

An isometric illustration of a cityscape with various skyscrapers and buildings, rendered in shades of purple, blue, and red. The scene is overlaid with a network of dashed lines and glowing nodes, suggesting a digital or technological environment. The background is a gradient from dark red at the bottom to dark blue at the top.

Navigating the Top 9 Future of Work Disruptors

**A Guide to Creating Your
Custom Action Plan**

TOFFLER
ASSOCIATES

Introduction

Workforce Disruptors: Understanding, Anticipating, and Acting

There is no shortage of predictions about the future of work. This makes sense because important shifts are happening and society is poised for significant disruptions around the concept of work. However, while being aware of these disruptors is interesting and somewhat helpful, these predictions often are missing two key things to be valuable:

- A sense of the **relationships, interdependencies, and interactions** of the disruptors. These can create multiplier effects and significant secondary disruptions.
- An understanding of how to **prepare for and respond** to the disruptors to lessen their impact or even capitalize on them.

At Toffler Associates, when we analyze forces and disruptors that could influence the future, we always ask, “so what?” and “how can an organization prepare?” Our goal is to help you close the gap between interesting predictions and actionable insights.

In this document we start by exploring key future of work disruptors then offering a framework for better understanding the impact of these disruptors on your business. Understanding the compounding effect of the disruptors allows you to more easily identify actions to prepare for, and potentially even influence, the future.



In order for predictions to be helpful, you must understand both the **relationships between disruptors** and **how to prepare**.

Section 1

Top 9 Future of Work Disruptors

As a first step in the process of preparing for future of work disruptors, we must identify the key disruptors. Combining our research with studies, reports, and articles published by a variety of organizations, we found consistency around the changes/themes that are expected to disrupt how we think of work.

Of these disruptors, some were accelerated by the pandemic; however, others are the result of other independent factors from technology advances to shifts in societal norms.

Across the many inputs, these nine changes emerged as the key disruptors impacting the future of work, both now and over a 10-year horizon (in no particular order):

Our focus on the future is about preparation, not prediction.

As our founder, Alvin Toffler, noted in *Future Shock*, “No serious futurist deals in ‘predictions.’ No one even faintly familiar with the complexities of forecasting lays claim to absolute knowledge of tomorrow. This means that every statement about the future ought, by rights, be accompanied by a string of qualifiers—ifs, ands, buts, and on the other hands.”

Therefore, these disruptors are described in more certain terms than intended. The timing, scale, and intensity in which they manifest themselves are dependent on many variables. However, that uncertainty should not delay preparation for the subsequent disruptions.



1. The definition of an employee will continue to evolve.

Throughout the remainder of this document, we use the term employee; however, it's with the recognition that the relationship between an organization that pays for work to be done and humans who perform work is evolving with new models. As various versions of full-time, part-time, contract, and gig and other models emerge, organizations that rigidly stick to traditional relationship structures will find themselves fighting against the societal current. Conversely, organizations that appreciate and use a mix of workforce models can customize their employment approach based on their specific needs and the individual needs of those who do the work.



2. Remote work is in its infancy.

At its core, remote work breaks the historical connection between work and location. Once this break occurs, there are long-term ripple effects to organizations and across society. Direct impacts include office space requirements, team cohesion, and a potentially global job market. But while some studies show increased job productivity, more time is needed to see if remote work impacts "career productivity." More broadly, how remote work effects housing, living locations, commuting dynamics, and other factors that have evolved around the work/location symbiosis is yet to be determined.



3. Employees seek the customizable work experience.

As with any industry or part of society, increased technology and data leads to increased levels of customization. The employer/employee experience will be no different. As remote work infrastructures mature and smart devices become ubiquitous, more parts of the work experience can be parsed and rebundled, which allows for greater customization of the job experience. Nearly every aspect of work which is binary or limited to categories will be put on a spectrum; e.g., employee to contractor/gig, full-time to part-time, remote to in-person, working to retired. To attract and retain top talent, employers will have to be able to accommodate a wide range of employee relationships. This requires a compensation and internal operational structure that can effectively value and manage these relationships.



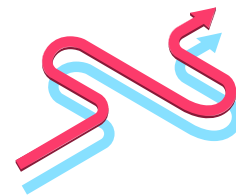
5. New talent models are required for rapidly atrophying skills.

The ever-increasing pace of change in society means the half-life of knowledge will continue to shorten. Organizations will have to determine whether they want to focus their response on upskilling/reskilling employees, choose to “rent” vs. buy talent to limit investment in skills that will rapidly become obsolete, redesign jobs to bundle tasks into rapid-atrophy and slow-atrophy positions, or determine how to mix these approaches across the organization. Additionally, as AI supports better assessing and monitoring of performance, changes to productivity and identification of aptitude can be quantitatively measured.



4. Employers increase focus on well-being and mental health.

The technology that enables remote work also enables greater work/life integration — wanted or not. Additionally, as data availability increases, along with the artificial intelligence (AI) to process it, employers will have an increasingly better understanding of the determinants of productivity. This performance, which will drive employers to be cognizant of and facilitate improvements in these areas. However, this must coincide with the destigmatizing of mental health issues and a willingness by both employees and employers to be open to collaborating in this area. One result could be a segmentation of the workforce and employers based on how much they desire to share and know in this area.



6. The non-linear career becomes common.

The trend of shorter and shorter tenures with an employer will take a twist to include shorter career arcs. Linked to rapidly atrophying skills where *duration* within a career has less value (in some cases, decreasing value), people will increasingly reinvent themselves and the careers they pursue. Concepts like “in school” or “retirement” will no longer be binary states that bookend a career but will become fluid states that people transition into and out of based on their skill relevance in the market, life demands, and individual preferences.



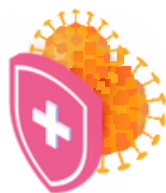
7. AI initially will be more about collaboration than replacement.

Artificial intelligence can displace workers; however, that will be limited to routine jobs or functions. Beyond those routine jobs, until general AI becomes a reality, today's specific/narrow AI is best suited for complementing human capabilities. Organizations need to prepare for an environment where they must maximize the productivity of hybrid human and AI teams. Getting humans to work effectively with AI (and other technologies, like virtual or augmented reality) will need to be a priority as humans will need to understand what the AI does well and doesn't do well, how data limitations impact its effectiveness, and its security vulnerabilities and how to recognize corrupted AI. As AI proliferates, its cost will drop and we'll enter the era of "personal AI" where employers will evaluate potential employees on their integrated human/AI capabilities.



8. Organizational adaptability is required for rapidly evolving markets.

As the ever-increasing pace of change shortens the half-life of knowledge, it will also shorten the half-life of enterprise strategies as market conditions change rapidly. The need for organizations to morph at market speed will require commensurate agility in its structures, processes, and people to adapt to new strategies. Flatter organizations, more decentralized decision-making, and modularized work units that can be plugged in and unplugged will all be characteristics of the adaptable enterprise. This type of structure may be significantly different than what's common today but aligns to many of the workforce disruptors.



9. Increased expectations on safety, security, and resilience.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted workplace vulnerabilities related to contagious diseases and the resilience of work and home locations. Social unrest provided examples of risks to physical safety at work, cyber breaches continue to underscore the fragility of personal data, and opaque AI algorithms create the opportunities for bias. As these threats increase – and the threat surface expands with remote work and pervasive digital connectivity – employees will increasingly look to employers to ensure their safety and security from natural, man-made, and cyber threats to their physical and mental well-being.

Section 2

A Framework for Understanding

As we analyzed these disruptors, two things became evident that affect understanding their impacts and how to prepare for them:

- There are **interdependencies** and mutual impacts across many of the disruptors
- Each disruptor may have a primary area of impact to an organization, but it typically causes disruption **across many facets** of an organization

To identify the breadth of impacts disruptors can have on an organization and inform how to prepare for them, we developed the **Disruption Planning Model**.

Workforce disruptors will have a cumulative effect on organizations; preparation starts with understanding.

The framework is based on the observation that regardless of where the initial disruption occurs, its impact radiates across an entire organization and beyond. We use seven Planning Dimensions in the framework to analyze these impacts, as explained on the next page.



The Disruption Planning Model



Whether you have two or 20 disruptors, the model uses seven Planning Dimensions to help you assess the impact of each disruptor across your organization. Additionally, the model allows you to view the collective effect of all disruptors across a single Planning Dimension to easily and quickly identify where impacts are magnified or in conflict.



Society and Markets

The broad, sweeping changes taking place outside the organization that impact the nature of the workforce and how it interacts with organizations.



Enterprise Strategy

The big questions about how an organization defines itself related to its products and services, the markets it serves, its differentiators, and its culture.



Policies and Practices

The formal and informal rules an organization establishes and practices; both those that are documented and the organizational cultural norms that reflect its values.



Technology

The tools, automation, systems, and data that enable an organization to function, including connections with outside entities.



People and Team Management

The structures, approaches, and skills of supervisory and management roles that define how people and teams are managed to maximize their productivity and experience.



Teams

The dynamics of how people collaborate within teams and how teams work together across organizations to optimize performance.



Individuals

The skills, behaviors, and beliefs of the people who are providing labor to an organization and how those affect their contributions to the organization.

By understanding the scope of disruption across each planning dimension, organizations have a much broader understanding of the impacts and are better equipped to develop plans that minimize, mitigate, or even avoid, the anticipated disruptions.

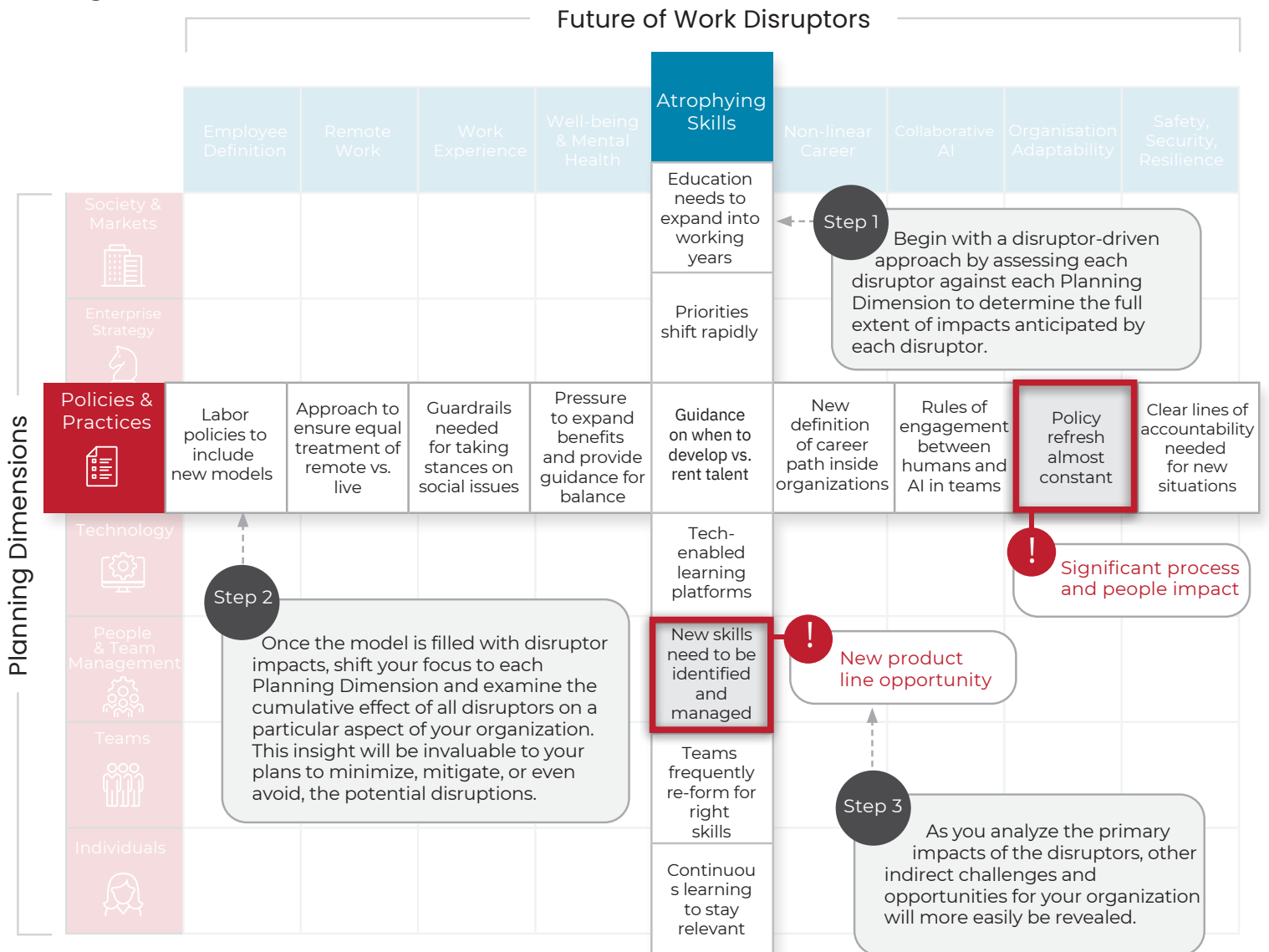
Section 3

Using the Disruption Planning Model

Even with the best intentions to proactively prepare for the coming waves of workforce disruptions, if disruptors are examined and responded to one-by-one, organizations will be susceptible to unforeseen disruptions to their operations due to the aggregate effects of the disruptors.

Using the **Disruption Planning Model** framework ensures a comprehensive understanding of the implications to an organization for each disruptor and their combined implications to various parts of an organization.

We have found that when identifying the impacts of potential disruptions, it is best to keep asking “and then what” to connect the dots from direct impacts of the disruptor to secondary and tertiary impacts. Injecting imagination, creativity, and diversity of thought at this point is important to exploring the ramifications of disruptions; different perspectives reveal different impacts, and both the challenges and opportunities they create. It’s better to be prepared for those impacts than surprised by them.



Section 4

Developing Your Disruption Response Plan

Now that you've methodically analyzed the potential opportunities and challenges caused by these disruptors, you won't over-react or under-react to the latest trend, nor will your organization react to them in a discrete, piecemeal approach. Your organization will be equipped to prepare for disruption through a coordinated and comprehensive approach that recognizes where short-term actions are needed and where long-term strategies must be developed.

To switch from identifying the impacts of the disruptors to preparing to address them requires imagination, creativity, and diversity of thought. This is the point where real, impactful innovation can occur, when organizations can leapfrog the competition, and, regarding the workforce, become an employer of choice.

Organizations that prepare for disruption can leapfrog the competition.

This part of the process has fewer prescriptive steps because it is fundamentally an ideation step that is informed by all the research into the disruptors and an understanding of the challenges and opportunities created by them. Responses are too customized to each organization's situation to provide specific examples.

However, this approach confirms inventor Charles Kettering's view, "A problem well-stated is a problem half-solved." Using our Disruption Planning Model to understand the collective impacts across an organization creates the well-stated problem for which effective solutions can be identified.

Six Secrets to a Strategic Plan

✓ Be aligned

Understand and align to enterprise strategy

✓ Be clear

Define specific organizational goals within each Planning Dimension to gauge success and focus actions

✓ Be proactive

While the impact of some of these changes may seem more distant, disruptions typically don't follow linear growth paths but hit inflection points without much warning; don't be caught unprepared

✓ Be measured

Develop phases/tiers of responses based on the intensity of the disruption (i.e., the more drastic the disruption, the more drastic the response)

✓ Be aware

Given the unpredictability of when these disruptors will occur at scale, identifying trigger events helps manage the uncertainty and links responses to tangible events

✓ Be free

Don't be restricted to ideas that are within the current norms of the organization, and consider that the farther out you go, the more things are variable rather than fixed; response ideation should be a highly creative process

Section 5

Putting Your Plan to Work: The Disruption Planning Model Methodology



Understand

Use the Disruption Planning Model for a comprehensive view of the range of potential impacts of disruptors.

The **Disruption Planning Model** and the identification of responses is part of a proven approach Toffler Associates has been using that has helped many organizations anticipate and prepare for impending disruptions. The three phases described to the left illustrate how those specific, actionable responses are developed.

With these disruptors on the horizon related to the future of work, planning for uncertainty is difficult. Many people try to solve that by striving for greater prediction accuracy.

This leaves organizations well prepared for one outcome. However, as we have seen throughout history, the probability of the future being as we predict it is fairly low; there are too many variables to predict accurately.



Plan

Based on the range of impacts, determine the range of responses to prepare for, or even influence, the future. Identify common responses across potential futures.

Using these three phases, together with the Disruption Planning Model, can help prepare your organization for a wide range of possible futures.



Adapt

Identify the decisions, investments, priorities, and initiatives that are needed today to convert the planned responses into action.

We think the safest approach is to prepare for a range of possible futures, broaden the perspective beyond the immediate impacts of disruptors, and plan for responses that are beneficial across the multiple potential futures. This will provide organizations with the clearest understanding of actions to take today to prepare for the future.

How We Can Help Future-Focused Strategic Planning

As a futurist firm, we are experts in uncertainty, whether that's five or more than 10 years from now, or for an organization's next planning cycle. The frameworks we have been using for over 25 years have allowed organizations to move confidently toward uncertainty by exploring a range of potential futures.

Whether your organization is an established company, a start-up, or a government agency, the speed and direction of these workforce disruptors will have different impacts to your organization. If you would like a customized analysis of how various changes to the future of work could impact your organization, please contact us.

As a futures-focused advisory firm, Toffler Associates, helps organizations prepare for and influence the future through:



Flash Futures

Targeted assessments of specific areas of interest for an organization (e.g., The Future of___) to provide creative, out-of-the-box perspectives on the future that informs strategic planning.



Wargaming and Table Top Exercises

Help organizations develop and test their strategies against a variety of future states, which identifies opportunities and vulnerabilities.



Alternate Futures® Scenario Planning

In-depth scenario planning that starts with a holistic, societal view of the future to understand broad, contextual drivers of change and allow organizations to immerse themselves in a future state to explore strategic options.

Uncertainty shouldn't prevent planning, nor should it force organizations to feel like they must be fortune tellers and predict the future. There are alternatives.

If you want to **prepare for, capitalize on, or influence the Future of Work disruptors**, contact us; we can structure a solution to meet your needs.

Toffler Associates is a future-focused strategic advisory firm that empowers organizations to discover new opportunities and create value in a complex world where change is accelerating.

TOFFLER
ASSOCIATES



www.TofflerAssociates.com



[linkedin.com/company/toffler-associates](https://www.linkedin.com/company/toffler-associates)



Contact