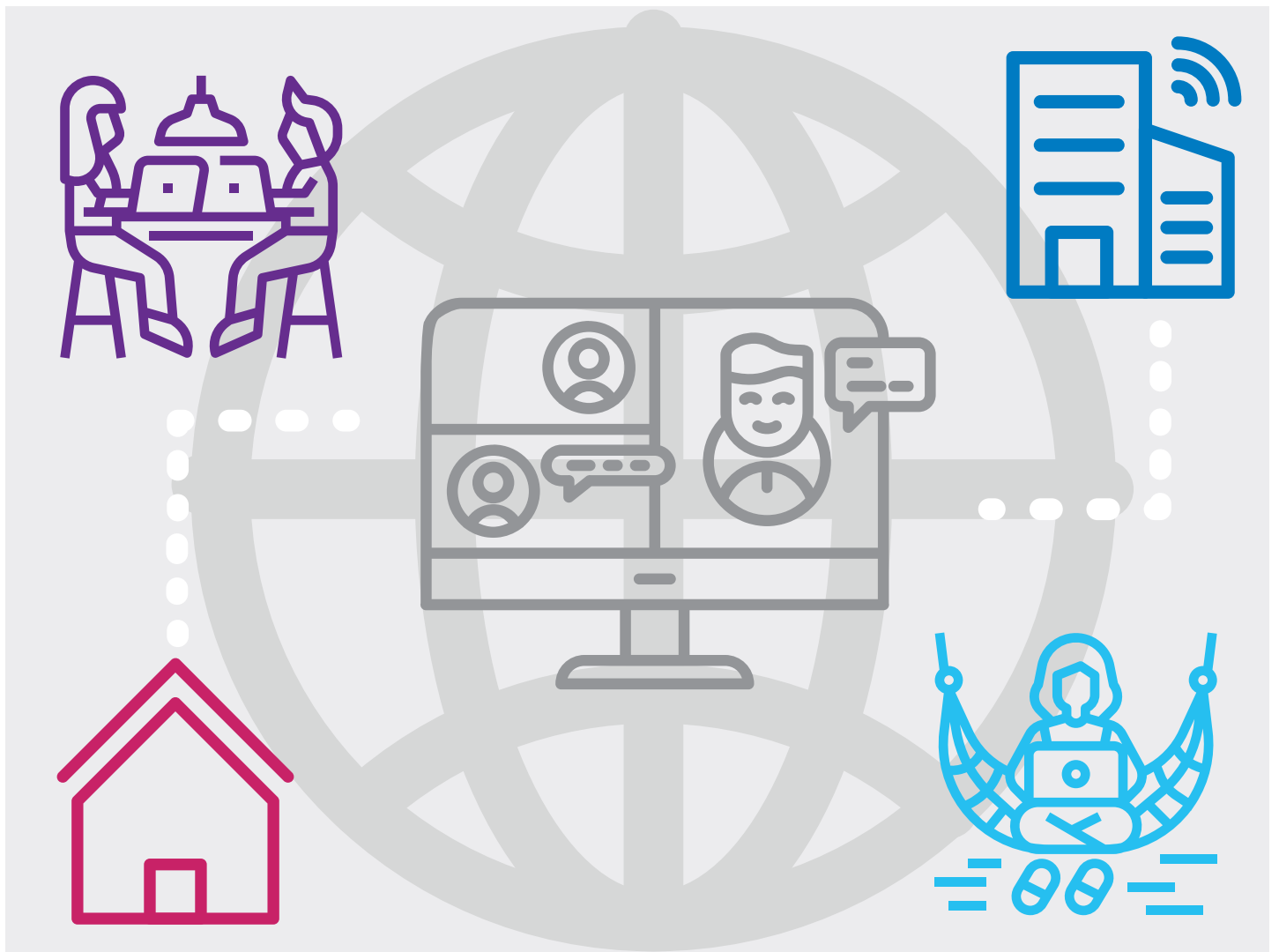The 2020 coronavirus pandemic had a transformative effect on where—and how—we worked. Nearly two years in, technological and cultural changes are cultivating a fairer, kinder normal.

Shaping the future of hybrid work

"Workplace" used to be defined by physical location. Even when employees were hard at work elsewhere, from home or on the road, they were "out of the office." When offices began to shut down in March 2020 to slow down the covid-19 pandemic, few realized that they were embarking on a fundamental and enduring transformation of the very concept of "workplace" and their relationship to it. Both workers and managers had to adjust on the fly as the weeks rolled by with no end in sight. Many companies had to deal with enabling a newly remote workforce while keeping workers productive and figuring out how the pandemic would affect their business, for better or worse. As everyone settled into the "new normal" — children and pets dropping in on video conferences, people learning how to blur their backgrounds to hide their makeshift home offices — the necessary changes began showing the way to a workplace future that might improve on the "old normal."

Key takeaways

1 Since shutdowns enacted to slow the spread of the covid-19 pandemic forced employees worldwide to work remotely, the very concept of workplace became unglued from its long-held association with physical location to work from anywhere.

2 Redefining the workplace has introduced technological and cultural challenges — adopting the right technologies to support a newly remote workforce, for one, and keeping newly remote workers productive.

3 On the whole, organizations have found that outcomes such as worker productivity, morale, innovation, and even customer experiences have not suffered from the shift — and in many cases, they've improved. Employees now expect work environments to be flexible, collaborative, and responsive to their individual needs.

Computing and infrastructure giant Dell Technologies found itself re-examining its own assumptions about the world of work and redefining every expectation, says Jennifer Saavedra, the company's chief human resources officer. "Early on I heard people say, 'I just can't wait to get back to doing things the way they were.' That's not ever a strategy for success," Saavedra says. "It's about

> ## "It's about reflecting on these last 18 months. What have we learned? What are some of the great things we want to carry forward? What were some of those challenges or obstacles?"
>
> Jennifer Saavedra, Chief Human Resources Officer, Dell Technologies

reflecting on these last 18 months. What have we learned? What are some of the great things we want to carry forward? What were some of those challenges or obstacles? How do we renew expectations?"

Saavedra sees many "great things": opportunities to be more efficient, productive, and inclusive, and ways for the reimagined workplace to achieve goals that were impossible before.

For example, Dell's salesforce of more than 25,000 could never meet in one place at one time — let alone the army of human resources, finance, and marketing staff that support them. Like many companies, Dell used to hold in-person training and leadership events for all sales managers, trusting that the strategies and the sense of purpose shared at those meetings would make it out to the rank and file.

The pandemic changed all that. Suddenly, the managers couldn't meet in person, but everyone could meet virtually, on video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom. Although it was a great opportunity for connection and

communication, figuring out how to engage that many people in a virtual environment was a challenge, Saavedra says. "You don't just try to replicate what you did in an in-person or classroom experience."

Resources for developing skills or absorbing new material, often delivered in group or class settings in the old days, moved online to the Dell Learning Studio, where people could visit individually at their leisure. The group component of the events, now held virtually, focuses on collaboration and networking. "Instead of having a leadership program or training program, it's now a training experience or a leadership experience," Saavedra adds. "That change in language is actually reflective of the change in design."

Dell has reimagined its entire training function: for example, individualized learning plans have expanded, augmenting group training for each of its 15,000 engineers, across more job functions, to address specific knowledge gaps and requirements.

Embracing technology and culture, together

Redefining the workplace to be independent of a physical location has required fundamental changes in technology and organizational culture. For the most part, it hasn't meant redefining "work" as such, which still centers on outcomes, such as productivity, innovation, communication, customer experiences, and other key performance measures. But for many employees, these rapid and necessary changes proved that the work environment can be flexible, collaborative, and location-agnostic and still get the job done, maybe even better than before. Their output – the achievement of goals – has largely displaced facetime as a primary performance metric.

Global consulting company Deloitte calls the new paradigm "distributed by design." Its research reveals that 77% of employees say they can be as productive – or even more – working from home (though most think they're productive about 58% of the time). "Employers should focus on improving the workforce experience by reducing mandatory meetings and email and focusing on culture and well-being," says Alex Braier, managing director and US public sector leader for organizational strategy, design, and transformation at Deloitte.

### Figure 1
The benefits of working from anywhere
Organizations that are working toward "hybrid" work – a mixture of remote and in-office – report happier, more productive employees, lower operating costs, and reduced staff turnover.

Increased employee satisfaction/well-being	56%
Increased productivity	52%
Improved efficiency	49%
Decreased operating costs	45%
Improved innovation	44%
More effective collaboration	36%
Reduced staff turnover	32%
Access to a wider talent pool	32%

Source: "Work from anywhere: Empowering the future of work," Dell Technologies in partnership with Intel and VMware, based on a survey of 2,000 IT decision-makers worldwide, June 2021

38%
of IT decision-makers worry that returning to a physical working location will leave them with less time to spend with family.
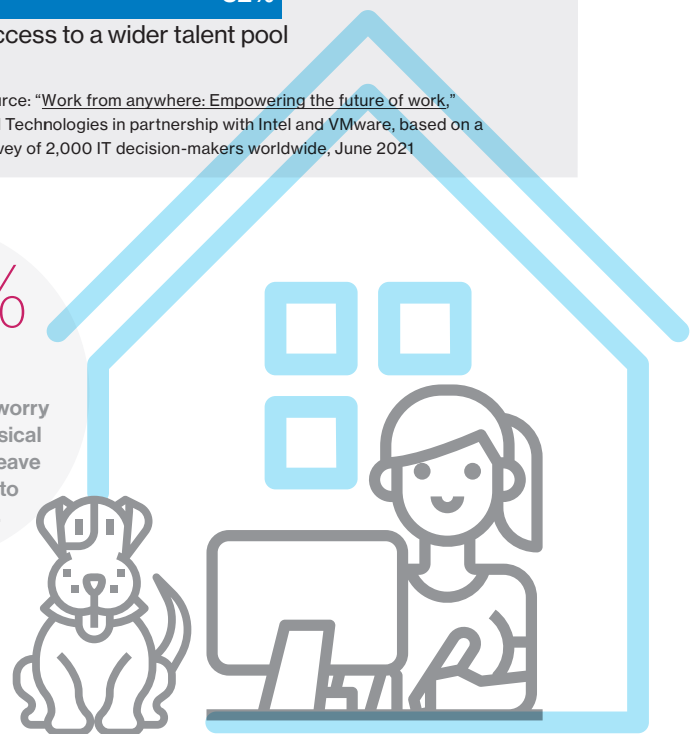
Source: Dell Technologies' "Work from anywhere: Empowering the future of work," 2021

Dell's data also reflects improved working conditions, including less stress and better connections with colleagues. For example, more than half of organizations that are instituting a "hybrid" work model — that is, incorporating a mixture of in-office and remote work in employees' schedules — report increased employee satisfaction and well-being (see Figure 1).

Although many experienced managers aren't comfortable with the distributed workplace because they feel they can manage people better when they can see them, Braier says that's a myth. "The percentage of workers you can see at any given time is very small. Conducting work using virtual collaboration tools can enable you to gather enormous amounts of data, and you can do a far better job of understanding how work is actually getting done by mining that data."

Managers at an organization can use the metadata created on collaboration platforms to see the overall pattern of which employees are collaborating and which are being left out, which ones are leading meetings and who's attending them. They can keep track of whether diverse groups and interests are represented on all relevant teams, furthering their organization's diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. Sticking to the metadata, rather than tracking individual activity, keeps the data mining anonymous, while allowing leaders to monitor the overall health of their distributed workforce.

Black Friday at Dell — as for many retailers, the single biggest sales day of the year — was always a high-pressure in-person event, with "war rooms" set up around the globe to monitor and react to the performance of each individual promotion, and

52%

of IT decision-makers spend half or more of their time working remotely, while 63% would like to work that way in an ideal world.

Source: Dell Technologies'
"Work from anywhere: Empowering the future of work," 2021

hundreds of employees working round the clock. Dell's chief digital and chief information officer, Jen Felch, says the pandemic forced a major overhaul — moving all the dashboards from the centralized war rooms to team members' individual screens at home, and setting up alerts so that they wouldn't miss essential information or opportunities to take action in case they stepped away.

The transformation was so successful that even though the company could have considered returning at least partially to the in-person set up for 2021, it elected to continue "the pandemic way." That way, "People can remain at home. They can have dinner with their families," and still be effective, Felch says.

Meet the moment with technology
Although, like many companies, Dell Technologies already had a substantial number of employees who worked from home either full-time or occasionally, the pandemic highlighted the dramatic difference between "occasionally" and "full-time for months."

"It wasn't in our roadmap to say, 'Let's go enable everyone to work from home.' But like every other IT organization, we rallied and made that happen," says Felch.

In contrast to the controlled IT environment of a central office, "home" could mean anything: one desktop computer that's also used for homework, gaming, and Zooming with grandma and grandpa; an apartment with five roommates, five laptops, and a temperamental wireless router; no internet connection at all except for a mobile hotspot. "Everyone's got a different environment. We have to figure out how to make them successful in their jobs," Felch says.

"It wasn't in our roadmap to say, 'Let's go enable everyone to work from home.' But like every other IT organization, we rallied and made that happen."

Jen Felch, Chief Digital Officer and
Chief Information Officer, Dell Technologies

Deloitte's Braier says companies can help employees achieve that success by making some degree of investment in their workers' home computing environment, perhaps as simple as an updated Wi-Fi router or a subsidy on upgraded internet access "just to level the playing field and make sure everybody has access to the same equipment."

Most companies have adopted virtual collaboration tools of some kind, Braier says, but many either don't have the right set of tools or don't know how to use them effectively. "People tend to underuse asynchronous tools," such as group messaging or co-creating and editing documents whenever is convenient rather than sequentially as they did in the past, "because it's a new way of doing business," he says. "A sign that your organization might be doing this is if workers are still using email at pre-pandemic levels, instead of transitioning a lot of this communication to collaboration platforms. This creates a lot of inefficiency and also places unnecessary burdens on staff."

The newly distributed IT architecture also poses unique cybersecurity risks, says John Scimone, Dell's chief security officer. "Organizations had employees using their corporate laptops and corporate systems outside of their traditional security boundaries," he says. "Many organizations never designed from the get-go thinking about a mass mobility remote workforce."

Dell's research shows that cybersecurity is high on the minds of IT decision-makers who are considering a hybrid work arrangement (see Figure 2).

The new paradigm requires everyone — not just IT — to take ownership of security. IT can train everyone to securely use a virtual private network, safeguard their home networks, and detect and avoid security risks when traveling, but it starts with a culture in which "security is everyone's job," Scimone says. He's been encouraged by how Dell employees have stepped up — for example, by reporting thousands of phishing attacks and becoming sophisticated about spotting them.
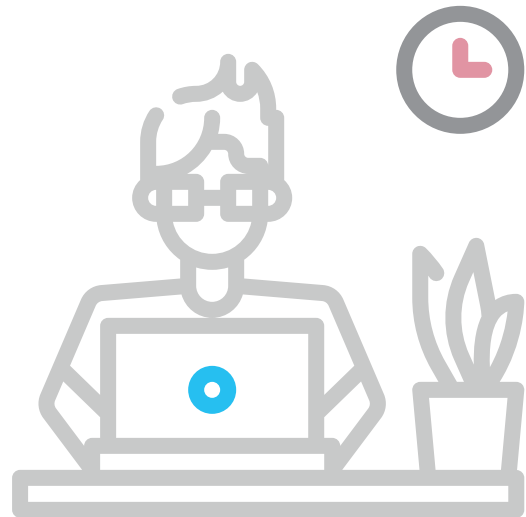
Figure 2

Remote-work worries

IT decision-makers who are thinking about supporting a work-from-anywhere model have multiple concerns.

50%	Keeping the organization secure
49%	Providing remote IT support
48%	Employees remaining productive
43%	Remote employees having access to all the applications and documents they need
39%	Making sure that all employees feel included
36%	The ability to scale when needed
35%	Providing end-user devices to employees remotely
27%	Redesigning old office space

Source: "Work from anywhere: Empowering the future of work," Dell Technologies in partnership with Intel and VMware, based on a survey of 2,000 IT decision-makers worldwide, June 2021

"Many organizations never designed from the get-go thinking about a mass mobility remote workforce."

John Scimone, Chief Security Officer, Dell Technologies

Changing the culture to fit a changed world

Dell's human resources department is thinking carefully about how to maintain the pandemic-related gains the company has made in equity, inclusion, and offering multiple ways to work and contribute — and manage.

"You've heard the concern of 'If I'm not seen, maybe I won't get ahead'," Saavedra says. "We made sure that's not the case, but that takes thoughtful, dedicated commitment every day by our leaders and our processes to make sure we're creating visibility into those opportunities."

At the same time, employees working from their homes need to find ways to delineate "out of the office" time to give their personal obligations the time and attention they deserve, and managers have to allow them to do that, Saavedra says. "People now want choice.They want flexibility. They want a sense of belonging and inclusion and an environment that works for all."

Indeed, the future is employee-driven, Saavedra asserts. "The job market is super-hot, so if we're not thinking about how to create that flexible environment and understand the needs of the role and the individual and bringing those

BUSINESS LAB PODCAST Jen Felch and Jenn Saavedra, both of Dell, discuss the culture shift required as companies recenter themselves on their people.

two together, companies will find themselves, honestly, somewhat behind."

86%

of IT decision-makers agree that all organizations should be adopting a work-from-anywhere mindset.

Source: Dell Technologies' "Work from anywhere: Empowering the future of work," 2021

Dell's expanded ability to collaborate virtually proved its value in early 2021 when the second wave of the pandemic hit India, where the company has a large presence and employees had urgent, immediate concerns. "They really felt like, 'How do we help our colleagues? How do we help our friends? How do we help our families when we're searching for oxygen concentrators?'" Felch says. In a matter of weeks, they formed projects to help connect communities in need with resources such as oxygen concentrators and hospital beds.

"It's been phenomenal how people have been able to rally," Felch says. "I don't know if we would have been able to do it as successfully if we thought we needed to get together in a room and talk about it first."

Five secrets for an effective work environment

Building a flexible work environment for all employees – whether in-person or remote – doesn't happen without careful planning and execution. Here's how to get started:

1. Trust employees – to know when and where they can be most productive, to get the job done, and to respect the employer's needs and priorities.

2. Provide solid technology, data, and communications infrastructure for all employees regardless of location, including supplying and maintaining a consistent and secure level of hardware and software, assisting with internet connectivity and home network setups.

3. Enable effective use of collaboration tools. Arrange training so that everyone understands how to use them and how they can help and track which tools are underused (for example, chat functions or collaborative document development).

4. Ensure full inclusion in hybrid events. Even when some attendees are at a central location, it may be more inclusive to hold a meeting entirely through a collaborative tool – so that everyone has "equal glass" and access to whiteboarding and chat functions – rather than having those who are elsewhere "attend" a conference room from inside someone's laptop.

5. Use in-person time to maximum effectiveness. Rather than arbitrarily choosing certain days to be "in the office," assemble people with specific intentions: say, kicking off a new initiative or introducing new employees.
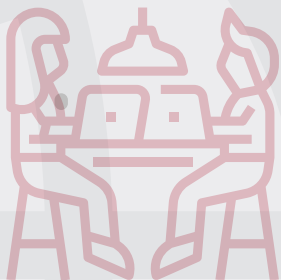
"Shaping the future of hybrid work" is an executive briefing paper by MIT Technology Review Insights. We would like to thank all participants as well as the sponsor, Dell Technologies. MIT Technology Review Insights has collected and reported on all findings contained in this paper independently, regardless of participation or sponsorship. Jason Sparapani and Laurel Ruma were the editors of this report, and Nicola Crepaldi was the publisher.

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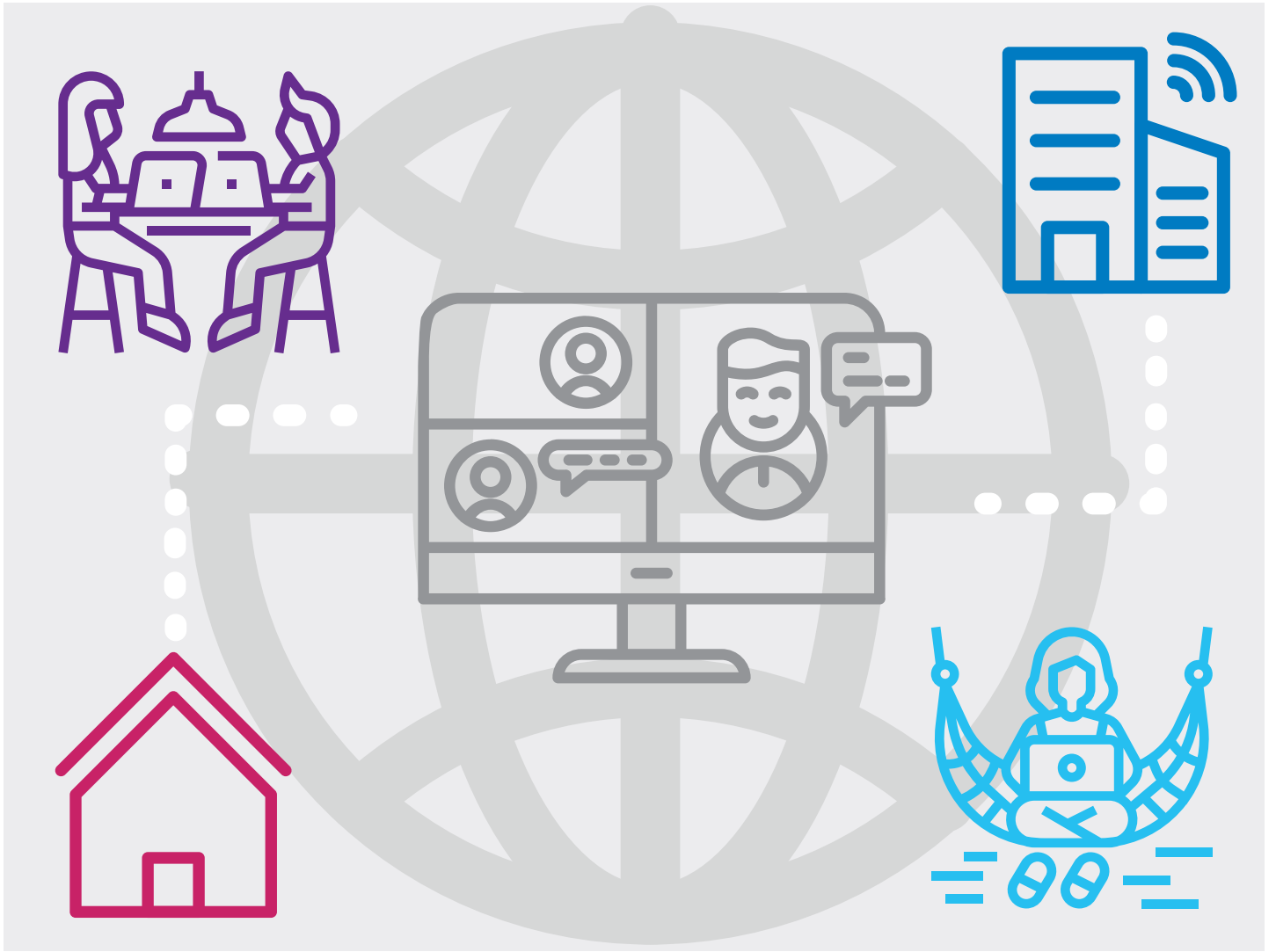
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