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Coronavirus will disrupt your workforce: Ensure that you have the right tooling strategy for remote workers

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The coronavirus outbreak has increased remote working as businesses look to protect their employees, manage their operational risk and comply with new policy around social distancing. Among the aspects that go into making remote working effective, the right strategy around workforce tooling is critical. We look at different options to support employees and explain why it's about more than collaboration.

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Introduction

The coronavirus outbreak is proving highly disruptive, with businesses scrambling to manage risk in their supply chains and across their workforces. No business function remains untouched by the rippling effects of the outbreak, with leadership needing to implement comprehensive mitigation strategies. We are addressing these impacts in a series of reports – the first detailing key corporate mitigation strategies, this one discussing the technology angle to support effective remote working.

Effectively implementing prolonged remote working at scale is not straightforward; it involves more than the right remote access and conferencing tools. Visibility into work, transparency, engagement, accountability, governance and compliance all change. We are not proscriptive on the types of tools businesses should deploy; neither are we recommending any of the vendors we mention. Every business's needs are different. Instead, our goal is to highlight some of the tooling types that may be supportive as more employees shift to working remotely.

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The challenge of supporting prolonged remote working at scale should not be underestimated, especially when the shift is catalyzed by something as immediate as a public health crisis like COVID-19. It's tempting to think that conferencing and messaging tools can bear the brunt of remote working, but the reality is that prolonged and mass remote working changes the dynamics around work that remote conversation doesn't solve. Instead, tools keeping employees focused, aligned and engaged around goals should be at the heart of keeping the workforce productive.

Remote working is commonplace but not a standard

Although the coronavirus outbreak is shining a spotlight on workforce tooling, a growing number of companies have for several years been prioritizing workforce productivity and collaboration strategies. In fact, as figure 1 below shows, it's now the single most focused-on area in IT's transformation agenda.

Figure 1: Improving the Workforce's Collaboration and Productivity Tools Is a Transformation Priority for IT

Source: 451 Research, *Voice of the Enterprise: Workforce Productivity & Collaboration: Employee Lifecycle*, Q2 2019

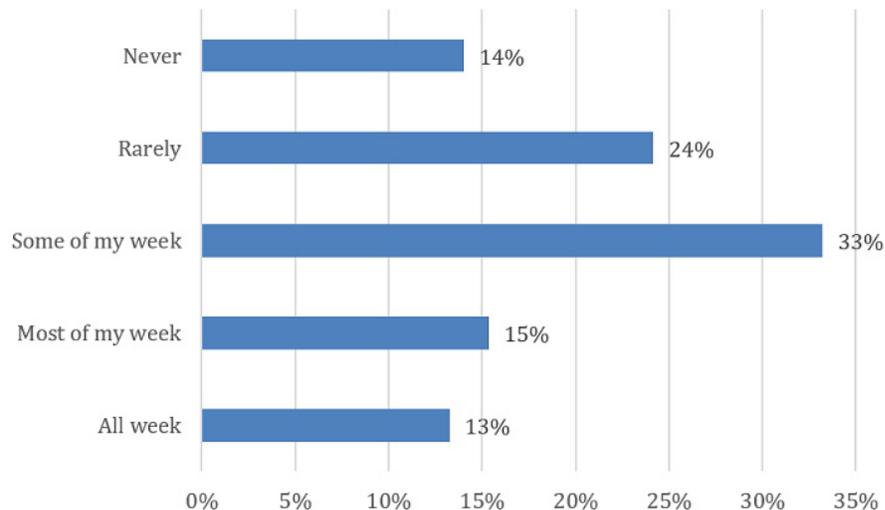


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Our survey data also shows that just over a quarter of employees already work all or most of their time across a typical week from home or another fixed location outside of their office. Almost two-thirds work remotely at least some of their week.

Figure 2: Remote Working is Commonplace for a Significant Portion of the Workforce

Source: 451 Research, *Voice of the Enterprise: Workforce Productivity & Collaboration: Employee Lifecycle, Q2 2019, Q7*



There is already a significant acceptance by businesses, therefore, of at least partial remote working. We also ask in our surveys whether employees feel the amount they work remotely is too much or too little – on the whole, those favoring an increase or decrease cancel each other out. Some biases exist – our data shows that fast-growth, younger and tech early adopting companies perhaps unsurprisingly tend to actively support a higher level of remote working.

It's only a minority of businesses therefore that are all-in on remote working. Those that do likely skew toward software and service companies (41% of employees working most or all of their time remotely compared with an average across verticals of 29%), and those heavily reliant on frontline, seasonal, contract and temporary workers.

Asynchronous alignment over synchronous communication

Even for many of those businesses that have generally been supportive of some remote working, there likely won't have been significant thought around how to support prolonged remote working at scale, as opposed to occasional remote working by some of their employees. In other words, for the vast majority of companies now instituting large-scale remote working policies, there are new and significant cultural, operational and technical challenges to getting it right.

With many more people working maybe on a prolonged basis from home, the dynamic around work changes. The sense of dislocation employees can feel, especially for those not favoring remote work, can be profound. Remote synchronous conversation is one capability but it has to be put in context of what our surveys show, which is 25% of non-managerial employees wanting to have more time focusing on their own work not in conversation with others, and 33% wanting to spend less time on email and messaging with their colleagues. That was before the shift that's underway to more remote working, where the temptation will be to over-rely on those tools.

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Tooling that can drive engagement around asynchronous work will likely drive productivity more strongly; in particular, providing visibility, transparency and accountability to support employees' focus and keep them aligned. Synchronous conversation should be a support, not a replacement, for those efforts. Clearly this challenge goes beyond standard conferencing and collaboration tools.

Tool types to consider

We outline below some different types of tools that companies might want to consider. Companies should be careful, however, not to introduce too many new tools, and err on the side of leveraging existing tools that may already be part of the workforce armory. Our survey data shows that 23% of employees would like more control over the tools they use to get their work done, but at the same time their number one pain point around the technologies they have to use for work is having to use too many applications.

Work management

A growth segment of productivity SaaS, vendors like Asana, monday.com, Smartsheet, Workfront and Wrike have grown virally among teams providing straightforward ways to structure, track, report and collaborate around a range of different work scenarios. Useful for organizing work, keeping teams aligned, empowering users with ways to automate new workflows and integrating data from multiple applications and business systems into those workflows, these tools have some of the most engaged users across productivity software. Albeit a still nascent category, our survey shows that already for 18% of employees, they are among their most useful productivity tools. Mass remote work could easily leave some employees feeling disconnected from key projects and initiatives in a way that conversation, email and file sharing can't address. Work management tools could provide a useful plane across different initiatives to maintain focus, demonstrate progress and around which purposeful and effective conversation can be directed.

Collaborative work spaces

The past several years has seen a new type of lightweight digital workspace emerge – part wiki, note taking and document collaboration tool. Optimized for individual and team work, tools like Coda, Confluence and Notion have as their basic premise combining documents, data and conversation. Others like Airtable and Kintone focus more on enabling no-code application development but are similarly optimized for teams and individuals and are equally extensible across a range of lightweight work scenarios. Quick to spin up, strong for documentation, knowledge capture and sharing, organizing disparate data and information, and inspiring conversation, they could address a gap for remote workers looking for easy-to-use and purposeful asynchronous collaboration.

Immersive workspaces

Another potentially useful category of productivity tools are collaborative digital whiteboarding tools like Mural, SharpCloud Software, Stormboard, MultiTaction, Microsoft's Surface Hub, Google's Jamboard and Cisco's Webex Board. At the low end, they typically enable general team collaboration, help employees organize their ideas and support brainstorming and other discussions. Some support more involved scenarios such as visualizing project statuses, complex data and supporting deliberative practices like Agile and Scrum. Integrations with key file sharing and conferencing tools further enable productivity. Spatial, Glue and Vizable leverage virtual and augmented reality to enhance team collaboration, while others such as TechViz, SolidWorks by Dassault Systèmes, Siemens NX and The Wild specialize in 3-D visualization and prototyping for design-centered industries like engineering, architecture and automotive.

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Innovation management

One of the risks of prolonged remote working will be the disengagement employees might feel from company-wide initiatives. Intranets can effectively support the broadcast of information and facilitate conversation and knowledge sharing around focused initiatives, but other than keeping employees 'in the know,' aren't very participative. An interesting segment of technology that aims to do exactly that is innovation management software. Vendors like BrightIdea, IdeaScale, Planbox and Planview's Spigit help organizations directly crowd-source opinions from their workforce.

There is clear appetite for this; 38% of C-level executives believe that having employees contribute more actively to the company strategy would be an effective way to drive their engagement. Typically requiring executive sponsorship, these tools can powerfully vest employees in solving often critical company initiatives. Another relevant use case is keeping an internal workforce connected to its external ecosystem of partners, customers and other stakeholders. If remote working is prolonged, then these tools could provide useful rallying cries for highly distributed workforces around company goals, along with more specifically acting as a funnel for internal and external ideas on how to address company issues resulting from the virus outbreak.

Employee engagement

Regardless of the challenges associated with the coronavirus outbreak, one of the biggest challenges with the move to a remote workforce is keeping them engaged. Employee engagement tooling has thankfully bolstered the remote work toolkit aiming to keep employees connected to the company and its mission. Companies like Waggl, Peakon and TINYpulse provide short pulse surveys to gather and relay employee sentiment data back to managers. The likes of People First, Culture Amp and Glint blend performance management with employee engagement to help remote employees manage their goals, development and responsibilities. Communication tools like StaffConnect can help bridge the communication gap if your team remains a mix of remote and in-office workers. Companies such as Limeade blend engagement with communication, well-being and inclusion. Some of these tools also have analytics capabilities for predicting attrition risk – helpful for managers needing to identify disengagement and potential flight risk. If your company isn't ready to invest in a stand-alone tool, be sure to check with your human capital management suite provider to see if they have an option in their portfolio.

Mobile messaging for frontline workers

Frontline workers who will have to continue dealing directly with customers through the coronavirus outbreak or are closely involved in production processes, are highly numerous in retail, manufacturing, healthcare and other industries. Historically underserved, a growing number of vendors are addressing their requirements. These include mobile messaging applications such as Beekeeper, Crew and Rodio, which target frontline workers in verticals such as retail and quick service restaurants. In addition, more horizontal-focused team collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams and Workplace by Facebook are looking to address the requirements of frontline workers with capabilities such as schedule management. Modern intranet platforms on offer from vendors like Akumina, Smarp and SocialChorus are also looking to support distributed workforces with contextually relevant information delivered to distributed employees at the right time. This addresses a key pain point for employees – the number one use case for automation across their daily tasks employees report is having information automatically surfaced to them when they need it.

Collaboration and communications tools

Team collaboration, voice and video conferencing services including G Suite Hangouts Meet, Cisco Webex, LogMeIn GoToMeeting, Microsoft Teams and Zoom have seen increased demand in recent years given the growing trend toward mobility and flexible work arrangements. Employees report them as among their top three productivity tool types, after their productivity suites and file sharing tools. The coronavirus outbreak will put their capacity to the test. Cisco reported that traffic on the Webex backbone connecting China-based users increased by as much as 22 times since the outbreak began.

As more workflows inevitably shift to conversation and much of that on mobile, compliance needs to be a key consideration. There are several options here such as TeleMessage, which, through its partnership with Proofpoint, enables the capture of mobile content into the Proofpoint Enterprise Archive. Tango Networks' Mobile-X enables organizations to securely connect their unified communications systems and business applications to mobile devices over any mobile network. CafeX Communications allows IT organizations to control how information is shared between internal teams and external companies.

Desktop virtualization

One of the challenges for IT will be ensuring the right oversight over their application estate as more employees work remotely. Virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) is one such tool that supports that oversight by offering remote employees a secure desktop – imaged and controlled by IT – that they can access from anywhere. VDI can help increase continuity for business performance while alleviating some of the potential compatibility stresses that may come from necessary bring-your-own-device (BYOD) associated with emergency remote work initiatives. VDI can give end users a consistent experience with their work tools while offering IT the control it needs to easily onboard new users and maintain security and compliance in the midst of a public health crisis – such as COVID-19 – that forces employees to work from home.

Vendors such as AWS, BlackBerry, Citrix, Microsoft, Workspot and VMware have all focused on helping IT organizations address distributed workforces. DaaS provider Workspot's Cloud Desktop Fabric aims to optimize distributed work environments by leveraging Microsoft Azure to deliver Windows 10 desktops to users around the world. VMware's Workspace ONE has some use cases among frontline workers in healthcare. Citrix's intelligent workspace provides secure access into employees' apps while also providing a micro-app infrastructure to support customization of individual users' experiences. Secure access, aggregation of apps and content, IT control and contextual optimization by user will support remote worker productivity.