



Continuity in Crisis

How to run effective business services
during the COVID-19 pandemic

April 2020





The COVID-19 pandemic presents a serious threat to people, businesses and economies across the world.

Gartner's recent Business Continuity Survey shows just 12 percent of organizations are highly prepared for the impact of coronavirus.¹ Smart leaders must focus on how they can best protect their people, serve their customers and stabilize business continuity.

Why take action now?

During times of crisis, business operations—the intelligence engine of an organization—are more important than ever. Business continuity and disaster recovery plans are being tested by rapidly evolving challenges, such as travel restrictions, and as large-scale remote working becomes a reality.

Business process functions, including finance, supply chain, procurement, human resources, marketing, sales and customer operations, and industry-specific services, such as health, insurance and banking, are being severely disrupted.

For many multinationals, complex and business-critical services that are handled by global operations must be reassessed and restructured. It is estimated that 75 to 80 percent of *Fortune* 500 companies are using some form of shared services model.

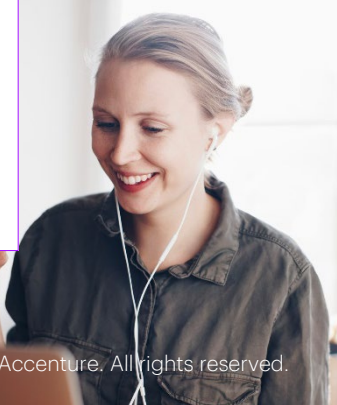
However, they need to safeguard and de-risk their operations if they are to continue to serve and grow their enterprises post-COVID-19. They must devise a response that is rapid and robust to maintain continuity in the face of uncertain times.

For leaders seeking direction on how to act now and next, **we offer recommendations to help their global business services be more resilient** and weather the pandemic storm.



According to senior executives polled, one-third (32.4%) rarely update their operating model.

Source: Initial data from ongoing Intelligent Operations survey, Accenture and Oxford Economics, March 2020



What are the challenges?

For operations teams, efficiency has long been a byword. Having a passion for and taking advantage of new technologies to tackle the challenges that go beyond “keeping the lights on”—especially during a pandemic—is a huge part of running operations responsibly and with resilience in extreme circumstances. Operations must enable data, intelligence and insights to be available in an instant, wherever and whenever they are needed. With agility, flexibility and responsiveness, businesses can act swiftly to steer a new course with confidence and adapt to evolving global challenges.

Organizations are increasingly using platforms that support analytics, artificial intelligence, and machine learning, alongside greater automation, to drive digital experiences that help their operations to gain insights and become more intelligent. For example, Accenture is helping a medical technology company maximize the availability of medical equipment, for use during the COVID-19 pandemic, by operating and optimizing its spare parts supply chain.

The world is now [operating in a post-digital era](#), with digital technologies a basic expectation of consumers and businesses alike. Sustained business continuity and success will come to rely increasingly on more human-focused experiences, continually adapting the latest technologies to the world they have created. To help achieve this, leading companies are introducing [human+machine](#) models, where most routine tasks are automated and everyone is a knowledge worker with access to insights that mean they are more prepared to manage in difficult times.

76%

of executives agree that organizations need to dramatically reengineer the experiences that bring technology and people together in a more human-centric manner.

Source: Accenture Technology Vision 2020⁴

Workforce augmentation and paying attention to data and security protocols, technology infrastructure and support means organizations can perform on their best day. Take **CloudMedx**, a clinical AI platform that focuses on streamlining clinical encounters in the United States. It can help hospitals and payers to predict surge, length of stays, the use of beds and equipment and staffing needs. It also has an AI chatbot, AskSophie, to help patients self-assess for the risk of COVID-19. Armed with this knowledge, users of the AskSophie platform can be more informed about this and other diseases, and be a part of the decision-making process with their doctors while avoiding public interaction as symptoms persist.²

According to a recent article, leadership’s ability to respond to these emerging risks will be critical to their organization’s success.³

So, how can executives in large, complex businesses most effectively respond to the COVID-19 threat?

Act now

The spread of the COVID-19 virus has proven to be rapid and difficult to control, so the means to deal with it and actions taken must be equally agile—but focused. Any actions need to be in line with your organization’s business continuity planning.

Empathetic leadership and **communications** are two key areas that aid [human resilience](#) in difficult times:

1. Adopt a pragmatic, collaborative approach to help adapt to new ways of running the business and make things happen in a timely, empathetic manner. Recognition where due can help to improve well-being and engagement across teams—both locally and globally—which contributes to maintaining business continuity.
2. Emphasize a strong and active communications strategy when dealing with a major crisis. Communications to employees, clients, suppliers and partners should be rolled out as part of a phased approach. Following the initial priority communications, we recommend ongoing, daily updates.



“We have a client who asked us literally to go from zero people using Teams to their entire 61,000 workforce in five days.”

Julie Sweet, CEO, Accenture

Recommended Actions

Accenture recommends the following actions for organizations looking to address what to do now, next and for the longer term.



PREVENT: What to do now

Take immediate steps to ensure the safety and well-being of employees.

Prioritize actions that put your people first and exploit the capabilities that global business services offer:

- Enable people to work and connect with colleagues from diverse, safe, secure locations.
- Create safe and secure working environments through regular sanitization.
- De-densify workspaces by limiting the number of people working together, curbing large meetings and ensuring that protocols are followed in canteens, elevators and areas of common use.
- Limit all non-essential business travel and client visits.
- Align with local health and safety guidelines.



PREPARE: What to do next

Identify priority processes and establish a command center to manage a virtual workforce.

Take action to meet the needs of your key stakeholders:

- Identify priorities:
 - Critical processes, including functions such as employee payroll, healthcare and supply chain (to keep goods moving and services ongoing).
 - Highly important processes and other services such as payments and necessary services in healthcare, insurance and banking.
 - Important/other processes such as order management and reporting.
- Establish a command center for a virtual workforce to measure quality, productivity, compliance, insights and intelligence, people engagement and workforce well-being.



PREDICT: What to do for the long term

Be proactive and establish a comprehensive, customer-oriented plan that is sustainable.

Prioritize actions that help you pre-empt the impact of volatility:

- Bring together highly skilled, distributed teams that can log in anytime, anywhere and deliver on customer commitments at scale.
- Build a broader ecosystem around the organization's workforce to enable collaboration across a broader set of priorities—including healthcare and childcare. This will lead to improved morale and engagement levels resulting in better business outcomes.

What have we learned?

Global businesses are under immense strain and pressure due to the current crisis with few industries remaining unaffected.

Our recommended approach includes:

- **Develop empathetic relationships.** Put people first by establishing strong partnerships across the organization, built on transparency and trust. This can help to govern, monitor and track progress to achieve resilient, intelligent operations during an unprecedented crisis.
- **Enable secure office environment leading practices and policies.** Help teams to work from home and amplify secure office environment leading practices policies—it is important to accept that not all work can be done remotely. Adjust expectations accordingly, both within your teams and with your stakeholders.
- **Be pragmatic about technology.** Set up a command center to oversee all employee requirements and better manage a virtual workforce.
- **Be nimble and innovative with the latest technologies.** Consider solutions that ensure distributed teams can connect and collaborate effectively. For example, a simple self-reporting app, where employees can give feedback on their login times, transactions processed and business updates.
- **Stay connected.** Consider running video sessions between multiple colleagues—supervisors, subject matter experts and team members—to maintain the quality and compliance around how to deliver services. It can also support the safety and well-being of people more effectively in challenging times.

Accenture has learned that it is possible to not only secure and reshape critical functions such as employee payroll and healthcare within three to six weeks, but also establish a cohesive set of leading practices that can be scaled across all dispersed locations—both now and as the crisis unfolds.

Where is it **working today?**

Within Accenture, an operations team of 7,000 people runs our own global business services using a human+machine model that helps us to deliver seamless operations.

Here's how it's working in Accenture

Accenture has extensive experience that is positioning our organization well to handle the current crisis:

- Our way of working “in the New”, now more than 60 percent of our business, strong relationships with leading companies and unique business model has prepared us for uncertainty.
- We have operated our business as a virtual team without a headquarters, and with our top leaders spread across the globe, for more than three decades.
- We have tried and tested protocols in place that have helped us to move rapidly.
- We have made many changes across the majority of our 50 locations around the world including China, India, Italy, Philippines, Poland, United Kingdom and United States.
- We provide the tools to support a collaborative workforce; for example, we are the largest user of Microsoft Teams in the world. Our Teams audio usage has almost doubled from our typical 16 million minutes per day to almost 30 million minutes per day.

Here's how it's working for our clients

Accenture has helped the following organizations to manage in the current crisis:

- A bank has moved a complex, judgment-based process to a 100 percent working from home model, enabled by technology and within the necessary data security and regulatory demands.
- A North American retailer's local stores are meeting accelerating demand for produce and products due to COVID-19 and by applying AI-enabled demand and supply planning services, increasing shipment visibility and collaboration with local vendors.
- A multinational consumer electronics retailer has set up a COVID-19 hotline to support employees and partnered with payroll and benefit teams to implement various compensation solutions such as minimum-guaranteed pay, benefits and personal time out programs.
- A large airline has increased cash reserves by identifying non-essential activities and non-critical commodity contracts that can be placed on hold.

Which teams are needed?

Although every business has its own way of working, there are clear priorities in terms of focusing on both people and business functions, to drive intelligent operations and organizational and [human resilience](#). And while the impact of COVID-19 is global, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to managing through the crisis.

A cohesive response organization can help to establish clear priorities, with dedicated core teams responsible for keeping global operations running smoothly. These include:

- **Lead response team** to manage the overall status of the incident response, working closely with a command center, involving both central and local taskforces, to track relevant progress including key performance indicators and any issues needing further work.
- **Work from home enablement team** to drive all customer-specific requirements, government approvals and our people’s technology enablement and support.
- **Local team** to ensure uninterrupted, compliant client services in a distributed delivery office environment, managing diverse issues such as office seating, resource supply and demand, and workforce well-being.
- **Robust communication team** for both internal and external audiences, including leadership communications and crisis management response.
- **Customer engagement team** for proactive client stakeholder management including status reports such as the current delivery situation and managing any escalations.
- **Workforce well-being team** to maintain high levels of engagement and morale while people work remotely, helping them to feel more connected and improving mental health and well-being.
- **Command center team** for managing virtual workforce productivity, quality, compliance insights and intelligence.

Creating focused teams can mean decisions can be taken quickly and actions can be swift.

Accenture has helped one government body to build a call center for a state government overnight, which was further enhanced using virtual assistants to provide COVID-19 information.

Five steps to operational resilience

In a period of unprecedented global crisis, leaders recognize the need to **remain focused, be collaborative and act with compassion**. Now, more than ever, organizations must focus attention on those areas that can thrive in a post-COVID-19 world.

Here are five ways to help your organization achieve intelligent, resilient operations:

1 Establish a resilient culture

In a highly volatile world, being dedicated, calm and compassionate in all situations should be actively encouraged. Organizations should continue to execute work in a collaborative manner—with critical knowledge workers augmented by digital capabilities. Success depends on proactively addressing and managing critical situations through applying innovative solutions. Identify opportunities to adapt and reshape priorities and develop new business models to create an evolved working environment.

How can this help? This is not the first or last time an outbreak of this nature will impact the world, but lessons are being learned along the way. As a result, economies and societies will develop a better understanding of how to move quickly, be proactive and better prepare for future incidents.





2

Create broader ecosystems based on social collaboration

Move beyond employee workspaces to broader ecosystems that employees can access, such as healthcare or childcare. Consider how all of these environments can be woven into new forms of collaboration with an improved sense of corporate social responsibility. How executives think and plan for employee expenses is likely to change to include home offices, childcare support and so on. An organization's workforce could include niche, skilled, flexible and part-time workers who form part of its broader ecosystem.

How can this help? Employees could create demand for simpler digital solutions to collaborate not only with their co-workers, but also with broader essential ecosystems such as healthcare, childcare and so on.

3

Employ agile, elastic workplace models

The best combination of working from home and the office, depending on the nature and type of work and relevant skills required, can be enabled by technology, data, security and cloud computing. Current investments in technology and the related infrastructure make such scenarios possible; in the future, this fluid approach is likely to become the new normal. Elastic workplaces using agile leading practices, align with millennial expectations—"log in anytime, anywhere" employment that maintains flexibility and privacy. Create diverse teams that focus on key priorities across business functions such as finance and human resources to resolve new or unexpected issues.

How can this help? Working within an agile model means people can pick up new skills easily and work across locations and time zones to be truly global.



4

Build a human+machine workforce

Make transactional processes more digital and focus on value-led, proactive operations driven by data and analytics to reduce stress on operations. From our own experience it is possible to achieve effective unattended automation. By creating a [human+machine workforce](#), tens of thousands of people can be reskilled and redeployed to ensure continuous operations while using analytics, AI and real-time monitoring. Machines capable of continuous learning could provide an ideal basis for further scaling operations.

How can this help? Although digitalization is having an impact on transactional and repeat processes, the human workforce is likely to focus primarily on solving complex problems and exceptions that are unable to be resolved by the machine.

5

Adopt a distributed global services model

Use a mixture of service models to de-risk the organization in a volatile world. Distributed global services mean that high performance can be delivered anytime, anywhere. Monitor and distribute work across the network in real time using a [command center](#) for a virtual workforce. Partner with the best service providers to ensure brilliant execution and to fuel the company's growth and market share. Introduce the best talent and capabilities and allocate the best skills to the most complex jobs, without the restrictions of region or time zone, while maintaining high levels of compliance and assurance.

How can this help? Future organizations will not be driven by their headquarters or dependent on offices. They will instead be solely driven by customer needs and the availability of the right talent that can cater to those needs.

References

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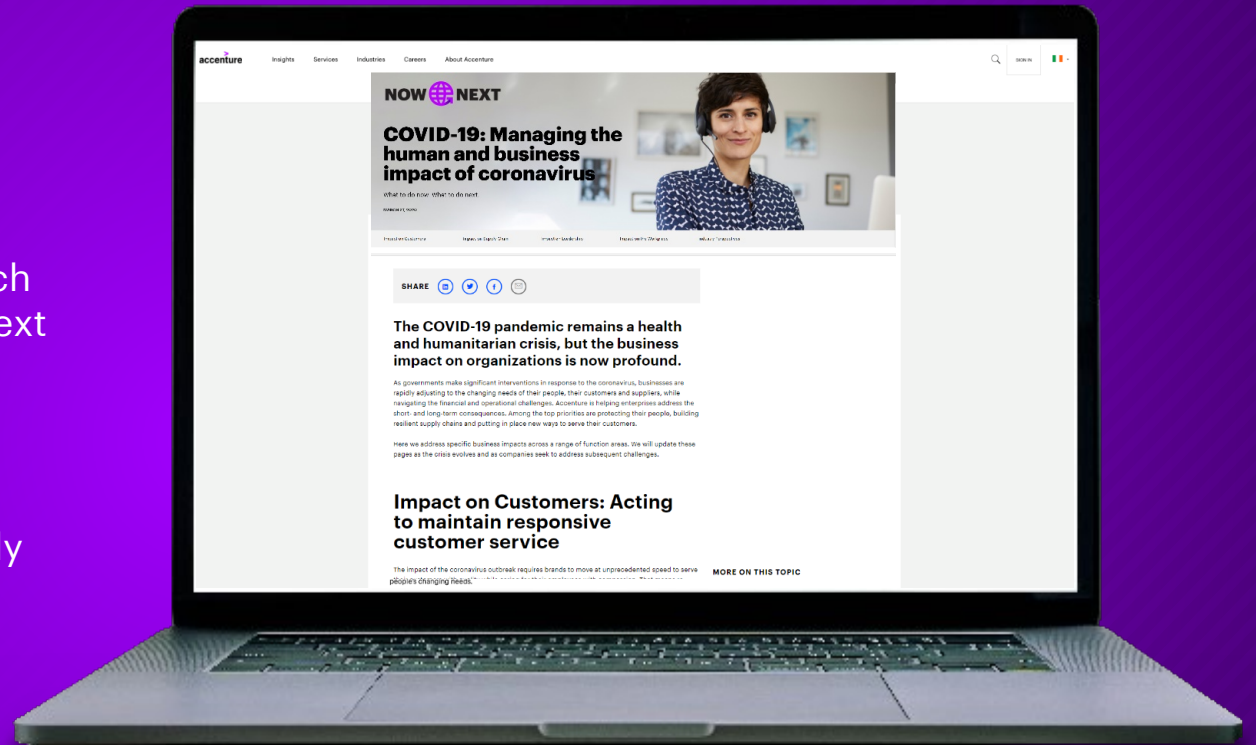
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To help our clients navigate both the human and business impact of COVID-19, we've created a hub of all of our latest thinking on a variety of topics.

Each topic highlights specific actions which can be taken now, and what to consider next as industries move toward a new normal.

From leadership essentials to ensuring productivity for your employees and customer service groups to building supply chain resilience and much more, our hub will be constantly updated. Check back regularly for more insights.

[VISIT OUR HUB HERE](#)



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