



EMERGING FROM THE STORM:

Reimagining the workplace

When the Coronavirus pandemic subsides, what might the modern, post-Covid workplace look like - and how should CIOs and other IT decision-makers be preparing for it?



Against a backdrop of disruption, lockdowns and serious health worries, a surprising number of employees worldwide have managed to keep working during the Covid-19 pandemic. For this, they should be applauded - but a good deal of the credit must also go to the CIOs and IT decision-makers (ITDMs) who, in the face of serious time constraints and already heavy workloads, have equipped them with the tools needed to work from home effectively and, in the process, keep their businesses running.

In fact, there's striking evidence to suggest that employees have managed to maintain their productivity - and, in some cases, even improve on it. That's the verdict from a recent survey of over 12,000 employees in the US, Germany and India, one of the largest of its kind, conducted by global strategy firm Boston Consulting Group in the early part of June 2020.¹

75%

of employees say they were able to maintain or improve productivity during the first few months of the pandemic, when working from home on individual tasks, such as analyzing data, writing presentations or handling administrative tasks.¹

The study finds that, when working from home on individual tasks, such as analyzing data, writing presentations or handling administrative tasks, three-quarters (75%) of respondents say they were able to maintain or improve productivity during the first few months of the pandemic.

When it comes to collaborative tasks, such as interacting with colleagues, working on team tasks and communicating with clients and customers, the proportion is lower - but even so, more than half of those surveyed (51%) said they were as productive as usual, or more so, while working at home.

The role of technology in supporting them in that work cannot be overstated, and nor can the role of the CIO/ITDM, despite the many complex challenges they already face on a daily basis. When BCG's researchers asked respondents about tools such as video conferencing, virtual white boards and project management software, those who said they were satisfied with the tools provided to them by corporate IT were about twice as likely to have maintained or improved productivity, compared to those less satisfied with the tools at their disposal.

In short, the global pandemic has been the CIO's time to shine. According to a recent survey of more than 150 CIOs across 10 European countries, conducted by management consultancy PWC Strategy&, almost three-quarters (72%) say it took them less than three days when Covid-related lockdowns began to get their organization working from home satisfactorily.² More than four out of five respondents (84%) rate IT's response to the Covid-19 crisis as very good or good.





As a result, they have never been so popular with executive leadership. This in turn suggests that those able to smartly leverage the goodwill and trust they have generated during the crisis may well play a starring role in the post-Covid era, too. More specifically, CIOs and their teams look set to act as leaders in a wide-ranging reimagining of the workplace for a new age of flexible working.

The 'next normal' of hybrid working

There can be little doubt that change is coming. If 2020 has seen the global workforce participate in a 'working from home' experiment on a massive scale, then the broadly positive results raise interesting questions about what the future workplace should look like. Here, then, is another opportunity for CIOs and ITDMs to shine, to double down on their reputation as serious contributors to, and enablers of, business strategy.

Working from home may have its downsides, especially at a time when employees have had to juggle working life with childcare duties and home-schooling, but many still value the flexibility and better work/life balance it affords them, as well as the chance to escape the daily commute. In the BCG study, six out of ten respondents say they want more say in future over when and/or where they work.

Many want to split their working hours between the office and home - and managers are keen to accommodate their requests. A Gartner, Inc. survey on June 5 of 127 company leaders, representing HR, Legal and Compliance, Finance and Real Estate, reveals that 82% intend to permit remote working some of the time as employees return to the workplace.³ They will need the CIO on their side.

All of this has massive implications for corporate real estate. Company leaders will leap on the chance to optimize costly workplace footprints, since conserving cash is a key priority for most organizations now. In a recent IDC study, over 40% of Western European organizations intend to reduce their office floorspace as a consequence of keeping in place newly implemented work-from-home policies.⁴

As Barclays CEO Jes Staley predicted back in April: "There will be a long-term adjustment in how we think about our location strategy. The notion of putting 7,000 people in a building may be a thing of the past."⁵

At property management giant JLL, workspace strategy business developer Sunica Monard points to a growing interest among organizations of all sizes in a 'hub and club' strategy.⁶



of company leaders intend to permit remote working some of the time, even as employees return to the workplace.⁵



Here, a company would deploy a number of 'hub' locations in suburban areas, available for booking by employees looking to avoid the full commute but needing to concentrate, away from the distractions of home. The 'club' side of the equation, meanwhile, would be provided by fewer, city-based locations, close to major public transport exchanges, which offer fewer desks but plenty of room for big internal and client-facing meetings.

While future Covid-19 outbreaks remain a possibility, spreading employees across multiple sites might help with social distancing, she says. But longer term, firms could also find themselves able to tap into a wider pool of talent as employee location becomes less important. "People increasingly want to work according to their needs and preferences and companies need to find ways to facilitate that if they're to get the best out of their employees," she says.

Key considerations for ITDMs

The changing shape of the corporate workplace will present CIOs and ITDMs with a whole raft of new decisions to make. It's a challenge many of them will relish, because the decisions and actions they take will have huge impact on the wider business. "The question now facing many organizations is not how to manage a remote workforce, but how to manage a more complex, hybrid workforce," says Gartner analyst Elisabeth Joyce. "While remote working isn't new, the degree of remote working moving forward will change how people work together to get their jobs done."⁷

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Gartner analyst

Gartner Press Release, Gartner Survey Reveals 82% of Company Leaders Plan to Allow Employees to Work Remotely Some of the Time, July 2020

That, in turn, will require new decisions around infrastructure, digital tools and the best ways to support them. So what preparations might CIOs and ITDMs be making now for the post-Covid workplace? Here are some key considerations that may help you to find a way forward:



1. Networks

At the outset of the Covid-19, many CIOs and their teams found themselves scrambling to procure additional virtual private network [VPN] capacity for legions of employees newly working from home on a full-time basis. Now that remote working seems likely to be a more widespread practice for the long term, they will need to investigate and identify the best ways to right-size VPN capacity in more cost-efficient ways. In other words, the way they met demand in the face of an immediate crisis might not be the best way to respond to the connectivity needs of the new, hybrid workplace, which as well as including employees' homes, may also include greater numbers of smaller 'hub' offices, as well as 'on the road' locations, such as cafes and hotel rooms.

Without sufficient capacity, users will struggle to log on or stay connected, performance can be sluggish and latency can create bottlenecks in regular business processes, negatively impacting business continuity. Again, that might be something users will tolerate in a short-term crisis, but not for the long term.

When it comes to right-sizing, it will be important to recognize that some users will need to be allocated more bandwidth than others. Heavy use of video conferencing tools, too, can place a significant burden on networks.

"Employees who simply check email will have different demands from those downloading and analyzing large sets of sensitive data," says Rob Smith, a Gartner analyst.⁸

At the same time, employees' home internet connections may be pushed to their limits, so it may be necessary to authorize purchases of higher-speed 4G routers, WiFi signal boosters and/or higher speed plans.





2. End-user devices

During the pandemic, comfort may have temporarily taken a back seat for employees suddenly working on their kitchen tables and from spare rooms - but ergonomics will need addressing if employers are to observe their duty of care to remote workers. New monitors, printers, headsets and other peripherals may need to be allocated, in the interests of both productivity and health.

For virtual meetings, for example, a webcam, wireless headset and touchscreen are frequently seen as top priorities by end users. Likewise, a second external monitor is considered important by users who need to multitask - for example, viewing company data on one screen, while writing a report on another.

For some companies, a virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) or desktop-as-a-service offering may provide a solution for companies that require flexibility and affordability in their remote workforce roll-out. Here, employees can be provisioned with a 'thin client' (a slimmed-down endpoint device), with all their applications and processing power delivered from a robust back end that is centrally managed by the IT team. This is an approach that works equally well for home workers and distributed office set-ups. Alternatively, VDI technology can be used to deliver a corporate desktop, pre-configured by IT, to a home PC or mobile device.

3. Collaboration tools

During the crisis, many more employees took part in virtual meetings, some of them for the first time. Using these tools has quickly become a regular aspect of working life for many and will likely stay that way - for both planned meetings and more spontaneous, unplanned discussions with colleagues.

Gartner predicts that by 2024, in-person meetings will account for just 25% of enterprise meetings, a drop from 60% prior to the pandemic, driven by remote work and changing workforce demographics. End-user spending on cloud-based web conferencing solutions is projected to reach \$4.1 billion in 2020, up from \$3.3 billion in 2019.⁹

4. Security and access

With company work set to be carried out from a far wider range of locations on a wider range of endpoint devices, ITDMs are right to be concerned about new security vulnerabilities and attack vectors. It's widely recognized that more remote working means more vulnerabilities.

In this new remote working environment, it's appropriate that they're thinking in terms of a layered defense, one that focuses on securing anything and everything that can be reached through a network connection. But delivering this in an effective way will require fundamental changes to processes and tools, ensuring that security monitoring tools and capabilities are able to deliver maximum visibility into more distributed workforces and work locations.

At the same time, considering who needs access to what materials and applications is an important step in building a strong remote working environment, according to Steve Bates, global leader of the CIO Center of Excellence at management consultancy KPMG International. "Using a persona-based approach tied to critical business functions will enable those that you have prioritized to be their most productive with the appropriate level of access," he advises.¹⁰

This may include key suppliers, contractors and other third parties, and it must keep firmly in mind regulatory requirements, such as the EU's GDPR [General Data Protection Regulation] and California's CCPA [California Consumer Privacy Act].



A new role for physical space

None of this is to say that the office won't still play a major role in working lives - just that it will be a rather different role. "Physical space can have a tremendous impact in inspiring staff and enabling companies to imprint their unique corporate values," says Mario Lombardo, an analyst at IDC.¹¹

"It generates 'human collisions' and company-wide collaboration in a unique way that is still hard to replicate in a digital workplace. As these aspects will continue to be fundamental for organizations going forward, it's important to aim for balanced approaches that continue to value the physical experience," he says.

But since that physical experience may also be characterized by reduced footprint and thus limited capacity, the CIO and their team must also play a part in delivering the tools needed to manage and allocate space. Again, this may be a new challenge for them - but the smartest will look for lessons from coworking space providers like WeWork.

For example, intelligent building management systems, based on sensors, might be used to monitor and track occupancy rates, to ensure space is utilized sensibly, with sufficient zones for meeting space and desk-based work. Smart booking software should be available to employees, allowing them to reserve an appropriately sized and equipped room in which to hold a meeting, or desk space where they can get a report finished or respond to emails.

In other words, both homes and offices must provide safe, comfortable and productive space for a workforce that will increasingly split their time between the two.

CIOs will play a unique role in making that a reality for their organizations - and the ones who have managed to navigate their way successfully through the additional demands of the pandemic have already demonstrated that they're more than ready for the challenge.

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Mario Lombardo,
IDC analyst





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