When remote working is the new normal

Even after COVID-19, don't expect working patterns to go back to how they were

by: IT Pro  19 Jun 2020

It's often said that there's an old Chinese curse: “may you live in interesting times”. Apocryphal though that particular saying may be, times don't get much more interesting than these. Countries around the world are currently under varying stages of isolation and lockdown, as governments try and prevent the deadly spread of the COVID-19 virus. Almost overnight, daily life changed dramatically; no more visits to see friends, no trips to restaurants or cinemas and, for the majority of employees, no more going into the office.

The prevailing advice is that those who can work from home should do so and as the lockdowns were introduced around the world, organisations up and down the country were forced to turn to 100% remote working. Even as lockdowns begin to ease, many employers are choosing to keep staff at home where possible, and government guidelines have indicated that social distancing measures may have to remain in place for some time after formal lockdowns end – meaning that remote working may be the preferred option for organisations that work on a basis of hot-desking.

For many employers, this is the first time that they've supported remote staff on a widespread scale. Organisations including tech giants like Twitter and Facebook are now gearing up to support increased levels of remote working beyond the end of the coronavirus crisis, prompting huge adjustments from both a cultural and an IT standpoint.

Video conferencing and collaboration tools have been the most visible examples of this, as organisations turn to tools like Zoom, Slack, GoToMeeting and Microsoft Teams to keep their staff efficiently connected. Digital workflow tools have helped link these services to SaaS products such as Microsoft 365 in order to maintain output and productivity, while various document management systems have been deployed in short order to meet compliance requirements.
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According to Jason Hill, executive partner of Reply, the tech firm has seen a major increase in organisations seeking its help for everything from deploying and managing G Suite and Microsoft 365 instances to ensuring their cloud and digital transformation journeys are secure and sustainable. Reply's video conferencing and collaboration tools have been the most visible examples of this, as organisations turn to tools like Zoom, Slack, G Suite and Microsoft Teams to keep their staff efficiently connected. Digital workflow tools have helped link these services to SaaS products such as Microsoft 365 in order to maintain output and productivity, while various document management systems have been deployed in short order to meet compliance requirements.

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According to Jason Hill, executive partner of Reply, the tech firm has seen a major increase in organisations seeking its help for everything from deploying and managing G Suite and Microsoft 365 instances to ensuring their cloud and digital transformation journeys are secure and sustainable. Reply's services have been instrumental in helping these businesses adapt to the rapidly shifting requirements of the current crisis.

The key question amongst all this upheaval is whether businesses will go back to the way they used to operate before the current situation forced them to adapt. Companies are eagerly welcoming the continued lifting of lockdowns so that they can reopen physical retail locations, ease pressure on supply lines and rejuvenate revenue streams – but will they reopen their offices, and if they do, will there be any staff occupying them?

After the lockdown lifts, organisations will no longer be able to object to remote working on the grounds of productivity or tooling, and although some may still hold firm on the basis of a desired in-office company culture, thousands of employees will be free to continue working from home for the foreseeable future. This means that companies will need to continue supporting the ongoing IT needs of remote workers, so the new culture of video meetings as standard may not be going anywhere even when lockdowns have ended.

In fact, with video conferencing and remote work now thoroughly normalised, many organisations may conclude that they don’t actually need a physical office at all. A fully distributed workforce means they can eliminate the rent, upkeep and other associated operating costs that come with physical premises which, coupled with a potential productivity boost from remote working, makes an attractive proposition.

“The business and IT leaders we’re talking to are no longer looking at remote working as a temporary measure. They are analysing the health and productivity of employees and the efficiencies to be gained by remote working,” said Hill. “A key part of that analysis is whether existing technology solutions can support wide-scale remote working in the long term.”

For companies that require access to on-premise services or infrastructure, VPN solutions are the obvious answer, as well as remote management to help IT keep them operational. Cloud-managed virtual desktop infrastructure has also been pushed to the fore to rapidly provision and deploy mobile devices in a way that is secure, manageable and – crucially – can be done from a distance.

With a sustained uptick in remote workers all but certain, companies must now look to the future of their
IT roadmap. For those that hadn’t embraced the relevant technology pre-COVID, the emphasis was on speed, with an urgent need to get a functional solution in place as quickly as possible. When the dust settles, organisations should consider how they can best build remote working into their DNA in a way that is going to be productive, secure and sustainable.

So what does the foundation of successful remote working look like? Part of this question is technological – for example, companies will likely need to adjust their security practices to account for a more distributed workforce, with a greater focus on multi-factor authentication, endpoint security and lateral network movement – but the cultural change aspect should not be underestimated either.

According to Hill: “Companies should get used to livestreaming events, both internal and external for those not able to attend in person. Managers also need to make concerted efforts to include remote employees as much as those based in the office and to make sure they’re not feeling isolated.

“For example, Reply offers a solution that can help solve these challenges, giving companies a digital workplace software platform that’s custom-tailored to their needs and goals, incorporating collaboration and knowledge-sharing tools, automation of business processes and a modular, highly flexible architecture.”

All the evidence points to one truth: remote working is here to stay. Putting it off or dismissing it is simply no longer an option, and businesses that put in the hard work and build a solid foundation now will be in the best position to ride that wave when the quarantine ends. Good remote working is about a seamless fusion of processes, tools and culture.

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