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Preparing for a Remote Workforce

A GUIDE



Equipping a remote workforce is an increasingly popular, viable—and in some cases, necessary—option that many businesses are considering. Some want to offer remote work to alleviate office crowding or offset spikes in rent prices for leased space. Others are looking to offer remote work as a perk to recruit top talent, while still others find themselves needing to quickly set up remote working infrastructure to keep their businesses open and functioning during the latest pandemic.

This guide covers essentials that CTOs, IT Officers, and other business leaders need to consider as they plan for a remote workforce.

This guide does not cover business continuity nor disaster recovery planning in detail. It does, however, contain tips that will help companies with remote work-related responses during a crisis response such as a pandemic.

A CHECKLIST OF PRIORITIES FOR EQUIPPING A REMOTE WORKFORCE

To help you get started, here's our brief checklist of priorities.

- Discover which files and the apps employees use to perform their jobs, and devise a plan for them to remotely access and share data in a secure manner. Cloud-based apps are inherently available - where there is internet - outside of your company offices and network. Files or programs stored or running on a desktop in the office prove a more difficult access challenge. You need to decide which option for extending remote access makes the most sense for your situation. A traditional VPN is probably the easiest option, although newer virtual desktops offer advantages. You'll find a full discussion in the section on Secure Remote Access.
- Ensure reliable, fast Internet service at home. If the employee does not have reliable internet access at home, consider providing them with an LTE wireless solution.
- Ensure continuity of voice communications. Do employees use physical phones? What options do they have for using their business extension remotely? Can they access their business line via a software-based unified communications app in place of their physical handset? Is it wise to have people use their personal mobile as their primary phone in place of a business extension? You'll find a full discussion of these points in the section on Voice Communications.
- Assess call centers. Remote work is an attractive option for companies that operate contact centers. How easily could you scale your contact center beyond your four walls?
- Consider web conferencing capabilities. What is the capacity of your current service, and how will it handle an increase in usage or number of meeting participants? Does your web conferencing service offer all the features your remote workforce needs? Are free conferencing services everything they claim to be?

6 BUSINESS CONSIDERATIONS DURING A PANDEMIC OR OTHER CRISIS

The complexity of going remote is not fully appreciated until you work through all of the stakeholders, influencers and steps needed for this move, particularly during a natural disaster or pandemic.

Considerations include:

1. Accommodation for work that can only be performed on-site. When on-premises work is the only option, you should provide safe physical access and prudent policies or practices for employees that must access offices, data centers, or other areas.
2. Response management and communications. Assemble a response team with representatives from your various regions and offices; meet regularly. Assign people to track actions, decisions, or announcements from health and other officials; school closings; quarantines near offices or companies nearby; facilities landlords, etc. Communicate with building management regarding status or concerns about illness spreading within your building, such as on a particular floor.
3. Human resources, benefits, employee relations and privacy. Employees may be anxious and fearful. They will have questions. Be ready to answer these fears, anxieties, and frustrations. Communicate proactively and regularly
 - a. Remind employees of your benefits and policies regarding time off, and to avoid coming to work when they are ill. If your benefits include a telemedicine option, this is the time to remind employees that it is available.
 - b. Be sure that someone on your HR team is certified in HIPAA privacy rules in case an employee notifies you that they are ill. Doing so can protect both the employee's privacy and the best interests of staff and the company. Follow HIPAA protocols to protect individual privacy.
 - c. This is a good time to "over communicate" among your leadership, HR, and employees.
4. Changing circumstances. Even if well prepared, you may find yourself responding to new developments. For example, if schools and childcare facilities close your employees will need to be at home with kids. Suddenly an entire office needs to work from home.
5. Ability to react or shift rapidly. During a pandemic or other critical business-impacting event, having the ability to pivot quickly to a remote workforce reveals the business value of investments in remote work infrastructure and practices. It's hard to move to a large remote workforce quickly if you don't already have the technology and processes in place. Smaller businesses may find it easier to respond and work through challenges or emerging situations more rapidly. Larger organizations could find this difficult, so having and testing a business continuity or remote workforce plan in advance is advisable.
6. Governing authorities approach guidance, policies, restrictions, and responsiveness differently. This, combined with the fact that the threat or risk can be localized and spread unexpectedly, means that circumstances affecting individual offices can vary widely by location. Investments made today in technology, infrastructure, preparedness policies and procedures can have long-term benefit, whether it becomes part of your natural course of operations, or is simply a fallback during the next event.

SECURE REMOTE ACCESS

Challenge: Giving employees secure access to corporate resources

The 'Good' remote work solution: Virtual Private Network (VPN)

The 'Better' remote work solution: Virtual (Remote) Desktop

With the move to the cloud and Software-as-a-Service, many core business applications in use today, such as Salesforce and Office365, can easily be accessed from anywhere. So making the move to remote work for employees who use mainly these types of solutions isn't terribly difficult. A more challenging scenario, however, is giving an employee remote access to a specific machine, set of files, or programs that traditionally are not set up for a remote working situation. The IT leadership team may need to consider options such as installing the application the employee needs on a home machine or company laptop. But sharing data from a remote location is trickier, and that's where remote VPN access can help. As we'll see, VPN access paired with data stored on a physical machine can still present risks.

Remote Work Increases Data Security Risks

In general, remote work can increase risk of information theft and cyberattack. Laptops can be stolen and the data removed. A virus infecting a desktop or laptop can subsequently be uploaded to the corporate network. Even the act of accessing files, corporate shared drives, and databases remotely can give bad actors opportunities they wouldn't have had otherwise.

In the age of data theft and cyberattacks, almost any remote work requires a private, secure connection. An employee working remotely and connecting back to corporate resources such as files, corporate shared drives, Intranets, and databases can become part of the potential attack surface and can increase

risk of information theft, or worse, an all-out cyberattack on your network. That's why even if an employee doesn't directly access or interact with sensitive data, a secure connection is still important.

VPN

For most remote workforce needs, companies find that a traditional VPN is an easy way to implement a private, secure connection. Even though a VPN requires some effort on the part of your IT team to set up and administer—including establishing policies and endpoints, and extending VPN permissions and credentials per employee—a VPN offers a lot of advantages and functions extremely well for most remote workforce needs. And while VPN has worked for many companies, many more are moving to a newer, more complete solution.

Virtual Desktop

A fully cloud-based virtual desktop is the modern way to both solve issues related to protecting corporate data and to give employees seamless access to all their files, regardless of location or device. With a virtual desktop, there is no data to steal from a laptop, because the data actually resides in the cloud. In addition, because the virtual desktop service establishes a secure connection between the local device and the virtual desktop residing securely within your corporate network, it eliminates the need for a separate VPN connection. It also reduces the likelihood of accidentally uploading a virus to the corporate network.

VOICE COMMUNICATIONS

Challenge: Traditional phone systems offer little flexibility for remote work.

The ‘Good’ remote work solution: Voice over IP (VoIP) phone systems

The ‘Better’ remote work solution: VoIP with Unified Communications features

Traditional Voice Systems Not Designed for Remote Work

Companies that use telephone systems based on traditional on-premises PBXs probably find voice communications to be the biggest hurdle in their remote workforce strategy. That’s because—apart from call-forwarding features—these systems are not designed to give users many options for making and receiving calls anywhere except from the employee’s desktop handset.

To use these systems remotely, employees might be assigned a handset compatible with the company’s phone system which they set up in their home office. Employees that work remotely part-time may opt to use their mobile phone to make and receive calls on the days they work remotely, and use their handset on days they are in the office. Of course, knowing which number to call on a given day can be confusing to fellow employees, partners, vendors, and customers. Call forwarding features can alleviate some of the confusion and awkwardness for inbound calling, provided the employee is diligent about setting (and re-setting) the call forwarding features.

While the use of a personal mobile in place of a business extension may be an acceptable option for some employees for the short term, it probably isn’t ideal for people working from home regularly (part time or full time) or working remotely full time for weeks or months. Consider what would happen, for example, if customers only knew the employee’s mobile number, and the employee left the company or was terminated.

VoIP Supports Seamless Work-from-Anywhere

Cloud-based phone systems are today’s ‘smartphone-easy,’ remote workforce-ready alternative to traditional premises-based systems.

Because these enterprise-class, cloud-based phone systems rely on Internet Protocol PBX (IP-PBX), users can place and receive calls across a range of devices. Employees can use an IP-enabled telephone handset. Or they can access their extension via a unified communications (UC) app downloaded to their mobile phone, tablet, desktop, or laptop computer.

Besides basic calling capability, UC apps also typically offer rich communications features such as presence, instant message/chat, video chat, file transfer, and screen sharing. IP-based phone systems typically include a much wider range of features than older premises-based systems. Users can manage these features on their own, without help from a telephone administrator.

With a VoIP solution, deploying voice communications to a remote worker is as simple as assigning them an extension, temporary credentials, and features in the administrator portal and giving them a link to download the UC app.



CONTACT CENTER / CALL CENTER

**Challenges: Remote-work-enabling your call center agents and managers.
Scaling your contact center.**

The modern remote work solution: Cloud-based Contact Centers features.

Premises-based Contact Center Solutions Not Designed for Remote Work

How easy would it be to transition your contact center to a remote workforce? Perhaps an even more important question is: could you easily and seamlessly scale—and continue to manage—your call center across onsite employees, remote independent contractors, and/or center vendors, as needed?

Premises-based call centers, like traditional on-premises PBXs, have limitations for remote work scenarios.

Cloud Contact Centers Support Seamless Scaling

Modern, cloud-based contact center solutions, on the other hand, let companies flexibly share call queues with agents located anywhere. Agents simply need access to the device-agnostic UC app downloaded to a mobile phone, tablet, laptop, or desktop.

Agents can take and place calls from their physical handset if they have one, or from the UC app that gives them additional features such as chat/IM, presence, file share, screen share, and more.

In addition, cloud-based call centers give supervisors and managers all the features they need - all web-based - to manage, coach, and train agents, and manage queues, such as monitor, barge, whisper, and reporting.



WEB CONFERENCING

Challenge: Web conferencing solutions may not support the additional usage or job responsibilities of a growing remote workforce.

The modern remote work solution: Enterprise class web conferencing; ample participant seats or user licenses.

As you consider increasing your remote workforce, realize that more people will be using and participating in web conferences. You may need to increase the capacity of your web conferencing service to allow additional participants and/or user accounts. Be sure to advise your telecom team that they may need to provision additional accounts for employees working remotely.

Also consider the job responsibilities of your remote workforce and whether the features of your web conferencing solution supports their needs. For example, if you plan to move account executives to a remote work model, and these employees need to present slides during a call, they will need a conferencing service that offers screen share.

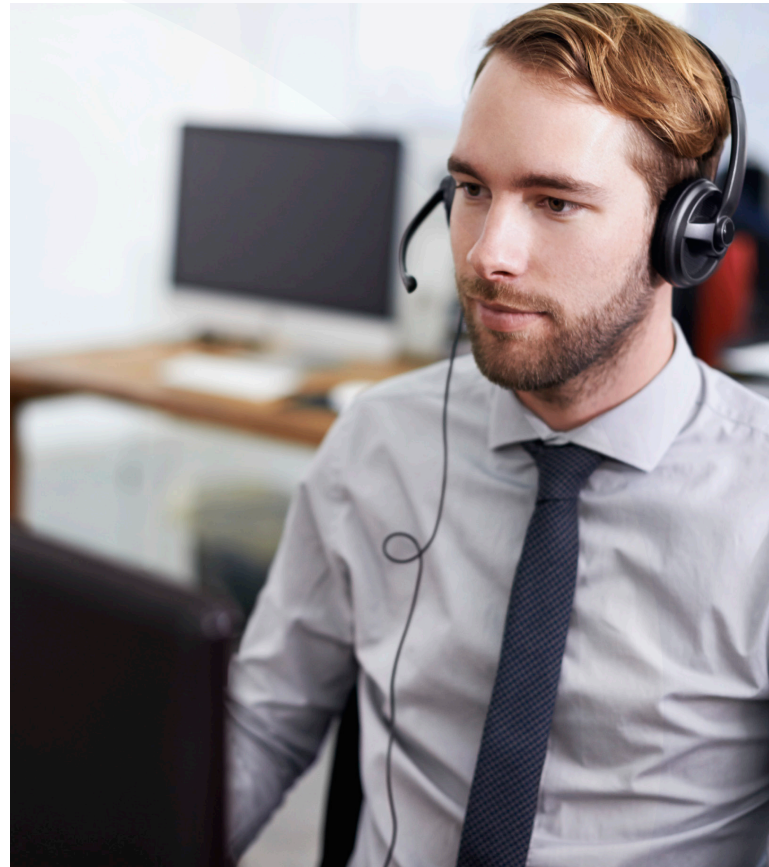
Be aware that free conference call services may not be your best option. Quality varies greatly, and heavy usage can result in choppy call audio, or difficulty connecting. This is the case during the recent COVID-19 pandemic: a spike in usage caused poor performance of at least one free conference calling service.

TRAINING

Employees new or returning to remote work—especially those who interface with anyone outside your company—may need a refresher in some of the nuances of remote work. For example, you may want to offer a checklist, webinar or self-guided training course that covers best practices for leading a conference call or giving a presentation via Web conference and screen share.

SUPPORT

As you adopt new remote work infrastructure, you'll need to consider how you'll support employee users: does your IT support desk need to provide support, or will the vendor take support requests directly from users?



CONCLUSION

Whether you are devising your remote workforce strategy as a matter of course, or setting up remote work options as part of a crisis response, today's enterprise solutions help solve many of the challenges you'll face along the way.

Disclaimer: The information shared in this whitepaper is not all-encompassing or comprehensive and does not, in any way, create or put into implicit effect any elements of a contractual relationship. The primary purpose of this whitepaper is to provide potential Fusion customers with pertinent information in order for them to thoroughly analyze the potential steps and services that would aid in implementing a remote workforce and make an informed decision.



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