



# BEING RESILIENT

## 5 WAYS TO STAY AGILE IN A COVID-19 VIRTUAL WORLD

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Like so many things these days, Covid-19 has made agile ways of working more difficult. Before the pandemic, the success of agile depended on co-location – the ability of cross-functional teams to conduct sprints, incorporate user feedback, and meet daily in the same office.

Now agile teams must work remotely, making certain parts of meeting their deliverables more challenging. Program Increment (PI) planning events in which more than 100 people gather to discuss and plan upcoming objectives for the next quarter must now be conducted virtually.

Developers who used to tap each other on the shoulder to troubleshoot a coding issue must have these conversations by chat or video conference. The logistics of continuing these processes remotely has led many insurers to reevaluate their organizational transformation programs and focus on completing the projects they deem critical. Others have used this time to accelerate the digitization of their business processes and move away from their brick-and-mortar distribution models.

No matter which approach insurers choose, continuing to pursue agile practices will

only help them move forward under the current circumstances. Unless they are agile, insurers can't quickly mobilize to support parts of the business experiencing spikes in demand because of Covid-19, such as billing, disability claim processing, and customer experience. Many of the changes that insurers have been forced to make, such as shifting entire workforces to operating out of their homes rather than at the office, aren't going away anytime soon – even after the immediate crisis passes.

## How to become virtually agile

In recent months, companies across industries have proven they don't need co-location to be agile. Using virtual workarounds, insurers can continue their transformation efforts and use agile ways of working to address immediate operational challenges. They can also use this time to get their houses in order by improving the architecture runway for temporarily delayed or upcoming projects. These five steps can help keep everything moving:

## 1. Provide the tools teams need for virtual collaboration.

To be successful, virtual agile teams need technology tools that enable them to chat, video conference, break into smaller groups, collaborate on whiteboards, share files and links, and maintain conversation threads. When selecting these kinds of solutions, integration is key to ensuring people don't waste time clicking in and out of different applications. Solutions such as Microsoft Teams and WebEx Teams are popular choices, as well as Google Jamboards, which can be useful for teams that do a lot of whiteboarding. Google Jamboards has a touch interface that automatically converts handwriting to text. It also allows users to insert Google documents into the board and save the board as a PDF for future reference.

## 2. Build in extra time for scrum and PI planning.

The first thing to keep in mind when managing scrum in a virtual environment is that everything will take longer because of scheduling and technology logistics.

The antidote to losing this valuable time is to use team meetings more efficiently. This means controlling cross chatter during calls, keeping everyone on topic, starting meetings on time, and requiring everyone to turn on their videos to ensure people are paying attention. At the same time, leaders need to check in on the well being of team members who may be struggling with financial, childcare, or health issues during the pandemic. Adopting a sensitive, empathetic, and flexible way of relating to each other will go a long way in building trust and organizational resilience.

Scrum masters overseeing agile teams working on their first project or large scale transformations with ambitious deadlines will also need to rethink their approach to coaching. They need to ask, "Do we have enough time to get the team where they need to go?" and adjust timelines and the frequency of their interactions accordingly. Some companies have found it helpful to expand their PI planning events from two days to three or four days to account for the extra time it takes to conduct such large meetings virtually. The success of this approach has caused many to consider

continuing to hold these events remotely after the pandemic passes to save on travel and other expenses.

## 3. Turn daily standups into a scrum of scrums and invite senior leaders.

Agile teams typically hold their own daily standups and conduct scrum of scrums only at program level involving scrum masters or ambassadors from each scrum group. However, these days it's easy for agile team members to feel more isolated and for leaders to worry that employees won't have the resources and support they need to perform their work at the same level as when they're in the office. To address these concerns, some insurers have experimented with holding a daily scrum of scrums in which all the agile teams within a portfolio meet virtually and include senior IT and business leaders. This helps leaders to see for themselves what the teams are working on and how they continue to make progress on important initiatives. This has built a stronger sense of trust and collaboration in an industry where face-time and silos are the norm.



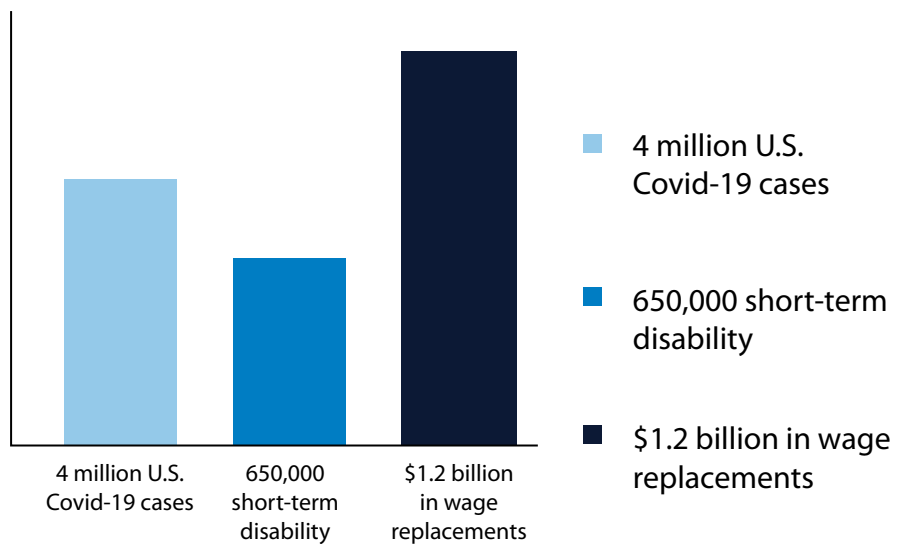




#### 4. Apply agile principles to immediate challenges.

Agile ways of working can help companies meet the demands of Covid-19, such as the surge in disability claims filed by employees who are unable to work because they've contracted the virus. Even under the low-range scenario of 4 million U.S. Covid-19 cases, there could be nearly 650,000 short-term disability claims amounting to \$1.2 billion in wage replacements, according to Integrated Benefits Institute [estimates](#).

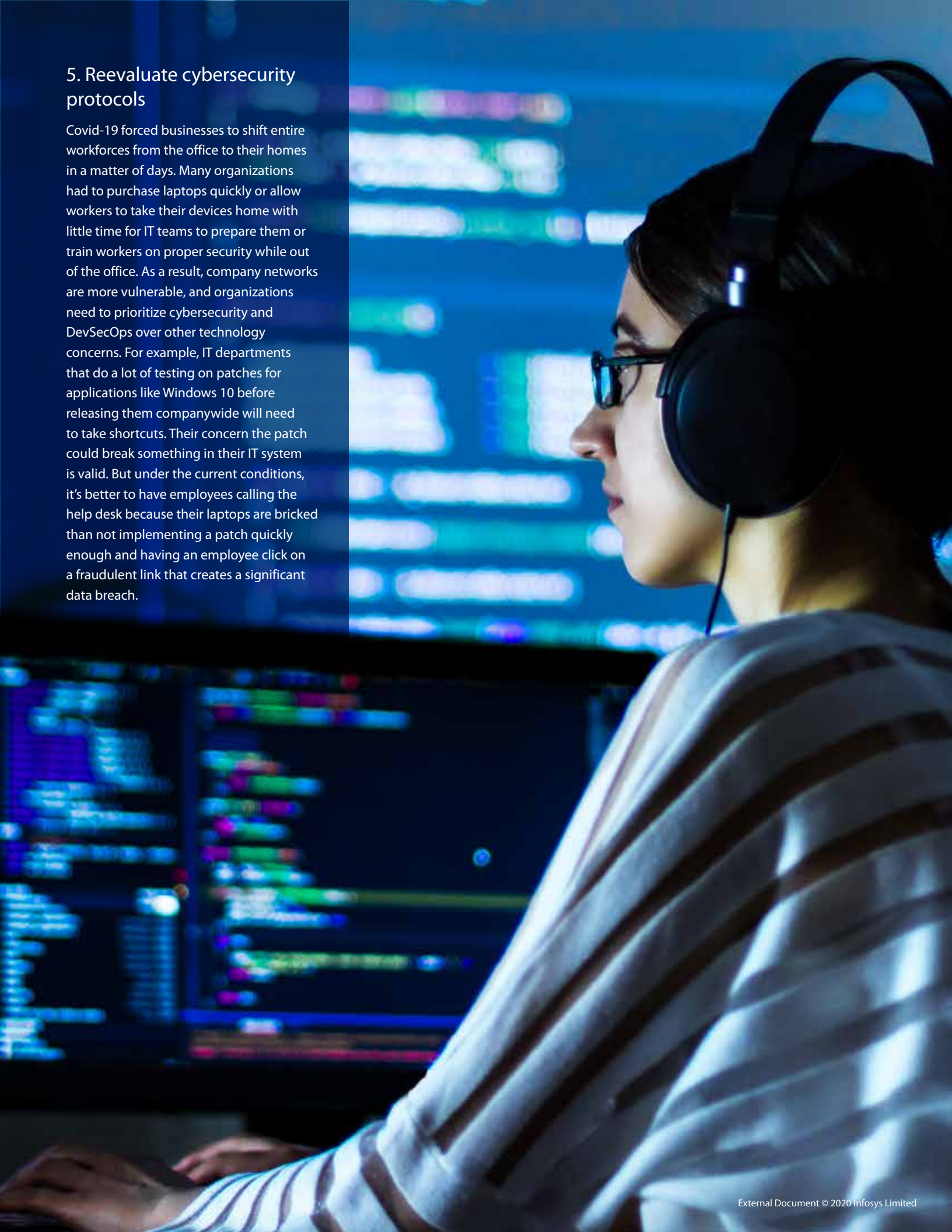
As the pandemic continues, the number of claims will grow even higher. In response, one major insurer moved agile team members from temporarily paused projects to the disability claims group to help process the higher volume of filings. Because of their cross-functional skills and exposure to different business processes from working in agile teams, these employees have adapted to the work quickly. Unlike before the pandemic, local managers are making the decisions about who to move to essential business areas without having to seek multiple approvals from the central office. That has strengthened another agile principle: empowerment.



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## 5. Reevaluate cybersecurity protocols

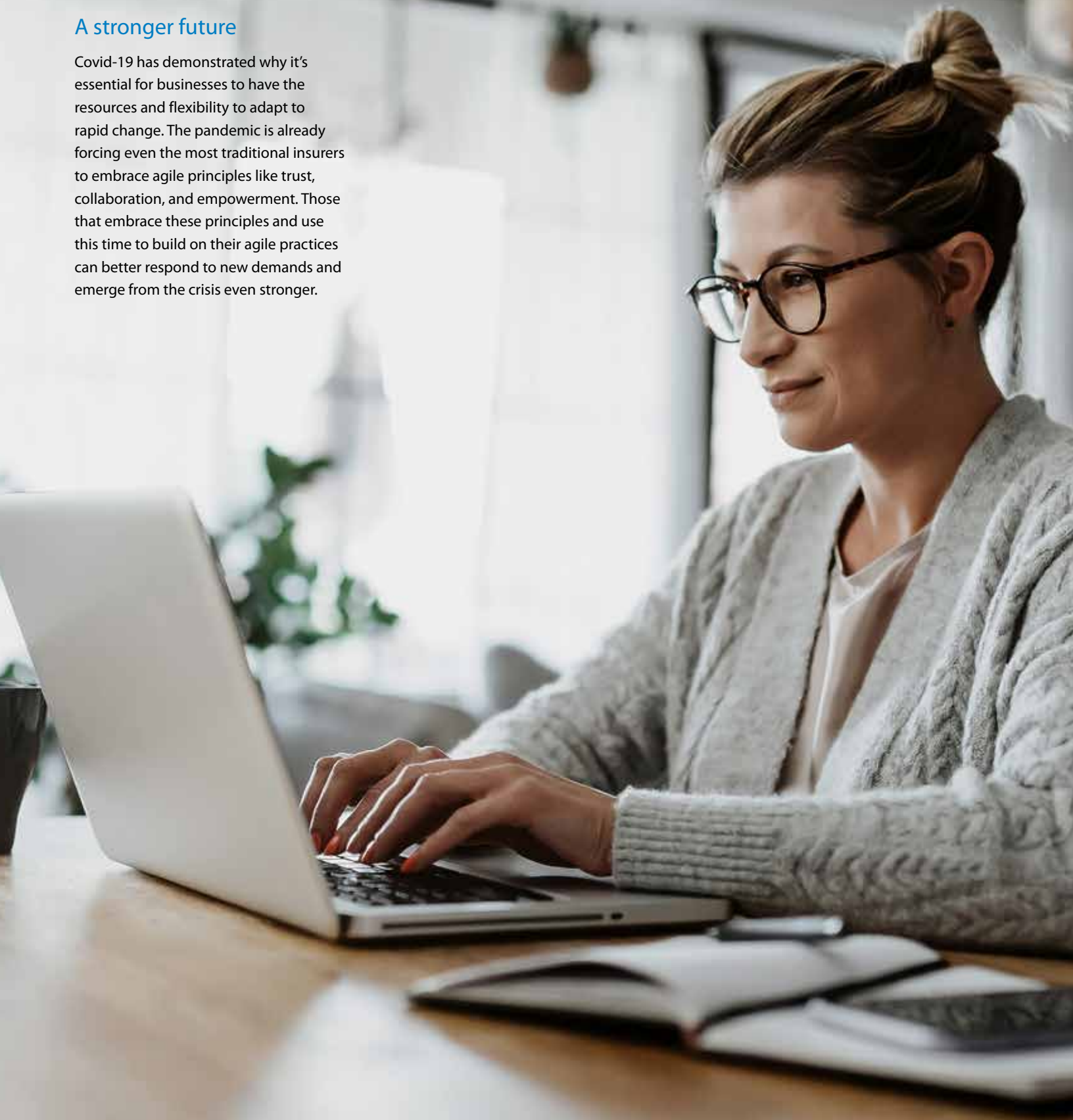
Covid-19 forced businesses to shift entire workforces from the office to their homes in a matter of days. Many organizations had to purchase laptops quickly or allow workers to take their devices home with little time for IT teams to prepare them or train workers on proper security while out of the office. As a result, company networks are more vulnerable, and organizations need to prioritize cybersecurity and DevSecOps over other technology concerns. For example, IT departments that do a lot of testing on patches for applications like Windows 10 before releasing them companywide will need to take shortcuts. Their concern the patch could break something in their IT system is valid. But under the current conditions, it's better to have employees calling the help desk because their laptops are bricked than not implementing a patch quickly enough and having an employee click on a fraudulent link that creates a significant data breach.





## A stronger future

Covid-19 has demonstrated why it's essential for businesses to have the resources and flexibility to adapt to rapid change. The pandemic is already forcing even the most traditional insurers to embrace agile principles like trust, collaboration, and empowerment. Those that embrace these principles and use this time to build on their agile practices can better respond to new demands and emerge from the crisis even stronger.





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