



Caring for employees = Caring for business

Four ways to ensure health worker
wellbeing and better business



COVID-19 has accelerated healthcare into a new era of positive change that is driving health organizations to focus more on people. That mindset should apply not only to patients, but to the workforce, too.

Employee wellbeing is often touted as vital to a thriving business—but it’s not necessarily practiced. Unsurprisingly, people often end up losing the purpose that drew them to healthcare in the first place.

The added pressures on a diverse population of healthcare workers imposed by successive waves of infection coincides with major shifts in the expectations of employers. The resulting workload coupled with anxiety and depression at work is carrying over into home lives—through potential exposure and a simultaneous lack of time with family and friends. While unprecedented in recent memory, COVID-19 won’t be the last external strain on healthcare systems. Now there’s even stronger evidence that focusing on healthcare workers’ overall wellbeing is not only right ethically, it’s smart business too.

A new survey has revealed the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic shocked and overwhelmed healthcare systems around the world¹:



Six dimensions of the “Net Better Off” framework

Accenture’s **Care to do Better** research across multiple industries in ten different countries has demonstrated that satisfying human needs in the workplace unlocks workers’ full potential resulting in a significant positive impact on the business. The study references the Accenture “Net Better Off” framework, which quantifies human wellbeing in terms of six dimensions.

Employers that focus on these dimensions to build trusting employee relationships see a marked increase in business performance. Across all industries, companies with net better off employees can see revenue growth of five percent, even during periods of weak GDP growth—while average company revenues decline. During better times, satisfied workers create even more revenue growth.





Net Better Off in healthcare

Healthcare organizations need to pay attention to their employees and act right now because, according to our multi-country study, the healthcare industry faces a 26 percent gap between workforce expectations and what employers actually provide in terms of the Net Better Off framework. Healthcare providers risk losing important skills to other sectors.

The research demonstrates that the gap is largely due to a misunderstanding of what exactly drives employee satisfaction and feeling net better off. Employers seem to be neglecting some important dimensions. While CXOs give the “hard” dimensions (financial and employable) attention and believe that is enough, they are failing to deliver on the human dimensions, which are just as important.

The expectation gap is also a business issue—forward thinking or modern industry leaders are paying more attention to workers’ wellbeing. As they make the shift, healthcare organizations have an opportunity to transcend typical C-suite responses and consider both internal workplace and external community sources of employee wellbeing improvement.

There’s a growing trend for healthcare workers (61 percent) to expect their employers to make them net better off. With just 35 percent of the healthcare C-suite thinking the same, that leaves a 26 percent gap. While healthcare’s employee expectation gap is narrower than those of other industries, it does present health CHROs and CXOs with an opportunity to reevaluate their workforce experience programs. While the initial research was prior to COVID-19, healthcare worker studies during COVID-19 reinforce the presence of the overall gap.

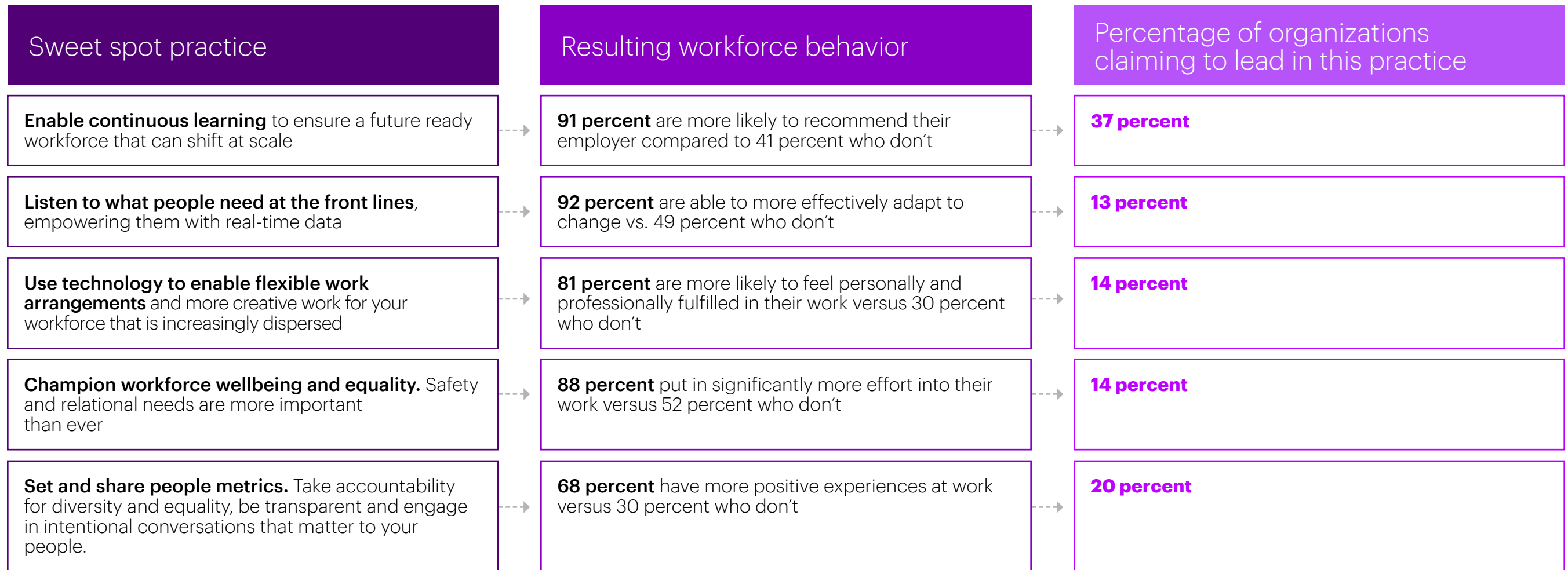
Five sweet spots = satisfied workers = enhanced patient health and experience

The Net Better Off dimensions hold true
across all workforces, not just healthcare.

Of the six dimensions that inspire worker potential, most companies are investing in just two: financial and employable. Underinvestment in the others (purposeful, emotional & mental, relational, and physical) leaves significant worker potential untapped. Some seem trapped in old school incentive patterns—it's not just the money and being in demand that makes people happy and productive. "Soft" human dimensions are key to employee feelings of wellbeing.



To help leaders address all dimensions that matter for employee happiness, we recommend five key practices which, with sufficient focus, could create a five percent revenue growth. Conversely, a lack of investment in these sweet spots could lead to a five percent revenue decline:



Stress could drive healthcare workers to other industries

The global pandemic has had an impact on both physical and mental health, especially among healthcare workers. High burnout rates and extreme fatigue are common effects of extended working hours, high patient mortality rates and increased risk to their own health—particularly among those working in long-term care facilities. About 40 percent of COVID-19-related deaths have happened in long-term care facilities, and exhaustion among nursing home staff is critical.²

There are [five different mindset shifts](#) emerging from societal response to COVID-19, which also impact workforce expectations. Crucial to understanding these mindsets is the distinction between confidence and trust. As healthcare providers aim to reduce the employee expectation gap in terms of being

net better off, it is vital to identify areas where both confidence and trust can be improved. This is even more important at a time when providers face additional financial burdens with direct impacts on the workforce via layoffs and furloughs. An illustrative study of providers across Massachusetts found the financial impact of the pandemic has caused a 20.6 percent reduction of staffing across all types of health providers.³ The study showed that all types of healthcare organizations faced greater reduction in revenue than expenses. The stress on employees creates a risk of people with highly valued transferable skills moving to other industries. Healthcare's C-suite is responding, however, with a growing number of CHROs recognizing their role in meeting workforce needs.

An illustrative study of providers across Massachusetts found the financial impact of the pandemic has caused a 20.6 percent reduction of staffing across all types of health providers.³

Why net better off employees matter more than ever for healthcare providers

To better help CHROs understand and address the needs of healthcare workers across all job types, we've expressed them in terms of three job types: physicians (non-unionized), nurses (unionized) and patient attendants.

Together, these categories account for nearly 70 percent of the average hospital workforce in the U.S. They face regular and direct COVID-19 exposure and range (in the U.S.) from physicians earning over \$200k per year to support staff members earning minimum wage. CHROs have to ask themselves how to keep these employees feeling net better off in order to retain them. If employers are addressing the financial and employable aspects of being net better off, in what ways are they neglecting the others (purposeful, emotional & mental, relational, and physical), and how can they be more effectively addressed?

What actions, policy changes and workplace practices can be adjusted to meet the human needs of an overstretched healthcare workforce?



Let's introduce the three personas:



The physician

Meet David, a physician dedicated to serving disadvantaged populations and improving health outcomes in low-income communities. David started his medical career determined to reduce health disparities by serving both the elderly and low-income populations. He currently works for a health system-owned medical group in the largest city in the Northeast. While he is passionate about his current position, his fatigue has him considering an administrative job instead.



David brings home \$250,000 a year—a high earner in his community.

In a typical workday, David spends a significant amount of his time in face-to-face meetings with patients and colleagues. He has the freedom to make important clinical and business decisions, and those decisions directly impact the practice's results and financial bottom line.

David became a physician because he is both thorough and social. He pays particular attention to detail and has honed his acute analytical skills to near perfection through medical studies and years of diagnosing illness.

Relationships, achievement, and recognition are all important motivations for David.

COVID-19 has challenged David professionally and personally, forcing him to rethink his choices.

Some patients are concerned about the pandemic and are not scheduling visits. Like 81 percent of physicians, David's employer has seen a 32 percent revenue reduction while simultaneously facing unplanned expenditures to ensure a safe medical environment.⁴ They have reduced administrative staff hours to stay afloat, placing more administrative pressure on clinical staff. It isn't clear how much longer David will remain with the group.

The strain is taking its toll on David—which is unsurprising because even before COVID-19, Accenture research estimated that the annual cost of physician burnout to the U.S. healthcare system is \$32 billion, including \$18 billion in lost productivity.⁵ The pandemic has made things even worse.

He has started investigating job options, something he has seen peers doing in the last year. He is trying to soldier on, but the cost to relationships, his own mental wellbeing and professional satisfaction continues to grow.



The nurse

Introducing Nancy, a registered nurse, primarily working in a large city hospital's emergency department in a southern state.

Nancy has a bachelor's degree and earns \$73,300 annually.

In a typical year, Nancy's job involves taking medical histories from patients and their families, administering life-saving medications prescribed by physicians, and ongoing trauma patient monitoring.

Her cooperative attitude and dependability are critical as she works with patients, doctors, assistants and non-clinical staff members throughout her day. She prides herself on acting with precision and accuracy when helping a trauma patient.

While considering her professional opportunities, Nancy was drawn to nursing because she is passionate about caring for others, while also having a desire for a social and conventional workplace. She values relationships, supportive workplaces, and is achievement driven.

As her hospital began responding to COVID-19, Nancy was quickly reassigned to a COVID-19 unit. After a year, this assignment is increasingly taking its toll on Nancy.

Nancy feels emotionally exhausted, like her nursing colleagues who, on average, report a 10 percent increase in extreme emotional exhaustion.⁶

Unlike 12 percent of her peers, Nancy doesn't currently have plans to quit her job, but she is struggling and beginning to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress.



The patient attendant

Anika is a patient attendant at the largest hospital in a large midwestern city.

With her high school diploma, Anika is enthusiastic about her role and earns \$29k per year.

In her five years on the job, she has had a wide range of interactions with patients.

In a typical day, Anika disinfects equipment, adjusts beds and furniture, transports patients throughout the hospital, and disposes of biomedical waste. She knows her job is critical and takes pride in seeing patients leave the hospital recovered from their illnesses.

After graduating from high school, Anika knew she wanted to help others, but didn't have resources to seek out higher education opportunities. One of her neighbors suggested she apply to the hospital for a secure job that would offer Anika the dependable and supportive atmosphere she sought.

The past year has been incredibly challenging for Anika, like all others at her hospital. While she knew her role could expose her to diseases, COVID-19 has made that a stark reality.

Anika signed up to work on COVID-19 floors, seeing colleagues in other practices furloughed or laid off. At Anika's salary level, the thought of losing her job is more frightening than potentially contracting COVID-19.

Create a hybrid workforce strategy

Where do you start addressing David, Nancy and Anika's specific needs? Well, you start at the beginning—reassess safety and relational needs from scratch and create a hybrid workforce strategy that accounts for and meets the needs of the individuals.

As hospital systems emerge from COVID-19, they are refocusing on opportunities for front line staff to empower themselves. In one example, an organization is redesigning its scheduling processes. Front line staff will utilize technology to schedule and change their shifts, as well as request leaves of absence. The approach will increase transparency and fairness to drive workforce satisfaction while alleviating managers' administrative burden of scheduling, giving more time to focus on patient care.

Net better off through continuous learning

While David and Nancy prefer to learn in bite-sized chunks that enable them to continue working effectively, Anika prefers focused time to learn and develop her career. Learning management systems (LMS) with specialized vendors supply content to enable employers to address each individual employee's needs holistically. An effective LMS enables the employer to create individual development plans that balance worker interests and aspirations and company business needs. It identifies customized learning opportunities on potentially hundreds of topics including specific professional skills, leadership and general business acumen among others. To complement training, mentor matching tools can enable experienced workers to volunteer and be matched with those looking for coaches with specific skills.





“Net Better Off” framework:  

The LMS might also match candidates with experiential learning through job-rotation or short-term project roles and ultimately enable workers to find specific opportunities for career advancement within the company. Skills are the new currency and can enable employers to earn the kind of loyalty and trust that not only retain staff but grow them into more skilled roles rather than losing them to competitors.

A creative/innovative learning series could increase learning access for Anika—for whom upskilling is a priority. In-service training on managing new equipment and behavioral skills can extend her ability to back up nurses, for example. This could potentially improve her awareness of patient condition and improve bedside communication.

In fact, with enough training, Anika could grow her career to become a licensed practical nurse (LPN). Her employer should be looking for ways to provide that training and help her advance. As for David and Nancy, they’re more likely to be looking for updates on their existing skills through bite-sized training modules that they can access when it’s convenient and they have a moment to spare. A hybrid training solution could provide both the extended learning and the smaller learning modules needed by David and Nancy.

All ears—listen to frontline workers’ needs

We’re not talking about casual conversations in the hallway. Grassroots engagement with staff should involve understanding employees’ views by watching social media trends and talking to Anika, Nancy and David on a regular basis to help them plan ahead. Set specific times to meet with them—ask what priorities they have to juggle and be prepared to hear that work is not their number one priority. If relationships, achievement and recognition are important motivators for David, try to identify how they can be enhanced within the context of his daily workflow. Identify those individuals that have “checked out” but are staying on out of necessity.

Perhaps Nancy has lost interest because she’s not getting the social interaction she needs anymore. Find out what inspires them to get up in the morning. Once you’ve identified their passions, encourage them to pursue those and achieve life balance. Identify the passion busters and find ways to help them cope with those or mitigate them as much as practical.

Find out what inspires them to get up in the morning. Once you’ve identified their passions, encourage them to pursue those and achieve life balance.

Leverage technology where possible

One way to foster a listening environment is through effective use of technology. Use technology to augment and elevate work by fostering colleague support and community using platforms like MS Teams or Zoom. When your workers are feeling stress, it’s time for rapid prioritization of a technology roadmap to support their wellbeing. Perhaps Anika can be listening to training podcasts or accessing a mobile phone-based training portal between tasks. If she could gain a clinical qualification, perhaps she’d feel less financially vulnerable and be more likely to stay with your organization.

Net better off through wellbeing and equality

Mental health support is vital, and a culture of silence makes it hard to change. Staff members are often conditioned to keep personal problems and emotions out of their work environment. Make sure your leaders are setting an example. Watch for signs of excess employee stress and low morale, and train leaders to recognize it. When you think you are seeing it, ask.

Nursing staff churn continues to plague healthcare organizations. An October 2020 study⁷ lists various reasons, including difficult practice settings and stressful work environments. The study further concluded that a sense of belonging and supportive workplace characteristics enhances nurse retention. In all, a healthy work environment leaves your staff net better off.



Four things to do now to leave your staff (and business) better off

Ignoring the problem of burnout and extreme pressure only raises the threat of losing important skills, and the longer you wait, the greater the threat. Here are four things you can do today to alleviate the problem and ensure that Anika, Nancy and David remain with you through the crisis:

01

Find C-suite and employee allies you can talk to informally—the like-minded advocates who will spread the word among their colleagues and support you during the all-important board discussion.

02

Take a pulse on your organization’s Net Better Off “quotient” with Accenture’s [Net Better Off Diagnostic](#), be scored across the six dimensions and receive your NBO score along with insights & recommendations.



03

The only way to know that your people are net better off is to measure—create a baseline and then track progress against transparent goals. This can happen through direct conversation or indirect measurement like watching social media to understand how employees see your brand. From a business perspective, understand the numbers—calculate the cost of losing people and find clarity on your unavoidable staff turnover threshold.

04

Find a trusted, external partner who can walk alongside you through the process and save you time and trouble with proven methodologies and lessons learned from other organizations.



Be proactive about communicating to your employees about your understanding of their needs, and make sure they can see your commitment is more than lip service. Appoint C-level executives to drive implementation and ensure accountability and ramp up your efforts to retain your valuable human assets during and after the pandemic. The results will be apparent to everyone—financially and through increased market share and improved patient outcomes.

References

¹ Mental Health America, June 1 – September 1, 2020, The Mental Health of Workers in COVID-19, <https://mhanational.org/mental-health-healthcare-workers-covid-19> (accessed 30/03/2021).

² Institute for Healthcare improvement, January 12, 2021, Lessons from Nursing Home Staff to Address Burnout and Enhance Joy in Work, <http://www.ihl.org/communities/blogs/lessons-from-nursing-home-staff-to-address-burnout-and-joy-in-work> (accessed 03/03/2021).

³ [Economic and Clinical Impact of Covid-19 on Provider Practices in Massachusetts | Catalyst non-issue content \(nejm.org\)](https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2025111).

⁴ American Medical Association, July/August, 2020, COVID-19 financial impact on physician practices, [COVID-19 financial impact on physician practices | American Medical Association \(ama-assn.org\)](https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/covid-19/financial-impact) (accessed March 17, 2021).

⁵ Accenture Health, May 2019, When healers are hurting, healthcare hurts, <https://www.accenture.com/us-en/insights/health/when-healers-hurt> (accessed March 10, 2021).

⁶ ScienceDirect, January-February 2021, Impact of nurse burnout on organizational and position turnover, [Impact of nurse burnout on organizational and position turnover - ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S089718972030063X) (Access March 17, 2021).

⁷ Anita C. Reinhardt et al, October 2020, *Why nurses stay: Analysis of the registered nurse workforce and the relationship to work environments*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S089718972030063X>, accessed January 29, 2021.

About the authors



Sig Shirodkar

sig.shirodkar@accenture.com

Sig is a Managing Director with Accenture. He is the North America Talent & Organization/Human Potential lead for Healthcare. Sig has nearly 25 years of consulting experience serving payer, provider, life science and state/local health clients across varying transformation initiatives.



Kristen Hines

kristen.hines@accenture.com

Kristen is a Managing Director for Talent & Organization in Accenture's Strategy practice. Kristen is on Accenture's global leadership team for CEO Transformation Change and leads the North America Inclusion & Diversity practice. She brings over two decades of experience across a variety of clients and industries, with expertise in Health and the Public Sector.



Stacy Blanchard

stacy.blanchard@accenture.com

Stacy is a Senior Managing Director leading Accenture's U.S. Strategy and Consulting business in the West across 12 industries, seven functions and six practices as a part of Accenture's New Growth Model. Stacy has led a number of healthcare organizations through complex transformational changes in her career and maintains close advisory relationships with many of her executive clients. Prior to this she led Accenture Strategy's North America Talent & Organization business.



Jennifer Hammond

jennifer.hammond@accenture.com

Jennifer Hammond is a Senior Manager with Accenture's Talent & Organization/Human Potential practice. With over 20 years of experience, Jennifer is a strategic and top-performing Fortune 30 executive with extensive business and human resource experience.



Christina Murtaugh

christina.murtaugh@accenture.com

Christina Murtaugh is a Manager with Accenture's Talent & Organization/Human Potential practice. Over more than ten years, Christina's collaborative partnerships with clients have inculcated organizational empathy and delightful employee experiences to enable digital-first enterprises.

About the Care to do Better Research

The Accenture Research program was built on four proprietary research initiatives:

- A survey of 15,665 workers **(including 1031 from healthcare, 602 in the US)** across skill levels and generations from a range of large and small companies: 30 percent were management workers.
- A survey of 3,200+ C-level executives **(including 180 from healthcare, 108 in the US)**: 50 percent were HR decision makers and 50 percent, other CXOs.

Both surveys covered 10 countries (Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Spain, Singapore, United Kingdom and United States) and 15 industries (Aerospace & Defense, Banking, Communications, Consumer Goods & Services, Energy (Oil and Gas), Freight and Logistics, Health, Insurance, Media, Public Sector, Retail, Technology (High Tech), Travel, U.S. Federal Government, Utilities). These were carried out between October and November 2019.

- A follow-up survey was conducted in the months of April – July 2020 with 5,400 global workers and 700 C-suite executives.
- 35 in-depth interviews involving CHROs, CEOs and academic experts, conducted by Accenture Research and third parties.

The research was followed by econometric modeling to determine the relationship between Net Better Off and companies' revenues.

About Accenture Health

From the back office to the doctor's office, Accenture's Health practice combines unmatched experience, business and clinical insights with innovative technologies to help clients around the world embrace the power of change to deliver more effective, efficient and affordable healthcare. To learn more, visit www.accenture.com/health.

About Accenture

Accenture is a global professional services company with leading capabilities in digital, cloud and security. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries, we offer Strategy and Consulting, Interactive, Technology and Operations services—all powered by the world's largest network of Advanced Technology and Intelligent Operations centers. Our 537,000 people deliver on the promise of technology and human ingenuity every day, serving clients in more than 120 countries. We embrace the power of change to create value and shared success for our clients, people, shareholders, partners and communities. Visit us at www.accenture.com.