Bridging the Gaps

Gender Equity & Economic Security

A Series of Tools for Employers in Restigouche (New Brunswick) and Avignon (Quebec)

March 2024

This project was created to help advance the economic recovery of women and gender minorities in our communities as we rebuild from the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tool #5:

Building resilience: Planning for future adverse events

20 Minute read

About this tool

This tool is informed by broad-based research on how employers can manage change, overcome challenges and handle unforeseen circumstances, with an emphasis on emerging trends and best practices.

This tool will address:

- The importance of investing in **psychological health and safety, wellness and organizational resilience.**

- The **best workplace practices to manage change effectively.**

This tool provides an overview of the situation; it does not cover all potential solutions. The aim is to help employers focus on retaining employees, even during times of change, adversity and unforeseen circumstances.

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the importance of planning ahead and having structures in place so workplaces can adapt to unforeseen circumstances. Prior to the crisis, many employers had never envisioned the possibility of such a global event, nor had they considered how it could drastically affect their operations and business framework or their employees' wellbeing and job satisfaction, especially for individuals identifying as women and gender-diverse.

Here are some **important facts to consider** about the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on businesses and other organizations:

Studies show that **small and mid-sized businesses were impacted more severely**, leading to widespread layoffs and, in some cases, bankruptcy.[1]

Research demonstrates that **when employees experience stress and adversity, it can lead to emotional exhaustion and drive up employee turnover as a result.**[2]

To manage the workplace impacts of unforeseen circumstances (such as pandemics) and to boost employee retention, research points to the importance of **investing in employees' wellbeing, including psychological health and safety**. Investments in organizational and employee resilience are important both before and during a crisis.[3]

When unforeseen circumstances arise, employers and employees must be prepared to adapt quickly. While much of the current literature and research focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic, **businesses and other organizations must recognize that unexpected events may occur at any time**. Rather than wondering whether they will occur, we should acknowledge that they inevitably will. **Preparedness is crucial**.
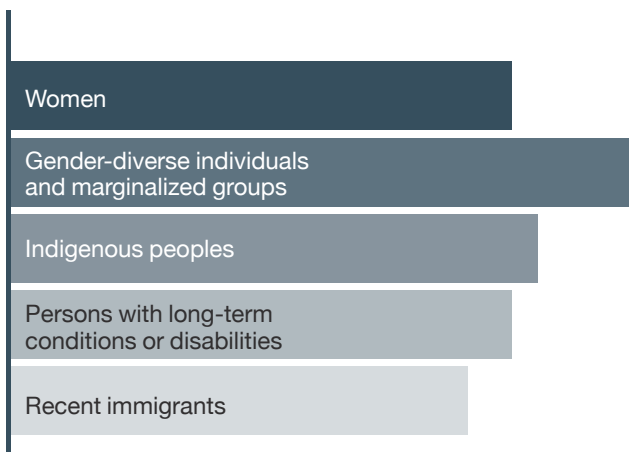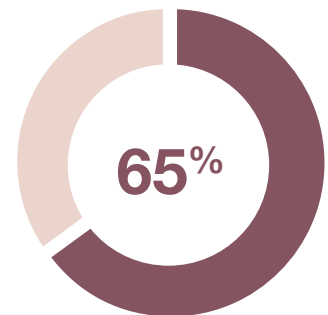
For example, Canada has been experiencing a notable increase in extreme weather events, among other environmental concerns. In addition to exacerbating social issues, including gender inequality, these events can significantly impact the workplace. We also know that **women, girls and gender-diverse individuals, especially those from marginalized groups, face unique challenges during a crisis**. By setting aside time for planning and being mindful of these challenges, we can create more equitable and resilient workplaces that can easily adapt to unexpected events.[4]

As business managers and employers, you can't always control external circumstances. Nevertheless, there are some things you can do, such as overseeing **the quality of products and services you provide to your clients/ communities and your employees' development opportunities** (e.g. digital skills training). You also have control over how you relate to your employees, including **treating them with respect, ensuring their wellbeing and being ethical and transparent in your dealings with them.**[5]

Impacts on women and gender-diverse individuals

As discussed in other tools and as identified in our findings, here are the main impacts of unexpected events and crises on women and gender-diverse individuals:

- Women and gender-diverse individuals were disproportionately affected by the pandemic: 65% of job losses in Canada in March 2020 were experienced by women.[6]

65%

Women

Gender-diverse individuals and marginalized groups

Indigenous peoples

Persons with long-term conditions or disabilities

Recent immigrants

- According to the federal government, during the pandemic, mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression and stress were reported mostly by women (57%) and gender-diverse individuals (71%), as well as marginalized groups, Indigenous peoples (60%), persons with long-term conditions or disabilities (57%) and recent immigrants (52%).[7]

- Gender-based violence tends to rise during and after natural disasters and pandemics. Lockdown measures forced partners to spend more time together, even though some individuals were not safe in their homes. But although the pandemic drove up rates of domestic violence, it was not the primary cause.[8]

Findings from our regional surveys to employers and residents (84% of residents self-identified as women):

Employers reported that pandemic-related restrictions led to confusion, feelings of being policed and scrutinized and personal issues such as difficulty accessing family support and childcare, which secondarily impacted the workplace.

Employers recognized the gendered impacts of the pandemic, reporting key challenges and disproportionate impacts among woman-identifying or gender-minority-identifying employees.

Survey respondents (residents) primarily reported that their general health and wellbeing were significantly impacted since the onset of the pandemic, including increased stress, anxiety and depression.

Respondents (residents) also reported loss of work or reduced hours and/or having to use sick days, vacations or flextime for family and childcare reasons.

Restrictions in place at the Matapedia and Van Horne Bridges linking New Brunswick and Quebec divided families and complicated co-parenting and care arrangements. The monitoring of this interprovincial crossing affected commuting to work for at least one quarter of the respondents.

Experiences of racism and discrimination associated with the bridge monitoring were the most frequently noted impact.[9]

What is organizational resilience?

- Organizational resilience involves anticipating potential threats, coping effectively with adverse events, thinking outside the box, seeking innovative solutions, adapting to changing conditions and fostering future success.[10]

- Resilient businesses are better equipped to deal with unforeseen circumstances like pandemics. They are more effective and perform at a higher level. As a result, they are better at facing competitors, meeting customer demand, improving product/service quality and enhancing operational competence.[11]


What is employee resilience?

- Employee resilience refers to the psychological capacity "to overcome or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure or other events that induce high levels of stress or pressure."[12] This entails not only persevering, but also using more effective methods and becoming better in the process.[13] Resilient employees tend to focus more on their jobs while achieving higher levels of performance and actively supporting the business.[14] Personal and external factors such as access to available resources or having a supportive employer can impact employee resilience.[15]

Why does workplace resilience matter for employers?

Research demonstrates that when employees' health and wellbeing are valued in the workplace, there are a number of positive benefits:[16]

- Reduced stress and work-related burnout.

- Fewer interpersonal conflicts and grievances.

- Increased employee engagement, creativity and innovation.

- Increased attraction of new talent and improved employee retention.

- Reduced costs associated with employee health (group insurance, disability insurance, absenteeism or productivity losses indirectly caused by poor physical or mental health).

- Enhanced business image and becoming an "employer of choice".[17]

There are three key stages when building workplace resilience: anticipation, coping and adaptation.[18]
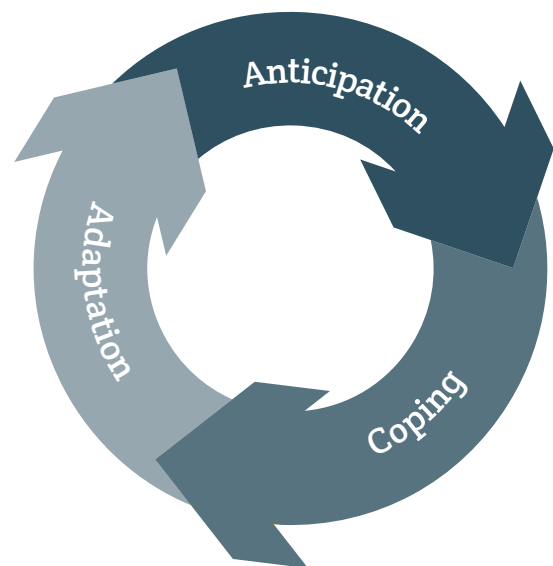
Anticipation Stage

The anticipation stage comprises three specific criteria:

- The ability to observe internal and external developments.

- The ability to identify critical developments and potential threats.

- The ability to prepare for unexpected events.[19]
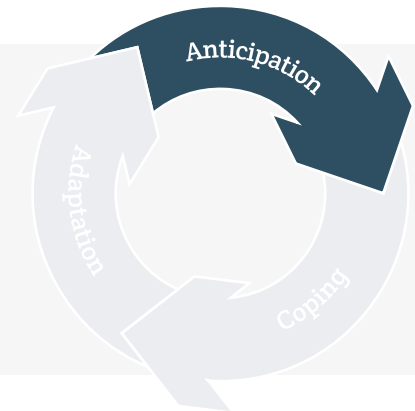
Best practices for your business before an unexpected event or crisis occurs

1. **Foster leadership development**

- Get all managers on board, including HR specialists, and share the decision-making.[20]

- Invest in management training (e.g. how to manage remote employees, emergency preparedness, dealing with unexpected events, etc.).[21]

- Provide managers with the resources they need to implement best practices (e.g. time, finance, human resources, etc.).[22]

- Cultivate an ethical leadership style and address any gender equity barriers.

2. **Analyze the status of your business**

To understand where you are heading, you first need to know where you currently stand. There are various ways to collect this kind of information:

- Quantitative and qualitative surveys or questionnaires to get feedback from employees (can be confidential).

- Interviews with senior management, supervisors in key positions and key demographic groups (e.g. women, parents, 2SLGBTQ+ employees).

This can be done regularly during performance evaluations and check-ins or at team meetings. Keep a record and analyze the information on a periodic basis. These processes can be done in simple, cost-effective and efficient ways, even in small businesses. They also have a big impact (e.g. free online questionnaires, questions asked at meetings).[23]

Examples of quantitative factors that can indicate organizational resilience:

- Employee retention rate (even during periods of uncertainty and crises).

- Absenteeism and grievance/sick leave rates.

- Productivity results (e.g. tangible goals and milestones).[24]

Examples of qualitative factors that can indicate organizational resilience:

- The reasons why your employees decide to leave or stay in your workplace.

- Your employees' level of satisfaction.

Use the section below to jot down ideas and reflect:

a. How would you describe your employees' current state of wellbeing? What about your business as a whole?

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b. What are the broader needs of your employees, managers and business in terms of psychological health and safety, wellness and organizational resilience? To reflect on this, think back on what the needs were during the pandemic or brainstorm with staff:

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c. What are some key concerns or challenges that detract from psychological health and safety, wellness and resilience for your employees and business? What are some cost-effective and immediate changes you could make to improve at least one of them?

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3. Strategic planning using SWOT analysis:

SWOT (strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats) analysis is a guidance framework for developing **short and long-term plans**.[25] When using SWOT analysis, try to include individuals with different backgrounds, experiences and perspectives in the process.

When you consider your employees' psychological health and safety, wellness and organizational resilience, what are:

Your strengths? (internal factors)

What makes your business a champion in this regard?

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_____

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For example: The presence of a champion (an organization or individual with high visibility and impact) who has the power to promote the required changes.

Your weaknesses? (internal factors)

What weakens your business' ability to take care of it?

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For example: You have no policy in place for protecting employees' psychological health and safety.

Your opportunities? (external factors)

What are the external circumstances that, backed by the right decisions, could enhance your business's ability to take care of it?

_____

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_____

For example: New funding is received to invest in employees' professional development.

Your threats? (external factors)

What external forces pose a risk to your business's willingness to invest in this area?

_____

_____

_____

For example: A competitor is taking steps to improve the wellbeing of its employees and is attracting top talent.[26]

Short and long-term plans should include:

Risk assessments. Think outside the box and ask yourself questions such as: What would happen if…? What is the worst-case scenario? What are the chances of that happening? The threats in your SWOT analysis can be a good starting point.[27]

Policies and procedures that would go into effect immediately and provide a response in the event of future shutdowns or major business/industry changes. They may include procedures and protocols for various scenarios, e.g. pandemics, natural disasters, economic downturns, gender-based violence in the workplace, technological disruptions, etc.[28]

■ NOTE: WorkingNB and the Government of Quebec's workforce consultants can guide you through this process of updating your business' practices and policies.

A health and safety plan if other unexpected events require any operational changes. To get started, consider COVID-19's impact:[29]

■ What adaptations did you make in your business?

■ What would you do differently next time (lessons learned)?

Use an analytical lens and identify who in your workplace was most impacted by various aspects of the pandemic:

■ What were the experiences of various genders or diversity groups?

■ What impacted employees with pre-existing health or mental health issues?

A detailed and clear communication plan is crucial and serves as a road map to navigate unexpected situations.[30] The best time to prepare is before an unexpected event happens.[31]

■ Choose a communication team and identify each individual's role (e.g. legal expert, HR manager, marketing coordinator, etc.) and who is responsible for what type of communication (e.g. communicating with staff, clients, media, etc.).[32]

■ Develop clear and transparent communication policies and procedures that are easy to adapt to different situations.[33]

■ Determine different methods of message delivery that are easy to use and accessible (by phone, email, MS Teams, etc.), timeframes (crises need to be addressed quickly), etc. Share in different ways and multiple times with different perspectives to make sure everyone receives and understands the information.

■ Identify a list of wellbeing benefits and programs (internal and external) that can be shared with staff if a crisis occurs.

■ Have a plan to help you locate each other quickly.[34]

Be sure to check out this BDC communication plan template: https://www.bdc.ca/globalassets/digizuite/10597-plan-de-communication-rh-en.

4. Review and redefine your broader policies and procedures

It's important to regularly assess your business policies and practices and to keep them up to date and relevant. Here are a few things to consider:

- Understand the pandemic's impact on women and gender-diverse individuals in the workplace (see Tool #1 for more information).

- Take steps to become more inclusive and equitable (see Tool #2 – Inclusive and equitable workplace culture).

- Review your hiring process (see Tool #3 – Inclusive and equitable recruitment strategies).

- Review your benefits and retention strategy (see Tool #4 – Inclusive and equitable retention strategies, which also includes links to pay equity guides).

One example is a "right to disconnect policy." This might include:

- Expectations for work performed after hours, such as answering phone calls and emails.

- Employees' right to additional compensation for after-hours work.

- Various work-related scenarios, depending on the topic, the importance of the task/message/call and who submitted the request (client, other staff, manager, etc.).

- Requirements regarding when to activate out-of-office notifications.

- The policy's effective date or timeframe.[35]

5. Establish support processes

Ensure that your teams can quickly take over the tasks and responsibilities of other team members in case of an emergency (e.g. shared drives and organized folders, documents explaining projects, etc.).[36]

6. Know your employees

As a leader, knowing your employees and appreciating their different personalities, preferences and work ethics will help to develop trust and foster a sense of community.

During a crisis, each interaction is an opportunity to make a deeper connection. Understanding your employees will help you to manage them more effectively. If you recognize their strengths and passions, your team will have a clearer sense of purpose and be more efficient.[37]

Coping Stage

The overall ability to cope with the unexpected can be divided in two: the **ability to accept a problem and the ability to develop and implement solutions.**[38] It is essential to understand and accept the underlying reasons for any changes. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to address the root causes.[39]
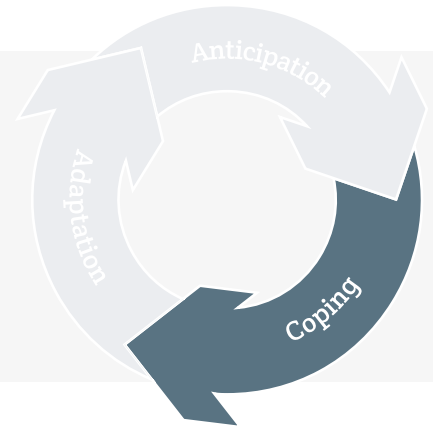
Best practices are important during the coping stage (during a crisis)

Note that some of those practices can also be applied during the anticipation and adaptation stages as well.

1. Use open and transparent communication

Inform and reassure employees in a timely and relevant matter about any business changes or challenges (e.g. closures, layoffs, restrictions or new procedures).[40] Share updates with employees on what is happening and on any decisions being made.[41]

2. Communicate often and ensure two-way communication

This prevents fear and uncertainty and ensures that all employees receive the same information.[42] Identify the main contact people for individuals wishing to express concerns or raise issues (include anonymous options). Provide accurate information and reassure employees about their job security. In the event of layoffs or reduced hours, it's important to inform employees as soon as possible so they can make arrangements.[43]

3. Offer resources and support

- Offer accommodations and equipment adapted to individual needs in case of a crisis.[44]

- Offer employee debriefing sessions during and after stressful experiences or events.[45]

- Offer programs to encourage your employees to take care of their physical and psychological health, depending on the situation (e.g. gym access, walking meetings, healthy snacks, community gardens, etc.).[46]

4. Motivate your employees

- Be clear on each employee's roles, responsibilities and tasks.

- Give employees autonomy.

- If tasks change during a crisis, try to use everyone's skills efficiently.

- Schedule regular meetings to give feedback, depending on employees' needs and availability.

- Recognize the importance of everyone's work.[47]

- Recognize employees who are doing a lot for your business or helping colleagues.

- Be empathetic and acknowledge employees' fears and concerns.[48]

5. Reduce stress in the workplace

- Determine whether employees' workloads are appropriate.

- Avoid time pressure. However, if deadlines are part of your day-to-day reality, communicate them early so your employees can plan accordingly.

- Give employees the freedom to determine their own workplan (keeping business priorities in mind).[49]

- Offer flexible options. See **Tool #4** of this series for more ideas.

6. Apply health and safety measures at the office or at home (for remote workers)

- Ensure that all work is carried out safely.

  - Employers' responsibilities: WorkSafeNB

  - Remote work: CNESST (QC) (in French)

- Offer support to employees (e.g. regular check-ins) and provide adequate equipment.[50]

- Ensure remote workers are not marginalized for being "out of sight, out of mind" (employees who are more present in the office tend to get more rewards, opportunities, promotions and pay increases).[51]

- Know how to respond to domestic/intimate partner violence if your employees are working from home. Be a Signal for Help responder. Applying some of the suggestions in this tool may help you to identify signs of whether employees are experiencing this type of violence.

- For more information, see the "Remote work" section in **Tool #4** of this series.

7. Encourage teams to understand and support each other

- Workers who have a strong connection with others feel more supported, less isolated and are more resilient when dealing with crises and other difficulties.[52]

- Social support, including sharing work tasks, responsibilities and debriefing after stressful experiences, is positively corelated with resilience. [53]

- Social support makes it easier to manage a high-stress job and mitigates the harmful effects of isolation.[54]

- Encourage open, direct and constructive communication and rapid conflict management.[55]

- Encourage cohesion, trust and psychological safety within teams by offering constructive feedback without fear of reprisals, by creating a learning climate where mistakes are allowed and by carrying out regular group and individual check-ins.[56]

8. Use performance management, feedback and recognition

Provide fair and regular feedback on your employees' performance, both informally and formally. Recognize your employees' good work, positive behaviours and attitudes.[57] Listen to what they have to say, even if you feel uncomfortable or don't agree with them.[58] This may help to shift the mood or change prior decisions.

Adaptation Stage

Resilience includes the ability to **adapt** to critical situations. It involves using long-term learning to reflect on the crisis, incorporate insights and bring about any required changes. Change management skills are fundamental to organizational resilience.[59]
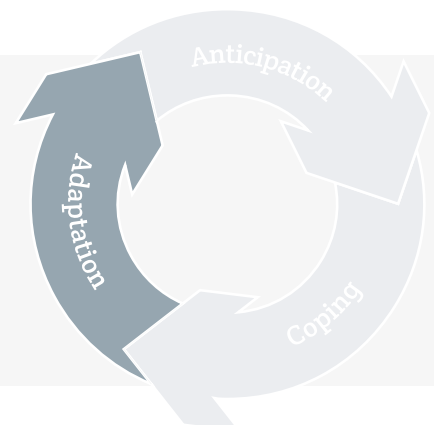
Best practices for the adaptation stage

1. Assess the outcomes of the steps you took during a crisis and adapt as needed

This provides an opportunity to explore various aspects of your business. To gain from these opportunities, consider conducting a "lessons learned" exercise. This will make your business more resilient to future challenges while improving your overall performance.

Objectively evaluate the effectiveness of the steps you took before, during and after a crisis:[60]

- Reflect on outcomes and long-term learning and adapt your strategies as needed.

- Realign your strategic priorities and objectives based on insights into unexpected events and emergencies.

- Review your SWAT analysis and short/long-term planning and make changes as needed.

- Ask employees to share their thoughts and encourage diverse perspectives.

  - What were we doing when we were at our best?

  - What activities did we struggle with and what capabilities are we missing?

  - What decisions did we make in the "heat of the moment" and which ones are worth retaining or redesigning?

  - What did our customers tell us, either directly or indirectly?

 - What surprised us the most?[61]

2. Implement lessons learned

To gauge business resilience and employees' willingness to apply these insights, consider their appetite for change. If staff require time to decompress and focus on their daily home and work responsibilities, we suggest giving them that space. Their renewed energy and commitment will reflect the consideration you show them during this process.[62]

3. Evaluate your teams following a crisis

- Give positive feedback. Be specific and focus on work performance. Share what you appreciated the most about your employees' performance during the crisis.[63]

- Assess your workplace to determine whether staff were encouraged to support each other, work collaboratively and increase social connections.

- Give constructive feedback. Be specific if someone did something that wasn't effective.

- Offer alternatives or suggestions for improvement and explain why it's important to do things differently in the future.[64]

Try to provide positive and constructive comments right away, either when you observe a given behaviour or shortly afterward. This will ensure that your feedback is taken seriously and action is taken right away. If stress levels are high, consider delaying feedback for a moment, but address any issues shortly afterward. Provide regular, ongoing feedback, not just during performance evaluations.[65]
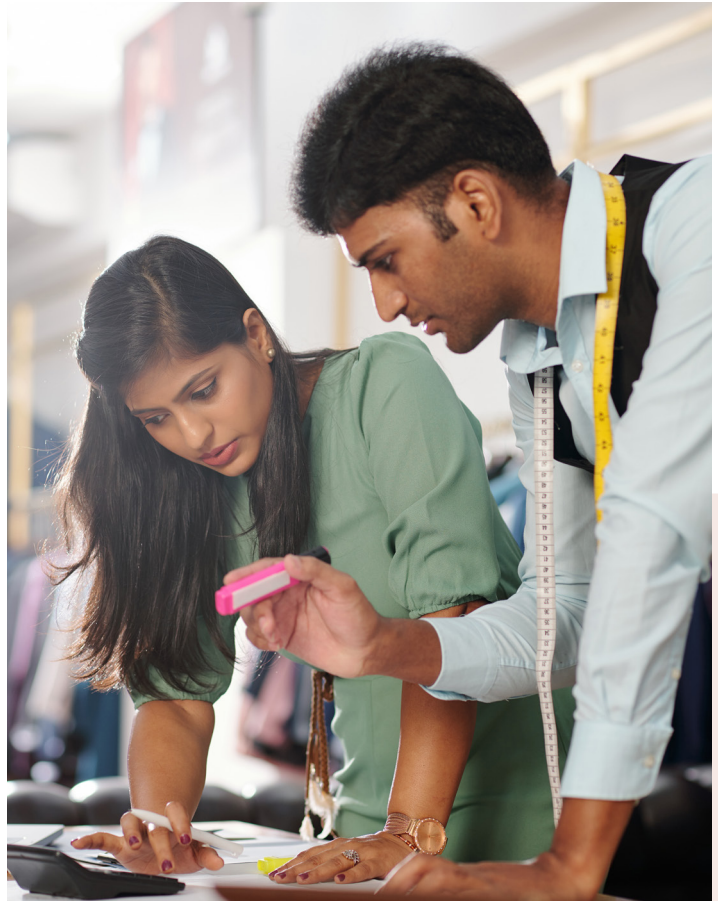
Conclusion

As mentioned throughout this document, workplace resilience is the key to success for businesses and other organizations. For employers, being able to navigate unexpected events and crises while prioritizing employees' psychological health and safety is essential. By implementing proactive measures and best practices (e.g. leadership development, strategic planning and fostering a resilient workplace culture), businesses can anticipate, cope with and adapt to challenges more effectively.

This tool underscores the importance of recognizing the unique impacts of unforeseen circumstances on marginalized groups, particularly women and gender-diverse individuals. It is crucial for businesses to promote and include inclusivity and equity in their response strategies. Ultimately, fostering organizational and employee resilience is essential when it comes to facing new and unexpected challenges and ensuring long-term success for everyone involved.

Endnotes

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