



# A New Era in Customer Engagement

**Transforming your continuity plan  
into your continuous plan**

Navigating the human and business impact of COVID-19

May 2020



# We're all in this together

COVID-19 has turned into a global crisis, evolving at unprecedented speed and scale in recent history. It is creating a universal priority for governments and organizations to take immediate action to protect their people.

It is now one of the biggest global events—and challenges—of our lifetimes. As such, it is changing human attitudes and behaviors and forcing organizations to respond.

However, the need to respond won't end when the virus's immediate threat eventually recedes.

“Whatever it is, [COVID-19] has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to ‘normality’, trying to stitch our future and our past ... offering us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. **Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.**”

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. **It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”**

**Arundhati Roy**, Financial Times<sup>1</sup>

**Leading organizations see the opportunity and are already questioning the future of their sales and service organization, customers and workforce. Company leaders want to know:**

- What will the post-crisis business landscape look like?
- How do I create adaptability and resilience in my business?
- Where should I be focused to come out of the crisis stronger?
- Which customer expectations and behaviors are here to stay?
- Which temporary solutions should I be retaining longer-term?
- What rapidly deployed customer channel experiences were well-received?
- Did shifts of my front-line employees impact my customers?
- What employee experiences should be retained or remedied?
- Are our workspaces optimized for the new normal?
- Which capabilities would have helped during the crisis?
- What do I need to do to create profitable growth in the new world?

# Adaptive Customer Engagement

## It's happening **now**

COVID-19 is creating massive shifts in human behavior and catalyzing end-to-end business reorientation. We believe impacts to customer engagement might be significant and permanent.

In this perspective, we explore how COVID-19 has accelerated organizations to a new customer engagement standard. **Predictable patterns have proven unpredictable. Tried and true models have been upended. The old rule book is gone.**

**The opportunity to transform is NOW.** We see three priorities businesses should address **to activate and support purposeful experiences.**

### 01 EMBRACE THE UNPREDICTABLE

Accelerated shifts in customer interactions have upended the “rules of engagement.”

### 02 FLEX YOUR CUSTOMER WORKFORCE

Flexible engagement models can deliver the seamless experience customers demand.

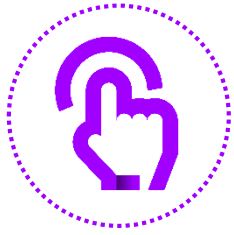
### 03 EMPOWER RESILIENT OPERATIONS

“Future-proof” operations to improve customer engagement for years to come.

A man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a grey crew-neck sweater, is looking down at a tablet device he is holding with both hands. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with other people. The lighting is soft and natural, coming from the side.

**EMBRACING THE UNPREDICTABLE**

**New and accelerated customer interactions have upended the “rules of engagement.”**



## **(Digital) Engagement is everything**

Digital channel usage is spiking throughout the pandemic. Corporate investment in digital experiences will need to mirror new ways of living and working.

How long such customer behavior will continue is unclear, but we do know there will be no return to the old ways of operating. Customer expectations for what constitutes “basic” digital capabilities have shifted permanently.

As customers continue to “go” and “stay” digital, post-crisis expectations for digital experience will continue to rise. Convenience, ease and accuracy will be table stakes. Intelligence, empathy and reciprocity will become the differentiators. Trust will be more critical than ever.

Organizations need to prepare for the future of digital engagement versus digital transactions. The speed at which companies build and deploy these capabilities will become a source of competitive advantage and the degree to which they can sustain them will become a source of cost advantage.

**“ We’ve witnessed stunning shifts in customer interaction volume, types and transactions. The timeline for developing relationships with customers is now significantly compressed. As customers navigate these uncertain times, demonstrating empathy through digital channels has become the new standard of engagement.”**

**Dawn Anderson**

Senior Managing Director, Global Lead,  
Customer, Sales & Service, Accenture

# Digital is now the default

**At home, online and ready to engage.** During their prolonged time at home, consumers have become more willing and able to use digital methods of engagement. Already digital-savvy consumers are increasing their use, while individuals who once resisted digital interactions such as e-commerce, mobile finance and video calls are emerging as digitally engaged customers.

Such changes are evident in industries ranging from beauty to groceries: The emergence of new digital customer profiles is likely to continue and will require ongoing analysis to maintain the right customer sales and service channel mix. New customer preferences will also have significant implications on the percent of total revenue businesses should expect to drive through e-commerce.

**Virtual access to everything.** Our digital lives are our “real” lives. We are entering the Virtual Century. Social isolation has brought technology even closer to the heart of the human experience. Take Facebook Live, for example. The service once faced limited adoption, but has experienced a resurgence, with 50 percent more people watching live videos monthly in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> So what did they watch? Mass held by Pope Francis, virtual tours of the Cincinnati Zoo, and countless weddings by couples socially distanced from their friends.<sup>3</sup> The most impactful events have combined physical and digital dimensions to create global reach for previously localized experiences.

Arguably more surprising than the abundance of virtual social engagements are the shifts for advisory services once thought to require in-person interactions. Medical visits have found their way online, online learning and education is spiking and customers are getting more comfortable with remote advisory services, such as in banking and insurance. Digital is gaining traction and trust as it is used during the crisis across critical business contexts, creating access, safety and continuity.

## In a global consumer pulse survey<sup>4</sup>...

**71%**  
report spending more time  
online during the crisis

New users expect to increase  
the proportion of the  
purchases made online by  
**10%**

**45%**  
are completing online  
education during the crisis

**32%**  
of purchases are  
being made online

**76%**  
expect this behaviour to  
continue post-crisis

**37%**  
Online purchases  
expected post-crisis

**1 in 5**  
who ordered their last  
grocery purchase online  
did so for the first time

**44%**  
are accessing healthcare  
online during crisis

For those aged 56+, this was  
**1 in 3**

**77%**  
expect this behaviour  
to continue post-crisis



# The shift from transactions to relationship-based interactions

**Reinforcing value through (and after) the crisis.** Trust has long been a critical component of digital customer engagement, but COVID-19 has brought the true purpose of brands to the fore. It has also put the notion of safety front and center in customer values. Post-crisis, customers will be reflecting back to think about how brands performed under pressure. During the pandemic, did customer sales and service organizations deliver on their brand promise? Did they put safety of their customers and their workforce ahead of their financial priorities? How did they demonstrate they deserve customer trust?

Both during and post-crisis, companies should focus customer engagement on reassurance and confidence-building to continuously reinforce the value of products, services and the organization itself. For example, a luxury automobile company may not be inherently well placed for success during global isolation measures. However, one brand recently created a virtual showroom that promotes personal safety and ease of vehicle use without mention of COVID-19. The innovation demonstrates that digital capabilities created during the pandemic can become a permanent engagement strategy.

**“Exceptional customer engagement means changing how we understand and respond to customer behavior, needs, and attitudes. Forward-thinking engagement models will make digital experiences more human at a global scale.”**

**Matteo Maga**

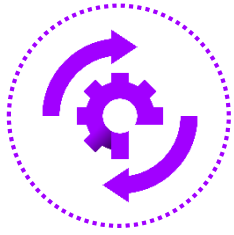
Managing Director, Growth Markets Lead,  
Customer, Sales & Service, Accenture



**FLEXING YOUR CUSTOMER WORKFORCE**

**Flexible engagement models can deliver the seamless experiences customers demand.**





## Unstoppable adaptation

Many companies have been forced to create agility in their workforce to support the changing needs of their business during the crisis. The lines between different human customer support channels have blurred, with retail store representatives, field service technicians and even airline gate agents temporarily shifting their focus to the call center, using chat and voice platforms to continue servicing customers.

Traditional barriers have disintegrated. Customer operating model lines have been distorted. In the face of change, sales and service organizations held their breaths and threw out the rule book in the name of creating continuity for their customers. And in most cases, it worked. Better than expected.

As a result, the foundation has been set for organizations to think more holistically about the flexibility of their workforce across customer engagement touchpoints. This will drive significant changes in customer sales and support operating models as well as the workforce skills required to succeed.

**“Operating model changes will benefit both companies and their workforce. They’ll find opportunities for more flexible and fulfilling employment and unprecedented workforce results. Companies can achieve such results through restructuring operations support models, standardizing platforms across their organizations and investing in analytics to guide decision-making.”**

**Bruce M. Holley,**  
Senior Managing Director,  
North America Lead,  
Customer, Sales & Service

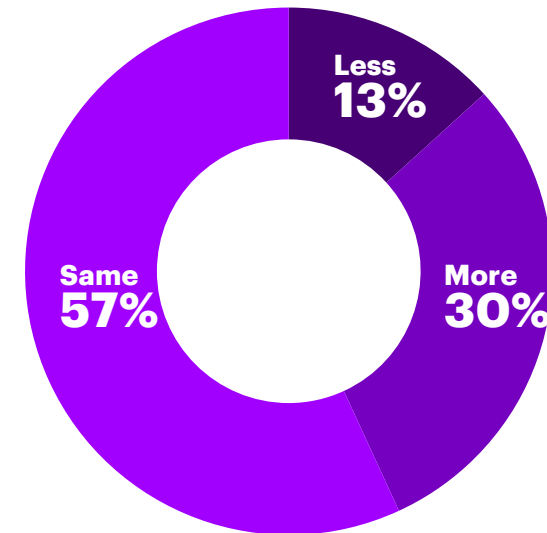
# Home is where the work is

**Virtual workplaces, real results.** Most organizations needed to do the unthinkable during the COVID-19 crisis: Make an entire workforce operate from their homes. Banks, communication providers and governments shifted thousands of agents to remote work, overcoming infrastructure, security and speed-to-competency barriers along the way. As an example, a US communications provider successfully moved more than 10,000 agents to work-from-home environments in a period of 3 weeks.

Since work-from-home models have been effective in creating safety for the workforce without compromising customer quality, we expect companies to shift work locations from physical to virtual, retaining larger percentages (if not 100%) of work-from-home positions. This will give them more flexibility to respond to customer needs with an optimized cost structure – consolidating roles and physical spaces in new ways. New standards, certifications and “starter kits” will be redefined to create consistency of at-home-workplace standards at scale.

Teams may consist of individuals with skills to address customer needs across the customer lifecycle or to take full issue ownership at certain lifecycle stages. This will help simplify customer engagement as well as workforce operations. The disruption of the agent “journey” will mean that the management approach will shift from line management to relationship management as cross-functional teams operate across multiple locations.

**Change in work-from-home frequency from pre- to post-outbreak<sup>5</sup>**



Further, **46 percent** of people who **never worked from home** previously now plan to **work from home more** often in the future.

# More flexible than ever

## Blurring boundaries between front office and back office

Rapid digital channel adoption is creating new dynamics for the human workforce. Customer engagement will rely heavily on digital, social and virtual assistant technology. With the growth of these channels, the human workforce's role must expand. Traditional boundaries between the front office and the back office will cease to exist. Sales and service agents must now support customers and become back office “knowledge engineers” – a new area of focus tasked with providing inputs to maximize the quality and effectiveness of digital experiences, such as training AI solutions.

The crisis is also putting a spotlight on traditional agent-sourcing strategies and business continuity plans. We now expect many organizations to revisit their sourcing mix, looking at opportunities to expand partnerships with third-party agent providers to share operational risk, create capacity for volume fluctuations and increase resiliency.

With these shifts, evolving operational support capabilities will be crucial. Operations functions will need to support a broader scope of work and take advantage of data to inform insights and actions. Workforce demand planning must be extended across the customer support needs, across customer lifecycles and across new customer contact shift patterns, which will require enhanced analytics. Sourcing criteria must also evolve significantly. Selection criteria must prioritize business resilience and work-from-home capability maturity in addition to cost and vendor partners who will have to prove they can effectively hire, recruit, manage and retain new types of talent. Success will require more ongoing collaboration and partnership, redefining partnership contracting models and incentive structures.

# More dynamic than ever

## Fluid talent models for exceptional service

Virtual work environments and blended workforce expectations represent a shift from traditional customer engagement strategies. The workforce will require new competencies and greater agility to serve customers. There will be a heightened expectation that workers can seamlessly move across channels, from retail to the field to the call center to the back office.

To meet these needs, workforce profiles will need to be reimagined while analytics are leveraged to optimize hiring. Success measurement for these roles will also need to be redefined: Businesses will need to focus on the metrics that matter. The focus of performance metrics must move away from transactional measurement to evaluating success in creating value through customer interactions. More than ever, an agent must truly own customer interactions end-to-end. Imagine retail sales reps evaluated on creating an enduring relationship versus immediate conversions, encouraged to share their “digital business card” to support a customer throughout their buying and onboarding journey. New analytics correlations will be necessary to establish high-performer profiles and redefine performance outliers.

Finally, empowering people to meet heightened flexibility expectations will be critical. Technology solutions must be advanced to help free agents to focus more on developing relationships and delivering outcomes to their customers. Organizations must simplify traditionally complex agent desktop, point-of-sale and field solutions and build scale by integrating AI into their operations. Less focus on the process enables greater focus on the customer, positioning agents for success.

A woman with dark, curly hair is shown in profile, looking out a window. She is wearing a white button-down shirt and a thin necklace. The background is bright and out of focus, suggesting an office or indoor setting with natural light.

**EMPOWERING RESILIENT OPERATIONS**

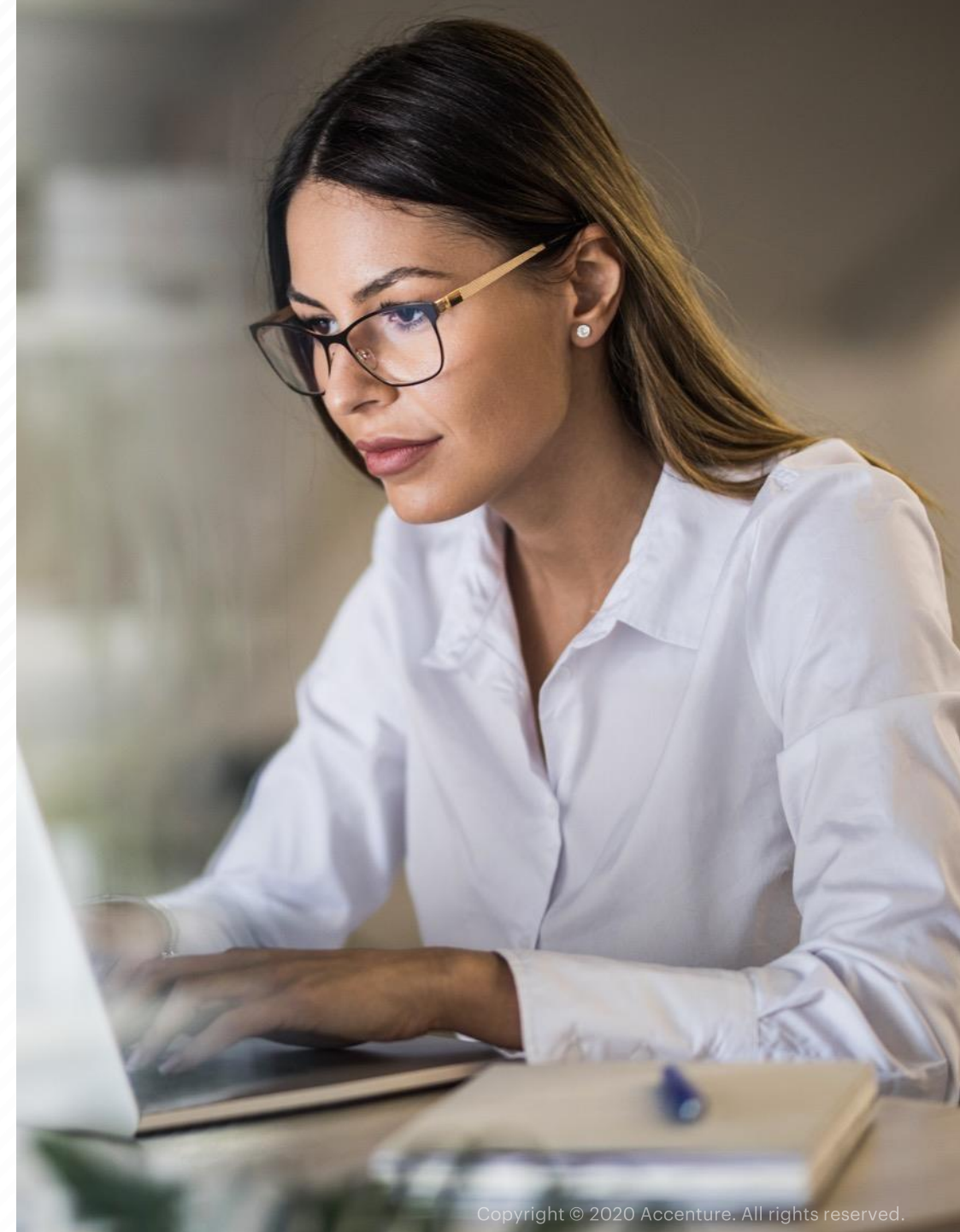
**“Future-proof”  
operations for  
improving  
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years to come.**

# It's time: transform to thrive

Are organizations prepared for the scale of the new digital consumer? While COVID-19 has accelerated innovation in many ways, it has also exposed the fragility of our economy and the insufficiency of traditional continuity plans. Digital and human resilience is critical. Governments and enterprises that have made investments to create an agile human and digital workforce have laid the groundwork to navigate the crisis and fare better than their counterparts.

Customer organizations that shifted to cloud technology, advanced data solutions and mobile employee technology pre-crisis were able to navigate the impact of the pandemic quickly and more confidently.

In the face of sustained customer behavior acceleration, there will be greater demand for flexibility of physical spaces, platforms and data. To succeed, companies should continuously recalibrate requirements and investments against outcomes. Space investments must be re-justified. Platform investments must yield results faster. Data must be comprehensive and accessible to power dynamic decisions. Those who have not planned for an unpredictable future must get there quickly.



# Redefining workspaces

**A new kind of spatial awareness.** With workforces relocated, physical retailers closed and offices sitting vacant, businesses are being forced to rethink their definition of and investments in customer-centric workspaces. Hygiene in physical spaces – once assumed – has been elevated to become a new driver of experience. As the crisis evolves and businesses prepare to reopen, physical space investments (retail and corporate) are being reevaluated.

In the call center environment, a prolonged period where the majority of agents worked virtually has set the stage for a net new approach to physical call centers. Companies are already starting to look for cost synergies by reconsidering their physical call center space investments and configurations.

In store and branch environments, extended closures of physical spaces are putting pressure on companies to reevaluate retail for value and viability. Trends expected to come to fruition by 2025 are being accelerated as brands redefine the role of physical space in the overall customer engagement strategy.

Economic conditions, the rise of digital engagement and pressure on health and safety will create the impetus to reconfigure the retail footprint, redefine retail purpose and reinvent retail experiences.

## What we predicted stores and branches would look like in 2025<sup>6</sup>

↓ **30%** Fewer traditional stores/branches

↑ **20%** New experience stores/branches

↓ **70%** Fewer tellers/transactional employee roles

♥ **50%** Employees in new relationship roles

↓ **30%** Less floor space



# Resilience at **scale**

**Intensifying platforms pressures.** Resilient technologies must underpin more nimble business. Platform adopters that have invested in “future-proofing” their technology landscape are best prepared for disruption. New product usage and monetization demands, increased emphasis on previously underserved aspects of the customer lifecycle, and dramatic shifts in digital channel engagement will require unprecedented agility in the enabling platforms to meet and exceed customers’ needs. For example, companies serving small businesses must be prepared for an influx of customers beginning their “back to business” journey – separate and distinct from common acquisition, retention, and service experiences.

Companies that demonstrate that they know their customers and have leveraged platform capabilities to address their needs in this time of uncertainty will be rewarded. Companies who have effectively decoupled their digital platforms from back office systems and processes will be well prepared to launch new experiences, apps, and even new market propositions and products with agility.

**A dynamic approach to data.** The COVID crisis has shown that internal data is no longer sufficient to inform and predict customer and employee needs. A combination of internal and external data will be required in the future to fully inform business decisions. Customer preferences in contact channels must inform new staffing models, identifying opportunities to integrate AI tools to handle low-complexity intents. Shifting sales channel preferences will require a data-driven approach to product supply and allocation and service to maximize revenue and customer satisfaction. Investing in advanced, real-time analytics models to inform customer sales and service decision-making will be critical to maintain adaptability and competitiveness in the new environment.

**“ COVID-19 has hit the fast-forward button for us. Customers are demonstrating behaviors we didn’t expect to see until 2025. Now, businesses must catch up. Using digital to create business continuity is no longer a nice-to-have. It’s the new normal.”**

**Edwin VanderOuderaa,**  
Senior Managing Director,  
Europe Lead, Customer, Sales & Service,  
Accenture



# We'll leave you with this message

Today's trying times are setting the stage for unprecedented opportunities.

Amid uncertainty, there is innovation.

Amid disruption, there is reinvention.

And through it all, we are here to help.

# How Accenture can help build your future **NOW**

## Assess and Plan

**Where are you today?  
How quickly can you get  
to tomorrow?**

We can work with you on a rapid diagnostic covering:

- Customer touchpoint mix
- Workforce flexibility
- Space readiness
- Platforms
- Data and analytics
- Overall function support model and associated spend

## Accelerate to Adapt

**Design your NOW strategy.  
Prioritize, mobilize, get going.**

- Create an accelerated end-to-end experience and touchpoint strategy
- Conduct design sprints to reimagine the role physical spaces play in the organization
- “Zero-base” your customer function support model and financials
- Optimize and prioritize your execution roadmap investments
- Kick off agile execution of top priority initiatives
- Continuously recalibrate strategy effectiveness through test-and-learn

## Rotate and Reinvent

**Create the future at scale.  
Run, reflect and refine.**

- Continue to execute prioritized roadmap focused on holistic experience transformation spanning people, technology, operations and physical spaces
- Measure success and outcomes: business value, customer value and employee value
- Continue to reflect, using analytics to adaptively refine strategy and execution to improve flexibility and outpace change

# References

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3. Forbes. [What To Know About The Vatican's Unprecedented Virtual Easter Week This Year](#) [Page 7]
3. CNN. [20 amazing virtual field trips to aquariums, museums and Mars](#) [Page 7]
4. Accenture Covid-19 Consumer Survey. Accenture Research conducted the research to understand how global consumer priorities, purchasing decisions, and behavioral patterns are shifting in the wake of coronavirus. The survey was conducted between 19<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020, and comprised of 3,313 consumers and between 2<sup>nd</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> April 2020, and comprised of 3,074 consumers. Both surveys were conducted in 15 countries at differing stages of the outbreak: Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, Spain, United Arab Emirates, UK, and USA. [Page 7]
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6. Accenture COVID-19 Consumer Pulse. conducted 2<sup>nd</sup>–6<sup>th</sup>, April 2020, N = 1,118 respondents working from home [Page 12]
7. Allen International. [Retail design & customer experience from Accenture.](#) [Page 15]

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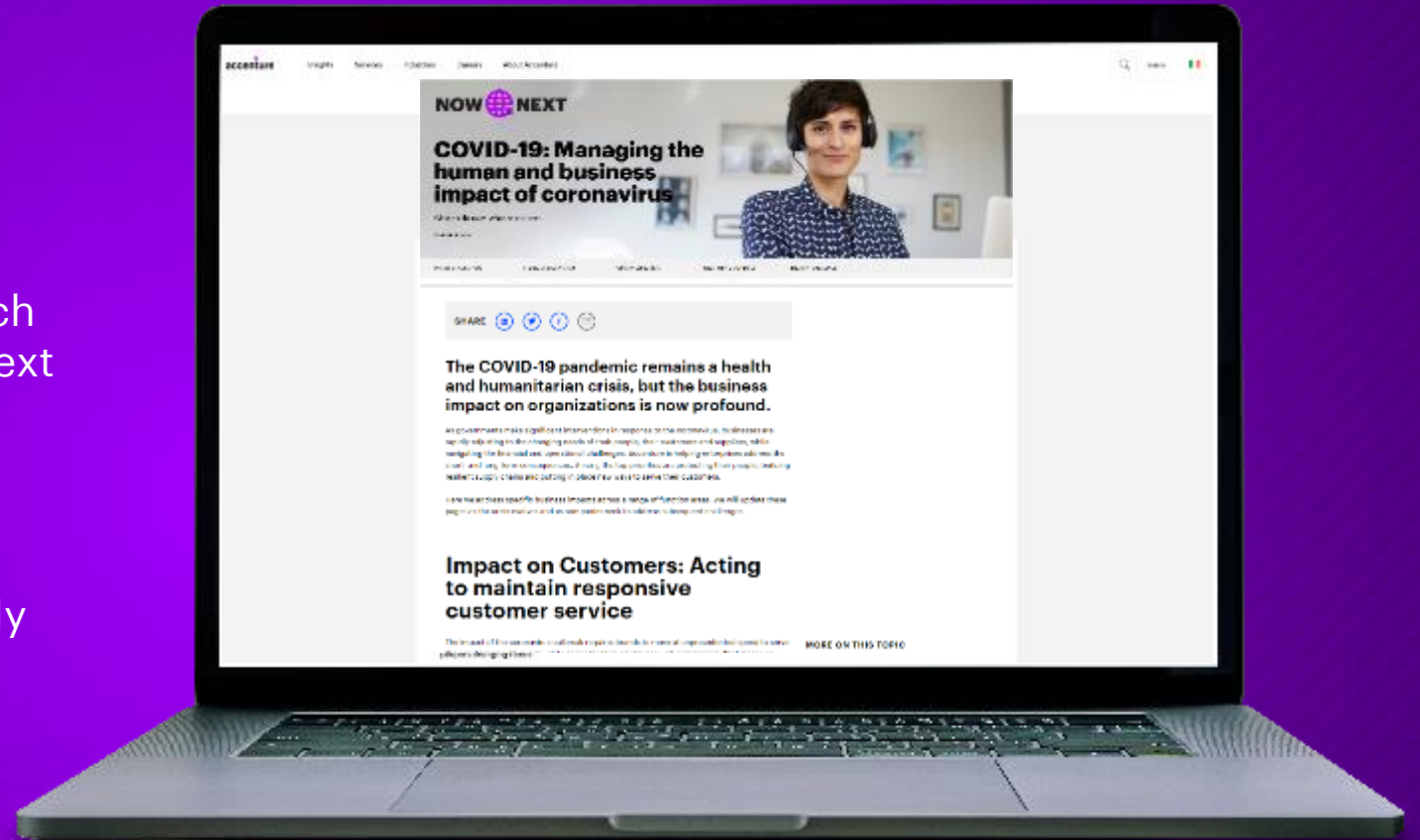
**Lan Guan**  
Managing Director,  
Accenture Applied  
Intelligence

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 towards 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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