We need a hero: HR and the ‘next normal’ workplace

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Abstract

During the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees worked from home in record numbers and enjoyed extraordinarily high levels of autonomy. Now, as employers reopen their doors, we can build on those gains to create better workplaces than the ones we left behind. HR has a window of opportunity in which to develop psychologically safe workplaces, trust-based employment relationships and socially connected workforces. But progress towards better workplaces hangs on a few critical adjustments in the HR researcher–practitioner relationship. HR researchers must work with HR practitioners to identify organization-level interventions and examine their simultaneous influence on employee and employer outcomes. HR practitioners must create sandboxes where those interventions can be pilot tested, and resist their instinctive urge to establish formalised structures and develop monitoring systems.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, psychological safety, researcher-practitioner partnerships, social connectedness, trust-based employment

1 | INTRODUCTION

I sometimes think of HR as the disciplinary equivalent of Clark Kent: mild-mannered, dependable, unassuming. But what if that was just a cover? What if, just like Clark Kent, HR was biding its time, waiting for the right moment to dash into a telephone booth and emerge as a superhero? Academic journal articles rarely evoke a superhero in the opening paragraph, but lately I am finding this analogy to be particularly apt, because Clark Kent personifies the parallel challenges—and opportunities—faced by HR researchers and HR practitioners. The questions that we study as HR researchers focus on the operational and practical elements of life in the workplace, so they might seem
Practitioner Notes

What is currently known?

1. The COVID-19 pandemic is driving dramatic changes in work and workplaces, with an emphasis on small teams, flexible work and remote workers.
2. HR researcher–practitioner partnerships can leverage these changes to design meaningful work with social connectedness.
3. Unfortunately, organisations are already implementing more formalised flexibility policies and greater levels of employee surveillance, risking the gains achieved during the pandemic.

What does this article add?

1. Identifies the opportunities created by COVID-19 to design better workplaces.
2. Links those time-urgent opportunities to robust research foundations.
3. Encourages HR academic–practitioner partnerships to engage in small-scale experiments to identify innovative strategies.

Implications for practitioners

1. Physical safety initiatives can foster psychological safety.
2. Flexible work delivers the greatest value when aligned with worker autonomy and trust-based employment.
3. Jobs can be designed to create social connectedness within teams and with clients.

mundane to other academics. In organisations, the HR unit is often viewed as dull and bureaucratic. But Clark Kent, and his superhero alter ego, also embody the transformational power of our discipline. HR is usually about day-to-day people management; yet, at the right moment, HR is at the forefront of revolutionary change and organisational reinvention. Like Clark Kent, HR researchers and HR practitioners are well positioned to leverage a window of opportunity when it arises. That window is often short, so their actions need to be swift.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic turned workplaces inside out. All around the world, employers released workers from their downtown office buildings and sent them to work remotely from their kitchen tables and spare bedrooms. Now, after months of isolation, many employers are unlocking their doors and inviting workers back into the office. In their living rooms and on social media, people are talking about ‘returning to normal’. But those ‘normal’ workplaces had plenty of undesirable characteristics: endless meetings, paperwork, bureaucracy. Isn’t there an opportunity here to re-invent the workplace to be an improvement over the one we left behind? Some pundits are describing a ‘new normal’ but I prefer the ‘next normal’. ‘Next normal’ acknowledges that life is dynamic, and whatever ‘normal’ looked like at the start of 2020, it may be different in 2021 and beyond. The next normal could be the best normal we’ve seen yet. But making it a reality is likely to require some re-imagining of the relationship between HR researchers and HR practitioners.

2 | WORKPLACES IN THE NEXT NORMAL: A WORLD OF POSSIBILITY

I’ll start by stating the obvious: in a pandemic, we need to keep people physically safe. But the steps we take during the return-to-office transition have enormous potential to create and nurture psychologically safe workplaces, trust-based employment relationships and socially connected workforces.
2.1 Psychologically safe workplaces

2.1.1 The COVID-19 call to action

In order to comply with social distancing requirements, companies might only be able to accommodate a proportion of their staff in the office at one time. Some employers are establishing A/B teams to minimise contagion risks; in a given week, half the workforce might be in the office and half are working remotely (Baird & Ker, 2020; Smith, 2020). Other employers envision a hub-and-spoke model that enables workers to access small-size offices closer to home (N. Berg, 2020). Limiting the number of employees in a physical location creates scheduling challenges but it also creates an opportunity for organisations to foster psychological safety alongside physical safety. Psychological safety is a shared belief that the work unit is a safe place for members to take interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety has demonstrated links to employees’ work engagement, task performance, citizenship behaviour, organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Frazier et al., 2017); it also has implications for organisational performance (Baer & Frese, 2003). Yet, before COVID-19, only about half of employees around the world described their workplace as a ‘psychologically safe and healthy environment’ (Ipsos, 2012).

2.1.2 The HR opportunity

In order to get to psychological safety, HR practitioners first need to establish physical safety climates within their organisations. Safety climates emerge when workers agree that their personal safety is a high priority at their workplace (Zohar, 2000); an organisation fosters these perceptions through its safety policies, procedures and practices (Griffin & Neal, 2000). HR would need to be completely unambiguous that employee safety is the highest priority during the return-to-office transition (Ely & Meyerson, 2010). Emphasising physical safety during a pandemic might sound obvious, but organisations often position safety goals alongside productivity goals as equivalent priorities; under pressure of tight deadlines or demanding clients, safety goals can slide into second place. An organisation-level safety climate is more likely to be established when a series of ‘HR events’ communicates and reinforces the safety message. In a typical workplace, employees experience an average of two significant HR events each workweek (Chacko & Conway, 2017); in the COVID-19 context, HR events might include the delivery of safety-themed organisational ‘swag’ (e.g., branded masks or sanitiser sprays; McGregor, 2020) or workplace cleaning demonstrations. Like any climate, a stronger safety climate will emerge when employees are directly engaged in developing safety procedures (Lee, Huang et al., 2019) and supervisors reinforce the safety message (Frazier et al., 2017). HR practitioners have a wealth of experience with employee consultation and supervisory training, but the timing of these events needs to be carefully coordinated so the organisation’s safety message consistently cascades down through the organisation.

Mental health professionals have noted the ‘simmering anxiety’ generated by the pandemic (Sethi, 2020), and anxiety heightens our natural desire for affiliation (Sarnoff & Zimbardo, 1961). The next normal’s small-size offices can operate as affiliation magnets, because the ‘real action’ for employees happens within their localised units (Ashforth, 2016, p. 366). Within these small office groupings, there are direct lines of sight between employees, so physical safety can be pursued as a collective goal rather than a personal one; in a collective, workers assume responsibility for one another’s safety (Crocker et al., 2010). Physical safety behaviours can be repeatedly modelled (‘I’m cleaning this equipment after I’ve used it’) and paired with a collectivist attribution (‘I’m cleaning this equipment because I care about your well-being’). A collectivist approach to physical safety encourages employees to be more public about their mistakes and find ways to avoid them in the future (‘I missed cleaning that piece of equipment; we need a checklist to make sure it doesn’t happen again’).
But the potential of small-size offices goes beyond their effectiveness in containing the risk of COVID-19 contagion. A collectivist commitment to physical safety tightens bonds between employees and gives workers more confidence about expressing their feelings and providing one another with emotional support, laying the groundwork for psychological safety. Ely and Meyerson (2010, p. 28) demonstrated how an organisational commitment to physical safety enabled oil rig workers to practise new ways of interacting that made them ‘kinder, gentler people’. If psychological safety can be generated in macho environments like offshore oil production platforms (Ely & Meyerson, 2010), it can also be created in high-rise office buildings. Imagine the potential of a physically and psychologically safe workforce in the next normal: Once employees recognise that their mistakes will not be punished or denigrated, they can begin to be more authentic about other vulnerabilities; these might include personal characteristics (sexual orientation, disabilities) or personal situations (a family history of alcoholism or domestic violence). Employees are usually reluctant to disclose personal information that might cast doubts on their competence or confirm negative stereotypes (Phillips et al., 2009). But concealing such information is effortful (Mohr et al., 2019). Psychological safety lifts a burden from employees’ shoulders and frees cognitive and emotional resources, so the entire organisation can benefit from higher levels of member well-being, work engagement and performance (Cha et al., 2019).

2.2 | Trust-based employment relationships

2.2.1 | The COVID-19 call to action

During the pandemic, employees haven’t just been working from home, maintaining their traditional 9-5 schedules. They’ve managed their online access around partners’ work schedules, children’s online learning schedules and caregiving responsibilities. Remote employees experienced unprecedented levels of autonomy and temporal fungibility (Bluedorn & Standifer, 2006), swapping activities across days and substituting evening hours if day hours were unavailable (Borpujari et al., 2020). Work from home is likely to be a permanent part of the next normal. In Australia, two-thirds of survey respondents expect to spend more time working at home after the pandemic (Lunn, 2020); three in five US workers who worked from home during the pandemic want to continue to work remotely as much as possible (Brenan, 2020). Some employers (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) say that employees can work from home ‘forever’ if they want to; others say workers may ‘never’ return to the office (Swan, 2020). However, the pandemic-generated alignment between remote work and employee autonomy is at risk, because managers are less enthusiastic about work from home than their non-managerial subordinates (Kirchner et al., 2021; PwC, 2021). Accepting that at least some work from home is inevitable in the next normal, employers are instituting additional monitoring capacity (Cutter et al., 2020). Surveillance of work from home is already a ‘mega trend’ (Trinca, 2020). Unabated, this trend will constrain temporal fungibility and reduce the value of work-from-home arrangements; ‘when based’ flexibility has a greater influence on employee satisfaction than ‘where based’ flexibility of location (Cotti et al., 2014).

2.2.2 | The HR opportunity

HR has long advocated for flexible work, so employers’ new-found acceptance of work from home could be viewed as a positive step. But HR practitioners need to resist organisational pressures to closely monitor remote workers and limit their autonomy. At best, monitoring is a nuisance. During the pandemic, employees perceived employers who sent too many emails or required extra timesheets to be unhelpful (Gray et al., 2020). Over the long run, monitoring damages the quality of employment relationships. An employer who misaligns one organisational practice (e.g., work from home) with another (e.g., surveillance) sends mixed trust signals and evokes psychological
reactance from employees, expressed in extra-long breaks or productivity slowdowns (Jensen & Raver, 2012). These counterproductive employee behaviours would confirm employers’ worst fears and both the psychological and productivity benefits of flexible work would be lost.

Instead, HR practitioners can build on the pandemic experience to move their organisations closer to trust-based work (OECD, 2020) and develop evaluation systems that are based on tangible performance indicators. Workplaces usually reward employees for face time—demonstrated by hours in the physical workplace and visible busyness (Williams et al., 2013). In trust-based work, employers relinquish control over working time and assess performance solely on outcomes (Cristea & Leonardi, 2019). Employees with more control over their work hours report lower levels of stress (Henly & Lambert, 2014) and are more committed to their employers (Lyness et al., 2012). Trust-based work boosts autonomy for both on-site and off-site workers. Therefore, an organisation that makes a commitment to trust-based work is likely to improve productivity and well-being for the entire workforce, not just for employees working from home (Clegg & Spencer, 2007). Trust can be conveyed through HR activities that include emphasising trust during new-hire inductions, giving employees responsibility for monitoring their own attendance, adopting policies that permit personal use of company laptops and other equipment, and prioritising time to pursue ‘passion projects’ or exercise (Eberl et al., 2012; Kotler, 2021).

Importantly, trust-based employment generates positive outcomes for organisations above and beyond the benefits of traditional flexible work arrangements (Godart et al., 2016). In particular, trust-based work dramatically changes the attributions made for flexible work arrangements. Many employers still view flexibility as an accommodation designed to fit work around an individual employee’s family responsibilities. These ‘exceptions’ re-affirm traditional work hours and the office workplace as the norm (Correll et al., 2014). As a result, even in organisations that ostensibly support employee flexibility, managers are less likely than other employees to take advantage of remote work options (Kossek et al., 1999), even when the office is a poor fit to their work demands. Managerial job descriptions emphasise strategic decision-making, a kind of deep work (Newport, 2016) that creates new value for the organisation. Deep work requires concentration; it can take 15 min or more to move into the state of intense concentration researchers call ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). And once accessed, flow is fragile and easily disrupted (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). In an office environment, a manager’s deep work is regularly displaced by day-to-day firefighting (Mintzberg, 2018). Sometimes the best place to do deep work is at home, where the manager can control interruptions (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). Only a system-wide commitment to flexibility (Kossek et al., 2015) and reason-neutral flexibility policies (Williams & Multhaup, 2018) will encourage managers—along with the subordinates who use those managers as behavioural role models—to work in the place that provides the best support to their work objectives.

## 2.3 Socially connected workforces

### 2.3.1 The COVID-19 call to action

A company-sponsored survey of more than 6000 EY employees working from home during the pandemic showed ‘a split down the middle on whose well-being has improved and whose has gone backwards’ (Tadros, 2020, p. 30). This divide is not a new phenomenon. Studies published long before the pandemic demonstrated that working from home can increase positive emotions like happiness and joy, but these emotional boosts are most likely to be experienced by employees who are highly connected outside of work (Anderson et al., 2015). During the pandemic, we saw the divide more vividly: The highest levels of loneliness were reported by remote workers in single-person living arrangements (Kulik & Sinha, 2020). Working from home gives employees flexibility to strengthen out-of-work connections (e.g., to have lunch with a friend or read a story with a child). But if employees do not have those outside connections, contact with co-workers is an essential source of support.
2.3.2 The HR opportunity

In the next normal, one way HR practitioners can protect worker well-being is to create more opportunity for employees to choose where they work; ideally, employees with the strongest out-of-work ties would choose to work remotely and employees with weaker out-of-work ties would opt for the office. Indeed, employee choice has a major impact on whether work from home has psychological and productivity benefits (Bloom et al., 2015). However, working from home is contagious—people who initially are uninterested in working from home begin to do it because their co-workers are working from home (Rockmann & Pratt, 2015). As more and more people work from home, the office will become increasingly impersonal and less likely to deliver value to the employees who crave connections. Quoting a senior manager, Trinca (2020) asks: ‘if you only have 30 percent of staff back, is that an office or is that just a very quiet place to work?’ When organisations encourage remote work, they risk fostering employee loneliness (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018)—a serious concern because loneliness’s association with mortality and disease puts it in the same league as smoking, obesity and alcoholism (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017).

Managerial concerns that remote work reduces collaboration and slows employee development are creating interest in hybrid models, where employees work 3 days in the office and 2 at home (Cutter, 2020; Kitney, 2020). Researchers have recommended these hybrid models (New Zealand Work Research Institute, 2013) to achieve the benefits of working from home (more focused time for deep work) alongside those of the office environment (more collaboration with co-workers) (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). Hybrid models could create opportunities for spontaneous conversations, reducing loneliness and boosting employee well-being. Employees who participate in office chit-chat experience more positive emotions, go out of their way to help co-workers, and end the workday in a better frame of mind (Methot et al., 2020); these interactions are especially important for younger and early career employees (Lindzon, 2021).

However, the benefits of hybrid models will only be realised if work-based social connectedness is built into the organisational culture. Research demonstrates that interrelated HR policies and practices create relationship-oriented cultures (Six & Sorge, 2008): value statements that express the organisation’s commitment to its people, new-hire induction activities that use relational language, organisational training that teaches employees to constructively manage interpersonal conflict, and norms that encourage paying public compliments to co-workers. These HR activities will nurture relational cultures within hybrid models as organisations organise the work-from-home and work-in-office scheduling. Flexible work arrangements can—and should—be designed collectively at the team level (Leana et al., 2009; Tims et al., 2013). For example, those psychologically safe A/B teams could be empowered to launch a customised redesign of their interactive work, making team members jointly responsible for ensuring that the design would be equally effective when they worked in or out of the office (Bernstein et al., 2020).

Further, work-based connections do not need to be limited to co-workers. Employees are motivated to perform well when they have direct access to the internal and external ‘clients’ who receive their work (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), or to the ‘beneficiaries’ impacted by their work (Grant, 2008). But many of these connections have been lost or strained as a result of the pandemic’s social distancing requirements (ABC News, 2020; Convery, 2020). HR practitioners need to build relationships directly into the next normal’s jobs, reconnecting workers with the people they serve and giving workers wider latitude to meet the needs of their customers, clients and beneficiaries. For example, Australian telecoms company Optus accelerated an Experts@Home programme that is likely to continue beyond pandemic lockdowns (Boley, 2020; Fernyhough, 2020). The programme gives employees a technology toolkit that lets them work from home, but it also creates more meaningful jobs (by promoting mental health and purpose to staff) and better customer service (by giving staff more latitude to resolve customer issues). Call centres’ HR practices are ‘notorious’ for generating employee absenteeism, burnout and turnover (Lee, Batt, & Moynihan, 2019, p. 531). HR might be the force that re-positions call centre work as desirable, by simultaneously giving employees flexibility to work from home and the opportunity for meaningful customer contact. The academic literature provides tantalising—but stand-alone—examples of empowering call centre employees to act authentically and customise the service that they deliver to customers (Cable et al., 2013).
3 | GETTING THERE FROM HERE

Now that we have imagined the next normal, we need to lay out what it will take to get us there. Let's start by considering the role HR researchers will play in designing the next normal workplace.

3.1 | HR's research agenda

In order for HR practitioners to build psychological safety, trust and social connectedness into the next normal workplace, HR researchers will need to expand the evidence database they deliver to practitioners in several ways.

3.1.1 | Cross-organisation research

Psychological safety, trust and social connectedness are constructs with strong theoretical foundations, backed by robust empirical evidence of their value. But these are usually conceptualised as group-level constructs, developed within organisational teams with stable membership and explicit boundaries (Mortensen & Hass, 2018). As a result, the advice HR researchers can deliver to practitioners is limited to a few isolated HR activities (e.g., select applicants whose personality predisposes them to care about psychological safety or train supervisors to support psychological safety within the teams they lead; Frazier et al., 2017). HR practitioners' ability to influence psychological safety, trust and social connectedness can be broadened if HR researchers acknowledge that these constructs also operate at the organisational level (Baer & Frese, 2003; Carmeli, 2007) and make a concerted effort to identify their organisational-level antecedents (Newman et al., 2017).

Over the last two decades, researchers have emphasised employee perceptions of HR practices (Beijer et al., 2021). This emphasis has focused research attention on the meso-level (where we observe cross-unit variations in employee reactions to the same HR programmes), crowding out macro-level investigations (where we observe cross-organisation variations in the outcomes of different HR programmes) (Kulik, 2014). Understanding HR's role in initiating and maintaining psychological safety, trust and social connectedness at the organisational level is especially urgent when work teams are increasingly fluid, overlapping and dispersed (Mortensen & Hass, 2018) and COVID-19 is eroding employees' sense of an 'organisational we' (Ashforth, 2020). Directing research attention to organisation-level versions of these constructs might have a bonus benefit of expanding the international HR database. Many European (e.g., Spain, France, Italy) and Asia Pacific (e.g., Australia, China) economies are dominated by small-to-medium enterprises (ESPON, 2020; McCrindle, 2021; Xinhua, 2019) within which employees are likely to have a shared organisational identity that facilitate organisation-level climates.

3.1.2 | Multiple outcomes

The literature has long recognised that HR practitioners' multiple roles encompass employee champion and organisational strategic partner (Ulrich, 1997): practitioners care about employee well-being and organisational performance. HR practitioners' ability to influence psychological safety, trust and social connectedness will be better supported if HR researchers commit to the same dual-outcome focus.

Many management areas are characterised by a micro–macro divide (Eckardt et al., 2019); in HR, micro researchers are most likely to study employee well-being and macro researchers most likely to study organisational performance. Either approach misses the opportunity to understand the simultaneous—and potentially divergent—impact of HR activities on employee and organisational outcomes. Psychological safety, trust and social connectedness often do have positive implications for organisational performance (e.g., Baer & Frese, 2003; Godart
et al., 2016; Lyness et al., 2012). But HR researchers should not rely exclusively on a ‘mutual gains’ perspective (Guest, 2017) and assume that the HR activities that benefit employee well-being will automatically improve organisational performance. Psychological safety, trust and social connectedness may not always lead to short-term performance benefits, but they nonetheless make long-term employment more sustainable for an organisation's employees, and increase the organisation's odds of survival.

3.1.3 | Longitudinal research

Multiple waves of data collection would enable HR researchers to better understand the emergence and maintenance of employee well-being alongside organisational performance (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). Changes in psychological safety, trust and social connectedness can be treated as outcomes at multiple levels of analysis (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010) and compared across organisations adopting different HR activities. Longitudinal research will be especially important in the next normal because the HR innovations adopted during COVID-19 have different short- and long-term consequences across employee groups. We might have expected work from home to benefit women, but COVID-19 imposed heavier burdens on work-from-home mothers than on work-from-home fathers (Craig & Churchill, 2020). And work from home may have long-term career disadvantages for women, whose weak-tie networks need constant nurturing (Milliken et al., 2020). The negative effects of HR activities on employees’ physiological and psychological well-being, in particular, may not be visible until a significant amount of time has passed (Han et al., 2020).

Longitudinal research is also important in understanding the impact of HR activities in different national contexts. Most of the research on psychological safety, for example, has been conducted in Western cultures characterised by low levels of collectivism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001). The inter-organisational variance in psychological safety may be greater (and the consequences of HR interventions that enable psychological safety even more important) in cultures that attach higher costs to individual divergence from societal norms (Newman et al., 2017).

3.2 | HR practitioner mindset

What about the HR practitioners who are the end users of academic research? This is a critical moment: Companies need to hold on to their best talent, the employees who helped them pivot through the worst part of the crisis and who have proven their resilience. And that requires a very specific mindset in the next normal.

3.2.1 | Take the long view

Commentators are advising HR managers to be ‘hard-headed’ and keep their eye on the bottom line (The Economist, 2020a). In economic downturns, organisations usually reduce their investments in travel, catering, training and development, and other activities that employees value (Dolan et al., 2020). HR practitioners may be able to champion building psychological safety, trust and social connectedness as low-cost activities that make the workplace a more attractive environment as other cuts are implemented. Employees say that they would change employers to get access to flexible work arrangements (Boleyn, 2020); some are prepared to sacrifice pay for jobs that deliver better fit, balance and meaning (Feintzeig, 2020).

People are usually the largest proportion of an organisation’s fixed costs, and the economic consequences of COVID-19 are motivating some employers to retrench, downsize or restructure. An organisation’s ‘relational reserves’ of psychological safety, trust and social connectedness play a particularly important role in surviving
economic downturns (Gittell et al., 2006). The long-term impact of lay-offs depends on the reactions of the lay-off survivors; lay-offs are more likely to facilitate an economic recovery within workplaces characterised by trust (Bergström & Arman, 2017; Cregan et al., 2021). COVID-19 lay-offs are expected to reduce the number of managers, leaving organisations more dependent on non-managerial employees to work autonomously (Trinca, 2021). Therefore, the investments that HR practitioners make in supporting psychological safety, trust and social connectedness will have significant organisational benefits even if their employers are forced to restructure.

3.2.2 | Avoid dichotomous thinking and negativity bias

At the national level, we are engaged in debates about whether countries should prioritise public safety or the economy (Foster & Godfrey-Smith, 2020; The Economist, 2020b). The same kind of dichotomising language is seeping into the HR discussion: Will employees work from home or in the office? Dichotomous thinking will narrow the options that employers consider, and make them less agile when circumstances demand another pivot (McDonald & Bremner, 2020). For example, an organisation that wants to build trust might frame this as a dichotomous choice (organisational control or employee autonomy), but trust can be built within carefully designed and well-implemented control systems that signal the organisation’s predictability, fairness and reliability (Verburg et al., 2018; Weibel et al., 2016). A negativity bias is also beginning to dominate discussions, as journalists list what will be missing from the next normal workplace: handshakes, personal workspaces, shared candy jars and communal lunches (Landis-Hanley, 2020; Margolies, 2021; Singer, 2020). An over-emphasis on negative dimensions in organisational change breeds rigidity and recalcitrance (Cameron, 2008). HR practitioners need to focus instead on what we might gain in the next normal workplace, and champion its strengths, capabilities and possibilities.

3.2.3 | Resist formalisation

Organisations’ understanding of flexibility has broadened over time to encompass flexible schedules (e.g., part-time work), flexible workplaces (e.g., work from home) and flexible work arrangements (e.g., customised hours). But if there is one lesson to be learned from the pandemic, it’s that flexibility itself needs to be flexible. The full range of flexibility options will only be enabled by flexible organisations—and most organisations are decidedly not flexible. As organisations grow in size and complexity, they inevitably develop more formalised structures for control and standardisation (Hage & Aiken, 1967; Hales, 1999). HR practitioners are usually central players in the march towards formalisation; they have a talent for generating standardised job descriptions and organisational policies. But in the next normal, HR practitioners may need to ‘hold the line’ in their organisations—to resist formalisation, to not re-introduce all the meetings and checkpoints (Klammer et al., 2019), and to maintain (and grow) employee autonomy and trust. The ‘best’ organisational structure for the new normal is likely to be one that deliberately backs away from formalisation; a looser fit can develop new opportunities for innovation and impact (e.g., Sandhu & Kulik, 2019).

3.3 | Re-imagined partnerships

Everything I’ve described in this article is a big ask. Multi-organization longitudinal research with multiple outcomes is heavy lifting for HR researchers, and resisting formalization goes against all of HR practitioners’ most basic instincts. But, giving voice to a COVID-19 cliché, we’re all in this together. Designing the next normal workplace is an opportunity for HR researchers and practitioners to find new ways to partner.
3.3.1 | Design experiments

The next normal workplace might be the ideal place to design small-scale experiments that test HR innovations. HR researchers need to observe the process through which psychological safety, trust and social connectedness emerge in the workplace—and we can’t do that without real-world access to organisations. Emergent states like psychological safety, trust and social connectedness are inherently fragile (Mortensen & Hass, 2018)—practitioners won’t want to risk damaging their workforce’s well-being with a failed intervention. Experiments are unusual in the HR literature; even when the innovation relates to work flexibility (clearly an HR topic), experiments are more likely to be reported in the health or psychology journals (e.g., Bray et al., 2018). There are many opportunities to experiment in the next normal. For example, organisations are combating Zoom fatigue with meeting free days, micro-meetings and ‘no camera’ meetings (Vasel, 2020); these innovations can be introduced as short-term experiments in field settings without large investments or long-term commitments.

3.3.2 | Find actionable steps

The literature includes many empirical investigations on psychological safety, trust and social connectedness; their benefits have been neatly summarised in meta-analyses and narrative reviews (Costa et al., 2018; Frazier et al., 2017; Steffens et al., 2017). As a result, it is not difficult for HR researchers to ‘sell’ HR practitioners on the value of these constructs. The literature also includes qualitative analyses that track organisational journeys towards psychological safety (e.g., the oil rigs studied by Ely and Meyerson [2010]), trust (e.g., the apprentice programmes studied by Eberl et al. [2012]) and social connectedness (e.g., the professional consultancy studied by Six and Sorge [2008]). HR practitioners can use these case studies as aspirational targets, along with media celebrities (e.g., Patagonia is known for its ‘let my people go surfing’ philosophy that gives employees autonomy to make their own schedules; Kotler, 2021). But the action steps that HR practitioners need are often missing from the HR academic literature (Kulik, 2020) or are expressed in ways that practitioners are unlikely to find helpful (Joullié & Gould, 2021). What we are missing is the research on the effectiveness of first steps (e.g., the impact of committing to ‘all roles flex’ in recruitment material or organisational templates that require managers to provide ‘why not’ or ‘not now but when’ justifications if they decline a flexibility request; Williams, 2019).

3.3.3 | Create sandboxes

Not all organisational contexts will be receptive to HR experiments, and the organisations that need them most (larger organisations with the most formalised structures; organisations with a pre-COVID adversarial union relationship) will be most resistant. In these environments, HR researcher–practitioner partnerships may be able to create ‘sandboxes’ with temporary exemptions from the organisational bureaucracy (Pierce & Delbecq, 1977; Zmud, 1982), in which to test the impact of HR interventions. Unions can impede and resist HR proposals that they view as detrimental to their membership, but they can also champion initiatives and offer support for their implementation (P. Berg et al., 2014; Bryson et al., 2013). Scholars have noted inconsistencies in the relationship between unionisation and the implementation of work–life flexibility practices; unions are positively associated with some benefits (e.g., leave) but negatively associated with flexible hours and part-time work (P. Berg et al., 2014). Organisations can use sandboxes to signal to the union that management values the contributions of employees and is committing resources to improve the workplace environment (Pohler & Luchak, 2015); they can engage the union in prioritising the practices that are tested in the sandbox (P. Berg et al., 2014). These signals are important over the long run: Employee-focused business strategies generate more profitability in unionised firms.
than in non-unionised firms, but the opposite is true when organisations do not adopt employee-focused business strategies (Pohler & Luchak, 2015).

The HR researcher–practitioner partnerships are best positioned to identify the workforce segments who could test drive these innovations. For example, it might make sense to start by implementing HR innovations with professional and managerial employees. Managers are likely to be the first employees to return to office environments (Kitney, 2020), and it is usually easier to build flexibility and autonomy into professional roles (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). But we can’t stop there, because we need to be thinking about greater flexibility for the entire workforce. For example, shorter shifts might give hourly workers more temporal fungibility (Clarey, 2020).

4 | CONCLUSION

Circling back to my opening analogy, there’s one more way that Clark Kent reflects the shared experience of HR researchers and practitioners. Clark works in a newsroom and, like any good reporter, he is always monitoring the airwaves to find the next story. He’s data-driven and diligent about fact checking so that his superhero alter ego can step into the picture and make a positive impact. But once the drama is over, Clark returns to his desk to conscientiously document the day’s events. In the same way, our HR academic–practitioner partnerships are continuously cycling back and forth between information and action, between the theoretical and practical, between the academic literature, and the day-to-day workplace. HR academics have laid a robust research foundation, and HR practitioners are already implementing the post-COVID-19 workplace. Only their partnership will expand the HR knowledge base enough to ensure that the next normal workplace is better than the last.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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