterprise-solutions/insights/how-empowered-managers-build-stronger-workplace-cultures).

Five years after the pandemic, most workplaces are still grappling with the new normal. For example, a March 2025 [Gallup - \(https://www.gallup.com/workplace/657629/post-pandemic-workplace-experiment-continues.aspx\)](https://www.gallup.com/workplace/657629/post-pandemic-workplace-experiment-continues.aspx) poll showed that employee engagement plummeted during and after the pandemic, hitting a 10-year low in 2024.

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Beyond Functional Frustrations

In addition to the operational challenges of a widespread crisis, the pandemic also led to emotional and cultural fallout. The rigid organizational structures, fragile communications, and neglected well-being of the pre-pandemic status quo left workforces unprepared and disengaged. Companies that had no crisis management frameworks were forced to reactively address challenges posed by the pandemic, Campbell said.

Most employees were either thrust into remote work or into operating under more stressful conditions as essential onsite personnel. Many organizations underestimated the long-term effects of these changes, failing to implement strategies that would foster collaboration and engagement.

“Employees working remotely often felt disconnected from their teams and the company culture,” Campbell said.

Organizations scrambled to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, many figuring it out along the way.

“With so much focus on logistics and systems, employee wellness took a back seat, especially early on,” Bostic said. “Leadership expected the disruption to be short-lived, but once it dragged on, there was less bandwidth to address how people were actually doing. Concerns about employee safety and isolation emerged, including everything from team members that couldn’t be reached to possible domestic concerns. Remote work blurred lines between professional and personal life. Suddenly, employers were exposed to household dynamics they had no precedent for addressing.”

Employee [mental health - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/shrm-research-covid-19-takes-toll-employees-mental-well \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/shrm-research-covid-19-takes-toll-employees-mental-well) and well-being flagged during the pandemic, and many employers struggled to maintain engagement.

“Employees faced heightened stress, burnout, and emotional fatigue due to the lack of support systems,” Campbell said. “For organizations that were less effective in responding quickly to changes needed, [pandemic challenges] resulted in a lack of trust in leadership.”

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Lessons Learned

The challenges of operating effectively during the pandemic showed that resilience must be built into workforce design, not bolted on in crisis. “The pandemic was a defining moment that tested every organization’s resilience,” said Scott Redfearn, executive vice president of global human resources at Protiviti. “It reaffirmed the importance of leading with both agility and empathy.”

The Need for Connection

One of the most enduring lessons of the pandemic was “the power of connection,” Redfearn said. “We doubled down on communication that was clear, consistent, and human.”

Similarly, at Amalgamated Life, leaders learned that “structured communication matters,” Bostic said. “Email alone isn’t enough. Regular check-ins, whether that’s monthly or even bi-monthly, help keep teams engaged. That cadence didn’t exist initially and would have helped. Leadership learned the hard way that staying connected required intentional effort.”

The need for ongoing connection and communication was evident by the rise in popularity of connectivity tools such as Slack and Zoom. For example, from March 2020 to April 2021, [Slack - \(https://slack.com/blog/news/slack-announces-strong-fourth-quarter-and-fiscal-year-2021-results#:~:text=GAAP%20gross%20profit%20was%20%24780.9,margin%2C%20in%20fiscal%20year%202020. \)](https://slack.com/blog/news/slack-announces-strong-fourth-quarter-and-fiscal-year-2021-results#:~:text=GAAP%20gross%20profit%20was%20%24780.9,margin%2C%20in%20fiscal%20year%202020.) saw a 43% increase in revenue. In the first fiscal quarter affected by the pandemic, Zoom’s revenue increased by 169%, and during the next quarter, by 355%, [Forbes - \(https://www.forbes.com/sites/moorinsights/2023/03/03/zoom-gears-up-for-post-pandemic-growth-as-competition-heats-up/ \)](https://www.forbes.com/sites/moorinsights/2023/03/03/zoom-gears-up-for-post-pandemic-growth-as-competition-heats-up/) reported.

Managers as Connectors

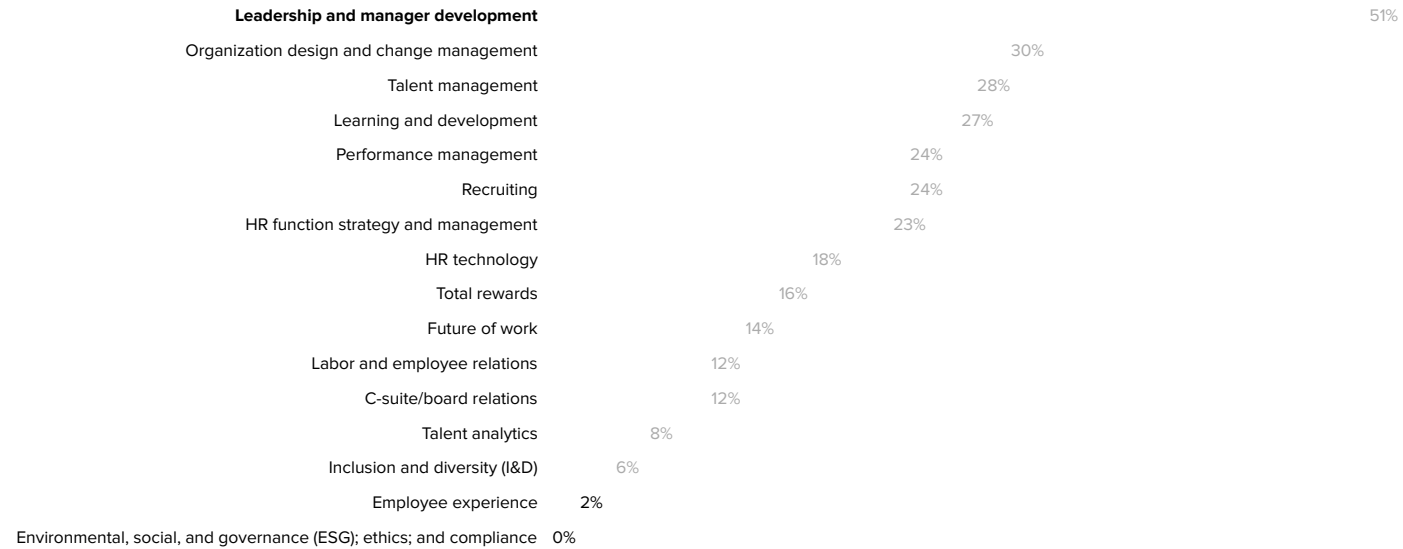
Another lesson learned was the “critical role that managers play in shaping the employee experience,” Redfearn said. Protiviti invested in helping leaders lead differently by providing them with tools and support to manage distributed teams effectively.

Managers learned through experience that “everyone had different personal realities,” Bostic said. “Leadership recognized the stark contrast between people’s home setups. Some were parenting toddlers while others had college-aged kids and more flexibility. Those differing realities shaped how employees coped and reminded managers to show empathy, not just set expectations.”

The need to focus on developing managers has persisted beyond the pandemic. In 2025, more than half of CHROs (51%) identified leadership and manager development as a priority, making this topic the most frequently cited focus for respondents in SHRM's [CHRO Priorities and Perspectives - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/shrm-chro-priorities-perspectives-research-report.pdf \)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/shrm-chro-priorities-perspectives-research-report.pdf) research report.

CHROs' selections for their top HR priorities in 2025 SHRM

Respondents could select up to three options across 16 HR practice areas.*



Source: 2025 CHRO Priorities and Perspectives report
Results based on responses from 212 CHROs. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number. Any discrepancies with the text are the result of rounding. *See Appendix for definitions of the HR practice areas.

Strategic Takeaways

It may feel like the pandemic is behind us, but disruption isn't slowing down and health risks remain. Public health experts cautioned that [the world remains vulnerable to another pandemic - \(https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/next-pandemic-not-if-but-when/ \)](https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/next-pandemic-not-if-but-when/)— and being prepared requires a holistic disaster planning process. Organizational leaders should examine the lessons learned through the last pandemic and tease them into strategic tactics that can help them be prepared for the next disaster.

To be ready for the next crisis now, organizations should:

Take contingency planning seriously.

HR and [workforce planning - \(https://shrm.formstack.com/forms/long_term_workforce_ebook \)](https://shrm.formstack.com/forms/long_term_workforce_ebook) must be integrated into business continuity and [scenario planning efforts - \(https://www.shrm.org/executive-network/insights/people-strategy/using-scenario-planning-to-facilitate-agility-strategic-workforce-planning \)](https://www.shrm.org/executive-network/insights/people-strategy/using-scenario-planning-to-facilitate-agility-strategic-workforce-planning). “Too often, contingency plans are filed away and only pulled out for formal reviews,” Bostic said. “They need to be revisited with the understanding that they may actually be needed.”

For example, Amalgamated Life now undergoes regular simulations to test crisis scenarios such as cyberattacks, data breaches, or threats to infrastructure, Bostic said. The goal is that with regular drills, the company’s response will be more automatic in the future.

Cross-train aggressively.

Past crises have shown that roles may need to shift or employees may be absent due to illness, loss, or other disruptions. And in those cases, “others need to step in without a steep learning curve,” Bostic said. “Absences could leave someone juggling tasks far outside their daily role, and that shouldn’t happen by surprise. The more we can expose teams to each other’s work, the better off we are.”

Double down on communication strategies.

Figuring out how to communicate openly, frequently, and with disparate teams was essential for managing disruption during the pandemic, and proactively adopting [communication strategies - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/managing-organizational-communication \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/managing-organizational-communication) and tools may help organizations prepare for the next crisis. “It took time to embrace it, but having

contact info, team chats, and informal channels ready made it easier to communicate when formal systems were strained,” Bostic said. “These tools shouldn’t be viewed as optional. They’re essential in a crisis.”

Equip managers to lead through uncertainty.

Managerial strategies - (<https://www.shrm.org/enterprise-solutions/insights/lead-through-uncertainty-5-steps-to-strategic-delegation>) may look different during a crisis — and leaders need to be prepared. For example, in the wake of the pandemic, Protiviti reviewed and recalibrated expectations of leaders, adjusting the company’s definition of success for leaders to be “a balance of driving outcomes but also being able to be an empathetic, agile, and digitally savvy leader who is able to lead effectively in person or remote and can build trust with team members,” Campbell said.

Prioritize employee wellness.

Crisis and disruption can take a toll on workers. For example, during the pandemic, between 22% and 35% of employees reported experiencing symptoms of depression often, and as many as 2 in 3 said they experienced depressive symptoms sometimes, according to **SHRM’s COVID-19 Research** - (<https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/news/SHRM-CV19-Mental-Health-Research-Presentation-v1.pdf>). In response, many organizations aimed to prioritize employee wellness.

Protiviti developed new and more frequent ways of listening to employees, offering pulse surveys, coffee chats, and focus groups “to understand how our employees were feeling and to inform changes needed,” Campbell said.

Even if employees are back in the office, keeping an eye on wellness remains a priority to many employers. Employee well-being is a core element of operational resilience, not a perk. Health care benefits remain important, but since the pandemic, more employers are adding telehealth and mental health benefits to their traditional offerings. According to the 2024 **SHRM Employee Benefits Survey** - (<https://www.shrm.org/about/press-room/2024-shrm-employee-benefits-survey--health-and-flexible-work-ben0>), 90% of employers now offer mental health benefits.

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Build a Culture of Resiliency Ahead of a Crisis

Leaders must **design resiliency** - (<https://www.shrm.org/executive-network/insights/people-strategy/big-question-building-resilient-organization>) rather than attempt to improvise it under fire. Globally, 57% of workers who rated their workplace culture poorly said they are actively looking or will soon be looking for a job, according to SHRM’s **The State of Global Workplace Culture in 2024** - (<https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/research/the-state-of-global-workplace-culture-2024.pdf>) report. Analysis of the study revealed five key drivers of positive workplace cultures around the world:

1. Honest and unbiased management.
2. Civil behavior.
3. Meaningful work and opportunities.
4. Open communication.
5. Empathy.

“Culture is a key factor in determining if an organization will deal successfully with future crisis or disruption,” Campbell said. “Building and cultivating a culture that values resiliency, adaptability, mutual support, and continuous learning will help ensure that employees remain engaged and skilled to meet changing demands and enables companies to react to and withstand future disruptions.”

Future disruptions are inevitable, and organizations have the recent lessons of the pandemic to help them build agility into their workforce plans and strategies. Rather than dwelling on the past, savvy leaders will use it to build resilience, agility, and workforce continuity.

Nancy Mann Jackson is a freelance journalist and content writer who writes regularly about finance, insurance, HR, healthcare, and education. Her work has appeared in Entrepreneur, Forbes, Fortune, CNBC, and many other outlets.

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