



THE FUTURE WORKPLACE



AN EMERGING “HYBRID NORM”

PEOPLE WANT
CHOICE AND
FLEXIBILITY
ON WHERE AND
HOW THEY WORK

Sweeping statements abound in respect of the last 12 months. “Work [and life] will never be the same again”, “We will soon be back to normal” or the most popular “We’ve experienced 5 years of digital transformation in the past 12 months”.

We are still in the midst of a global pandemic, and what’s clear is that what we have experienced profound and enduring change to the idea of what ‘work’ is, and as such what we consider a ‘workplace’, or ‘workspace’ to be.

Not since the last major upheaval as the economy shifted from product-based to services led outputs have we been presented with an opportunity to fundamentally reconsider the Future of Workplace.

There is little debate that the future of workplace will be “hybrid”, meaning that people want choice and flexibility on where and how they work. With many employees adapting to home working over the past 12 months, there are undeniable benefits – less time and stress on the daily commute, the ability to adopt a working pattern that is compatible with home life, and so on.

Yet there have been challenges – maintaining engagement and connection with colleagues and clients, staying motivated and focussed, and simple practicalities of establishing an effective workspace in a busy home environment. For many people a dedicated home office is a given, for many others the ‘office’ is the breakfast counter, dining room table or dressing table.

And yet there is a huge swathe of the population for whom work is still a place. Field-based workers in retail, hospitality, manufacturing, logistics and many other industries. For these people the only change to work has been the enhanced risk of attendance from a health perspective, or more onerous restrictions and safety controls that could not have been envisaged 18 months ago.

THE FUTURE OF WORKPLACE

The subject of workplace futures is so broad, that we consider it in four major segments:

- People
- Space (Workplaces and Workspaces)
- Technology (Products and Platforms)
- Service

PEOPLE

CORPORATE EMPLOYEES & THE SINGLE PERSONA

The notion of grouping employees by persona has been a popular trend over the past 5 years. Identifying groups of common roles and aggregating them to a stylised model [i.e. persona] has provided a framework for better definition of IT services, optimisation of IT budgets and the allowance of choice.

Though now, corporate employees have been reduced to a single persona. Whether we work in finance, HR, technology or customer services – we are all working in the same way – remotely. Our needs are common and simplified:

- a reliable and performant device,
- effective remote connectivity to corporate systems,
- ideally ancillary peripherals such as keyboard, mouse, headset and webcam.

A fundamental of any workplace vision for years has been that “the device doesn’t matter”. Originally this related to abstraction from the Operating System, allowing people freedom to switch devices and still be productive with common apps and access to data. Now “the device doesn’t matter” as it is static on the desk. Assuming you have a consistent place to work, physical specifications that have historically dictated device preference (Weight, battery life etc) have been marginalised, but the peripherals and ancillaries are key to the experience.

As people start to drift towards the hybrid mode of work, is there still a place for the persona model in the future workplace?

FRONT LINE, FIELD AND SHOP FLOOR EMPLOYEES

Too often “non corporate” employees are forgotten in these discussions. Throughout the past 12 months nurses have still attended hospitals, engineers have still attended manufacturing plants and retail and hospitality staff have, as best has been possible, attempted to serve customers from their venues.

The future of the field and shop floor worker is mainly one of uncertainty in their industries, particularly as consumers have been forced to make a transition towards online purchasing and interaction at venues. Within their workplace it is likely that there will continue to be additional public health measures for some time. Temperature screening, hand sanitisation and the requirement for PPE is unlikely to simply evaporate in the short to medium term.

WELLBEING AND SUPPORT

Employee health and wellbeing has for a few years been an emerging concern, in the face of multi-channel communication, information overload and day to day stresses of home/life balance. The past 12 months have simply accelerated this and created an emerging crisis.

Current support in this area is largely pastoral in nature, but there are new approaches emerging. Technology vendors are now incorporating personal wellbeing into their products, from “night mode” in your phone, to wellbeing features built into productivity applications which can remind you to take a break from the screen, or schedule “focus time” for you to be productive.. There are a new range of wearable devices that we see opportunity to inform and empower people to be more active simply through raising awareness or “nudge theory”.

We are evaluating the role of the business in enabling health and wellbeing initiatives – do people need to be told, or simply feel empowered that they can choose to take a call whilst walking the dog, or that they do not need to be visible on video calls 6 hours of the working day – modern day virtual presenteeism.

Do employees and employers need to define a new ‘contract’ in encouraging and maintaining a healthy work life balance?

SPACES

The current adage suggests we are “living at work not working at home”.

In workplace visions dating back 5-10 years we expressed the notion that work was something you did not somewhere you went (note earlier caveat that this does not apply to all) and this is one of the cultural changes that this “five years of digital transformation in 12 months” has helped to enable.

Employees are looking for a “hybrid” future. With choice to work at home more, but also to visit the office for collaboration and social purposes. In the future the average corporate employee will spend 40% of their time in the office, down from maybe 70% pre pandemic. Employees benefit significantly, and businesses have already seen benefits of reduced travel/expense costs and the effectiveness of virtual ways of working. Put simply, there is no need or benefit for either party to go back to how it used to be.

In the short-term businesses are left with large offices, often on committed long term leases that will be underutilised. Expect consolidation to corporate office footprints, and potentially a move towards more of a satellite office model rather than large

big city hubs. This will reduce real estate costs and widen the net to attract talent from across the nation or beyond.

For employees this new balance sounds attractive. However, there are many people who simply do not have the space at home for a designated workspace. Over time, the inconvenience and potential health outcomes of working in this way could have significant impacts to motivation and productivity of staff.

Offices will not go away, but their purpose will change. From being desk based to collaboration focussed, the office will be the “go to point” to meet colleagues and share ideas, not simply to produce individual outputs – or worse, to be seen “at work”.

There are examples emerging of large corporates partnering with shared workplace providers to basically outsource desk provision in shared buildings. Companies minimise the overheads of maintaining real estate, and employees benefit of greater proximity of office space to their home.

Hotdesk as a Service perhaps?



TECHNOLOGY

Technology continues to evolve at pace. In the face of the claim of “five years digital transformation in 12 months” one might contest that we have equipped people rapidly but are yet to transform the workplace. Many people have simply been displaced, and are still largely working in the same ways, using the same technology. A key example for the current time is the number of organisations requiring VPN connection to on premises corporate systems. As hybrid work becomes the norm, this needs to change.

The future workplace needs to be built on the cloud and for the cloud. The corporate network is no longer expensive MPLS circuits between corporate offices, it's the public internet. In the hybrid world where 50% of people are remote, management platforms, policy controls, software delivery and even applications need to be served from the public cloud with SASE [Secure Access Service Edge] security controls, and flexible office connectivity like SD-WAN.

Automation is imperative for the future. Equipped and empowered employees will self-serve and automated workflows will predict and resolve technical or procedural requirements before they become impactful. Robotic Process Automation [RPA] is already emerging as a key enabler to drive cost out – replacing repeatable manual processes with simplified and faster automated workflows.

“Citizen Development” is also gaining traction, with tools to allow people to create micro-apps that solve routine tasks becoming more widely available from key technology providers.

Endpoints and Interfaces will continue to evolve. IOT and Edge device provisioning and management will be a key workplace discipline, as too will be leveraging the power of data from these platforms to deliver next generation service and experience. XR [Extended Reality] is also becoming significant. From initial use cases such as training and education and field service augmentation we are now seeing requirements for Virtual Reality solutions to extend virtual collaboration. Microsoft Teams or Zoom suit most virtual meetings, but could meetings be more immersive and engaging if you felt like you were sat around the same board table, for example?

Whilst it may sound a novelty, many organisations are actively exploring XR technologies for a range of new use cases, and beyond the experience, it offers health and wellbeing and sustainability benefits by further reducing corporate travel - particularly that which is typically undertaken by plane.

SERVICE

Transformation of Workplace services is the biggest opportunity of the future workplace – both to enhance experience and to reduce costs. Service Desk interaction, which we have been augmenting with additional channels over recent years, has returned to the fore as people work remotely. Voice engagement is now a premium for the convenience and richness that it offers.

Deskside services have clearly been challenged, their need has not diminished, it has simply been “virtualised” to support employees remotely rather than at their desk or at the IT Café/ Tech Bar.

Traditional engineering/break fix services will continue to diminish. Hardware continues to become more reliable, and technology simplifies provisioning and management. Technologies such as Autopilot [Windows], Device Enrolment [Apple] and Modern Management deliver on the promise of enterprise technology “out of the box” and a shift to swap-based services.

These technologies are being implemented now and are already challenging traditional service models. Service offerings to employees' home are now core, and they can either self-enrol directly or have a streamlined enrolment facilitated from our Integration Centers.

In the face of a hybrid norm of work, one area of exploration is centralised service hubs, e.g. Tech Bars, and lockers that are located in key locations [e.g. a shared office or high street location], providing a local access point for individuals, but servicing multiple customers for leverage and scale.

Analytics and Artificial Intelligence underpins the Workplace service. A future workplace must be more proactive. This means pre-empting issues before they materialise, resolving them at source. AI capabilities anticipate what people are doing and what they need to do, in order to make them more productive.

The services direction of travel is towards zero-touch deployment, proactive services and a ticketless service regime – underpinned not solely by SLA-based metrics but a greater focus on user experience and satisfaction – derived through Experience Level Agreements [XLA] and empirical measures such as Net Promoter Score [NPS].

COST VS BENEFIT CONSIDERATIONS

Amid all this conversation, a key challenge is the cost and benefit of these initiatives, considering the pressures facing businesses currently.

It is exciting to focus upon user experience and the new technologies that can transform ways of working, but this may introduce significant additional cost, and for many organisations IT, particularly workplace IT is deemed a commodity service with a focus on industrialising and driving cost out.

A key challenge we have always faced is gaining the adoption of new technology in workplace to drive measurable ROI. Moving forwards this will be under even greater scrutiny, and a closer correlation of IT initiatives and spend to user or customer satisfaction and revenue generation will be key.

TIME FOR WORKPLACE AS A SERVICE?

A lot of focus from IT departments has been on provisioning and supporting workplace technology to keep employees connected, productive and engaged. Arguably this has come at the expense

of other business impacting technology initiatives that have had to be deprioritised in recent times.

With the continued impacts to revenue streams, and potential changes to staffing requirements in the short to medium term, is the true future workplace vision one of finally achieving the state of utility to which we have often aspired?

We continue to see interest in Device as a Service, and consumption-based access to other services is now commonplace. Is the future workplace one where the businesses procure their Workplace [technology and service] on a true pay-as-you-go basis, to give them cloud like flexibility and agility according to their needs.

With the emergence of the shared office partnerships, will corporate real estate start to embrace the same principles? Will we be able to unitise all aspects of an employee's workplace provision and strip out swathes of fixed costs?

SUMMARY

We are exiting a period of unprecedented change in our lives and work. The amazing work and achievements of the past 12 months, to enable and equip people is however not the true transformation of the workplace required to prepare businesses for the next wave. But this is the opportunity ahead.

Our Digital Me proposition continues to focus on the Workplace journey towards an empowered, equipped and assisted workplace – ready to embrace the needs of people holistically, and leverage the opportunities enabled via technology innovation to fundamentally redefine where, how, when and why we work.



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