



THE IMPACT AND LEGACY OF COVID-19 FOR TECHNOLOGY LEADERS

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INTRODUCTION

AT COMPUTACENTER
WE INCREASED OUR
VPN LOAD FROM
APPROXIMATELY
2,000 USERS A DAY,
TO OVER 10,000
USERS A DAY AND
TRANSITIONED OUR
ENTIRE GLOBAL
SERVICE DESK
WORKFORCE TO
WORK FROM HOME

COVID-19 is a topic that requires little introduction. This global pandemic is having a profound impact on the personal and professional lives of nearly everyone on the planet. As yet the impact upon businesses and industries across the globe is immeasurable, and perhaps will be for many years to come.

This situation is unprecedented in modern history. Any “Business Continuity” plans that existed before this crisis have either been found wanting or needing to be quickly redefined. Such has been the pace and impact of the restrictions that governments have imposed in order to protect citizens lives, businesses have had to act at a pace that was previously unimaginable.

There will be subsequent ‘stages’ in the response to this situation from where we are today. We cannot specifically and accurately predict them now, in terms of their scope or duration, but reacting quickly and decisively has been key in every aspect of the global response – from governments, health services, citizens and businesses. This paper focuses on IT’s role in supporting businesses throughout this period of disruption and uncertainty.

INVOKING “BUSINESS CONTINUITY” TO ENABLE USERS

The first trend of the response to “lock down” has seen huge demands from every type of organisation to equip and enable users for home working. This demand spike occurred quickly, and in conjunction with constraints imposed from manufacturing disruption in China and elsewhere, caused by earlier pandemic impacts, created a significant tension throughout the supply chain. Standard device types and product catalogues have often been disregarded in the melee to get users set up for home working.

Securing infrastructure and platform availability was the second trend. Assuring network and VPN capacity, reviewing and enhancing controls to address the extended security perimeters has been of critical importance. In the face of a global health pandemic, cyber security remains a significant business issue.

As the period of lockdown continues managers and business leaders are facing new considerations including management of user engagement, health and wellbeing and catering for long-term home working by equipping users with appropriate technology and peripherals.

THE BUSINESS RESPONSE

The impacts on businesses have been felt differently across industry sectors. The difference in responses has been notable. Manufacturing organisations have had to cease a vast amount of their activity, creating huge staffing and revenue challenges. Retailers, in the face of huge volatility in consumer demand, have had to materially shift their in-store business model and enable and enhance their digital channel strategy. The logistical and distribution challenges caused by the lockdown are outside of their control, but the impacts upon the end-to-end customer experience has been notable.

Businesses in the hospitality sector are all essentially “mothballed” and are facing a very uncertain future.

No two industries have been impacted in the same way, and a tailored response for each will be necessary to protect and re-ignite businesses in the future. A culture of sharing experiences across businesses and industries is forming. Relationships between customer and supplier are being tested to the limit. Customer loyalty is fragile in the face of uncertainty, and the organisation's behaviour within the community is being scrutinised more than ever.

A NEW BUSINESS AS USUAL

As we observe the situation domestically and internationally, there is recognition that what we originally felt as short-term restrictions to our liberty now form the basis for a ‘new normality’. Many nations are taking their first tentative steps out of their lockdown, and life, and work is on a slow return to ‘normal’. Industries will start to re-open, as the economy and society begin the slow healing process.

A recognition that things will not be the same again dawns. We are redefining “normal life” to accommodate significant changes that we need to adapt to, testing our tolerances. Accepting social distancing and contact tracing, dealing with the anxiety and fears of employees and consumers, compound a lack of confidence of people, customers and in the markets overall.

Yet despite this, appear glimmers of optimism. We turn our attentions to “repatriation” initiatives to get businesses operating once more, to getting “back to normal” as quickly as we can.

In the office context, post lockdown, we are looking at how we strike a balance between accepting that those people who can work at home should, for the protection of themselves and others. But there are other groups who need to be in the office. For those that do return, can we implement social distancing measures to protect health and wellbeing, but which are not so onerous that they impact on the user experience and create adverse effects on those people?

In the shop floor context, particularly manufacturing, how will throughput and productivity be impacted if the priority is to keep people safe and distant at work? In retail, the challenges are compounded as employees and consumers co-habit the physical space. Both expect appropriate social distancing measures to be in place, whilst having limited tolerance for ongoing impact and disruption to their daily lives.

WORK IS SOMETHING YOU DO NOT SOMEWHERE YOU GO

Remote working will be key; indeed, it is now the norm for many. It is not a panacea, but with individuals “safe” at home, adapting to a new “workstyle”, many are seeing the benefits. Not losing hours of their day commuting, minimising the tension and conflict in striking a work/life balance, and the reality that video calls and collaboration are more than satisfactory alternatives for being present in the room are drivers for a change in the way we work. On the counter side, supporting and engaging users in this mode of operation, managing feelings of isolation and other mental health concerns become of more paramount importance.

For the business, significant reduction in expenses and travel bills, higher user productivity and a sense of employee wellbeing from removing friction from work such as travel and commuting are compelling benefits. Add to this the opportunity to rationalise real estate are compelling reasons to embrace the new norm. Looking further, access to talent enabled by not being limited by geography may be key to securing growth for the future.

INVESTMENTS AND BUDGET PLANNING

There are at least two major dynamics that could impact future planning. Many businesses have had to invest in technology to mitigate the impact of this situation; procuring additional hardware and peripherals to enable remote working and investing in enhanced infrastructures to maintain service availability. Secondly, in the face of significant revenue impacts felt across many industries, businesses are restricting and re-allocating budgets to sustain their core operations.

The challenge is a stark one.

“Invest to save, or invest to grow”.

For many organisations, the future strategy is founded on **optimisation**. Exploiting existing technology assets and investments, ensuring they are fully leveraged and providing value to the business before seeking to add new functionality or solutions. For the moment, “good enough may be good enough”.

Many organisations will pursue a **modernisation** strategy, whilst not fundamentally changing systems or engagement models, taking the opportunity to uplift technology platforms may realise operational efficiencies in support or maintenance costs to reduce future TCO.

Some organisations will embrace the situation as an opportunity to **transform** their solutions and platforms. Fundamentally re-thinking how they deliver services and the experiences they offer their users and customers as a way to drive growth and market share in the future. The most ambitious will seek to **innovate** in their response to the situation, fundamentally looking to how they solve their business and customer challenges.

The reality will be a blend of each of these approaches, depending on the use case, customer facing or internal systems, core to the operation or ancillary. Making decisions quickly will be key in order to achieve the desired benefits.

DRIVE OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY

Realise operational efficiency by optimising your IT infrastructure and boosting your internal productivity while staying secure, in control and compliant.



OPTIMISE

Optimise and secure your technology to derive the maximum value from your people and processes.

Key topics

- IT Foundations
- Digital Workplace



MODERNISE

Future-proof your organisation, improving productivity, sustainability and agility, with modern technology.

Key topics

- Software Defined Infrastructure
- Business Continuity & Security

INCREASE BUSINESS AGILITY AND INNOVATION

Improve the ways in which you service your users and your customers, leveraging cloud, data and other technologies to deliver better experiences and become more competitive



TRANSFORM

Become more agile, effective and people-centric while improving productivity and efficiency.

Key topics

- Employee Value
- Modern Cloud Platforms



INNOVATE

Support innovation and accelerate business growth with next generation applications and services.

Key topics

- Intelligent Applications
- Data Enabled Business

THE EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIP

Everyone has been affected by the situation of the past months. Fear, uncertainty and doubt are natural responses that have manifested in us all. This has prompted a profound response from business and HR leaders as to the management of people during this crisis, potentially redefining the employer- employee relationship for years to come.

Employees have looked to their leaders and organisations to provide assurance in the face of huge uncertainty. This is entirely natural. Ensuring job security or any other source of stability in an uncertain outlook is a key human need. Employees have been also been reliant upon their employers, to show flexibility and compassion to enable them to cope with additional challenges of home schooling or managing other personal circumstances such as vulnerable family members.

Many employees have also placed a different kind of trust in their employers. Many staff have been “furloughed”, a term rarely used three months ago but now firmly embedded in common vocabulary. They are trusting that all will be well, that this is short term and at some point normality will return and they’ll be able to resume their careers and contribute to the recovery.

Equally employers have been required to trust in their employees. Working remotely, many users are maintaining important customer relationships and touch points and helping many organisations to weather the immediate storm and disruption they face. For many employees who are “on the front line” of customer services, particularly those “key workers”, they become the face of the company’s endeavours and response to this crisis. There will be those organisations that acted with integrity, trust and humility in the face of an unprecedented crisis, and those who are perceived to have failed. This may often be an emotive debate, rather than a rational one.

Supporting employees in adapting to this situation has been the key priority. This crisis has thrust the conversation of “mental health” further into the mainstream conversation. A key pillar of the response in most organisations has been of how to engage and support employees – from simplistic management disciplines, through to fostering a new organisation culture within the virtual bubble in which we all now operate.

COMMUNITIES, PARTNERSHIPS AND ECOSYSTEMS

No organisation operates in isolation. Partnerships and ecosystems are a core aspect of any organisation’s operating model. Over the past few years as issues such as sustainability has grown, an organisation’s role and behaviours within its “communities” have become more prevalent issues - often a board-level issue.

In times of crisis and uncertainty, the natural reaction is to stick to who and what you know. For an incumbent supplier this may provide a short-term stay of execution, as cost and risk of change are difficult to justify. What is evident is those who are operating as suppliers versus those who are operating as partners.

Every organisation is stretched, under pressure, struggling to respond. The spirit of partnership is key to mutual success, and in these times key relationships are being formed, underpinned by mutuality, commitment to promises made and the need to deliver effectively. Whilst there is a natural inertia in the ecosystem, the experiences of this period will last long in the memory and will define future trading relationships.

From an “outside-in” perspective, an organisation’s role within its community is of critical importance. From protecting employee rights, to doing what the masses perceive to be “fair and just” – perception is everything when it comes to consumers and the media, both fierce judges and often owners of the narrative. The key tactics to maintaining a positive perception ranges from adhering to government guidelines to supporting good causes through altruistic acts or activities. These may become differentiating factors, securing the good will of the community, employees and ultimately consumers long after the immediate crisis has passed.

People, all people, have very long memories. Whether you are a consumer, a buyer of services, or a potential candidate for work – company brands and reputations will be reinforced or redefined by the community perception – call it “herd mentality”.

A LASTING LEGACY – WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

This is impossible to predict. When we speak of a “new normal” we accept that the world we entered into in 2020 is unlikely to look and feel the same for a considerable period of time. And whilst the adaptation and response has been significant, it is fragile. It would be remiss to talk or ruminate on the mid to long-term social or economic impacts of COVID-19, but from a technology perspective, the trajectory appears to be somewhat clearer.

There are a number of key assertions that can be made on the lasting legacy, instigated by COVID-19:

REVIEW YOUR BUSINESS CONTINUITY ARRANGEMENTS

We are primed for a potential “second wave”. It would appear naïve to consider that a situation such as this may never appear again. Business Continuity plans were often found wanting this time, and as we return to business as usual, undertaking effective planning for the future should become a priority issue to address.

TAKEAWAY

Accept and embrace the learnings of the situation we have encountered. Establishment of broader and more robust BC plans across the entire organisation ecosystem will be key to organisations’ risk management approach in the future.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION HAS HAPPENED, NOW COMES DIGITAL ACCELERATION

Digital transformation has been a broad and often esoteric buzzword of the past few years. What we have seen recently has been a rapid delivery of “Digital Workplace” (internal user enablement) solutions, equipping users with powerful collaborative and productivity technology that has been imperative to keeping them engaged and connected to their customers, colleagues and business. We have also seen the rapid shift in digital engagement channels for organisations looking to maintain engagement with their consumers, to provide continuity to their services and engagement.

TAKEAWAY

The legacy of this trend will be the pace at which these activities were achieved, and the benefits and adoption that have been achieved. It is doubtful this same impact would have been felt had it not been enforced.

WORK WILL NEVER LOOK AND FEEL THE SAME AGAIN

The notion that “work is something I do not somewhere I go” can appear rather trite. And it is a generalism, inapplicable to many users who operate on the front line or the shop floor – such as customer service, retail, manufacturing, blue light and many other services. However, for a significant swathe of users, operating remotely and collaboratively is a very valid operating model. The technology we are enabled with is powerful, and often underused. As Brits we have reconciled our cultural discomfort with appearing on camera during video calls, to wholly embracing it as a means to connect to people where physical contact is restricted.

TAKEAWAY

For many users there is no going back. The benefits of working this way far outweigh the downsides. For organisations they see that enabled properly, users can operate effectively outside of offices, creating huge opportunities to reduce facilities costs, access a wider talent base and save on discretionary costs such as travel and expenses.

REDEFINING THE ROLE OF IT TO ENABLE USERS AND THE BUSINESS

If the context of work for users has changed, then so too does the technology services and support that is provided. With users now working at home we are starting to re-think the way that IT services are provided. ‘Genius Bars’ or ‘Tech Bars’ have been in vogue for the past few years but are redundant if offices lay empty or under-occupied. But a subtle shift towards providing ‘Virtual Support’ to users via collaboration tools could aid with technology adoption or resolving support issues. Users can be better engaged and more productive while working remotely.

From the business perspective, technology will be an enabler to the challenges ahead. There will be many opportunities for technology to shine, to provide innovative new approaches to resolving the challenges that will emerge in the aftermath of COVID-19. Speed of execution will be key.

TAKEAWAY

IT is still too often treated as a cost centre rather than an enabler to the business. In a world where physical contact has a fundamentally new risk profile, digital technologies will be key to delivering customer experiences and enabling and empowering people. Technology may now be the source of fundamental competitive advantage to those that embrace it best.

Enabling users and their business

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