RETURN TO WORK: WHAT THE NEW NORMAL WILL LOOK LIKE POST-PANDEMIC

JUNE 2020

TechRepublic

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 completely upended the traditional approach to working. As the economy begins to re-open post-pandemic, the new normal of work, business travel, and office space is being redefined and discovered across industries.

What will the post-COVID-19 workplace look like? What role will technology play as workers return to office spaces?

This ebook from TechRepublic explores how workforces will operate, what future work spaces will look like, and what technology's role will be in these transitions post-pandemic.

TECH LEADERS ON HOW TO TRANSITION FROM "SURVIVE" MODE TO "THRIVE" AS STATES REOPEN

The coronavirus may permanently change how some companies function forever.

BY JONATHA GREIG/TECHREPUBLIC CONTRIBUTOR

The explosion of remote work since the outbreak of COVID-19 has fundamentally changed how businesses are functioning on a daily basis.

Even as states like Georgia, Texas and others begin to reopen, there are many indications that things will not return to the way they were in the next few months, if at all. How people conduct work when they return to offices may forever be changed by the work-from-home stint, which spurred the need for more video tools, better collaboration platforms, and a huge shift toward cloud platforms.

IMAGE: LINDSEY, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

"This whole notion of digital transformation has been going for a decade, but there was always this question of when it would become real. Well, it's real now. This whole conversation about work has been enabled by digital transformation and moving to the cloud as well as virtual meeting capability," said Carl Wiese, chief revenue officer at video, voice and content collaboration and communication technology company Poly. "Whole new business models will be created."

Wiese and Jeetu Patel, chief product officer at Box, spoke to TechRepublic about how their customers have adapted to remote work and what the biggest trends are across industries.

Poly is one of the world's largest providers of video conferencing devices, headphones, and conference phones that integrates with collaboration tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

Over the past month, Wiese, who spent decades as an executive at companies like Cisco and BlackBerry, says he has been in conversation with CIOs and IT leaders across nearly every industry including major universities and construction companies. Several customers he's spoken with had already begun outfitting employees and changing processes to enable remote work before shelter in place mandates but are now sketching out plans for reopening and what things may need to change for the time being or for good.

"Companies are in three areas—survive, alive, and thrive. People were in survival mode when this all started but now people are starting to plan for the stay-alive portion when the opening starts," Wiese said.

"Firstly, video adoption is here to stay. Prior to COVID-19, even when people got on a Zoom or Webex call, 80%-90% of people did not use video. Video will now become one of the sticking points. When people go back into the office and go to a conference room, they're expecting Zoom to be up just like they have on their personal device."

Wiese also said there will be a second wave of purchases centered around outfitting home offices. When states and countries initially began to put in place quarantine orders, people cobbled together whatever they could find or order on Amazon to get ready.

Cameras, headsets, PCs, and monitors were quickly ordered at first, but now that people have had a month or two to work from home, they have a better sense of what they need to be productive from home, Wiese noted, adding that even as people return to work, many will still be spending two or three days a week telecommuting.

The "tele-x" movement has also spurred widespread adoption of video tools. Churches, doctors, and teachers have all found ways to do what they do over video or audio, and this will almost certainly continue even when people are allowed to return to public spaces. Even government officials have made a point of communicating more frequently over video, highlighting the need for better tools to facilitate this.

This new wave of buying will include things like noise cancellation headsets, especially for those with kids, and possibly upgraded cameras, he noted.

CHANGES TO OFFICE WORKING

Even with enterprises being allowed to bring workers back, industry leaders are still questioning how offices should look in light of continued concern over the spread of COVID-19.

Wiese said team meetings at offices may be reduced or limited to no more than two to four people per room.

"The huddle room may become the new individual room because at a minimum, nobody wants to huddle right now. The room for 2-4 is now a room for one. The room for 10-12 is now going to be a room for four," he said.

He added that multiple executives have spoken to him about potentially continuing telecommuting practices even from the office in an effort to keep practicing social distancing. Office layouts may have to be changed to be more dispersed so that less people are forced to huddle in small rooms.

"Customers and partners, very few of them know what this looks like when they go back. They're still worried about how to open effectively and what the rules look like. They haven't even gotten to part two, which is the communication-collaboration piece in the office. That will flow in once they know what the office looks like," Wiese said.

"Some customers have said they've made a policy that there will be no more than 10 people in any meeting for the rest of the calendar year physically."

He suggested that some companies may want to try a model being practiced in schools across Europe where half of all students come in half of the week and the other half come in on opposite days. Each side is taught remotely on the days where they are not in the physical building. This way companies can promote social distancing while keeping enterprises running.

The crisis around coronavirus has also prompted many enterprises to rethink what they use to get their work done. In addition to providing higher quality video and good headsets with noise cancellation, many companies are trying to gain a better understanding of the best meeting collaboration platform for them.

Many companies have told him they use multiple platforms, whether it is WebEx, Zoom or Microsoft, but he suggested choosing one and rolling it out aggressively so that people can be trained effectively.

Another big change is that every company will now need to have a work-from-home policy.

"If you look at the research, a high percentage of companies did not have a work-from-home policy pre-COVID-19. Could you work from home? What could you expense? What was the technology you needed to use?" he asked.

"All have it now but initially it was thrown together. Now it will be well-crafted strategies around capability including things like support for people at home, people's bandwidth at home and the different levels of support needed. The policies will be clear, more robust and everyone will have one."

CLOUD ADOPTION AND NEW BUSINESS MODELS

Cloud adoption has also skyrocketed since the pandemic began and people had to spend more time working apart, Wiese said. Box's Patel agreed, saying adoption of cloud platforms will have "definitively accelerated into permanency."

"There are a lot of customers that might have been skeptical about the move to the cloud and what we've seen here is those customers that made the investment and moved to the cloud early on actually suffered way less compared to the ones that hadn't," Patel said.

"For the ones that hadn't moved to the cloud, this became a catalyst event for them to move to the cloud. The new normal is going to have cloud as a permanent fixture of work as you move forward."

Box provides services to 70% of Fortune 500 companies, and Patel added that people across industries are going to realize that there were some things the crisis taught them that they should probably keep even as enterprises get back to normal.

He noted that even at Box, they have innovated more than ever yet none of them had been at the office while doing it.

"A lot of these changes will become part of the new normal. I don't think things are just going to go back post-COVID to the way that things used to be. I don't think everyone will be exactly the way they were," he said.

"We have to make sure we're defining the new normal and people are going to want to work in a more agile way. The clock speed is much faster than we're seeing with our customers than what it used to be and as a result, our clock speed is faster. We have innovated more in this time period than we have in any other time period in the history of Box, and none of us have been in the office while doing it."

Wiese echoed those comments, saying the quarantine may prompt entirely new business models and redefined industries.

While many have likened the current situation to other notable events in US history, Wiese noted that few have had such a drastic effect on everyone simultaneously. Few things in history have had such a profound effect on how we live, learn, educate, and work.

"There will be a lot of things that we look back on and say, 'you know when that was done?' It may even give some people hope or the desire to get out of survival mode and get into thrive mode," Wiese said.

"This one will fundamentally change things. We have to be proactive with customers in thinking about what their business model is going to look like or what will be fundamentally different. How can you use what you did in the last eight weeks to figure out something different?"

OVER HALF OF US SMBS PLAN TO MAINTAIN REMOTE WORKING FOR EMPLOYEES

Small and midsize business owners believe working remotely is here to stay post-pandemic, according to a newly released survey by Intermedia.

BY ESTHER SHEIN/TECHREPUBLIC CONTRIBUTOR

Fifty-seven percent of small and midsized business owners who increased remote working due to the COVID-19 pandemic said they will likely maintain the option for employees in the long term, according to a new study by Intermedia. This indicates a shift not only in the way businesses operate but also how owners, employees, and customers will engage with one another in the future, the cloud communications provider said.

Among the biggest benefits of shifting to remote work, SMB owners have found that employee availability (up 19%), job (up 15%), and life satisfaction (up 7%) have all increased, while overhead costs have gone down, the study revealed.

Respondents offered real-world examples with comments like "workers attitudes have improved" and employees are "happier" and "more productive," the Intermedia survey said.

"There are obvious pressures from the shelter in place protocols, but workers specifically noted their reduction in stress was due to no longer dealing with stresses around office work, commuting, time away from family, and the costs associated with being in a physical location," the company said. This seems to result in workers who are more engaged and ready to make a difference, Intermedia said.

"Embracing remote work has been a love-hate relationship for many SMB owners," the company said. "With new technology allowing workers to work from wherever and whenever more than ever before, employers

have had to balance this reality against having the peace of mind that frequently comes from being in the same physical space as your employees."

As owners try to adapt to this new tech reality, more and more companies have been adopting a hybrid approach—offering the option for some remote work but not fully committing, the survey found.

The coronavirus has made it clear that the need to work remotely is no longer a perk or a convenience—it's a necessity. But thanks to the technology that has been enabling more productive and collaborative remote work in recent years, notably, unified communications tools, the ability to stand up a remote work environment can be easy, fast, and affordable, Intermedia said.

However, with any change, especially when that change occurs so rapidly such as the need to shift the majority if not all of a company's workforce from a centralized to remote model, there can be issues and concerns.

Of the SMBs surveyed, nearly 85% of their employees worked in a centralized office pre-pandemic, Intermedia said. That number has, not surprisingly, decreased dramatically—to 26% of respondents—once social distancing and shelter in place orders went into effect.

THERE IS STILL VALUE IN IN-PERSON MEETINGS

One of the top concerns respondents voiced was the ability to engage with new prospects and continue to serve existing customers while coronavirus-related interaction restrictions are in place.

Almost all SMB owners (94%) said in-person interactions have been essential to conducting new business in the last two years. Additionally, 72% said that the current restrictions on face-to-face meetings will play a significant role in their team's ability to continue business as usual.

However, technology was not cited as a top concern, implying that getting the right tools deployed to keep their businesses running was not a barrier, the survey found.

"In fact, survey findings indicate that companies are turning to technology to help deliver face-to-face interactions once reserved for in-person meetings," Intermedia said.

While 57% of respondents indicated a reliance on video conferencing pre-pandemic, that reliance has jumped to 84% currently–an increase of 27%, the most significant jump across all communications channels covered within the survey, including phone, email, and chat.

REMOTE WORK ISN'T JUST A TEMPORARY FIX

Remote work has been expanding considerably over the past few years. It's allowed companies to have a larger pool of candidates and reduce costs.

"Workers crave a more flexible lifestyle that balances work and play, which often means they want the option to work from anywhere," Intermedia said. Technology now provides a perfect foundation for employees to work from any location with total accessibility, easy collaboration, and robust security.

"COVID-19 has certainly made us reexamine the entire concept of work, illustrating that many jobs can be done remotely without sacrificing productively," Intermedia said. "More business owners realize that employee availability and job satisfaction can remain high, if not increase, within a remote working environment…even after the pandemic passes."

Intermedia said the survey was conducted in April among 250 business owners or senior decision makers, from organizations employing between 5 and 250 people in organizations where at least half of staff are normally office based.

UPWORK REPORT FORESHADOWS A FUTURE REMOTE WORKFORCE LOADED WITH INDEPENDENT ROLES

More organizations have adopted flexible remote work policies due to the coronavirus pandemic. A new Upwork report highlights shifting attitudes about remote work and adding independent professionals.

BY R. DALLON ADAMS/TECHREPUBLIC

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, organizations have been forced to rethink their entire business models. For many, this has involved the logistical challenge that is transitioning an entire workforce from a traditional workplace to the digital office. Earlier this week, Upwork released its annual Future Workforce Report, detailing the labor trends of more than 1,500 hiring managers across the US. The findings also focus on sentiments surrounding the perceived benefits of remote work. Interestingly enough, the research driving the report was actually conducted at two different times the first in November of 2019 and the second in April of 2020. As a result, the report details how hiring managers' decisions have changed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Below, we've curated a brief synopsis of some of the major key findings.

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

HIRING FREEZES AND ADDITIONAL INDEPENDENT EMPLOYEES

As part of the second wave of research conducted earlier this spring, 45% of organizations reported hiring freezes with an additional 39% reporting layoffs or anticipated layoffs. At the same time, hiring managers were looking to add independent professional talent for both cost-efficient scaling and downsizing.

Attitudes about bringing on independent employees have changed dramatically due to the onslaught of the coronavirus. About three-quarters of respondents reported continued or increased use of independent talent. Access to top tier talent was the main reason for tapping independent talent for 47% of those surveyed.

These independent professionals were mainly tapped for roles involving writing, software development, and creative solutions. On average, the length of an independent professional engagement was about four months. When compared to pre-COVID-19 attitudes, nearly half of hiring managers reported being more likely to bring on independent professionals moving forward.

REMOTE WORK IN THE LONG-TERM

While some may have viewed the transition to telecommuting as a short-term solution, many organizations will continue to operate remotely. Nearly one-third of hiring managers believed telecommuting increased overall workforce productivity. In fact, remote work has exceeded expectations for more than half (56%) of respondents.

The main benefits for remote workers include fewer "nonessential meetings," the lack of commute, and minimized office distractions. In the long-term, 62% of respondents believed their organization will operate more remotely compared to pre-coronavirus standards.

Needless to say, not all organizations are equally thriving during the grand work from home experiment of 2020. However, many hiring managers believe adapting to these models now may position organizations for greater success in the years ahead. Nearly 60% of respondents believed that organizations that have not fully adopted flexible workplace policies are at risk of falling behind.

"Companies are just beginning to scratch the surface when it comes to the advantages of having a more remote, dynamic workforce," said Hayden Brown, president and CEO of Upwork. "COVID-19 marks the turning point for how hiring managers holistically think about their workforce and embrace the benefits of having more flexible teams. In lieu of traditional hiring strategies and fully on-site teams, the most effective companies will blend full-time employees and tap into the specialized, in-demand skills from a flexible and remote workforce."

THE NEW NORMAL: WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT WHEN YOU RETURN TO OFFICE LIFE?

The coronavirus pandemic has forced businesses to quickly adopt and adapt to new ways of working. One thing seems clear—traditional office life won't be the same when we return to our desks.

BY OWEN HUGES/TECHREPUBLIC

The COVID-19 lockdown has served as a stark reminder of how hyper-connected life in the 21st Century has become, not to mention how much we take for granted the small activities and trivial interactions that bring such value to our lives.

It's also completely upended the traditional approach to working. Over the course of a few weeks, previously office-based workforces are now operating almost entirely remotely, strung together by patient IT teams,

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO/GREENLEAF123

chat apps and daily video calls. For flexible working naysayers, the pandemic has proven that employees can, in fact, be trusted to work from home without productivity taking a plunge.

On the contrary, several studies into remote working during coronavirus have indicated that employees are more productive than ever, likely thanks to the lack of office-based distractions, meddling middle management and a renewed focus on business-critical activities.

While the daily office grind will eventually resume, the widespread consensus is that it won't be a return to business as usual as we know it—or rather, knew it. "We've heard from several businesses that they'll be looking to reduce their office space post-lockdown," Peter Groucutt, managing director of disaster recovery firm Databarracks, tells TechRepublic.

"This is from businesses who hadn't really embraced remote working, but now they see it can work; they're thinking about the future savings."

Indeed, some of the most obvious changes we'll see when we return to our desks could be the office itself.

With our new-found appreciation for personal space, open-plan and bullpen-style offices could be remapped to put workstations further apart, suggests a recent report from Forrester. At the same time, the number of employees being crammed into meeting rooms is also likely to drop, in order to support the current two-meter social distancing rule.

This will be critical to ensure offices and other workplaces don't become a breeding ground for new infections. Brian Kropp, chief of research in the Gartner HR practice, suggests this could mean staff are placed on staggered or rotating shifts so that offices aren't filled to capacity.

"One approach to minimize the number of people in the office at any point in time, companies will actually open up their offices earlier and keep them open later," Kropp tells TechRepublic.

"This will spread out the number of people in the office at any point in time to minimize the risk of exposure. Other employers might decide that some employees can only come into the office on the even days of the week, others on the odd days as another strategy to minimize the number of people in the office at any given point in time."

HOME WORKING: HERE TO STAY

One trend undoubtedly here to stay is a more relaxed approach to working from home. In the future, businesses will be expected to have flexible-working policies in place; Kropp estimates that as many as four in 10 employees will work remotely at some point every week, post COVID-19.

That means that businesses will need the necessary technology in place to support such policies. "The employees that come into the office will spend more time on a virtual platform," says Kropp. "Even if employees come into the office, given that other employees will be working remotely, they will continue to spend time on their Zoom and Teams platforms."

Scott Crowder, CIO of BMC Software, agrees. "While we don't know what the lasting implications will be, we do know that remote working isn't going away," he tells TechRepublic.

"Whether an organization sends everyone back to the office or sticks with a partial or complete work-from-home workforce, IT must have tools in place to support the modern digital workplace."

Aside from an explosion in the use of workplace collaboration and productivity software, the coronavirus pandemic has also catapulted robotic process automation (RPA) tools into the spotlight.

Bots, for example, have played a key role in helping businesses cope with an upswing in customer demand as physical offices and storefronts closed down. Particularly vital has been the role of chatbots in enabling healthcare and government organizations to issue up-to-date information about COVID-19, and help stop its spread by allowing clinicians to triage patients digitally.

Automation technology has also been key in automating mundane—yet important—back-office processes that might previously have been performed manually, says Peter Brown, partner and head of clients and markets, people and organisation at PwC.

"I think we'll see businesses accelerating investment in those automation and back-office, process-enhancing technologies, that can be done digitally," he tells TechRepublic

"I think a lot of organizations maybe had these on the roadmap, but now they've been brought forward."

BMC Software's Crowder sees automation and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies playing a key role in helping IT teams work more efficiently going forward.

"Tools like automated workflows and virtual assistants via chatbots can route requests for automated response and remediation, or address non-urgent employee questions and requests so companies can free up the time of IT teams for more value-added work," he says.

Tools and technology are, of course, only half the battle: company culture also needs to carry over into the new digital landscape, says Crowder.

Achieving this starts at the top. "Companies should ensure that executives are fully engaged in the designated digital channels," he adds.

They should demonstrate the desired usage and tone of each tool; set healthy expectations around working hours, taking breaks, and work-life balance; and show empathy and compassion during what can be a tricky transition, says Crowder.

REASSESSING COMPANY VALUES

Arguably, the pandemic has also shone a light on the authenticity of organizations, namely whether they live up to the values they claim to stand for. PwC's Brown suggests that the lessons learnt from this will encourage some businesses to reassess company culture, and whether they really practice what they preach. "How organizations 'live it' and demonstrate that [authenticity] is very public and seen," he says.

"With hindsight, I think there are some organisations that will be very proud of the reaction they've taken to COVID, and there will be other that perhaps might have done things differently.

"I think we're seeing more emergence of roles around the culture and wellbeing of staff, and more focus around the purpose point—what is this organization about, how are we living that and how are we ingraining that in everything we do?"

As new roles are created with an emphasis on employee satisfaction and company culture, other positions could find themselves decreasing in demand. With remote working leveling workplace hierarchies and speeding up operations in some instances, companies may rethink the organizational structures they have in place.

In a recent report from PwC, Carol Stubbings, joint global leader of people and organization, suggested that office bureaucracy that had been removed as a result of remote working might not return to some organisations. "Many corporates, particularly those with lots of hierarchy, such as banks and financial services firms, are finding that they can get more done, with non-essential governance removed," she said.

"I've seen one example of a project that would typically take six to nine months taking less than two weeks. As they look towards corporate life after lockdown, clients are asking how they can stop layers of bureaucracy from creeping back in."

Recruiting has also undergone something of a crash-course in digitization in recent weeks. A recent Gartner poll found that 86% of organisations had turned to "virtual" methods of interviewing candidates during the pandemic, while 85% had used digital channels to onboard new employees remotely.

As a result, companies are beginning to recognize that remote working can help diversify their workforce by expanding talent pools outside of the cities—or even countries—in which their offices are based.

Lauren Smith, vice president in the Gartner HR practice, said: "While most organizations are currently conducting interviews remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual interviewing may become the new standard for recruiting leaders and candidates long after social distancing guidelines are lifted."

While many businesses had their hand forced to rapidly scale up remote working, Databarracks' Groucutt suggests that this has enabled some companies to make changes they'd been pushing for for years. However, he adds that the jury is out on whether new commitments are seen through.

"Although there's enthusiasm to keep this going after lockdown, we'll see how many stick to it," he says.

UPGRADING IT

We should, at least, be able to expect more reliable workplace IT: Forrester's report suggests that organizations that found themselves caught short in the pandemic with creaky architecture will emerge with a newfound appreciation for speedy internet and modern software.

"Business execs who experienced firsthand the shortcomings of legacy technology environments will demand that IT accelerate roadmaps for app and infrastructure modernization, a high-performance network, high-availability architectures, automation for speed and reliability, and cloud for scale and flexibility," the report reads.

"They'll also take an interest in once-unexciting technologies like video conferencing and collaboration tools, phone services, VPNs, and virtual desktops.

"Plan for an upswing in tech support as employees return to the office."

CONSUMER TECHNOLOGY ASSOCIATION PREDICTS FUTURE OF TECH INDUSTRY POST-PANDEMIC

From telecommuting to how many container ships are loading in China, the CTA has a unique position to predict from trends. Here are its projections.

BY MATTHEW HEUSSER/TECHREPUBLIC CONTRIBUTOR

While it's arguable if Gary Shapiro, the CEO of the Consumer Technology Association (CTA), has the most access to industry information (and his job is to analyze it), he would certainly be on the top 10 of anyone's list. As a nonprofit, CTA is essentially owned by its member businesses, which profit from sharing information, as well as participating in the Consumer Electronics Show. The last show, in January 2020 in Las Vegas, drew over 175,000 attendees and 4,000 exhibitors.

TechRepublic spoke with Shapiro, along with other key executives, to discuss what he and they were seeing now during the coronavirus pandemic, along with what that might mean for tech devices and careers.

TECH INDUSTRY TRENDS

It's Steve Koenig, VP of market research for CTA, who acknowledges the new reality. "There's no shortage of narratives about America shutting down and life at a standstill. And while that may be true in other sectors, as

we have no sports right now, we are still growing food and there are still deliveries happening. The economy is moving at a slower pace. Even Jimmy Fallon is doing 'The Tonight Show' from his home. Life is continuing and tech in many ways is the reason for that."

According to Koenig, the recent surveys indicate about half of the member companies faced measurable disruption because of COVID-19. The focus of those companies in mid-March was on the health and welfare of their employees, shifting to building the capability to telecommuting. At the same time, his most revealing comments were on the source of the disruption for computer equipment—disruption in factories in China.

For data, Koenig points to the seasonal return rates of Chinese workers from holiday. In simple terms, when holidays ended in China at the end of January, the workers did not go back to work. As of our late-March interview, Koenig was seeing a 75% return rate. Given a few days to restart the factors, and 30-40 days to ship containers to the USA, that means electronics should be back in stock by late April or early May.

From Koenig's comments it is also possible to infer a timeline. If China went from locked-down to 75% returns in a month and a half, then other developed nations could expect a similar time—though the measures China took to contain the disease may have been different, and some people question the accuracy of their data.

NEW INNOVATIONS DRIVEN BY DEMAND

Shapiro points out that in many ways, it is the tech industry that is keeping America working. "Twenty years ago, I don't know what I would be doing right now," he said. "Probably making a lot of phone calls, I guess."

Shapiro points to technology like Zoom and RingCentral as enabling the telecommuting revolution, and expects demands for IT support to only increase in the near term.

"There is a startup called Germ Falcon that uses a robot to kill everything using ultraviolet light. It doesn't miss spots, let me put it that way." Shapiro adds that "Robotics companies are stepping up, going places humans don't want to go. In terms of crowdsourcing, the tech industry can be doing things with this data; I saw a cyber contest involving solving these problems with AI and algorithms."

In terms of recovery, Shapiro sees this more like a time-limited event, perhaps a recession. "I've lived through a few recessions; we'll be looking at this a year from now and see how we survived it. Life will go back to normal at some point, the only question is when. Events will come back."

FUTURE OF IN-PERSON EVENTS

Unlike O'Reilly media, which recently canceled its in-person line of business, CTA is not willing to turn the lights out just yet. While leaders have canceled two shows in June, the next Consumer Electronics Show, scheduled for January 2021 in Las Vegas, is still scheduled.

Part of that may be the timeframe involved; another piece may be the physicality of devices. Where software is intangible, consumer devices are tactile. People like to touch, experiment with, and hear devices. Watching a live stream just isn't quite the same thing, and no one yet seems to be able to recreate the experience of an expo floor online.

Balancing this with the sheer number of people in a small space, and Koenig's comments about virtual events, and we start to see a future that is in the middle between the extremes of expected-in-person last month and all-virtual meetings, all the time.

Shapiro is quick to point out that that is how he sees the world right now. "We made some major decisions that seemed agonizing to make and so far they seem," then he laughs, "Today those decisions just seem obvious." He goes on to add: "So that's where we are. It's an unusual time. I'm sure that in the next six months time will prove about one third to half of what I said is totally absurd and ridiculous."

At least he's honest.

REPORT: WORKING FROM HOME IS THE NEW NORMAL, BUT CYBERSECURITY ISN'T KEEPING UP

COVID-19 has completely changed the work world, but many organizations have seemingly failed to realize that security risks are changing as well, a new report finds.

BY BRANDON VIGLIAROLO/TECHREPUBLIC CONTRIBUTOR

IT solutions firm Electric has released a report about the state of remote work in the post-pandemic world, and has found that "the office of the future has arrived early," but cybersecurity hasn't been refocused in response.

The report found that the shift to remote work has been massive: There has been a 39% decrease in companies with less than 25% of their staff working remotely, and a whopping 250% increase in companies with more than three-quarters of their full-time employees working from home.

IMAGE: NIYAZ_TAVKAEV, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

"The new normal will involve employees working more frequently from these less-controlled networking environments like homes, and as parts of the country reopen, potentially third spaces like cafes and libraries once again," Electric said.

Changes in the way people work have led to a well-documented explosion in adoption of collaboration and video conferencing technology, and Electric also found out which products are leading the pack there as well.

Microsoft Teams is the most popular chat tool, with 50.34% of respondents saying they use it; Skype for Business is No. 2 at 42.07%, and Slack comes in a distant third with only 18.62% of respondents saying they're using it.

As for video conferencing, Zoom has remained dominant despite its security woes, with 57.24% saying they use it. Skype follows with 41.28%, and Google Hangouts is being used by 29.66% of respondents.

HOW CYBERSECURITY IS FALLING BEHIND

"This new way of work with a greater emphasis on remote has surfaced the notion that the actual endpoints, meaning the mobile devices and computers that remote workers use to access company information, are critical to maintaining security," the report states.

The findings don't seem to indicate that businesses are taking this shift in cybersecurity seriously, which Electric explains with three data points: VPN usage, multifactor authentication adoption, and mobile device management (MDM) installation.

VPNs are an important part of remote work security because they encrypt traffic between an endpoint and business network, essentially extending the security of an organization's internal network to wherever an employee is located. Only 19.31% of respondents indicated that three-quarters or more of their organization access their network from outside through a VPN, leaving a lot of essential business machines without secure connections to business resources and data.

Multifactor authentication is also essential: It prevents malicious logins due to stolen credentials or devices, and while it's been more widely adopted it's still underused, only 48.28% of respondents said it was enabled companywide.

Lastly, MDM, which allows IT teams to push updates to remote devices, as well as lock them, erase them, and otherwise keep sensitive data safe in the case of theft or loss, is a third important factor in keeping company-owned devices safe while deployed remotely.

The report found that only 13.79% of company-issues devices had MDM software installed on 75% or more of devices.

Despite these low numbers, the report found that respondents were generally confident in the cybersecurity measures they take for remote workers: On average, respondents rated their remote work security practices a seven out of 10.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to remote work for many organizations, the report concluded, and "it's clear that remote work is going to continue to be a larger and larger fixture of modern business."

"The notion of the home office being an extension of your company needs to sink in now, not just for IT decision makers, but also for business leaders at all levels," the report said. That includes all the relevant security considerations that come with it.

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TOOLS IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Coronavirus has caused conferences, employee training, and meetings to go virtual—a trend that may not completely end after the chaos does, expert says.

BY MACY BAYERN/TECHREPUBLIC

With the coronavirus pandemic forcing organizations to shift to remote work, many companies are realizing their telecommuting abilities. Meetings are being held over video conferencing platforms, conferences are virtual, and employee training is provided via webinars.

Because so many organizations can function remotely, professionals are expecting the future of work to be more flexible. Remote work was already gaining popularity, but with the pandemic accelerating remote capabilities for organizations, telecommuting is now looking like the new norm.

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO/AHMET_AGALAMAZ

Everyone is turning to virtual tools for business, even those that were previously considered laggards, said Zvi Guterman, CEO of CloudShare, a cloud computing provider that helps facilitate virtual enterprise environments.

"Organizations that were more conservative and were late into the game of virtual are now using technology tools," Guterman said.

"We see many other companies that were already doing that, but shifting: Canceling their entire event for a virtual experience, providing free offering of trainings to their customers," Guterman added.

As more companies shift the focus to virtual tools, this way of operating has staying power that extends beyond the pandemic, according to Guterman.

BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL TOOLS

Remote work presents a bevy of benefits for companies, and with the cloud bolstering the capacity of virtual tools, the best companies are those embracing the change, Guterman said.

"Leading organizations were already using virtual employee onboarding before this all started. The top 10% to 25% of the organizations were already doing that," Guterman said.

"Meaning everything was online, employees were getting their package to their house before they started their new position," he said.

The other 80% of organizations didn't have that in place, but are starting to and will continue implementing these technologies in a post-pandemic world, after seeing the successes tools bring, Guterman added.

Virtual onboarding programs and employee training bring a new level of efficiency, preventing the need for travel and organized spaces, which can result in even more attendance. The same can be said for conferences: Guterman said that CloudShare saw even more attendees after moving an event virtual.

"We had a small webinar that we were expecting 200 people [to attend], and we had 750 people show up instead," Guterman said.

"We're witnessing shifts and people adapting," Guterman said. "[Companies] are taking this budget of travel and putting in programs that will allow employees to get onboard, to learn material, connect to different systems [via] cloud sharing."

The future of work will rely on digital tools, and Guterman recommended companies allow for that adaptation.

"Think about your business and look at what part of it can be done differently. Put the planning in place. Take that and translate it into the new reality," Guterman said.

"The best organizations will allow for different tools and will [use them] for their business goals," he added.

NEW PRODUCTS TARGET WORKPLACE SAFETY NEEDS POST-PANDEMIC

As people go back to the office, ThinkHR's "Tell Us" platform will let employees report organizational issues and SysAid's Worksafe app will help companies comply with new regulations.

BY ESTHER SHEIN/TECHREPUBLIC CONTRIBUTOR

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a new normal and different ways of working, as well as introducing new risks. New products from HR software company ThinkHR and Mammoth HR and enterprise service management provider SysAid are designed to help companies and employees feel safe.

ThinkHR and Mammoth HR are launching Tell Us, an anonymous reporting portal, for company leaders to manage and take action on incidents employees have confidentially reported at work, the company said.

It is meant to be an "early warning system for problems within the workplace by encouraging employees to report on anything they believe warrants HR or management's attention and do so without fear of reprisal," the company said.

Earlier this month, SydAid launched its Worksafe app, which is designed to help organizations comply with new health and social distancing regulations. Worksafe will let employees self-report their location and health status daily, while automatically alerting management to potential exposure at work, the company said.

If employees forget to self-report or present symptoms while at work, their SysAid accounts will be locked.
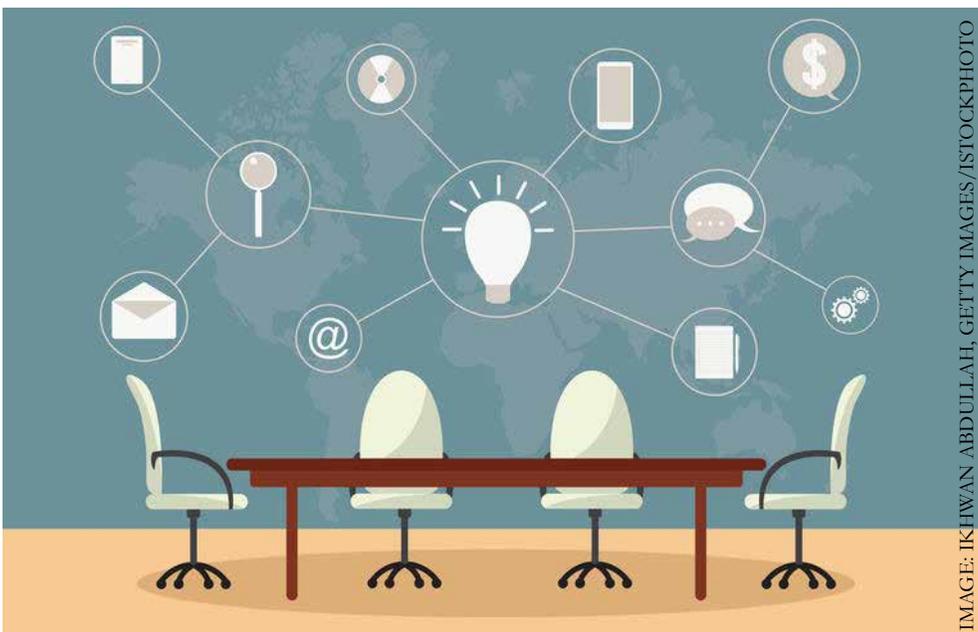
IMAGE: IKHWAN ABDULLAH, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

The Worksafe app can be customized for different reporting regulations, and with SysAid's automatic email rules, organizations can send employees a daily email reminder to complete the check-in, the company said.

"We needed a fast, reliable way to monitor the health of our team, so we initially developed [the] Worksafe app for our own use," explained Sarah Lahav, CEO, in a statement. "The app worked brilliantly, gave us peace of mind, and spared us from manually collecting and aggregating health check-ins. This app can help other organizations safely reopen their workplaces while preventing COVID-19 outbreaks."

- Some of what employees can report in Tell Us includes:
- Concerns about an employee not following COVID-19 preventative measures in the workplace
- Harassment or cyberbullying occurring in messaging or video conferencing apps
- Theft
- Suspicious behavior

Tell Us is part of ThinkHR and Mammoth HR's people management platform. The information employers receive from Tell Us will enable them to address issues in the workplace before they become a problem, prevent incidents from occurring, reduce the risk of lawsuits, and show their commitment to building a culture of trust and accountability, the company said.

"Many issues don't get resolved because there's not this two-way communication" when an issue arises, said Julie Small, vice president of product marketing at ThinkHR and Mammoth HR.

Tell Us will help an HR person to understand whether the incident was a one-time thing and request further details, Small said. Employees can submit documentation and check the status of whatever they submit, receiving a unique login to the portal every time they create an incident, she said. They will also receive notification when the matter is resolved.

The impetus for the portal came after a survey the company did and received a 64% response rate from people who felt something digital and systematic was needed to resolve workplace reporting issues, Small said.

In the pre-COVID-19 world, people were often reluctant to report issues such as harassment, she said. Now, with new safety and privacy procedures in place, "we think environmental health and safety are very top of mind," such as too many people entering an elevator, not washing their hands correctly, and inappropriate handling of data from temperature checks, among other issues, she said.

Tell Us will be available for ThinkHR customers on July 1, and available early next year for Mammoth HR customers, the company said.

THE "NEXT NORMAL" WORKPLACE NEEDS TO FOCUS ON EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING, DIGITIZATION

Bringing staff back to work requires an emphasis on safety and innovation through technology, according to ServiceNow executives.

BY ESTHER SHEIN/TECHREPUBLIC CONTRIBUTOR

The world is segueing to the "next normal" of the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes a greater emphasis on the well-being of employees and digitizing most aspects of the workplace, according to executives at PaaS provider ServiceNow.

Now that companies have figured out they can maintain operations, and staff are still productive, the next phase of work will include keeping employees engaged, onboarding people virtually, and rethinking supply chains, all powered by technology, said ServiceNow's Chief Talent Officer Pat Wadors, and CIO Chris Bedi, during a webinar Thursday on what the next normal workplace will look like.

Life and work are "crashing together," and technology is helping smooth that out, Wadors said. "There is no one-size-fits-all" when it comes to how people should be working, she added. "We talk with peers about what

IMAGE: KERKEZ, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO
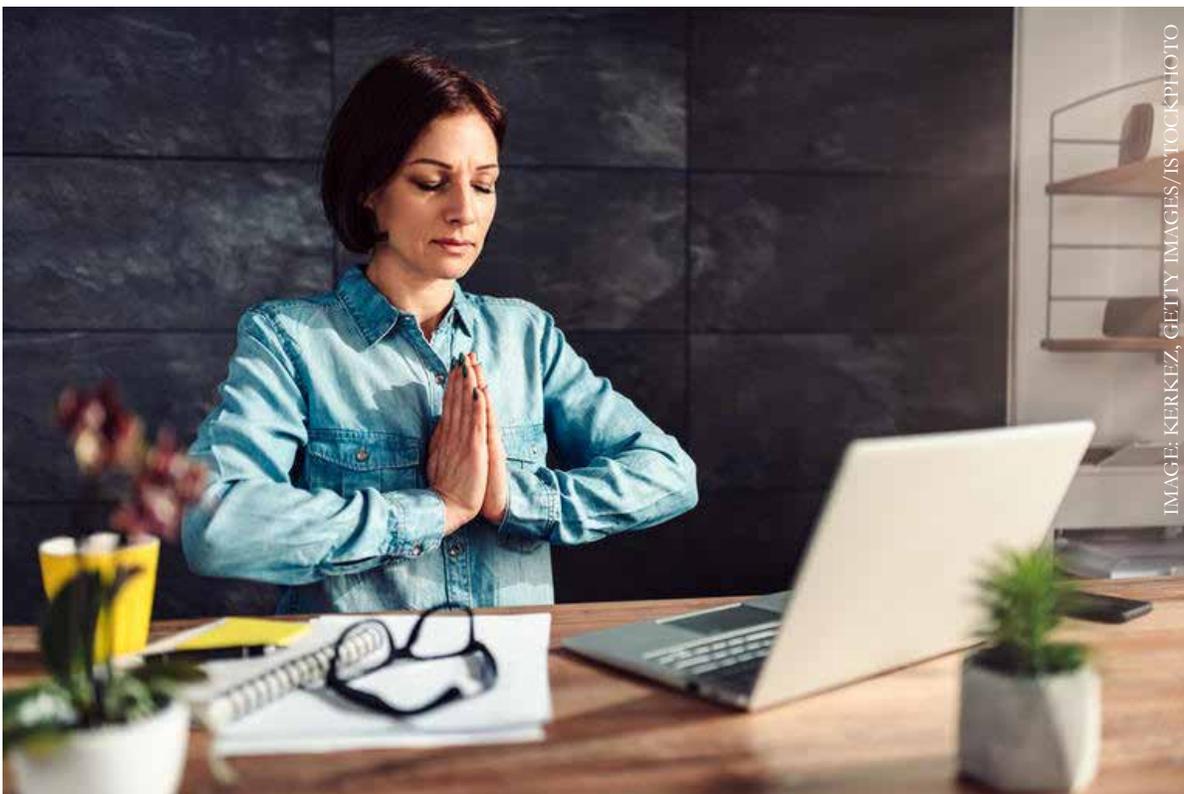
it looks like for employees to go back to work and do we want to go back? We know the answer is no. The pre-COVID-19 workplace no longer exists."

Nevertheless, for those who do go back to the office, it's important that businesses make employees the focal point and create a safe environment, she said.

ACCELERATING, NOT SLOWING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS

In conversations Bedi has had with other CIOs, top of mind is the need for "even tighter collaboration between the CIO, head of HR, and head of facilities to figure out how to make this work at scale," he said. Digitization and accelerating digital transformation is another trend, Bedi said.

"As I talk to CIOs, they say this can't slow down—in fact, it needs to accelerate because the pandemic exposed flaws they have," he said. The focus needs to be on digitizing workflows, even if it's at the cost of initiatives that may be interesting, but are not that compelling, Bedi said.

When it comes to protecting revenue, creating digital services to create new revenue streams, pursuing productivity, scaling operations, optimizing financial models, and prioritizing business continuity—all of that can be achieved with digital platforms, Bedi said. "And CIOs need to lean in harder to help their companies thrive and survive in the new normal."

Looking ahead, employers need to ensure the workplace is safe and that employees feel safe coming back to the office, "and we shouldn't confuse those two things," Bedi noted. "This is the new normal," and to make new processes effective and scalable, companies must focus on automation, he said.

This week, ServiceNow introduced apps for its own staff geared at employee readiness surveys, health screening, workplace safety, and managing global levels of PPE. Bedi said he anticipates biometrics being integrated into the employee health screening app. The workplace safety app will help facilities managers figure out where people should park and when cleaning crews should come in based on the flow of employees, he said.

In terms of advice for other HR professionals on how to navigate the new normal, Wadors said it takes about 21 days to create a habit, and that people who were initially reluctant about working remotely have learned to adjust. The past few months have been the experimentation phase. Now officials need to explore how to innovate and develop a better work/life balance, she said.

"We're perfectly imperfect. Adjustments are needed," Wadors said. "Employees love choice; it helps reduce anxiety … make sure they know they're the center of your universe."

WORKING AND COLLABORATING FROM ANYWHERE

The first chapter of social distancing guidelines illustrated that not only can people work from home, they can work anywhere, both Wadors and Bedi said.

"Just getting work done is really important, and supporting them is the new frontier," Wadors said.

The digitization of the workplace will include "a new wave of innovation that will spawn new technology," Bedi said. For example, already, biometrics startups have technology that will sound an alarm if people get within six feet of one another. It's "inelegant," he said, "but it's a start."

Most likely, there will no longer be large meetings with people huddled together for a long time to come, Bedi added. Executives also need to think through how people will get to the office, whether they can commute safely, and will they have to deal with elevators—and if so, how to maintain a six-foot distance, Wadors said.

"Managers have to listen to [their employees] and adapt and not apply old schedules to the new world," she said, noting that 60% of the staff on one ServiceNow team have toddlers, so flexibility is important.

The future of work is about working from anywhere with new, immersive ways to collaborate, Bedi said. "We're all used to getting on a whiteboard to collaborate, and we'll find ways to do that virtually."

Technology still needs to be written to have that happen at scale, he said.

"Digital will be the answer no matter if you're running a factory floor or you're a bank with a ton of compliance requirements," or in healthcare or at a tech company, Bedi said. "It all comes down to digital and scaling on the back end for companies."

WHAT BUSINESS TRAVEL WILL LOOK LIKE IN THE NEW NORMAL

Entering an airport, flying, and staying at a hotel will never be the same, observers say.

BY ESTHER SHEIN/TECHREPUBLIC CONTRIBUTOR

People have some pretty strong feelings about what the future of travel will look like in the new normal and many think that most of what travelers were used to—like long airport security lines, crowded restaurants, and a chaotic boarding process—will go the way of free peanuts.

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

"In the blink of an eye, business travel went from a high-status activity to an embarrassment," wrote Ben Pring, vice president of Cognizant's Center for the Future of Work, in his futuristic report, "After the Virus," which imagines life in 2025.

"Business travel, it turned out, was not the engine of commerce we'd thought it was. And those who still hop on a plane to get to a business conference find they've got some 'splaining' to do."

The report also envisions that just as 9/11 spawned the Transportation Security Agency (TSA), and completely changed the flying experience, the COVID-19 pandemic will prompt new health screening guidelines for travel because "each and every one of us is regarded as a threat." Just like TSA, a pre-approval system will be established so people can enroll at home via telemedicine and take a scan up to four hours before their travel time to certify they're not carrying any infectious disease, the report said.

The US Travel Association recently released new guidelines for travel and hotels, including enhanced hygiene and cleaning measures, limiting physical contact between staff and customers, and installing physical barriers to ensure a safe distance.

LOWER TRAVEL VOLUME AND MORE VIRTUAL EVENTS

Joseph Landes, chief revenue officer of cloud provider Nerdio, who used to travel for business several times a week, agrees that "business travel is changed forever. There is no question about it. Not because of masks, distancing, or less comfortable boarding processes, but because the pandemic will force people to rethink if each trip is necessary."

Landes said he has gotten used to interacting over Microsoft Teams and Zoom and realizes people can be productive using technology. "I predict many fewer trips will be taken and we will see a secular downtrend in business travel," thanks to technologies like video conferencing and VDI, which "will create much less of a need to meet in person other than for large trade shows and conferences."

Companies spend more than $111.7 billion on business travel every year and the average cost of a typical business trip last year was $1,286, according to a new report by Motus, which provides reimbursement software for businesses with mobile-enabled workforces.

"As a result of COVID-19's travel restrictions, and health concerns from both companies and their team members, there's been a boom in virtual events and business meetings, just by sheer necessity," said Ken Robinson, a market research analyst at Motus. "After being forced to rely on virtual meetings, many people are surprised at how effective they can be. We think that this will keep business travel at lower levels for at least the next six to nine months."

If major outbreaks are avoided in the future, confidence in travel is likely to recover, Robinson predicted. "However, even if people feel safe, it would not be surprising to see lower levels of business travel spend in the future, as adding efficiency and flexibility to top line expenses will be a very high priority for business leaders for months to come," as evidence has shown plenty of alternatives to business travel.

USE OF BIODATA WILL BECOME THE NORM

"Once travel opens up, biodata will likely become the new fingerprint/iris scan for travelers," said Alex Heid, chief research and development officer at security ratings platform provider SecurityScorecard.

"As of now, many of the biometric technologies that are used for travel within the US are in the form of opt-in programs and are offered as a convenience service from private companies as opposed to a mandatory procedure from a government," Heid said.

Yet, there are instances where biometric data is required by the US government, such as in the case of passport photographs, which are scanned for biometrics when being processed, he said. Many airport kiosk systems take photographs of all arrivals and correlate the photograph to the passport, he noted.

"Not only will this become prevalent in the travel industry but consumer use of biometrics will likely increase significantly as well; while such technologies used to be for border crossings, now it is used for something as routine as from unlocking a smartphone," Heid added.

Travel volume will take years to recover, and may not recover at all, he said. Business travel will be minimal in the next several months and only for very essential jobs, he said.

SLOW, PARTIAL COMEBACK

Of course, many businesses require travel as part of their basic function. Heid said they expect these businesses to be back to 70% of their previous travel levels in six months and back to 85% within a year. But he cautioned that "between likely higher flight prices in the long run and the economic blowback from the pandemic, it's hard to imagine even enthusiastic scenarios in which travel—even for businesses that aren't working when not traveling—returns."

Business travel will never return to what it was before, said Simone Collins, CEO of Travelmax, a corporate travel management company specializing in entertainment, sports, and production travel.

"People traveled very casually before the pandemic—far more…than they really needed to," Collins said. "Those days are behind us. Flying is now going to be less predictable, more expensive in the long run, and more 'icky' feeling," because it will be hard not to think about germs, no matter how clean planes actually are. "People are going to think long and hard before buying a plane ticket," she said.

That said, there may be an uptick in business travel in certain instances, Collins said.

"The pandemic is opening many eyes to the value and arbitrage opportunities associated with remote teams and working from home," she said. "If businesses start hiring people in further-away states with lower-cost labor markets, they may fly these people around…for the occasional in-person meeting and team-building exercise."

TechRepublic®

ABOUT TECHREPUBLIC

TechRepublic is a digital publication and online community that empowers the people of business and technology. It provides analysis, tips, best practices, and case studies aimed at helping leaders make better decisions about technology.

DISCLAIMER