

For many organizations, the current COVID-19 crisis appears to be an accelerant to their digital transformation initiatives, which include remote work, remote management, and virtual collaboration as staples of operational design.

Power Users in the Age of the New Normal

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Questions posed by: Z by HP

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Q. When the "new normal" is achieved, what will it look like and what needs must IT decision makers (ITDMs) take into account for their power users (technical and creative professionals) beyond the simpler needs (laptop, virtual meeting software) of typical office workers?

A. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations the world over have had their operations greatly disrupted. In a recent survey of 518 U.S. IT decision makers, 42% said they had to reduce headcount or hours, 38% said they shuttered or significantly altered offices, and 35% said they sent users home to work remotely indefinitely. The latter appears to be a permanent trend. Before COVID-19, 23% indicated that more than half of their users worked from home. That share rises to 42% when looking at expectations for 2021.

So, while no one can be certain about what the new normal will look like, for many the current crisis forces them to accelerate digital transformation initiatives with remote work, remote management, and virtual collaboration — all staples of operational design.

Remote work becoming a corporate staple brings about its own list of unique challenges, at the top of which sits "ensuring users can remain productive at home" (35% of respondents). This requires thinking about your users and the unique needs that arise for them from their home.

For the typical desk worker, this includes PCs with HD webcams, mic arrays, and sufficient memory and CPU for the deluge of video calls. For organizations with sensitive data, this may include cellular-enabled PCs. For power users, workstations are the way to go. Organizations with data scientists and digital content creators should consider sending their employees home with ISV-certified workstations if they haven't done so already.

The workstation value proposition is built upon three pillars. First, these devices are built to perform with some options configurable up to server-class processors, professional graphics, and ECC memory. Secondly, workstations are optimized

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and certified to run your most mission critical software applications. Thirdly, they are backed and supported by some of the industry's most trusted brands.

Consequently, a workstation in the hands of power-users ensures fewer disruptions and distractions for those users.

Q. What are the different challenges and benefits as power users shift to a new way of working?

A. Currently, most workers share the challenges of being consistently away from campus, colleagues, and customers. Workflows can be disjointed, collaboration and communication can be strained, and the efficiency from the collocation of resources is entirely mitigated. For power users who have traditionally designed in shared spaces or with shared resources, those challenges are exacerbated. IT's principal prerogative in moving these users off campus should focus on mitigating disruptions to existing workflows, driving engagement with collaborative tools, and ensuring their users retain the same speedy experience at home as in the building.

Workers will increasingly discover the benefits of reduced downtime (from lack of commuting) but supporting employees in the new normal will be onerous for IT managers. Many were already struggling to keep up with the demands of an increasingly multi-platform employee, and the mass migration of workers to impromptu home offices exacerbates an already tough situation to manage. After "ensuring users can remain productive at home", "serving as help desk for users at home" (27%) and "increased cost/complexity of logistics" (26%) rated as the second and third most difficult challenges, respectively.

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Q. What are the best practices and considerations to ensure power users can collaborate with their teammates on data- and performance-heavy projects when working in disparate locations?

A. Translating the office experience to each worker's home requires the right apps/services and the right system for each worker. Necessary apps for a power user include compute-intensive software, conferencing and collaboration apps, and cloud storage on top of whatever industrial applications and endpoint security may be included. In the absence of physical collocation, digital tools can help mitigate long-term disruptions.

The right system for a power user (particularly one in the field of engineering, design, programming, or digital content creation) should be a certified workstation to ensure they have the performance they need as well as a large display (if not two) to help them stay engaged with their data and content in a setting that hardly remains distraction-free during the work day. Workstations come in all varieties from laptops to towers that can drive server level performance down to

miniature form factors that can be VESA mounted to a display. Some can be rack-mounted for datacenters with users floating in and out.

When the power-user workflow relies on shared corporate storage with digital content creation assets, large design files that the entire team works on, or data that needs to stay secure and locked up, some companies take an approach using virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) to access a virtualized pool of computing resources. However, this method can introduce latency and performance degradation, in addition to the complexity and overhead associated with virtualization.

Since it's impractical to send users home with workstations and use their home networks to pull the big files from corporate into each employee's home, a more efficient solution is to rack up the powerful workstations right next to the storage, and offer a remote workstation experience where only the pixels of their screens are sent home. This low-overhead approach provides each user with access to the full power of a dedicated workstation, while keeping the data safely and efficiently stored in the office.

Organizations that are succeeding in this transition to the new normal are bridging the physical divides by stepping up their games in terms of the tools they are sending their users home with. Indeed, 53% of organizations with workstations deployed say that workstations will become more important to the success of their company in the next normal.

Q. How can ITDMs help their power users remain adaptable and ready for possible future changes and disruptions?

A. Keeping power users productive requires IT getting them the right tools that can bridge physical distances and reduce disruptions to workflows. That means responsive apps on reliable hardware. But what about safeguarding against future disruptions? For that answer, IDC recommends companies, at the very least, explore device as a service (DaaS) with a trusted partner.

DaaS can help IT catch up and keep up with the new normal.

DaaS can help IT catch up and keep up with the new normal. Supporting a complex device life cycle for remote workers can drain IT resources that will have better use as the world enters a recession. Partnering with a trusted DaaS vendor can unburden IT departments as they shift from managing campuses to managing cities effectively.

A trusted DaaS partner helps fortify the device chain, ensures assets are precisely where they need to be, can help predict productivity-crushing system failures, and can even right-size hardware with employee. Early adopters have touted significant monetary impacts of DaaS both to the bottom line (in terms of cost savings) and topline (in terms of liberating IT resources to drive other IT projects such as digital transformation or workspace modernization). In the aforementioned survey, 51% of respondents said that "support and service offerings" becomes more important in the next normal (the largest gain of any purchasing criteria). The right DaaS partner can help the organization stay running whether users are all congregated or dispersed.

Q. What are the barriers and/or opportunities to implementing advanced technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), for power users in this new normal?

A. The barriers for more common adoption of VR technologies in the corporate world are generally the same for any rising technology. IDC has found that organizations with successful deployments of either augmented reality (AR) or VR headsets share a few factors. They understand the problem the technology is trying to solve in their organizations, they define a clear measurement of success, and they seek the right combination of hardware and apps.

Many businesses in the post-COVID new normal will have developed a deep understanding of the need of these technologies given the newfound sprawl of their workforce. Defining correct metrics and finding the right solutions will still be complicated. In addition, most organizations will have to start from scratch (given the lack of longstanding institutional knowledge in new technologies) with potentially significant up-front costs. Given all these factors, it becomes easy to see how new projects can stall.

IDC believes that VR, or any digital tool that will allow users to bridge the physical divide, is worth the headache of implementation right now. IT managers can't reduce the uncertainty of the future, but they can ensure their most critical users don't skip a beat by giving them the reliability of high-resolution VR headsets with workstations to keep them online as well as communications and collaboration tools to keep them engaged, all while offloading administrative burden onto a trusted partner.

About the Analyst



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Linn Huang tracks market trends and industry developments that impact the worldwide and U.S. markets for PCs, thin clients, and monitors. He participates in cross-research streams that cover all device categories.

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