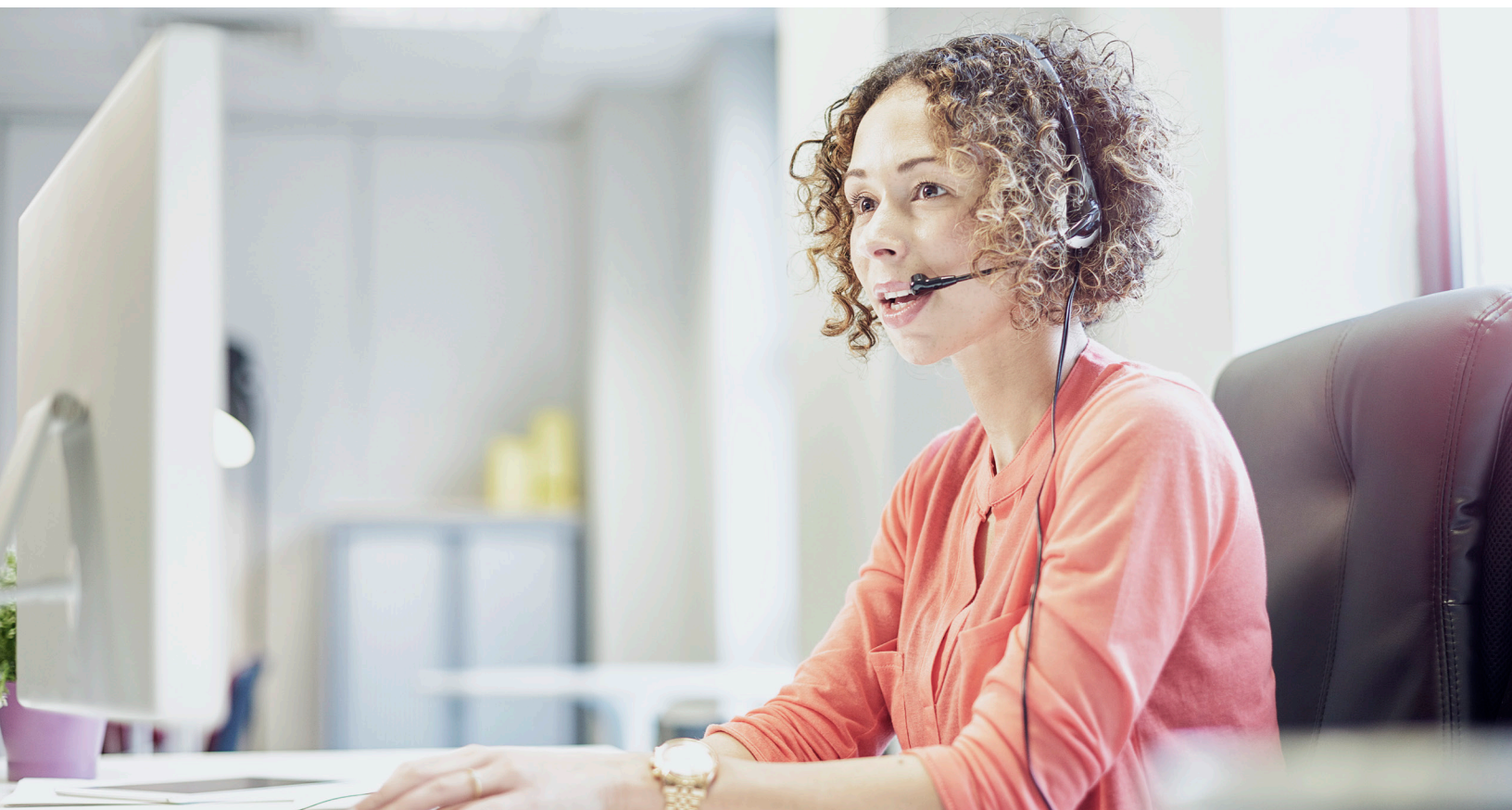# McKinsey & Company

Public Sector Practice

COVID-19: Reopening federal agency operations and reimagining a next normal

Government leaders should consider how employees can return safely to work as well as rethink their operations.

by Megan McConnell, Asma Mirza, Meg Sachdev, and Sarah Tucker-Ray

June 2020

US government agencies are entering a period of gradual recovery following the hectic months since the first US case of COVID-19 was confirmed in January. Resuming a semblance of normal operations for 2.1 million nonpostal workers and 1.4 million active-duty military will be an undertaking that lasts many months and spans multiple stages.[1] Agencies will have to carefully plan whether, how, and when to return fully to work—and provide answers for each state and city in which their employees work. They will have to prioritize and sequence agency services and functions and work to create appropriate infrastructure and safeguards for employees and the citizens they serve. Federal agency leaders also face strained budgets and a substantial work backlog as well as continuing responsibility to help manage the profound humanitarian toll that COVID-19 has taken.

These are significant burdens by any measure, but the pandemic crisis also offers federal agencies the opportunity to reimagine an operational "next normal." Like the private sector, agencies could question long-held assumptions and operate in previously unimaginable ways. As they plan a return, agency leaders should take stock of lessons already learned while the opportunity to effect change is greatest.

Agencies tackling the challenge of reopening should therefore consider focusing on two areas: returning employees to work and reimagining a next normal for government operations.

A blueprint for returning employees to work

To tackle the challenge of returning employees to work, agencies can consider three main activities: segmenting agencies, assessing infrastructure, and planning the return.

Segmenting and prioritizing agency services and employees

Agency leaders will have to make some hard choices as reopening goes forward. Two key activities will be sequencing the reopening of operations and segmenting their workforces.

Agencies can segment the reopening of operations based on criticality and risk, assessing first the urgency to reopen the service and then how effectively a service can occur without compromising employee and public health (Exhibit 1). This estimation—including considering both the intrinsic public health risk of an activity, as well as its potential to be modified with safeguards—will allow agencies to sequence its services into four categories:

1. Essential low-contact services. Because these operations are both low risk for viral transmission and high value—for instance, some national security and law enforcement activities—they should be at the head of the queue for reopening. Agencies can think through the necessary actions to get these vital services up and running as quickly as possible, prioritizing those that have been most affected during the period of remote operations.

2. Essential high-contact services. Agencies will need to think through additional safeguards necessary to reopen and restore services quickly while minimizing the health risk to workers and the public. For example, inspections that protect the health and welfare of US residents traditionally require site visits. Actions could include steps to reduce or defer demand for these difficult-to-deliver services.

3. Flexible low-contact services. In many cases, the task will be to develop processes and tools to sustain long-term remote operations. For instance, passport services may have a low urgency to reopen in-person citizen services and will have to ponder managing internal operations remotely. Agencies should consider whether any services or workers can be transitioned to remote work permanently.

4. Deferrable high-contact services. The questions to consider here are whether these services can be deferred or reduced while viral transmission is active or whether the mode of service delivery can be reconfigured to reduce risk while still maintaining adequate service levels. This may include policy development, traditionally done in offices, that may move to sustained remote work.

---

[1] "Strengthening the federal workforce," *Analytical perspectives: FY 2020,* Office of Management and Budget, March 2019, whitehouse.gov.
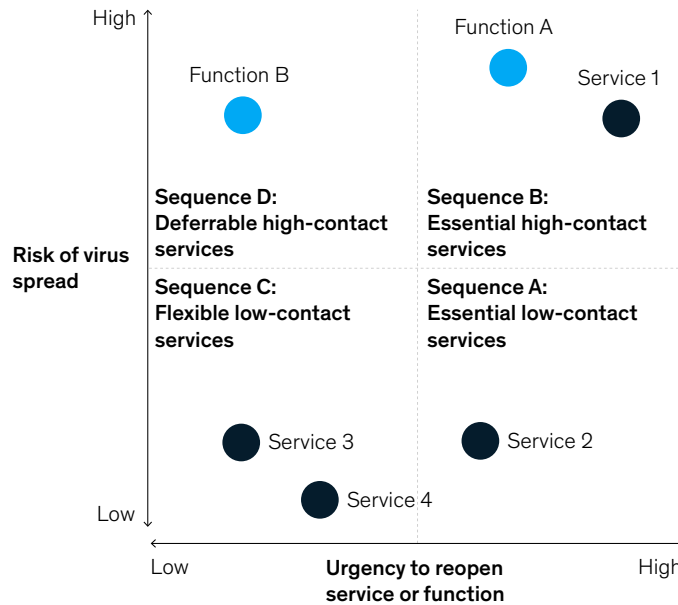
Exhibit 1

Agencies can sequence the reopening of government operations based on criticality and risk.

Segmenting and prioritizing services: Sequencing framework

● Mission services ● Mission support functions

Illustrative framework for sequencing government services by urgency, risk, and reach

To deliver these services, agencies can categorize jobs or functions by which specific roles and teams are truly essential for delivering a service, regardless of where they sit in the hierarchy. Then, agencies can map a sequence of which jobs to bring back and when to specific locations (in accordance with state and local governments' reopening laws), enabling managers to individualize work plans. In doing so, agencies can consider three workforce categories for the post-shelter-at-home environment:

— *On-site critical workers,* whose presence on-site is essential to perform their jobs. They can be recalled in stages based on local health conditions, but a detailed plan should look at virus spread, guidance from local public health authorities, workforce readiness for return to work, and legal liability.

— *On-site flexible workers,* many of whom might be able to complete their jobs with additional technology or simple interventions, such as being allowed to return to the office to collect documents and files. Ramp-up might be slower for these workers and include staggered shifts and flexible work arrangements as well as retraining to build more flexible skill sets.

— *Virtual workers,* who can continue to carry out their roles effectively while working from home. Remote work may also be the best choice for employees who are in specialized roles or are "single points of failure" for operational continuity—that is, for whom the risk of falling ill traveling to or working in an office is simply too large for the agency's mission. In all cases, agencies should focus on providing any additional support necessary to ensure productivity, connectivity, and health.

Across these worker types, agencies should consider new demands and opportunities, identifying where reskilling and hiring is needed to fill new roles and responsibilities quickly.

Importantly, agency employees may not be able or willing to return to work. Many workers care for young children, parents, or other loved ones affected by the pandemic. Without support, such as reopening of schools or childcare services, workers may need to continue to work remotely or not at all. Furthermore, some employees may themselves be members of vulnerable populations.

To inform their plans, agencies can start by surveying employees' readiness and comfort in returning on-site. They can also temporarily redeploy employees in lower-priority jobs or functions to higher-priority areas to fill critical gaps.

Assessing infrastructure and enacting safeguards

Measures to protect on-site workers will vary by workplace and type of work. Office workers, for example, will need much different methods than those required for transportation, security, or administration agents. To provide appropriate infrastructure across the agency, leaders must be able to accurately predict the working conditions for each role—particularly the level of contact with members of the public or other federal workers or contractors and of control over work environment (Exhibit 2).

Measures can be developed to meet the specific needs of each worker archetype and should cover three types of health-centered interventions:

— Measures to ensure healthy humans, such as enforcing physical distancing and adequately sanitizing materials and products that come into contact with the broader population

— Healthy business operations, including policies aimed at keeping workers safe, such as monitoring workers' temperatures, embracing work-from-home policies, and instituting flexible sick leave

— Practices to limit physical contact and create a healthy work environment, such as installation of barriers between workers, adequate ventilation, no-touch bathrooms, adequate supplies of hand sanitizer, and both routine and targeted cleaning and sanitizing

Most employers have already made progress toward this planning. In a recent survey of US employers, a majority said they planned to physically separate desks or use barriers in their work environments and to close common areas and remove communal food and beverage serving equipment. Seventy-seven percent also planned to implement temperature checks for employees—58 percent of whom said they planned to make this check mandatory for all employees—and 55 percent planned to implement contact tracing.[2]

Yet enacting adequate safeguards is not as simple as identifying and implementing the correct interventions. Agencies should examine how to get workers back to work safely while ensuring a great employee experience and a sustainable, long-term infrastructure. To tackle this challenge, agencies can focus on laying the groundwork for successful implementation and encouraging adoption among employees.

Planning and executing the return

Planning a safe and effective return will require coordination across an individual agency, as well as with local, state, and other parts of the federal government. In fact, 11 of the 18 cabinet-level federal agencies have employees in all 50 states—with approximately 93 percent of the total US federal

---

[2] McKinsey survey of US employers (n = 100), conducted May 7, 2020 to May 13, 2020; the survey asked company leaders about practices their companies have implemented or are planning to implement to keep employees safe as part of reopening and return-to-work protocols for COVID-19.
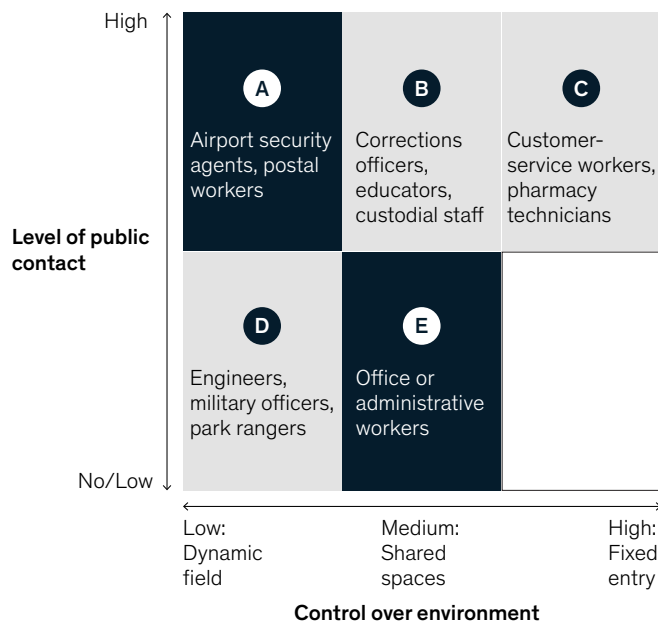
Exhibit 2

Measures to safeguard site-critical workers will vary by workplace and type of work.

Segmenting and prioritizing services: Sequencing framework

■ Particularly relevant to federal agencies

Archetypes of occupations by work environment

	Low: Dynamic field	Medium: Shared spaces	High: Fixed entry
High	**A** Airport security agents, postal workers	**B** Corrections officers, educators, custodial staff	**C** Customer-service workers, pharmacy technicians
No/Low	**D** Engineers, military officers, park rangers	**E** Office or administrative workers	

Level of public contact (vertical axis)

Control over environment (horizontal axis)

A

What safeguards are applicable in emergency situations?

What "portable" safeguards can easily be applied?

What measures can be reasonably applied to the public?

B

How can employee-only spaces be implemented, protected?

What measures can be reasonably applied to the public?

What measures are needed to share equipment safely?

How can the shared environment be altered to minimize group risk?

C

How can public engagement be altered to decrease risk?

What capacity or entry measures can reasonably be implemented?

What measures can be reasonably applied to the public?

D

What "portable" safeguards can easily be applied?

E

What measures are needed to share equipment safely?

How can the shared environment be altered to minimize group risk?

How to mitigate group risk exposure in collaborative teams?

workforce living outside Washington, DC. Indeed, there are federal employees and facilities in almost every county in the country.[3] A cross-agency governance structure that tackles this complexity (and other major focus areas of reopening) will be key to successfully managing this process (Exhibit 3).[4]

Agencies will also have to take stock of work backlogs. Major projects will have been paused or slowed by the virus, and agencies should ascertain where to focus their resources and how to reprioritize. Agencies can conduct a rapid portfolio review and choose which activities or resources to continue, stop, defer, or ramp down— and implement these decisions immediately.

Effective communication will be key to executing a safe return to an environment that encourages adoption of safeguards and is conducive to reimagination. Employees will look to their leaders for guidance, care, and empathy. In turn, leadership should consider the following guidelines when communicating:

— Be visible and communicate transparently

— Keep calm and set a tone of "bounded optimism"[5]

— Focus on public health, emphasizing facts and reality

— Be clear about what's expected of employees to ensure their safety

— Acknowledge emotions and uncertainty

— Keep messages short and simple

— Anticipate and solicit questions, and provide honest responses

In the same survey of US employers mentioned above, 83 percent of employers said they have implemented new communication channels or messages to encourage safe return, and an equal share are planning to offer return-to-work trainings.[6]

An engaging communication strategy will help agency leadership account for employees' experiences as they plan for reopening, keep employees informed as reopening plans evolve across geographies, and improve employees' comfort to return to on-site work.

Reimagining the next normal of federal agency operations

Even as agencies plan a safe and effective return to work, they should not wait to take advantage of the opportunities revealed by the crisis to institute the next normal. At both an organizational and individual level, the culture and environment are ripe for once-in-a-generation positive change. And done right, this change can lead to better services for citizens, better experience for government employees, and an overall accelerated step-change in how the government serves the country.

Through this crisis, organizations have realized how quickly they can move. The pace and scale of innovation has accelerated: by necessity, organizations have been forced to confront the reality of exactly what can and cannot be accomplished outside traditional processes. Going forward, employees will expect flexible hours and locations, as well as assistance to manage ever-pressing family and health needs, given gaps in elder and childcare services. And many employers are already thinking about the scale of this flexibility—for example, 44 percent of US employers surveyed believe that at least a quarter of their desk-based employees would be able to work from home permanently in a new normal.[7] Citizen expectations have changed as well: across demographics, there is likely to be an increased acceptance of and desire for seamless, contactless

---

[3] Federal Workforce Data, Office of Personnel Management, updated June 2019, fedscope.opm.gov; FY 2018 Federal Real Property Profile Data for Civilian Agencies, General Services Administration, updated May 28, 2020, gsa.gov.

[4] Andres Cadena, Mihir Mysore, Leah Pollack, and Catharina Wrede Braden, "Using a crisis nerve center to help reopen the economy," May 29, 2020, McKinsey.com.

[5] For more on bounded optimism, see Jacqueline Brassey and Michiel Kruyt, "How to demonstrate calm and optimism in a crisis," April 30, 2020, McKinsey.com.

[6] McKinsey survey of US employers (n = 100), conducted May 7, 2020 to May 13, 2020.
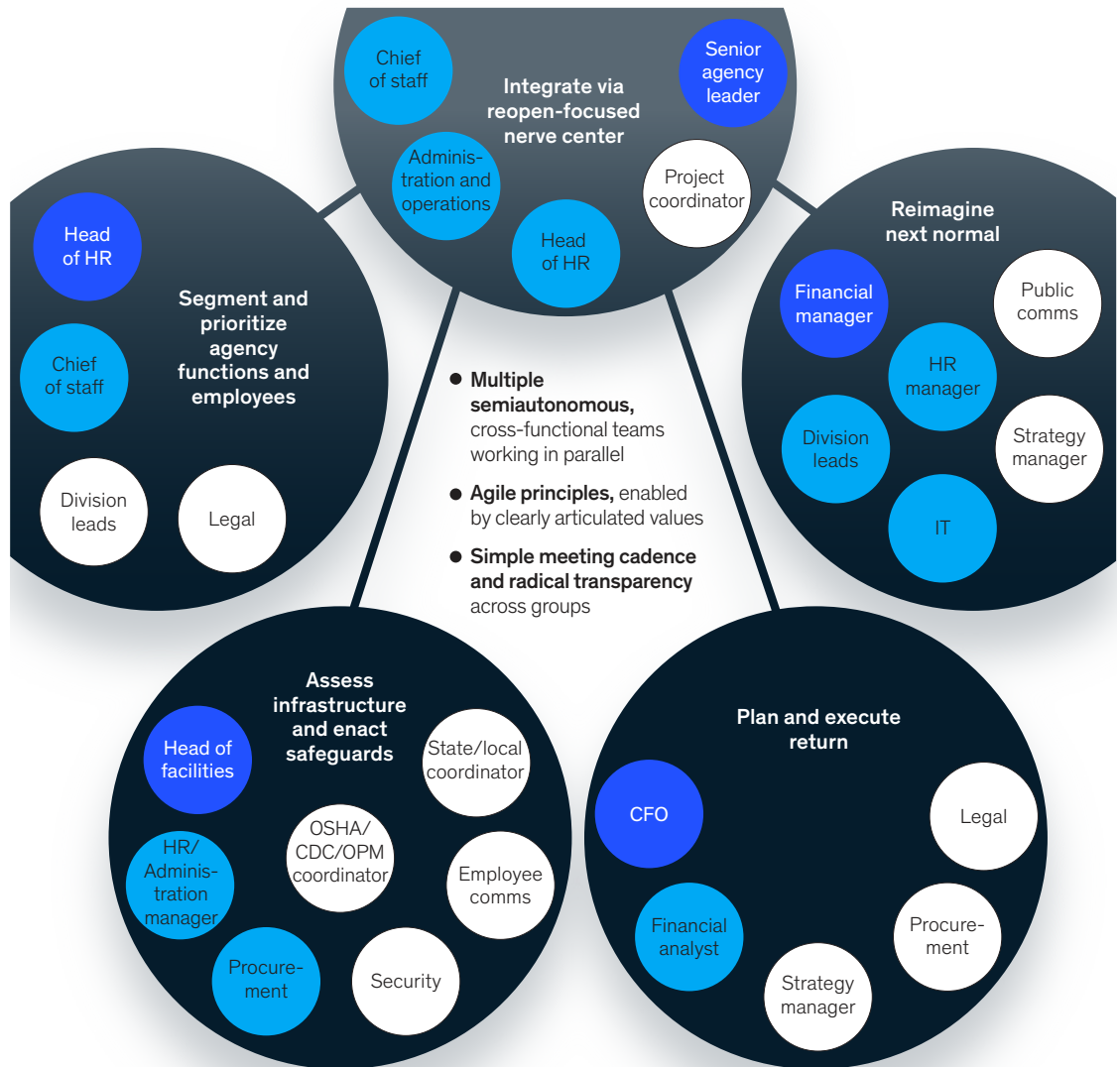
[7] McKinsey survey of US employers (n = 100), conducted May 7, 2020 to May 13, 2020.

Exhibit 3

The integrated COVID-19 nerve center is based on five cross-functional teams.

Example reopen nerve center organization—key roles

● Primary leader ● Secondary leaders

Integrate via reopen-focused nerve center
- Chief of staff
- Senior agency leader
- Administration and operations
- Head of HR
- Project coordinator

Segment and prioritize agency functions and employees
- Head of HR
- Chief of staff
- Division leads
- Legal

Reimagine next normal
- Financial manager
- Public comms
- HR manager
- Division leads
- Strategy manager
- IT

Assess infrastructure and enact safeguards
- Head of facilities
- State/local coordinator
- HR/Administration manager
- OSHA/CDC/OPM coordinator
- Employee comms
- Procurement
- Security

Plan and execute return
- CFO
- Legal
- Financial analyst
- Procurement
- Strategy manager

- ● **Multiple semiautonomous,** cross-functional teams working in parallel
- ● **Agile principles,** enabled by clearly articulated values
- ● **Simple meeting cadence and radical transparency** across groups

digital service. Agencies can look to the medical field for proof of change—for example, 97 percent of respondents to a recent survey said they were either somewhat or very likely to use telemedicine for future appointments, even though only 8 percent of respondents had tried telehealth versus a traditional in-person visit.[8] Finally, administrative demands will have shifted, with increased expectation of flexibility and cross-functional skills from the workforce, as well as to find new ways to deliver service effectively and efficiently given budget constraints.

8 McKinsey COVID-19 Consumer Survey, conducted April 13, 2020.

As organizations are forced to adapt to the implications of COVID-19, many are finding faster, simpler, and less-expensive ways to operate. These practices should continue after the crisis to direct taxpayer dollars to where they can have the most impact. Organizations have been forced to pare down to essential operations; as a result, there is a unique opportunity to uncover which services are truly necessary in the next normal. Finally, the 2020 fiscal year budget is likely to be more robust than in coming years, and agencies should use this opportunity to set themselves up for leaner years by changing their operations to serve the public better and more cost-effectively.

At the same time, agency leaders are faced with the classic challenge of focusing on the immediate, urgent issues while finding mindshare to focus on these strategic questions. Private-sector organizations also recognize this opportunity and are rethinking everything—from technology companies rethinking their real estate portfolio and planning a more decentralized approach to staffing, to financial institutions creating a "future of work task force" to devote thinking to employees' future needs—all in an effort to protect against future shocks to the workforce and plan for what is needed to be successful in the next normal.

To successfully reimagine how the government operates, we have identified six approaches that agency leaders could take:

— *Gain support from leadership.* First, assign a respected senior leader to sponsor "reimagination" work and clearly communicate to the workforce that it is a leadership decision and topic.

— *Dedicate resources.* Convene a dedicated and effective "reimagine" team to work alongside the team coordinating immediate return. The team can include representation from different agency parts or functions.

— *Apply customer-experience tools to rethink service delivery.* Agencies can employ customer-experience tools such as journey mapping to uncover worker and public needs and pain points, which will have changed during the crisis. Using a resident lens, agencies can address safety and resilience and create distinctive long-term solutions while accounting for improved human experience.

— *Lean on data.* Use metrics and data to inform decision making wherever possible—for example, employee surveys and metrics dashboards to assess new ways of working.

— *Review mission, strategy, and backlog.* Review existing strategy and mission and adjust as needed. Continuously groom and reprioritize project backlogs as "reimagine" objectives clarify.

As organizations are forced to adapt to the implications of COVID-19, many are finding faster, simpler, and less-expensive ways to operate.

— *Review and iterate.* Implement after-action reviews immediately to account for rapid pace of change; analyze feedback and iterate appropriately.

The federal government has a unique opportunity to reimagine itself—but that window is tight. As services and operations come back online, agencies can choose to return to business as usual with some additional safeguards or to reinvent how they work and leapfrog ahead to better serve the public and the country.

possibility will enable the federal government to reopen to a next normal and define a new and better future. The path forward for federal agencies is not without its challenges, but it is possible to navigate what lies ahead effectively and create positive, sustainable changes for the public and employees.

During the current crisis, governments have worked faster and better than they dreamed possible just a few months ago. Maintaining that sense of

Megan McConnell and **Sarah Tucker-Ray** are partners in McKinsey's Washington, DC, office, where **Asma Mirza** and **Meg Sachdev** are consultants.