



Small Scenarios for Changing Times:

Rethinking Work

By Heather Bussing and John Sumser

Spring 2020

As things begin to reopen and employers start to bring employees back to work, everyone is trying to figure out what safety measures they can and should take for returning workers.

There's a lot of advice floating around. There is tremendous pressure to do something, anything. The urge to do something fast usually has troubling consequences.

It is better to understand the problem before you solve it.

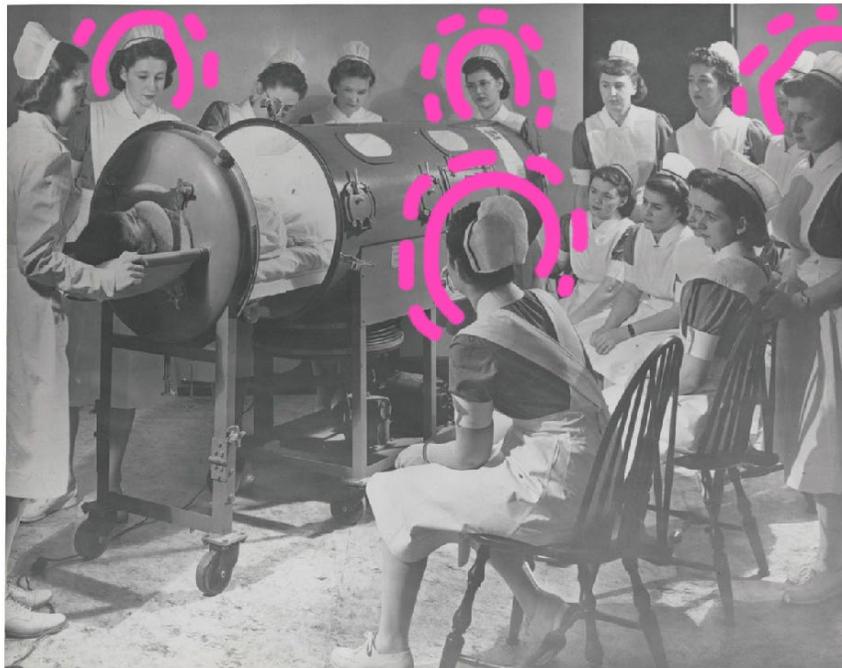
There is also denial about the risks to people. A thing is not safe just because the authorities say you can do it. COVID-19 has not changed or gone away. When things are open, it just means there is room at the hospital.

This is a deadly virus that is highly contagious and can be spread by people who show no symptoms. We are just beginning to understand what it is, how it is transmitted, and how long it lasts. We still don't know for sure if recovering gives you immunity or for how long. There is no vaccine or cure. There are only interventions for severe symptoms.

We can't stay home forever. People need to

work, make money, and pay bills. But none of that matters if people are too sick to work. Or dead.

We will not be back to normal. The world is different now. We are just beginning to make sense of what that means. Trying to go back to what it was like is a mistake. We have to let go of nostalgia and our strong desire for something familiar. We have to grieve the losses of the people we love and the way we used to live.



““Instructing nurses on the use of respirator for a polio patient.” National Archives

Acceptance that things are different now and grief for what used to be are the essential first steps.

Then we can begin to see this is an opportunity to start fresh, to rethink what matters, and what our priorities are. We need to evaluate what work is necessary

and what is a result of our systems, processes, and hierarchies.

For many of us, there is no longer any difference between our work and the rest of our lives; it's all life.

Before we bring people back to work, reimagine what is necessary versus what is tradition, familiar, or how we've always done things. We can't go back. So, it's time to figure out where we're going. It will take time and it will require more change. Here are the questions to get you started in how to rethink work.

1. How do we address the combination of grief and opportunity?

Ask your people. This is the single most important thing we've learned. Gather the group and explore the things we've lost and the things we've gained.

2. How can I help my customers be successful in this new reality?

It doesn't matter if you can continue to do the work you've done if nobody needs it or wants it. The most important thing organizations can do is think about their customers and how help them survive and thrive. Start by imagining the outcome you need and want first, then figure out how to get there.

3. What do my employees need to do their best work?

This is going to be different depending on the work and the employee's circumstances and requires care, compassion, and creativity. Do they need

childcare? Do they live with someone who is especially vulnerable to COVID-19? What will keep them safe, help them feel appreciated, and make the best use of their skills and talents?

4. What assumptions do we have about how things work that we can reimagine? Are schedules necessary? Does paying people by the hour make sense? Where do our processes create needless work or stress?

Ask the experts — the people who actually do the work — for ideas and guidance. And don't get defensive when you find out how bad it's been.

5. What are we afraid of that's getting in our way?

It's easy to be afraid and there's a lot to fear when so many things are changing fast. Make a list and see how many are real. Most aren't. And the ones that are can often be solved when you can see them clearly.

We humans have been adapting to change and using our creativity since the beginning. It's a matter of survival. But it can also be fun. It's time to rethink work.

About the Small Scenarios series:

Massive change is afoot. The pandemic gives us the opportunity to rethink and reappraise. The small scenarios project is designed to provoke thought about the medium-term future and how it will be different. The goal is to help HR prepare for the future we will encounter in a few short months.

The Small Scenarios Team



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About HRExaminer

HRExaminer is a research and publishing company focused on the evolving edges of HR and HRTechnology. The publications team includes a 25 member editorial advisory board who deliver insight and opinion. The company also produces two award winning podcasts (live on Thursday and Friday mornings at 8:00 AM Pacific). Each year, HRExaminer delivers the market benchmark report on the evolution of Intelligent tools in HRTechnology.

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