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Workforce Resilience in the Eye of the Pandemic: Overcoming the Current Remote Work Situation While Planning for the Future

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As the shock of mandatory remote work requirements begins to diminish, digital workplace leaders are left with the immediate challenge of improving the current situation, while beginning to consider the short- and long-term impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic on workforce resiliency.

Analysis

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic transformed business operations overnight. Most organizations mandated work at home for the vast majority of their office workers, creating chaos and confusion. Few were prepared for such a massive change.

The initial shock of mandatory remote work is over. In most cases, employees and managers have reached a minimum working arrangement in a difficult situation. Significant remote work problems persist, such as inadequate equipment and infrastructure, inaccessible applications and information, ineffective working practices, and home circumstances, where the mixture of children, space, health and financial concerns make home work difficult. But at least the lights are on and business operations – while often impaired – continue.

The most immediate concern for businesses is to improve the current situation, and the research material provided below is designed to help do that. The research is divided into four categories, each of which addresses an element of a work-at-home strategy: remote work applications; online meeting technologies; remote work program management; and remote work infrastructure. The goal is to ensure that workers feel connected and informed in this difficult time.

At the same time, digital workplace leaders should start to think about two crucial follow-on matters: What have we learned from this massive shift to work at home, and how will the pandemic impact the future of work? There is a combinatorial effect at work: The economic impact of the pandemic will drive significant cost-saving efforts, which may align with new workforce strategies. For example, office hoteling – which can deliver significant cost savings over individual offices – can be aligned with an expansion of work-at-home entitlements. And extending flexible work policies to more workers can promote greater employee engagement and a better employee experience, thereby boosting employee retention and attraction. A robust remote

work capability that can be utilized when necessary will now be seen as mandatory for future business continuity plans.

Mandatory work-at-home efforts and consequences are different at every organization, but five consistent themes were apparent in the first few weeks of the outbreak, requiring follow-on remediation actions:

1. Employees equipped with laptops, for example, have had a far easier time making the shift to home working because they can easily take their work with them. While Gartner has been recommending laptops over desktops for several years now, **there is still a large base of legacy desktop PCs in use**, which are not intended to be brought home. A laptop alone does not solve all problems (endpoint security, network access problems were widespread), but it has proved to be the first step in facilitating remote work. On average, workers spend 45% of their time working on a desktop, and more than 70% of workers spend at least 20% of their time working on a desktop, according to the 2019 Gartner Digital Workplace Survey.
2. Equipping employees with SaaS-based personal and team productivity applications – what we call the “new work nucleus” – was clearly essential to effective home work. What quickly became apparent, however, was that even though organizations moved to Office 365, G Suite or a collection of best-of-breed new work nucleus applications, **many employees were not sufficiently adept at using the applications**. Enabling employees to productively use new work nucleus applications is crucial for effective work.
3. In a similar vein, **many workers lacked the basic digital dexterity required** to assemble and connect their new home office. This dynamic underscores the need for employees to actively participate in the digital economy: using modern devices, managing healthcare and finances online and socializing online. Digital dexterity needs to extend to the home and personal life to ensure employees have the digital savvy for post-COVID-19 working practices.
4. Even when organizations have been relatively well-prepared for mandatory work at home, technical issues such as patching Windows or unexpected security flaws in meetings software have **impacted workers’ ability to work remotely** when scaled to maximum capacity.
5. It is clear that **managers have struggled with helping team members stay focused and productive** during the crisis. Table 1 reflects the best practices for managing employees working at home due to COVID-19, which now must be ingrained in any emergency – and ongoing – management plans.

Table 1: Best Practices for Managing Employees Working at Home Due to COVID-19

Managers leading remote work teams should:

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- Empower employees to contribute to the most critical needs of the business by clearly communicating work priorities and aligning these with resources. Focus on (critical) outcomes rather than on how and when workers complete tasks.
- Create mechanisms for sharing ideas on how to address family needs, acknowledging employee fears and stress, using online forums.
- Identify where to reduce individual work demands through reprioritization, as negotiated with business partners. Be sensitive to the fact that workloads will increase for some and decrease for others.
- Allow for work flexibility beyond remote working opportunities by accommodating different start times, work hours and general flexibility on when, where and how work gets done.
- Address employee concerns about their livelihood by providing transparency around business conditions and performance.

Source: Gartner

Few business continuity plans include extensive remote work scenarios. The most important continuity lesson from the pandemic is that digital resilience must extend to the workforce and the home. Digital resiliency involves multiple threads – where employees work, the tools they use, how they are managed and how they are motivated – none of which can be treated in isolation. Workforce digital resilience is best nurtured in an engaging and intuitive digital workplace environment, which boosts employee digital dexterity.

In optimal circumstances, responsibility for the digital workplace is shared across HR, facilities management, corporate communications and line-of-business managers, as well as IT. The output of a digital workplace (workforce digital dexterity – the ability and ambition to work and live digitally) is the key to ensuring organizational resiliency in the time of a crisis. It is also the foundation for digital business success.

Remote work emphasizes the importance of an interdisciplinary effort. IT groups establish bring your own device (BYOD) programs, facilities management pursues office hoteling strategies, and HR enables flexible work programs. Yet each initiative is often done independent of the others. If efforts are united behind a common message about the need for and benefits of remote work, they are more likely to succeed. These dynamics are especially critical now, as most organizations are considering expanding work-at-home entitlements as part of a post-pandemic workforce realignment.

Other workforce vulnerabilities exposed by COVID-19 that can be addressed within a digital workplace program include the following:

- Paper-based workflows don't work in a remote work situation and must be replaced with digital alternatives.

- The ability to acquire, deploy and fix hardware and office equipment is not always possible under stressful conditions, requiring prior planning for a crisis.
- In-person meetings and real-time interactions may be impossible with remote teams, requiring skilled use of asynchronous collaboration tools.
- Ignorance of work-at-home best practices for managers and team members has been apparent, requiring specific education programs.
- Ready help with remote work technology best practices is scarce, suggesting the need to accelerate “technology champion” programs, where a team member offers IT-related help to teammates.

Research Highlights

Recommended content available to Gartner clients.

New Work Nucleus

The mandatory work-at-home practices necessitated by the pandemic have uncovered gaps in the toolset provided to workers for remote work. In some cases, workers have been provided with legacy, on-premises productivity applications that have proven woefully inadequate for remote use. Most organizations that have moved to new work nucleus applications such as Google G Suite or Microsoft Office 365 have been more successful in implementing remote working. New work nucleus applications that were combined with a substantial enablement effort to get employees productively using the applications have been the most successful with remote work programs.

“Create a Culture of Digital Dexterity With the ‘New Work Nucleus”

A shift to SaaS-based personal and team productivity tools can profoundly enhance organizational digital dexterity goals by transforming workforce culture and facilitating new ways of working. Application leaders must include this “new work nucleus” in their strategic plans.

“Assess the Role of Content Collaboration Platforms in the New Work Nucleus”

Content collaboration platforms play a leading role in the new work nucleus. We drill down into these important platforms and offer guidance to application leaders on their evolution, use of supporting augmentation services, employee-centric enablement and ability to change how work gets done.

“The Role of Email and Calendaring in the New Work Nucleus”

Application leaders supporting the digital workplace don’t pay enough attention to email and calendaring. But they should treat these as key components in the new work nucleus, and exploit their new capabilities, which grow rapidly with the transition to the SaaS platform.

“The Role of Meeting Solutions in the New Work Nucleus”

Meeting solutions are a key component in the new work nucleus. This document serves as an introduction to meeting tools and is followed up with the section below on meetings.

“The Role of Workstream Collaboration in the New Work Nucleus”

Workstream collaboration tools such as Slack and Microsoft Teams play a prominent role in the new work nucleus. Application leaders will gain guidance on its evolution as a digital workplace application and its ability to change how work gets done.

“The Role of Documents, Spreadsheets and Graphics in the New Work Nucleus”

Documents, spreadsheets and graphics play a starring role in the new work nucleus. We drill down into this important topic and offer guidance how they change how work gets done.

“Collaborative Work Management in the New Work Nucleus”

Collaborative work management plays a prominent role in the new work nucleus. We drill down into the details to offer application leaders guidance on how these ‘project management tools for the rest of us’ create team efficiencies.

“Go Beyond Conventional Training to Drive Digital Workplace Adoption”

As organizations look to enable agility and innovation, they struggle to find the most suitable role for training. Application leaders responsible for digital workplace programs should incorporate training into adoption and engagement efforts, rather than organize distinct training programs.

Remote Work Meetings

The pandemic has underscored the critical need to rethink traditional approaches to meetings and meeting technologies. Remote work demands fewer meetings where presentations are made to passive audiences and more meetings where attendees actively and collaboratively create new assets. Remote work means there will be fewer formal, scheduled interactions between fixed groups of people at fixed times, and more ad hoc meetings with shifting participants. A focus needs to be on boosting participation via polls and surveys, and using brainstorming tools in meetings that extend beyond the appointment window so that participants can continue to interact afterward. Recordings should be used so those who cannot attend will be able to easily catch up.

“Use AI to Hack Your Tricky Meeting Problems”

Artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities emerging at work will improve meeting efficiency, save time and cut the drudgery for this key collaboration activity. To reap the benefits, application leaders for the digital workplace must plan AI capability for meetings and manage the new risks it creates.

“Peer Lessons Learned: Implementing Meeting Solutions”

Meeting solutions blend communications, collaboration and content to enable real-time group work from anywhere. Application leaders in charge of deploying meeting solutions can learn from the implementation experiences of their peers shared on Gartner Peer Insights.

“Survey Analysis: Accommodate Different Meeting Cultures and Technology Expectations for a Digital Workforce”

More than 7,000 digital workers have expressed their pain points about meeting overload and enabling meetings for a global, multigenerational and increasingly mobile workforce. This research provides insight to help application leaders hone their digital workplace and meeting solution strategies.

“Modernize Collaboration With Moderately Priced Meeting Room Technology”

Vendors are responding to business users’ demand for advanced meeting room functionality with services and solutions that deliver a widening set of capabilities. We explain how I&O leaders can meet changing user expectations with modern and budget-friendly meeting room technologies.

“Choose a Meeting Solution That Performs Well on Virtual Desktop Infrastructure”

Getting a meeting solution to perform well on virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) in terms of audio and video quality has always been a challenge. This report will help application leaders identify and deliver meeting solutions that perform consistently well in a VDI environment.

“Enable More Productive Meetings With Google G Suite or Microsoft Office 365”

Employee attitudes toward meetings are tainted by frustration due to poor planning and unproductive outcomes. Application leaders should enable access to capabilities within the cloud office suites to make meetings more effective and productive for their employees.

“Adoption of Meeting and Workstream Collaboration Solutions Spikes in Response to Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic”

With the emergence of the COVID-19 outbreak, many organizations are facing disruption to their operations. This report helps application leaders to successfully leverage meeting solutions and workstream collaboration applications to support a remote worker strategy and mitigate business discontinuity.

“How to Maximize Unified Communications Adoption Inside the Digital Workplace”

IT departments often deploy unified communications (UC) solutions, only to find that user adoption fails to achieve the usage levels expected. This research outlines several best practices that application leaders can use to improve adoption by grounding their UC strategy inside the broader digital workplace.

Remote Work Programs

The global pandemic has triggered nationwide lockdowns to curb the spread of COVID-19. Organizations have been required to institute remote work to keep employees safe and healthy while ensuring business continuity, but most have been unprepared to support it. Effective remote work programs require more than just giving employees laptops with VPN access and allowing them to work from home. An effective remote work program requires a cross-functional team to build a comprehensive remote work policy that overcomes the challenges from multiple perspectives. Priorities include establishing a culture of mutual trust, identifying tasks that are suited to remote work, and measuring quantified outcomes. But organizations must also consider their employees' desire to work remotely.

“How to Cultivate Effective ‘Remote Work’ Programs”

In an effort to reduce the cost of office space, application leaders often encourage employees to work remotely. However, if the emphasis is only on freeing up space, then these efforts will fail. This research describes the essential first steps of creating remote work programs.

“Harness Remote Learning to Equip Employees for COVID-19 Response”

Enterprises must quickly arm employees with the skills and competencies to address the new COVID-19 reality. Executive leaders can adopt modern remote learning practices right now to provide much needed upskilling or reskilling.

“Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Managing the Remote Worker”

To be successful in implementing a remote worker or teleworker program, CIOs must ensure that “out of sight” is not “out of mind.” This research will help CIOs assess what jobs and which individuals are suitable for remote working and provide strategies for effectively managing the remote worker.

“Overcome the Fears, Embrace the Benefits and Launch a Remote Work Pilot Program”

CIOs need to take the lead to help managers and other stakeholders overcome their fears of implementing a remote work program. The many benefits of such a program must be embraced because it can bring to the organization a competitive edge in the recruitment and retention of highly valued IT talent.

“Toolkit: Remote Work Policies”

Remote work programs benefit from having well-designed policies that clarify employee and manager responsibilities. Application leaders responsible for digital workplace initiatives can use this template to create policies for their organization.

“Reap the Benefits of Remote Work for Your Midsize Enterprise”

CIOs in midsize enterprises can use remote work technology to drive organizational resiliency against world-impacting events. Midsize enterprise C-suites are hesitant to allow remote work for

fear of a drop-off in productivity. They need to work with HR to dispel fears and highlight benefits.

“Maverick* Research: Monitoring Remote Worker Productivity Is Pointless”

Remote working is becoming the norm. IT leaders must both redesign the performance management system and move away from monitoring remote workers' productivity to measuring performance-based outcomes. Management approaches that fail to redesign create a toxic culture that hits business outcomes.

“Maverick* Research: The End of Office Space”

The “office” is an artifact of industrialization. As digitalization calls for far more agile, flexible and productive digital working environments, IT leaders must prepare organizations to discard outdated ideas about physical offices. (Maverick research exposes unconventional thinking and advice.)

Remote Work Infrastructure and Operations

The ability for employees to remotely connect to key systems and receive technical support can minimize the level of disruption to day-to-day work during workplace closures. Companies cannot assume that employees can work from coffee shops and other gathering places using public Wi-Fi access. When employees work remotely during a crisis, I&O leaders should:

- Focus on ensuring remote access infrastructure is available and can scale
- Review existing policies including standard approvals, management controls and remote work entitlements
- Prepare hardware kits for key roles to ensure the people who fill them remain productive for critical business functions

The pandemic will broaden support for BYOD, accelerate migration to cloud-hosted VDI or desktop as a service (DaaS), and modernize endpoint management strategies – both during the crisis and after (to support the expected surge of permanent remote work entitlements).

“Solving the Challenges of Modern Remote Access”

Remote access VPN was thought of as a dying technology until COVID-19 changed the way people work. This research offers guidance, including a decision tree, for security and risk management leaders to solve the challenges of quickly scaling large-scale modern remote access.

“Enablement Mindset Is the Missing IT Ingredient to Improve Workforce Digital Dexterity and the Employee Experience”

I&O leaders often measure success by system stability and security, ignoring employee use of technology. A hands-off approach not only inhibits adoption, but also often leads to incorrect use.

We analyze the impact that enablement can have on digital workplace success.

“Prepare for Unified Endpoint Management to Displace MDM and CMT”

I&O leaders managing increasingly diverse endpoints want to simplify the many tools, processes and policies that span their device environment. As unified endpoint management (UEM) technologies mature, a viable option for a single-pane-of-glass solution is emerging. This research defines UEM tools and where to apply them.

“Microsoft’s WVD Will Accelerate Virtual Desktop Maturity but May Not Lower Total Cost of Ownership Enough”

I&O leaders running or interested in VDI and DaaS have been intrigued by Microsoft’s announcement that it will include its Windows Virtual Desktop (WVD) DaaS offering with Windows 10 Enterprise and RDS CALs. But the cost of Azure and potentially additional management tools will inhibit broad adoption in the short term.

“Adopt Continuous Endpoint Engineering and Modern Management to Ensure Digital Workplace Success”

Traditional end-user computing fails to elevate employee experience amid continuous endpoint updates. I&O leaders must prove the value of infrastructure-led disruption by adopting a continuous endpoint engineering approach and modern endpoint management to drive user enablement and operational efficiency.

“Solving the Challenges of Modern Remote Access”

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“4 Steps to Implement a Perimeterless Digital Workplace”

Digital business expects an agile workforce independent of location and device. I&O leaders must drive employee agility by creating a perimeterless digital workplace to enhance customer responsiveness and employee engagement, and yet minimize security risks.

“Limit the Business Impact of COVID-19 Coronavirus Outbreaks by Improving Infrastructure Resilience”

The coronavirus outbreak in China has grown to a pandemic and is affecting the global supply chain. This research helps I&O leaders respond to infectious disease incidents by improving infrastructure resiliency to protect their organizations from significant business disruptions.

“Physical, Virtual and Cloud Desktops: Is a Hybrid Approach Inevitable?”

Desktop as a service, also known as cloud-based desktops, further blurs the line between workspace delivery approaches. I&O leaders must determine when a hybrid approach is the best option.

Evidence

2019 Gartner Digital Workplace Consumer study: This study was conducted online from March through April 2019 among 7,261 respondents in the U.S., Europe and APAC.

Participants were screened for full-time employment in organizations with 100 or more employees and were required to use digital technology for work purposes.

Ages ranged from 18 through 74 years old, with quotas and weighting applied for age, gender, region and income, so that results were representative of working country populations.

Results of this study do not represent "global" findings or the market as a whole but are a simple average of results for the targeted countries covered in this survey.

Recommended Research Available to Gartner Clients

[Market Guide for Desktop as a Service](#)

[Lead Your Employees Through the Emotional Side of COVID-19](#)

[Toolkit: Remote Work Policies](#)

[Maverick* Research: The End of Office Space](#)

[How to Cultivate Effective 'Remote Work' Programs](#)

[Maverick* Research: Monitoring Remote Worker Productivity Is Pointless](#)

[Getting Value From Employee Productivity Monitoring Technologies for Remote and Office-Based Workers](#)

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This complimentary research is part of Gartner's ongoing coverage of the business impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

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