




POINT OF VIEW | DYNAMIC WORKPLACE SERVICES

The Digital Workplace Challenge: Meeting Employees' Modern Needs in the New Normal

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When the pandemic is behind us and the economy has rebounded once again, the deeply ingrained work arrangements and environments we once knew will have changed forever.

Over the last decade, the implied contract between employer and employee has been in a constant state of transition, as have the workplaces they share and work styles in general. Fluctuating economic conditions, rapid technological advancement and evolving social norms exert powerful influences on the way people do their jobs. For employers, meeting the needs of modern workers — to both attract top-notch talent and drive business results — is an ongoing journey of constant assessment and adjustment, and the coronavirus crisis is only the latest bump in the road.

Consider how much the employment landscape has changed in recent years. In 2010, the U.S. economy was still in the early stages of recovery from the 2008 financial crisis and resulting recession. Unemployment was high, and companies could cherry-pick the best available employees with little concern for their demands. The situation reversed in the second half of the decade, as the country enjoyed its longest economic expansion in history. Businesses found themselves facing a severe talent shortage and were under pressure to digitally transform their workplaces in an effort to stay relevant among an empowered, tech-savvy workforce.

Then came COVID-19 in early 2020, when the world all but shut down. From March to April, the U.S.

unemployment rate skyrocketed from a near record low to the highest level seen since the Great Depression. The balance of power between hiring companies and jobseekers flipped again, but this time employers faced an entirely new challenge: maintaining business continuity while closing their offices and equipping millions of employees to work from home. Unfortunately, most organizations found themselves underprepared to accommodate the sudden shift to remote working en masse, and performance suffered.

As the weeks under quarantine dragged on, most companies and their employees managed to adapt, with many traditional office and field workers proving that — with the right tools — they could be just as effective from home. A considerable percentage of them may wish to never return to the office. Companies, seeing opportunities for workplace cost savings, may be willing (even eager) to oblige. And when the pandemic is behind us and the economy has rebounded once again, the deeply ingrained work arrangements and environments we once knew will have changed forever.

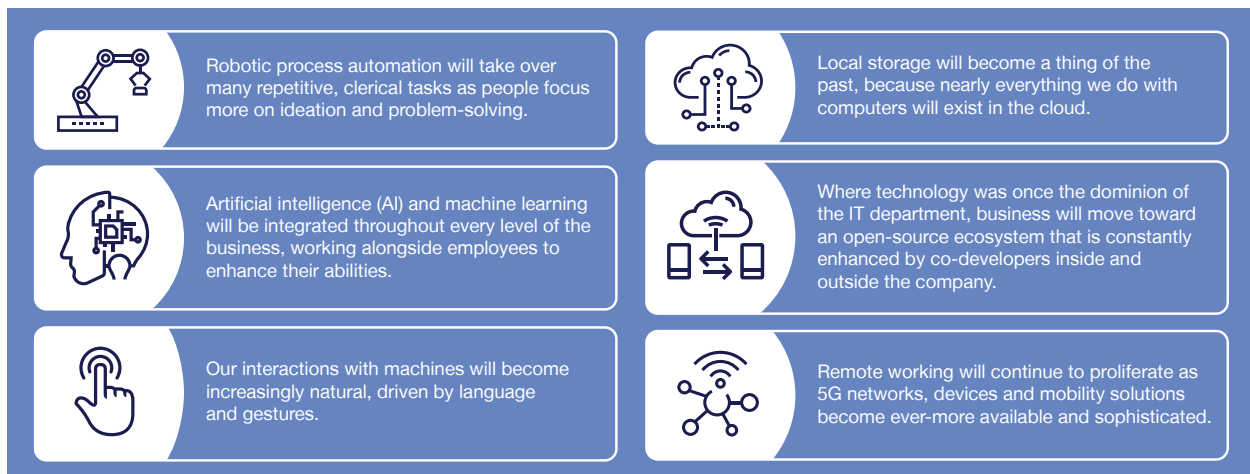
Whatever the future may hold, it's likely that some things will never go back to the way they were. Moving beyond the temporary Band-Aid solutions that have been hastily deployed during the COVID-19 crisis, businesses will need to fully embrace and integrate dynamic workplace technologies for the long term — if not to attract and retain talented people, then to empower the employees they have to be successful under any circumstances. Recent events have made it clearer than ever that flexibility, scalability and security should be critical attributes of any organization's technology strategy.

This paper explores these challenges and opportunities in more detail, in addition to offering solutions to help companies understand their employees' technology needs, deliver empowering user experiences and optimize their operations for the digital future.

The evolving world of work

To anyone observing the workforce for 25 years or more, many aspects of today's workplace environment look much different, and decidedly more high-tech, than before. Our daily lives are now defined by email, web browsing, smartphones, social media, video collaboration, software as a service and other technological developments that were non-existent or considered progressive not long ago. But the evolution of the workplace is far from complete, and it likely never will be.

Inevitably, the next decade will bring more sweeping changes to the way people do their jobs. For example:



The list of potentially transformational advancements is endless, which is why it's essential for companies to start thinking in these terms today. As workplace technology continues to advance, so too will the expectations of employees, customers and investors. What is avant-garde today will be table stakes tomorrow.

Proceed with caution

While adopting a technology-forward mindset is critical, organizations must also be capable of tempering grand aspirations with prudent decision-making. For example:

- Cost is always an issue. If money were no object, companies could invest unlimited funds to upgrade workplace processes and technologies across the board. In reality, projects must be strategically planned within budgetary constraints to deliver value where it's needed most.
- Important business decisions will be increasingly informed by big data — some will even be automated by algorithms. Yet, companies can't completely disregard the value of human experience and intuition.
- An ever-growing inventory of connected devices sharing sensitive information will demand heightened security at the edge of the network. While security must be stronger than ever, it can't become a roadblock in the way of employee productivity.

In moving toward a modern, digitized workplace that includes an ecosystem of remote employees, a balanced approach is clearly one key to success. That is, companies must find ways to embrace advanced workplace technologies without undermining other business priorities.

A three-pronged approach to workplace modernization

The business case for companies to modernize the workplace is well established, and in light of the pandemic even more compelling. Yet, many organizations struggle to develop a clear vision for how an array of available technologies can come together to help them meet their goals.

Experts at NTT DATA propose that business leaders think of workplace modernization in terms of a three-legged stool. In any such scenario, all three legs are essential for the whole to stand. And in this case, the triad consists of insights and analytics, a unified and frictionless employee experience, and optimized operations — all delivered through a suite of advanced technologies.

Drive initiatives with insights and analytics

Creating a dynamic digital workplace starts with self-assessment. Before companies can deploy new technologies to heighten employee satisfaction and performance, they should have more than a gut feeling about where employees' needs lie. Just as modern businesses use big data analysis to better understand their customers, they can turn that lens inward to get to know their own workforce. A robust program of data-gathering and analysis can provide visibility into what's working, what could be improved and how certain technical solutions might help.

On the one hand, user data collected from many different sources can reveal a lot about how employees do their jobs. Which software tools do people access most often, or not use at all? How do they use technology to collaborate with their teams? Which processes seem cumbersome and inefficient for a person to complete? Over time, the usage patterns offer insights on which to base improvements, such as simplifying a user interface or automating a specific business process, enabling people to focus more on revenue generation and customer retention. The data can also be used to

form employee personas, representative profiles that categorize groups of people based on their work styles and technology needs.

On the other hand, insights and analytics can help organizations keep a closer watch on technology itself. For example, digital monitoring, automated testing and predictive maintenance can identify system abnormalities and correct them before they become serious problems. NTT DATA put these practices in action when we helped a government technology authority understand the diverse needs of thousands of users across 80 state agencies. Based on the insights gleaned, our client developed user personas, optimized its software and hardware inventory,

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implemented self-check and self-healing automation, and rolled out several new services to enhance productivity. As a result, the client's progress toward a digital workplace dramatically improved the speed and effectiveness of IT services to state employees, which in turn empowered those workers to improve their service to the public. More than a one-time exercise, insights and analytics should play an ongoing role in the organization to proactively assess workplace technology needs and enable continuous improvements.

Enhance flexibility with frictionless services

As data insights emerge and reveal opportunities to modernize the workplace, organizations can choose from a wide range of off-the-shelf or customizable technology solutions to meet their needs. In any case, "modern" should be the operative word. Because, as any



workforce analysis will likely show, today's employees want technology at work to mirror the seamless, effortless, empowering digital tools they use every day in their personal lives. Searching with Google, shopping with Amazon, riding with Uber, sharing with Instagram — these are the incredibly user-friendly experiences they expect from technology. Companies that can elevate their own workplace services to that standard will establish themselves as employers of choice and unlock new levels of productivity and innovation.

For many organizations, a good starting point might be implementing a bring-your-own-device policy, rolling out an internal social media tool such as Yammer or Workplace by Facebook, and/or adopting a converged collaboration platform such as Microsoft Office 365 or VMware's Workspace ONE. Companies that had these measures in place before COVID-19 struck were ahead of the game when they had to send employees home.

Enterprises further along in their digital evolution should also begin to rethink the way they deliver technology services. For example, many of the routine requests familiar to the IT department can be handled by employees themselves through a self-service portal, which should incorporate an AI chatbot or virtual agent. Certain other IT tasks must be automated completely, freeing technology staff to focus on higher value work and provide more responsive, personalized service when complex problems arise.

With these goals in mind, NTT DATA recently helped a global process manufacturer adopt several new services, all of which are growing increasingly popular inside progressive companies. First was the introduction of technology lounges — walk-up storefronts on major campuses where employees can come for technology help, much like an Apple Genius Bar. Second was the use of technology lockers, physical locations where employees can securely drop off or pick up technology devices when service is required. Third was the addition of technology vending machines, which make getting a new accessory or peripheral like a mouse or headset as easy as buying an afternoon snack.

With the combination of state-of-the-art software, self-service conveniences and concierge-level support, the workplace starts to more closely resemble the outside world. That's what employees want in their work lives — and what they need to excel.

In the post-COVID-19 environment, of course, some of these enhanced IT services might need to be delivered

in new ways, similar to how many consumer-facing establishments are modifying their operations. For a while, at least, we may be receiving IT support through virtual tech bars, and when an in-person visit is required, contactless field services.

Optimize operations with modern tools, automation and processes

Insights and analytics reveal the organization's needs; frictionless services empower employees to be at their best. The third prong in our approach focuses on optimizing operations, using technology to make the workplace as efficient, cost-effective, secure and innovative as it can be.

In recent years, many large organizations have made significant progress in this area as they enable the increasing mobility of employees who use an ever-growing array of devices to connect with work. Virtual desktop infrastructure has become a common strategy to create secure access to a complete work environment from

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anywhere, while reducing the organization's hardware requirements. Concurrently, unified endpoint management provides IT administrators a single interface by which to monitor and manage a vast inventory of laptops, smartphones, tablets, printers and other devices. This, in turn, reduces costs, improves security and allows greater scaling as business needs change.

For NTT DATA clients, solutions like these proved invaluable as COVID-19 necessitated remote working for everyone. For example, a large insurance provider called on us to establish remote access connectivity for

more than 45,000 of its users per day, deploy 3,000 new virtual desktops with virtual private networks/encryption and configure 3,000 additional laptops. The company was able to maintain business continuity with minimal disruptions as the pandemic spread. And the same solutions will help them cut costs and operate with greater agility and flexibility, even after the crisis is over.

While optimizing network access and asset management are certainly steps in the right direction, they only hint at the full potential of more advanced workplace technologies. The most exciting breakthroughs occur when technology is used to transform the nature of work itself, and that begins with automation. Automation can take nearly any repetitive, high-volume business process and perform it in far less time, at lower cost and with fewer errors. When it's deployed strategically and deliberately across the organization, the cumulative gains can be profound. And despite the common grievance that automation will cause job losses, the longer term prognosis for the workforce is quite optimistic. Automation will relieve employees from tasks that nobody enjoys and free them to focus on higher level pursuits that require creativity, problem-solving, experimentation and innovation. A customer service agent, for example, needn't be replaced by automation; rather, with certain tedious parts of this job made instant and effortless by technology, the agent could focus the time savings on providing more personalized and thorough customer care.

Data convergence will also play an important role in optimizing operations. As businesses adopt automation, AI and other technologies, they rely on a constant supply of high-quality data to turn the cogs in the machine. In today's environment, where data comes pouring in from everywhere (apps, infrastructure, internet of things devices and so on), companies must be able to efficiently decode that information and direct it to the proper channels. As they do, data becomes a powerful force that accelerates decision-making and makes people more effective.

As you would expect, the IT department will lead the charge in implementing and supporting these transformative technology projects. Thus, IT must transform as well, increasing its responsiveness and agility. One way to do that is to unite the company's workplace services and applications management teams, two groups that have traditionally operated in separate silos. At NTT DATA, we recommend a converged approach (we call Digital Operations Management) because it's capable of unlocking economies of scale and serving IT customers more efficiently.

We also advocate for the adoption of DevOps, a framework for enhanced collaboration between software development and IT operations. DevOps breaks down barriers to productivity and enables the technology team to fix problems faster and deliver a continuous stream of workplace enhancements.

Transparency builds trust and engagement

To take the three-pronged approach to the next level, organizations need to drive transparency throughout their workplace modernization initiatives. Adopting new systems and strategies will have an impact on employees — some more than others — and will require them to change what may be long-established work styles. As any experienced manager knows, change isn't always embraced enthusiastically, which is why the company must engage employees in the process and be transparent about what it hopes to accomplish. This will be even more critical as organizations recover from COVID-19 and a new normal begins to coalesce.

From a general business standpoint, employees first need to understand the company's vision for the workplace of the future. Leaders should clearly communicate why the organization needs to modernize its practices to remain competitive, as well as explain the long-term benefits to the business and its employees.

That communication should extend to workplace insights and analytics. Employees deserve to know exactly what information is being gathered about them, and how it will be used to make improvements. If they understand that they're contributing to a better workplace, employees are more likely to be eager participants.

Finally, when it comes to automation, workers should receive an honest assessment of how their jobs might be affected. While outright downsizing is probably the worst-case scenario in their eyes, automation is just as likely to present opportunities for employees to take on more fulfilling responsibilities.

Transparency is also important for people who will work with automation. They need to have at least a baseline understanding of how the automated system works — what factors it considers and why it makes the decisions it does — so they can trust it to do the job effectively.

Over time, this policy of transparency is what will turn naysayers into believers, engaging employees to harness the full potential of their digital dynamic workplace.



Conclusion

As it stands today, many organizations around the world are still operating in survival mode. They're focused on keeping employees safe and productive while management seeks to fully understand the long-term impacts of the pandemic. The silver lining in the COVID-19 cloud is that it has forced companies to rethink their workplace technology strategies, revealing opportunities to make improvements with lasting benefits to the organization and its employees. As the economy rebounds and business settles into new rhythms, companies with progressive digital workplaces will hold a distinct advantage over those who only seek a return to their old ways. And when the next war for talent begins, they will be well-positioned as contemporary employers of choice, those that live on the edge of innovation and provide their people with the powerful yet intuitive technologies they need to excel in a digital world.

Of course, the workplace will always continue to evolve, and the next disruptive turn of events may be just around the corner. But if one thing is inevitable, it's that businesses will always work to operate more efficiently, outperform the competition, and ultimately realize greater profitability. Those improvements will be delivered not by technology alone, but by a modern workforce who is equipped and prepared to make the most of technology's potential.

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