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CONNECTED BUSINESS

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TRUST

The key to an empowered workforce

While the coronavirus outbreak may have hastened technological transformation, cultural change must take place to emerge from the pandemic stronger than before

Virginia Matthews

Moyo Studio / Getty Images

As our crisis-led immersion in virtual connection, conferencing and collaboration has amply demonstrated, it is technology that enables workforce empowerment when the chips are down.

Yet while millions have relied on tech to maintain a semblance of normality in extraordinary times, it is cultural change, as much as enterprise software, which will transform flexible working from a temporary fix to the new default.

Despite initial misgivings on both sides, the potential financial and wellbeing advantages of remoteness are now clear. For those organisations able to embrace the growing appetite for autonomy, self-determination and greater meaning at work post-coronavirus, the empowerment gains made during lockdown will be permanent.

"Culture and technology that work together to give employees the ability to use the right tools and collaborate with the right people to do the right work at the right time, no matter where they are or how they want to work" is no longer a nice to have, argues Laura Butler, senior vice president of enterprise work management platform Workfront.

In the coming months, she says, "getting the tech and the culture right will be a business imperative".

The willingness of the workforce to use technology, some of it alarmingly unfamiliar, has been a key factor in ensuring so many organisations are surviving through the pandemic. Ensuring all workers continue to feel valued and included as the rebuilding phase gathers pace is now a priority.

Nicole Alvino, who founded the workplace communications consultancy SocialChorus, says: "Every employee, even the most disengaged, has needed to receive certain important information and support from their employer during this difficult time."

While previously engaged employees are more receptive to the use of collaborative tech, or indeed to any new process, the virus "has taught us that reaching all employees is foundational for any change", she says.

While the role of internal communications in informing, advising and boosting morale has taken centre stage in the pandemic, it is important this continues. Organisations that remain a "trusted and transparent source

of information" will see a significant upswing in engagement, Alvino believes.

For those people who continue to be subjected to prolonged virtual conferencing or mandatory hourly progress reports, the whole notion of workforce empowerment may still feel a long way off.

Trusting remote staff to do their job isn't easy for some employers, regardless of the fact that Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams and so on have been available for some years. In the view of Michaela Rollings, senior manager at Hive, a project management platform, suspicion is fast melting away however.

"If there's a silver lining in all of this, it's that organisations have increased their digital interaction across all areas of employees' lives," she says. "Post-coronavirus,

our hope is that this trend of active engagement will continue as work-life balance moves towards work-life integration."

While many organisations had relegated remote-work technology to the "one day" wish list, COVID-19 precipitated an emergency overhaul.

While Alvino notes "five-year roadmaps to move to the cloud" are common among larger customers, the need to deliver on them practically overnight has helped expose basic connectivity, rather than staff duplicity, as the core issue for many firms.

"Every leader has felt the pain of needing to deliver real-time, targeted, measurable communications to their entire workforce," she says, a steep learning curve, which has been shared by all too many of their newbie remote employees.

As more organisations build confidence in the power of remote technology to keep the show on the road, the new question is around whether or not we need to go into the office at all.

The prospect of greater flexibility for the many, not the few, is attractive. Yet for this to happen, entrenched thinking around presenteeism will need to be challenged, says Emma de Sousa, UK managing director at IT solutions provider Insight.

"Even if they have all the technology in place, too many employers and employees still have a mindset tied to the office-based nine to five," she says. "The workforce will never feel empowered if they are solely judged on what time they go online or how long they spend there. In future, it's vital our understanding of work moves from time, place and actions, to looking at goals and results."

Understanding individual tastes will also be paramount. While some of us find solo working at night, perhaps, a welcome change, others will prefer a structured routine with maximum team engagement. To build workforce empowerment, both will need to be supported, de Sousa believes.

Leaders must also be positive role models for change, she adds, particularly in terms of demonstrating there is no inherent risk in taking advantage of flexible working initiatives.

We can't change the fact that we will always have unexpected emergencies to deal with and, while they won't always be a matter of life and death, even supply chain disruptions can pose a significant threat.

Building the cultural and technological resilience that powers a business-as-usual mindset in a crisis is vital, but so too is paying attention to the very human need for our work to have significance, says Workfront's Butler.

"Technology that connects work overall and the processes, data, content and people who perform it, is critical for businesses trying to navigate a world which is increasingly digital, distributed and borderless," she says.

"Great work can only happen when people have the right technology, are connected regardless of physical location, have the freedom to create and innovate, and know that what they do matters. That's why this isn't a coronavirus story; it's a future of work and workforce empowerment story." ●

5% of US office workers said their bosses don't trust them to do flexitime

11% said flexitime sounds good, but they are afraid to use it because of the negative perceptions

51% said they like flexitime and it works, if people know how to manage themselves

Workfront 2018

Picking the right tools

With a boom in remote-working technologies, it can be difficult to know which tech is best suited to your business. Examining the issues facing you and your staff is a good place to start

Rachel Muller-Heyndyk

Regardless of the sector or size of an organisation, the coronavirus pandemic means organisations will have to find new ways of collaborating and working at a distance. While there's no shortage of remote-working technology to aid this, knowing which software will be right for your workplace can be difficult. Luckily, there are options available to help ease the pressure of even the most significant business challenges.

Managing projects working from home

In the current climate, even the most diligent employees could find themselves feeling more distracted than usual. For some, working remotely could be a welcome break from the interruptions of the open office. For others, a lack of structure, caring responsibilities and financial pressures mean staying on top of workloads can be a challenge.

Meanwhile, for senior employees and managers of large organisations, ensuring tasks are ticking along and communicating across departments can make larger projects more difficult without a physical workplace.

Managing projects with remote-working technology might look different for everyone. For some, this could mean setting clear objectives and asking employees to log tasks. Increased flexibility over tasks for those with children could also be helpful.

Thankfully, there's a number of different project management software tools available, which are both cost effective and have been successfully used by both public and private-sector employers alike. These technologies can give workers the autonomy to plan and track tasks, and enable employers to create daily check-ins that are both clear and non-intrusive.

Scalability and long-term growth

As organisations try to navigate how to stay afloat during the pandemic, scaling and growing businesses can feel overwhelming. However, innovative businesses and start-ups within the hospitality industry have shown that with the right remote-working technology, it's still possible to thrive.

The World Economic Forum has stressed companies that adopt cloud computing will not buckle under the pressure of the crisis. While larger supermarkets and food retailers have struggled with high demand and long queues of disgruntled customers, local restaurants and food startups have kept ahead through reinventing themselves as food outlets. For smaller restaurants trying to keep on top of long orders and rapidly changing business models, cloud computing has proved vital.

Once, to operate restaurant management software, restaurants were required to have servers on the premises to capture data, process transactions and measure performance. Cloud-based systems ensure that not only are these processes better aligned, but can also be beneficial for cash flow, as businesses pay for software as a service, or SaaS. This means small businesses can quickly scale up or down. Companies can add users, integrations and new features without the hassle of lengthy implantation processes or visits from technicians.

Tackling isolation in remote teams

Protecting the emotional health of a remote workforce has been a concern for organisations long before the outbreak. Good employers recognise both the negative impact that loneliness and isolation can have on engagement and productivity, and that it can be prevented.

A study of 2,500 remote workers by Buffer found loneliness was the second biggest challenge for remote workers, affecting almost a fifth (19 per cent). Even sectors like IT, where a large proportion of employees have always worked remotely voluntarily, have recognised the need to keep teams motivated and engaged through regular contact.

Of course, video conferencing has helped with the logistical elements of carrying on with regular team meetings and providing quick feedback. But it could be just as important to allow employees to use these tools for more casual chats, especially for employees who are living alone and missing out on conversations with colleagues in the communal office kitchen.

The key to making remote-working technology work, to better connect employees, is to find software that matches your company culture. If your business has a fun, social element, find technology with which employees can find it easy to chat as well as share fun images and videos. Employees who are finding new working from home arrangements are affecting their mental health could also be directed towards organisations offering virtual counselling and resources.

Overwork and e-presenteeism

While employees are often found to be more productive when working away from the office, they can also be more susceptible to overwork, bringing a host of business challenges. A recent study by LinkedIn revealed human resources professionals think working from home is encouraging e-presenteeism, which means they feel they should be online as much as possible. On average, those working from home were found to put in an extra 28 hours a month, equivalent to four extra working days.

Encouraging remote teams to turn off their notifications for messaging platforms outside working hours can help to put boundaries in place, but it can also be useful to empower employees to keep track of how they're spending their time. Automatic time-tracking software doesn't require any manual entry and detects when employees might be working excessively.

This sort of remote-working technology can dig into working and non-working hours to find out how long you're spending on specific tasks, such as meetings, on apps or on emails. It can also send employees alerts when they're spending a significant amount of time working on evenings and weekends, and help employees to develop better habits.

Cybersecurity

An increase in email scams, phishing and the potential for third parties to spy on confidential meetings are just some of the risks associated with remote working. These can be all the harder to monitor when remote workers are using personal devices.

If organisations haven't already done so, part of the solution towards this is educating employees about security breaches. Both employees and IT departments should be taught to be wary of unexpected queries and calls from people asking for passwords, codes or requesting virtual meetings.

For more advanced attacks, it can be difficult to know what to look for. The best way to stay ahead of cyberattackers is to implement technology that can spot patterns and quantify risks. Artificial intelligence is continually evolving to spot threats and risky behaviour online. While IT workers might be in high demand, autonomous response technology can intervene by stopping malicious activity in its tracks.

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Engaging remote teams

As motivation can feel especially hard to come by, a little recognition through remote-working technology can do wonders for engagement. Platforms using gamification can give a welcome boost to employees. Users can collect points, and earn badges and rewards, such as gift cards, for performance.

When in doubt of how to reward employees remotely with your organisation's resources, it's often best to ask them directly. Setting up a social media group to gain insight on rewards means rewarding employees can feel far more personalised. It's easy to assume, for example, employees will be motivated by perks.

Research from Gartner, however, has found that compensation, work-life balance and stability are still the top priorities for employees. Showing strong leadership through small gestures, even if it's just saying thank you via email, can make all the difference to remote teams having the resilience to take on the business challenges ahead.●

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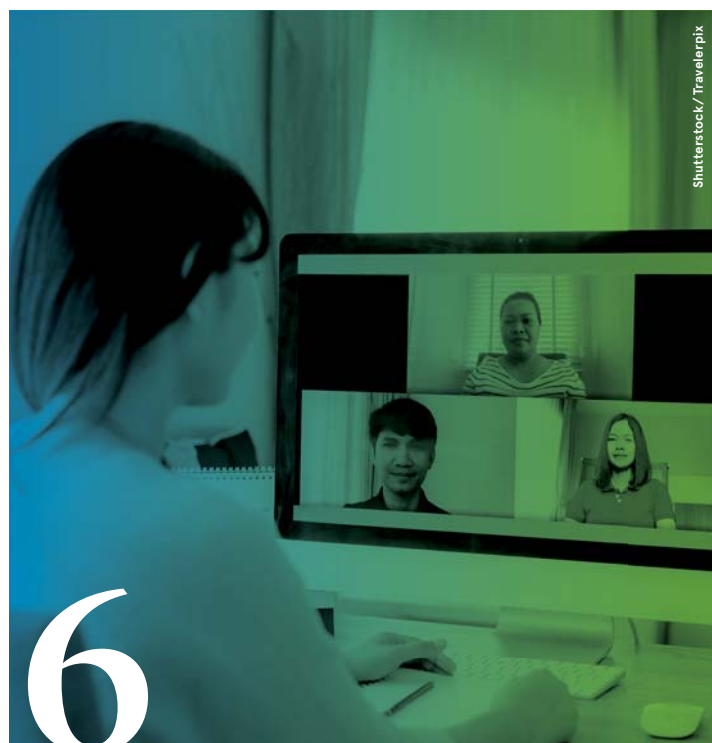
Hybrid model of working fuelled by pandemic

After the pandemic subsides, organisations will finally embrace a truly hybrid model of remote and office working powered by a new trend; bring your own meeting (BYOM), says **Lieven Bertier**, segment director for workplace at Barco ClickShare

A s the coronavirus lockdown eases, the world of work isn't going to go back to how it was at the beginning of the year. Expect many more companies to allow their employees to split their working day between the office and home. This new status quo might not drive new productivity highs, but it will reduce commutes and travel, slashing business expenses and carbon emissions.

Building a hybrid model will allow companies to be flexible after the pandemic, so they can deploy human resources swiftly when and where they're needed. Tapping into a home-based, remote, yet agile, workforce will be critical, as will managing an office-based workforce that may be more distributed across multiple rooms or office locations.

Before the crisis hit, virtual meetings were already rising exponentially. As some begin to return to the office, getting the technology right will be crucial for companies going forward. Platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams have provided vital video-conferencing capabilities during lockdown and this will continue in the "new normal", but in the long term businesses will want more.

Those hosting conferences from office meeting rooms will now be looking for ways to connect peripheral cameras and microphones wirelessly to their screens so they can stream rich, audio-visual content to remote workers and ensure a great experience at home.

Their key aim is to enhance the virtual experience and improve the engagement and participation of remote participants, who live on their laptops and whose productivity is directly affected by this experience.

That's why we've seen a lot of interest in our ClickShare Conference product, which merges in-room engagement and dynamic collaboration with the ability to connect with colleagues anywhere in the world.

At the same time the pandemic has seen a big increase in the number of employees using their own computers to join virtual meetings. The next evolution of this trend has been dubbed "bring your own meeting" (BYOM), where employees use their preferred video-conferencing software on their own device.

The desire for flexibility is one reason why ClickShare Conference was designed to be platform agnostic because Barco wanted users to be able to not only use their own laptop, but also their preferred software, whether that's Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet.

Yet it can still be harder for remote participants to engage in a meeting compared to those attending in the office.

Our research has found that nearly half of employees feel less important when joining remotely, while 43 per cent feel frustrated or disengaged.

As we look to the future, we need to be designing meeting rooms in offices that enable virtual participants in remote locations to feel part of the action and engage with other participants as if they are there in the room. It's state-of-the-art technology that will facilitate this.

People also want shorter, more efficient and, crucially, more engaging meetings, whether they are in the room or joining virtually. Over the course of the global lockdown, people have discovered virtual tools they didn't know existed, from online white boards to virtual breakout sessions.

Within our ClickShare product we've seen an increased use of moderation tools, audio and screen-display controls, and more annotation with the use of blackboards. This is something we expect to be an increasingly important part of future meetings.

Whatever happens over the months ahead, businesses realise remote working brings real benefits. We will see a significant shift towards this hybrid model. But more importantly, it's a model that provides much more freedom and flexibility to choose how and where workforces collaborate and communicate. A heady cocktail of human innovation, a global pandemic and technology has facilitated this. And there is no going back.

To find out more please go to barco.com

FUTURE OF MEETINGS SURVEY

76%

agreed that technology should play a central role in all collaborative sessions, particularly where they include remote attendees

51%

said their meetings now have remote attendees

25%

said the average meeting now has all participants attending remotely

71%

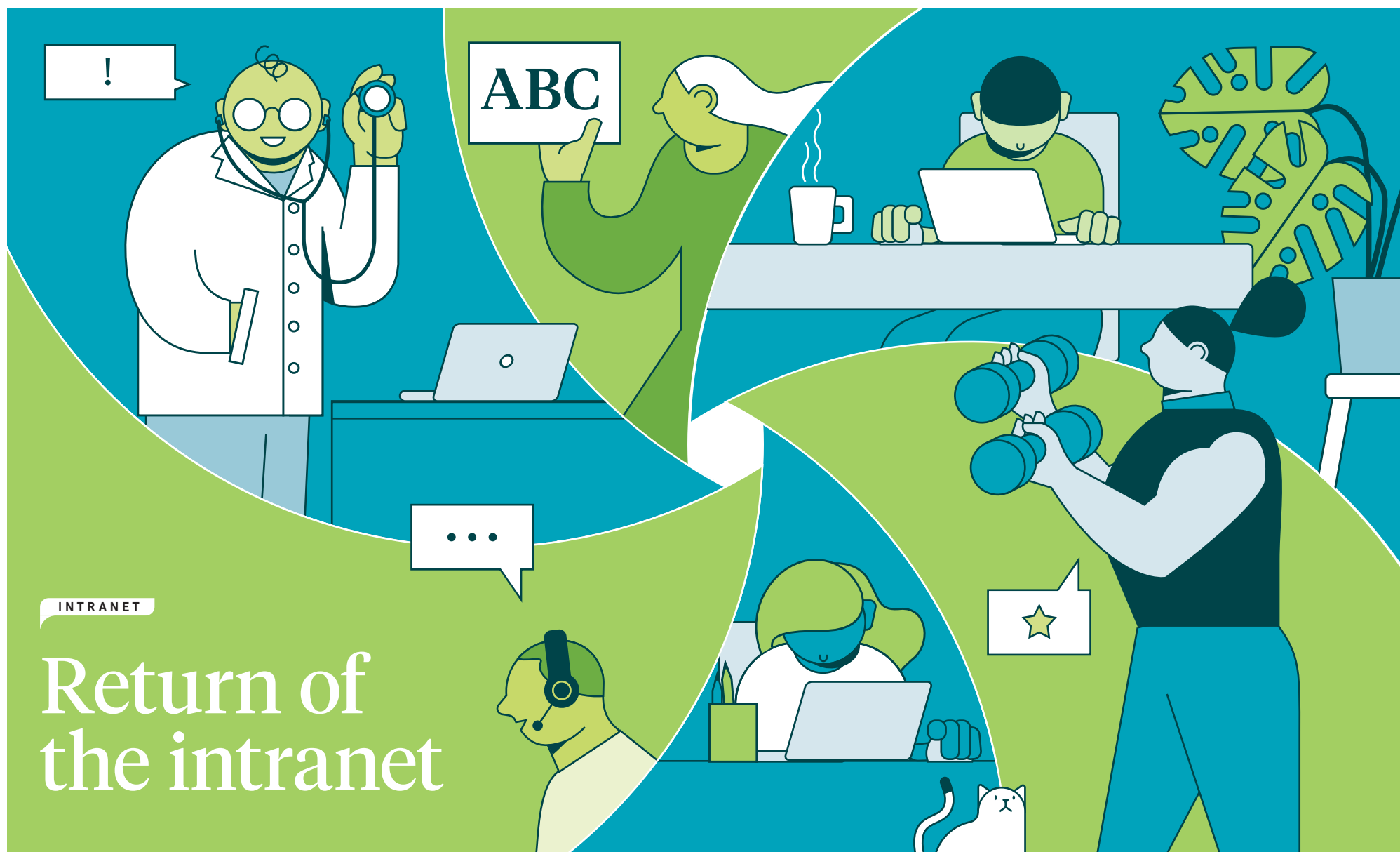choose the tools and software applications they use for conferencing

6

different conferencing apps installed on average

Barco survey of more than 1,500 office workers around the world

Return of the intranet

Intranet may seem like a relic of a bygone age, but as workforces the world over go remote, it can be a perfect way to keep company culture intact

Gareth Platt

A t the start of May, amid the chaos of coronavirus, staff at NatWest were offered a new way to access healthcare advice. The company rolled out a virtual GP service, enabling employees to get essential diagnosis without having to visit a surgery.

The service is part of a new hub that also includes a toolkit to deal with the emotional stress of lockdown, advice on managing teams during COVID-19 and even a Zoompowered storytelling service for children. And it's all hosted on the NatWest intranet portal.

This is just one example of how companies are rebuilding their employee experience around the intranet. A whole stack of multinationals, from Lenovo to Thomson Reuters, have created resource centres for all their COVID-related advice. Some are also issuing instructions to staff: Delta Airlines, in a much-criticised move, used its intranet to tell sick flight attendants not to post on social media.

The intranet was always intended to be the fulcrum of the digital workplace. As far back as 1996, Intranet Genie was promising to provide a single source of information for every employee. But for too long it's been little more than a bulletin board, home to corporate bragging and not much else. While nine out of ten companies of more than 200 employees have an intranet, usage rates have always been low.

Finally, however, the intranet is doing what it was supposed to do all along. Sam Marshall, a digital workplace consultant and commentator, says: "Early intranets took the company print magazine and digitised it; like a lot of early websites took newspapers and just did the same thing digitally.

"Now they recognise it can be much more transactional and interactive. Today it's still about news, a reference point for all the nuggets of information. But it's also the place to go for employee services.

"Most employees will have their day-to-day tools, like computer-aided design if you're an engineer for example, but for anything else – claiming expenses, booking travel, booking meeting rooms – where do you go? Today's intranet is your starting point."

The modern intranet is best understood as a confederation of satellites, providing a gateway to apps such as Yammer and Slack as well as chatbots, which have been proven to boost adoption rate. Some commentators suggest Microsoft Teams, which now boasts 75 million users, is an alternative to the intranet, but that's not the case. As one provider says: "The intranet is part of what we're doing."

Sharepoint, also published by Microsoft, has provided a universal platform for intranet development, much like WordPress for websites. Companies such as Attollo, Jostle and Unily can now build out-of-the-box intranet packages at breakneck speed; the average creation time has fallen from 6.2 years in 2011 to 1.2 years in 2018.

Take-up remains patchy. Digital workplace consultancy Prescient says only 13 per cent of employees are using their intranet on a daily basis. However, there is a growing body of evidence to show the benefits a well-designed intranet can provide.

Just take US insurer Liberty Mutual, which says its award-winning "intelligent employee experience platform" has speeded up the information-seeking process by 70 per cent and delivered millions in savings. Or Sodexo, which claims its intranet-based sales incentives have delivered a 100 per
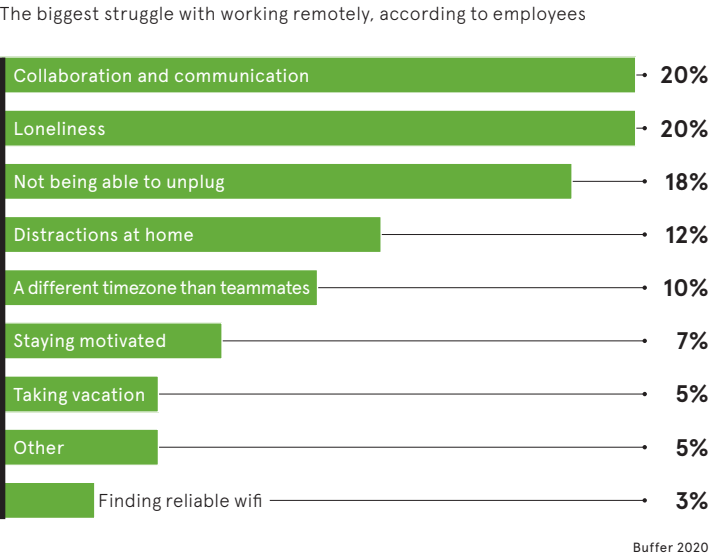
REMOTE WORKERS STRUGGLE MOST WITH STAYING CONNECTED

The biggest struggle with working remotely, according to employees

Collaboration and communication	20%
Loneliness	20%
Not being able to unplug	18%
Distractions at home	12%
A different timezone than teammates	10%
Staying motivated	7%
Taking vacation	5%
Other	5%
Finding reliable wifi	3%

Buffer 2020

cent increase in leads. Or IBM, which says it has achieved e-learning benefits worth $284 million.

Now the intranet's champions believe it can provide the perfect employee engagement platform for the post-COVID-19 world. They believe it can create a new, democratic ecosystem and help the distributed workforce avoid isolation, which is cited by remote workers as their single biggest challenge.

Matt Roszell, a consultant who has worked with Yahoo, Workday and others, says: "Companies are grappling with how to recreate the office and its culture in a virtual environment. They need a place for people to connect, communicate, vent and share. Just like they would normally do.

"The modern intranet helps to fill this gap. It can serve as a virtual water cooler, enabling employees to feel more connected by allowing them to take part in a company's culture and dialogue, and providing two-way, transparent communications features like social networking and news."

What's more, today's intranet is optimised for mobile. This breakthrough has only been made in the last five years, but it allows today's companies to reach their entire workforce in a way that suits them.

A shining example of this point is provided by Flight Centre Travel Group, which has rebuilt its intranet for a roster of 2,000 people. The new site, named PILOT, was built by Unily and was named among the world's 10 best intranets in the Nielsen Norman design awards last year.

According to internal communications lead Tessa Buckman, the site is intended to be accessed from all locations; although the majority of interaction takes place on desktop computers, a mobile-friendly design means area leaders can also connect while on the road. The new intranet is also linked to Facebook's Workplace platform, which sends notifications via push alerts.

Buckman says the key goals are simplicity and personalisation. "[Our colleagues'] expectations should match any other external website that they use", she tells us. Rather than hard-coding the new platform, the design team have created a lattice of widgets, which can be continuously moved around; this gives Buckman and her team the freedom to continuously redesign the pages, based on their analysis of colleagues' content consumption. Anything that colleagues can find on Google, such as baggage allowance information, is explicitly omitted.

Two years on from deployment, Buckman says "the results are night and day." The intranet has gone from an organisational pain-point, barely used by anybody, to a central pillar of Flight Centre's organisation. What's more, projects like Flight Centre's are lighting a path forward, laying the groundwork for an intranet which understands the way people want to consume information.

Of course, for every Flight Centre, there are countless companies yet to catch up.

Marshall says many employees still feel overwhelmed with communications telling them how wonderful everything is, and that intranet search functions are often vague and inefficient. However, the direction of travel is certainly promising.

Even after COVID-19, remote working will endure; according to research from Gartner, 74 per cent of chief financial officers plan to move some employees out of the office permanently. The corporate world needs a fresh nucleus, which allows people to build communities and exchange information in a modern, collegiate environment. The intranet's time may finally have come. ●

How technology can improve mental health working from home

Although the new remote-working age offers numerous benefits, it can also pose significant mental health risks. Buffer's latest *State of Remote Work* report, based on 3,500 interviewees, shows loneliness, burnout and demotivation are all everyday problems for asynchronous workers.

The intranet, and its constituent technologies, can play a key role in preserving employee wellbeing. Toby Ward, chair of the Digital Workplace & Intranet Global Forum, says: "For some who struggle with mental health, the intranet may in fact be a beacon of connection with other employees, and therefore a means of overcoming any feeling of isolation or struggle."

However, if technology is going to provide this wellbeing function, it must be accompanied by an enlightened policy at corporate level. Many companies are already making strides, but none is more progressive than online bank Monzo, which already has a high proportion of remote workers and has developed a holistic strategy to ensure connected wellbeing.

Video conferencing is a key part of this strategy – all calendar invites have video-conference links attached – as is a dedicated mental health channel on the Monzo Slack group, where people can discuss their feelings and receive peer support. The company says this is not a replacement for professional help, more a safe space where people can speak freely.

From the Slack group, Monzo staff can reach out to mental health first-aiders on Google Hangouts and access digital wellbeing aides such as Headspace and Thrive.

Live windows are available for staff to drop in for a chat, backed up by online quizzes, board games and bingo. There is even a lunchtime "dog hour", when team members bring their pets to a hangout for an added feel-good factor.

Monzo says the policies are already bearing fruit and it has been able to maintain business as usual during the current turbulence. In fact, in some ways it has brought a big company even closer together.
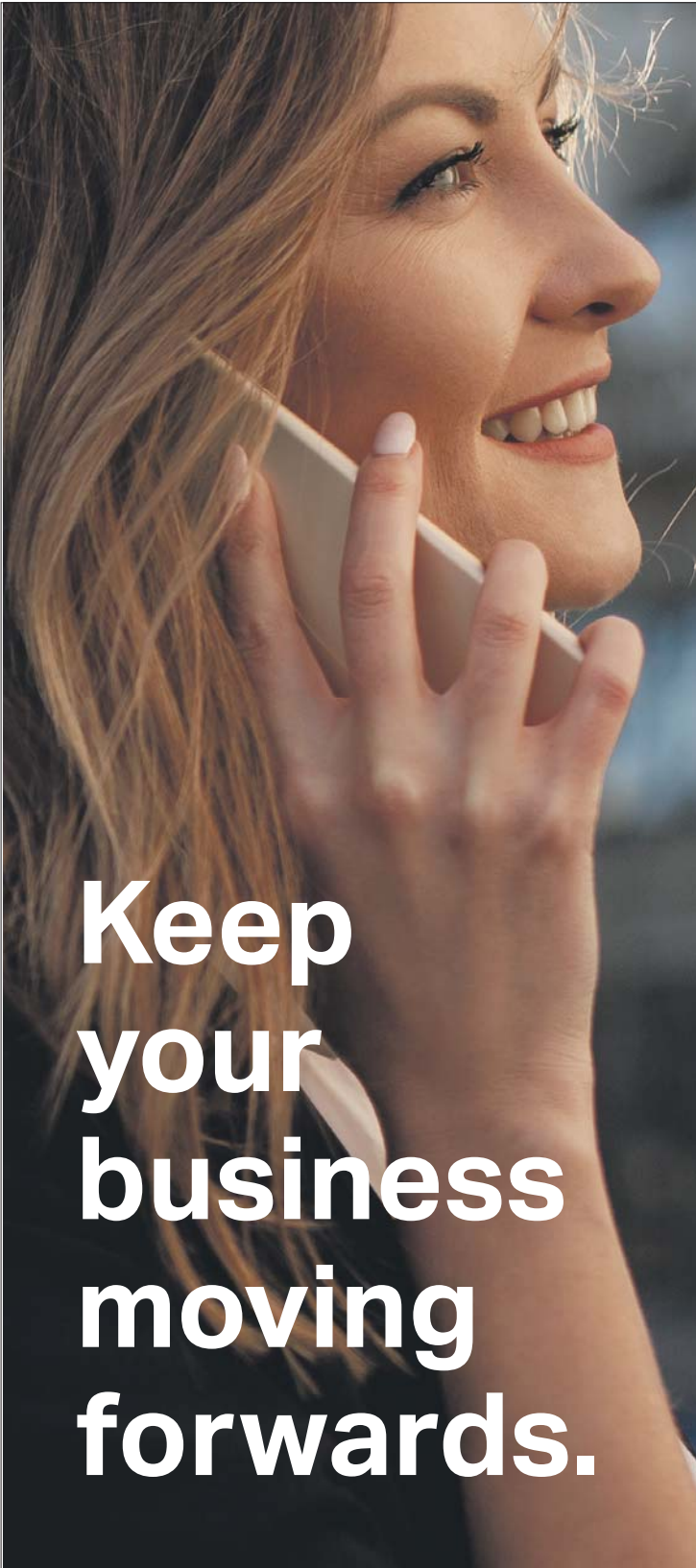
PRODUCTIVITY

Will COVID-19 solve the UK productivity puzzle?

Adversity often gives rise to innovation and a boost in productivity, and the coronavirus outbreak looks set to be no different, prompting a new attitude to digital technology

Nick Easen

The coronavirus-induced shutdown has caused a revolution in how we work. Overnight bricks-and-mortar stores shuttered, while agile businesses shifted online to survive. Countless collaborative tools, from Zoom to Microsoft Teams, meant remote workers have to show real output to justify their jobs, rather than just turn up to a physical desk. Could this pandemic increase productivity long term?

"Even traditional government services sectors, which have had strong reservations about tech adoption throughout their workforce, have figured out what digital transformation means and are now working from home. They're getting the same kind of work done, with minimal or no commute," explains Dr Sreevas Sahasranamam, research fellow at the Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship at the University of Strathclyde.

COVID-19 has dragged many kicking and screaming into the digital era, even the Queen is on Skype. "For everyone, technology is now being viewed as a source of real value, rather than simply as an enabler," says Andy Stanford-Clark, chief technology officer for IBM UK and Ireland. "The changes we are experiencing today are a preparation for the future."

Consumers, whatever age, are also being forced to utilise online services rather than face-to-face ones. Remote learning is used en masse, while home delivery apps and big tech are thriving. Here lie nascent answers to the UK productivity puzzle.

"I think we could expect a brief productivity revival as social distancing requires companies to adopt more digital technologies, automation, even robots," explains Dr Carl Benedikt Frey, Oxford Martin Citi fellow at the University of Oxford. A silver lining, perhaps, as warnings of the worst recession on record cloud the UK economy.

UK productivity stagnated since the 2008 financial crisis and has failed to recover. It's the single most important indicator of a nation's living standards. Brexit uncertainties late last year caused a further slump; the worst performance since the 1800s. A lack of productivity growth limits a country's ability to boost wages and become richer.

It's no wonder the Bank of England's chief economist Andy Haldane called it the "single most

WHAT IS DRIVING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION?

What CIOs and IT executives worldwide cite as the top factors driving their digital transformation efforts in 2020.

● Very important ● Somewhat important

	Very important	Somewhat important
Customer experience	69%	24%
Improving existing products/services	57%	39%
New products/services	53%	41%
Growing new markets	53%	33%
Technology	52%	43%
Increasing efficiency/cost savings	52%	42%
Workforce re-skilling	40%	48%
Partners	31%	52%

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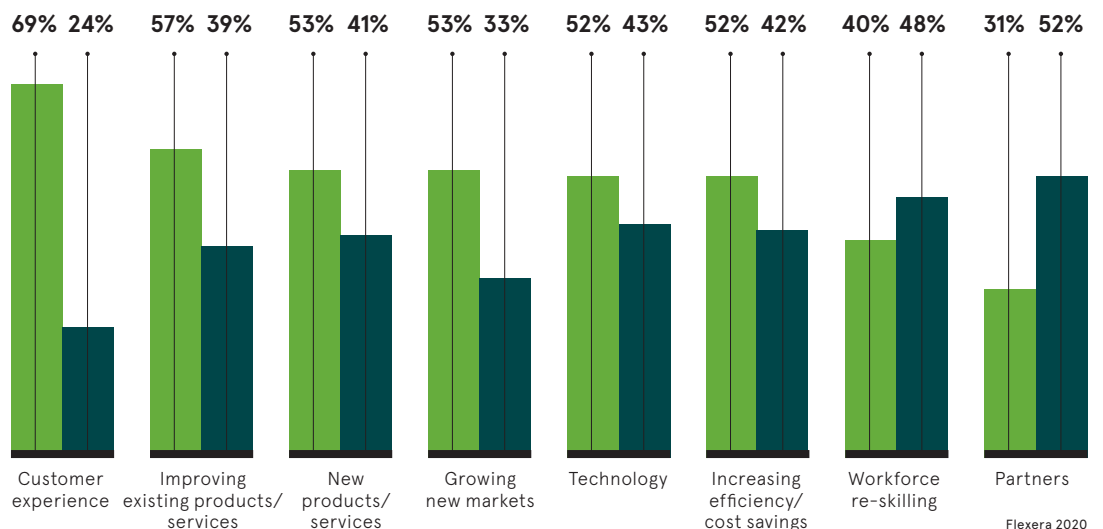
56%

of UK workers say productivity is stalling at their company because of outdated technology

Workfront 2020

"Lockdown has created legitimacy for certain ways of doing things now that we thought would never be productive, for example the assumption that our working culture is based on a need for people to have a physical space where they must be monitored physically to be productive. Coronavirus has forcefully shaken up this concept," says Sahasranamam at the University of Strathclyde.

"A big benefit could be savings in capital expenditure and real-estate costs. Businesses won't have to expand office spaces or have an office at all. Employees no longer have to work and live in high-priced, real-estate congested cities either and they will also save on commuting time."

The pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of overstretched, globally expansive, just-in-time supply chains or call centres in the Philippines or India. This could lead companies to onshore business, with a 21st-century digitalised focus and upskilled workforce. Corporates are already getting a taste of what consumers expect. Some will want to go further.

"In this locked-down environment, productivity is being boosted in various sectors through the use of automation to deliver savings and time back to businesses so staff can be liberated to refocus on delivering higher value," explains Peter Walker, chief technology officer, Europe, Middle East and Africa, at Blue Prism, a robotic process automation software developer.

"The key challenge for organisations will be to strategically adopt automation solutions to make the enterprise smarter, more agile or efficient rather than focusing on short-term tactical savings."

If British grandparents in their 70s and 80s aren't now afraid of digitalised services from banking to online grocery shopping, nor should unions, businesses or employees be. COVID-19 reset is occurring right before our eyes. It is also happening globally, even in China and elsewhere in Asia, where labour is a lot cheaper.

If the pandemic can be used as a reason to get more people to use more sustainable forms of transport, such as bicycles and walking, or tackling the climate crisis, it could also be used as a catalyst to tackle the UK's crisis in productivity.

"The main risk to any coming productivity revival is a Luddite backlash against automation, in which fears over its immediate social costs end up denying us its long-run benefits," Oxford University's Frey concludes.●

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pressing issue" for the UK economy prior to the pandemic. However, if you take the long view, this great reset has the potential to boost the output that a British worker could generate and increase productivity. There are parallels in history.

The Great Depression of the 1930s, when a quarter of the US workforce were out of work, was also a time of rapid automation. It saw the fastest productivity growth in American history. Yet President Roosevelt at the time tried to slow down the pace of automation with a bill that included 36 restrictions on machines.

"Just over half the jobs in the United States today are possible to perform at distance with digital technology," says Frey. "The coronavirus will accelerate digitalisation and automation. Businesses want to cut costs during downturns. This also spurred automation during the financial crisis and contributed to a jobless recovery. Today cash-strapped consumers also trade down to cheaper, less labour-intensive goods and services, which also increases the level of automation in the economy.

"Looking forward, ecommerce, telemedicine and online learning are likely to finally fulfil the productivity promise of the internet, which has been disappointing so far. Estimates also show that high-income earners are five times more likely to be able to work during the pandemic, while we find low-income jobs are at much higher risk of automation."

More low-skilled jobs could evaporate after the pandemic subsides. Retraining will be crucial. Yet companies will be in a perilous state after lockdown. With high levels of indebtedness, many won't have enough money to invest in skills, training, capital equipment or automation. However, those companies that do invest could be longer-term winners.

"New technology adoptions really require initial investment upfront and changes in business models. During this crisis, businesses are unlikely to be in the position to do this due to financial pressure and uncertainty," says Dr Jun Du, professor of economics at Aston Business School.

"As a nation, developing automation technologies to replace low skills and retraining workers into higher-skilled work would be a sensible strategy. This crisis will continue to push many people out of jobs. This is a golden opportunity to retrain them to prepare for that future."

With record low interest rates and strong government assistance, nimble businesses could look to save costs elsewhere and invest in upskilling their workforce, as well as digitalising further. This could be transformative for the UK and increase productivity.
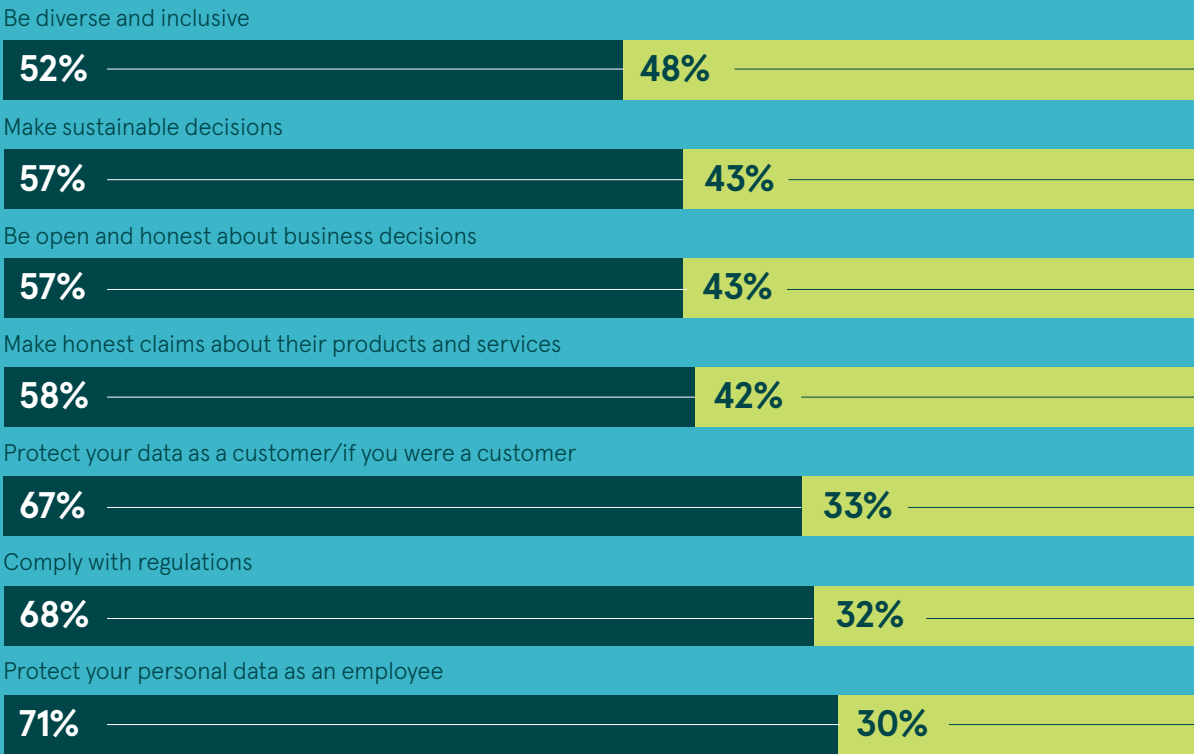

EMPOWER & ENGAGE

Employees are key to weathering the COVID storm, so it has never been more important to empower them – be that through deeper levels of trust during widespread remote working, greater autonomy, or by ensuring every worker has the tech and tools they need to succeed

TRUST IS THE FIRST STEP TO EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES

Whether business leaders trust their organisations to do the following

● Trust ● Don't trust

Be diverse and inclusive

| 52% | 48% |

Make sustainable decisions

| 57% | 43% |

Be open and honest about business decisions

| 57% | 43% |

Make honest claims about their products and services

| 58% | 42% |

Protect your data as a customer/if you were a customer

| 67% | 33% |

Comply with regulations

| 68% | 32% |

Protect your personal data as an employee

| 71% | 30% |

Dell EMC 2018

TRUST AND AUTONOMY FEED WORKPLACE HAPPINESS

Employees from around the world were asked what they felt were the top ten factors affecting their happiness at work, where one is the most important

01 Feeling valued as an individual

02 Doing a job that you enjoy

03 Work–life balance

04 Pay and benefits

05 Trust in the people you work with

06 Quality of leadership

07 Career development

08 Ability to speak your mind openly and honestly

09 Having control over your work (autonomy)

10 An interesting role

The Happiness Indicator 2018

HOW YOU BUILD TRUST IN THE WORKPLACE

CEOs' answers to the question "to what extent is your organisation using the following strategies to build trust between your workforce and senior leadership?

● To some extent ● To a large extent

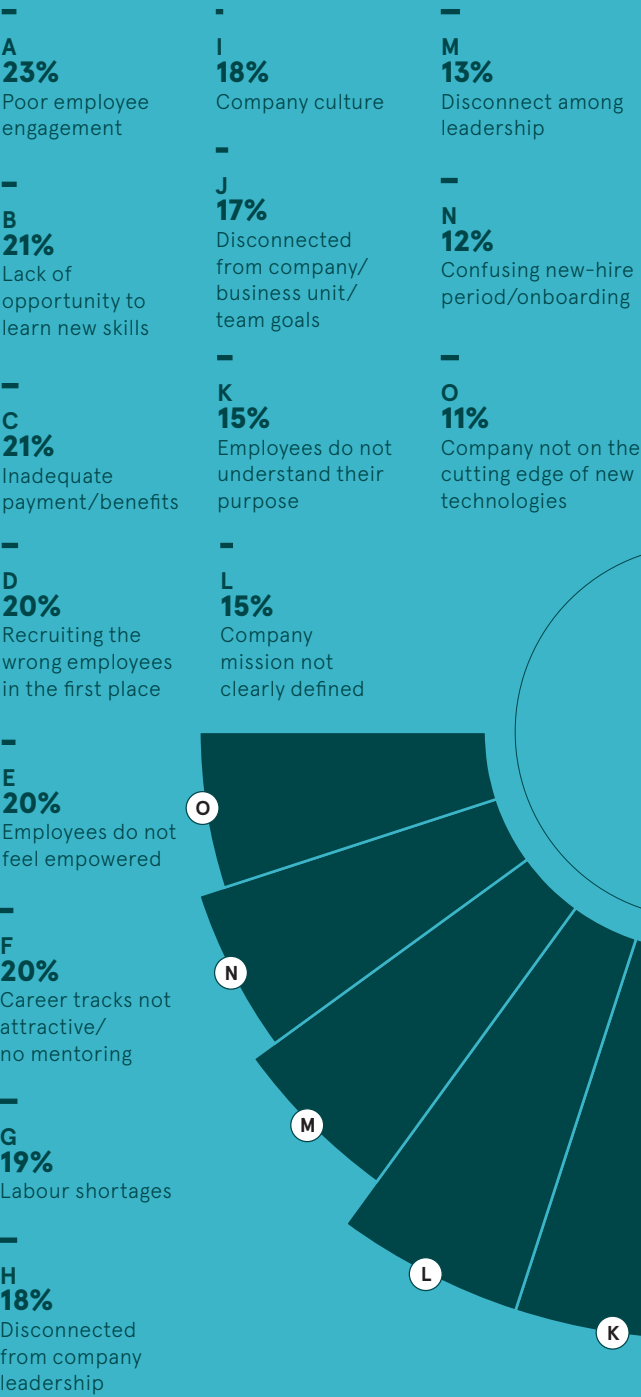| 40% | 21% | The impacts of automation and AI on your workforce |
39%	51%	Your compensation and benefits strategy
36%	53%	Your diversity and inclusion policies
33%	58%	Your people strategy
31%	61%	Employees' contribution to the overall business
21%	73%	Your organisation's values

PwC 2018

TOP CAUSES OF UNWANTED EMPLOYEE TURNOVER

US-based CFOs noted keeping wanted employees is a challenge, for some of the following reasons...

Forbes Insight 2018

A
23%
Poor employee engagement

B
21%
Lack of opportunity to learn new skills

C
21%
Inadequate payment/benefits

D
20%
Recruiting the wrong employees in the first place

E
20%
Employees do not feel empowered

F
20%
Career tracks not attractive/ no mentoring

G
19%
Labour shortages

H
18%
Disconnected from company leadership

I
18%
Company culture

J
17%
Disconnected from company/ business unit/ team goals

K
15%
Employees do not understand their purpose

L
15%
Company mission not clearly defined

M
13%
Disconnect among leadership

N
12%
Confusing new-hire period/onboarding

O
11%
Company not on the cutting edge of new technologies

87%

of CIOs believe digitally empowering employees can drive at least 5 per cent additional revenue growth over three years

DIGITALLY EMPOWERED

Results where firms make apps available and highly accessible

17%

less time spent on manual processes

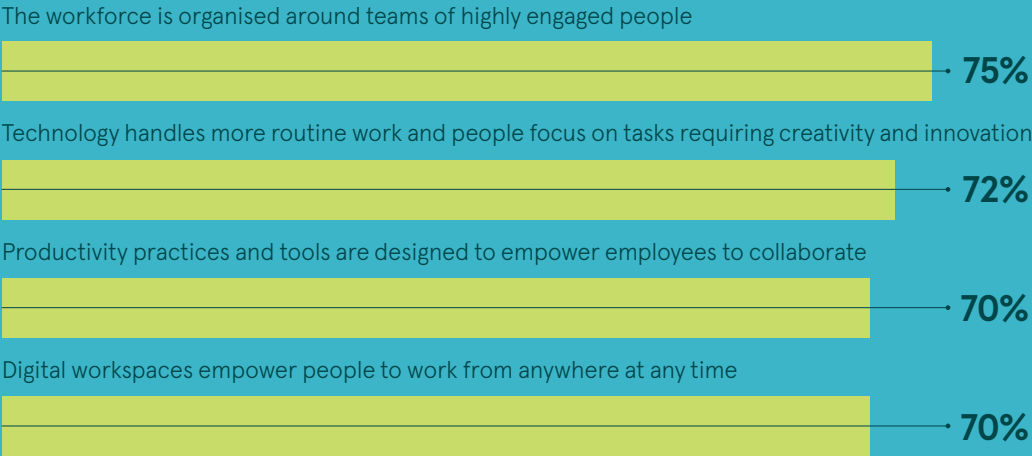## 16%

increase in team collaboration

16%

faster decision-making
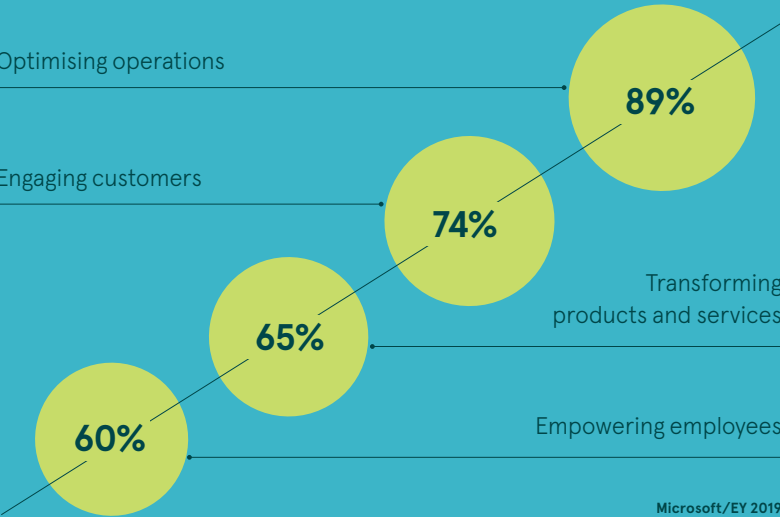
Microsoft/EY 2019

USING TECH TO EMPOWER EMPLOYEES

Percentage of business leaders who said the following attributes were very important to the creation of a modern workplace

The workforce is organised around teams of highly engaged people
75%

Technology handles more routine work and people focus on tasks requiring creativity and innovation
72%

Productivity practices and tools are designed to empower employees to collaborate
70%

Digital workspaces empower people to work from anywhere at any time
70%

Harvard Business Review and Microsoft 2018

AI CAN EMPOWER THE WORKFORCE

Top business benefits of artificial intelligence, according to global companies that are considered AI leaders

Optimising operations **89%**

Engaging customers **74%**

Transforming products and services **65%**

Empowering employees **60%**

Microsoft/EY 2019

Commercial feature

Work from anywhere: How to help your workforce collaborate without compromise

With Cisco's Webex platform, your people can work seamlessly anytime, anywhere and on any device, says **Jeff Boslem**, regional director for cloud and hosted collaboration at Cisco. But can the same be said of your current provider?

All around the world, people are discussing business continuity and how best to achieve it. Many of these conversations will explore not just how businesses should respond to the coronavirus crisis, but how they might operate once lockdown rules and social distancing restrictions are relaxed. So, what might the new normal look like?

As someone who works for a company where remote working is already the norm, I believe it will feature collaboration tools that benefit not just businesses and employees, but also their customers. It's not possible to do every job remotely, of course. But as many of us have recently discovered, there are often other ways of doing things, and they might be more efficient, effective and enjoyable than we may have thought.

During the pandemic, Cisco's employees have been working remotely via Webex, our single app and unified

platform for meeting, calling, messaging and contact centre. We've also helped thousands of customers to continue operating successfully. In fact, Webex usage has increased dramatically, with a record 500 million meeting participants generating 25 billion meeting minutes during April alone.

We're proud to have kept so many people connected during those early days of the crisis and to have played a part in ensuring enterprises, healthcare, education and governments were able to function properly.

But we realise many businesses simply reached for whatever tools were at hand at the time, just to keep the lights on. As we shift into the next phase of the pandemic, many of these businesses are starting to review the decisions they made at that time and this includes whether the collaboration tools they're using now are the best long-term solution.

Webex brings together all your collaboration needs – meeting, calling, messaging and contact centre – on a single platform. It also brings together all your collaboration places – your desk, meeting room, huddle spaces, home and even your car – by securely integrating hardware, software and the cloud. This creates collaboration experiences that are simple and intuitive everywhere you work.

As more detailed reviews of remote-working setups begin to take place, more businesses will realise it's not just meetings and working from home that need to be digitalised, it is

Jeff Boslem
Regional director for cloud and hosted collaboration, Cisco

your calling, messaging, contact centre and office too.

The current crisis should therefore accelerate business trends we've observed for several years. A Gartner review in March revealed that 74 per cent of CFOs surveyed will move more office workers to permanent remote work post-COVID 19. With even more of them realising that with the right tools they can improve their work-life balance, be more available or simply work more productively than in the office.

#1
trusted leader for collaboration

Cisco 2020
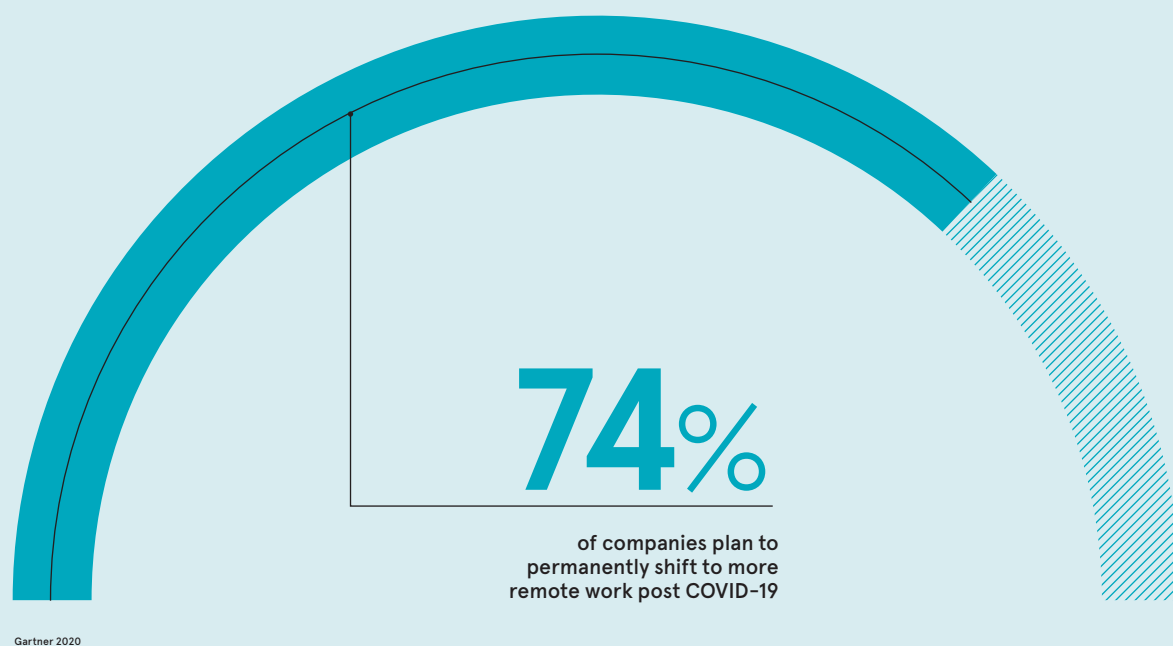
500m
meeting participants in April 2020

25bn
meeting minutes in April 2020

Webex. Purpose-built to scale for years to come

REMOTE WORKING IS HERE TO STAY
Proportion of workforce that CFOs expect to remain permanently remote post-coronavirus, who were not working remotely before

74%
of companies plan to permanently shift to more remote work post COVID-19

Gartner 2020

> **More businesses will realise it's not just meetings and working from home that need to be digitalised, it is your calling, messaging, contact centre and office too**

While working from home, all of us have strived to improve the home office environment. Some are lucky to have dedicated offices, others may need to set up on the dining-room table. But whatever scenario you find yourself in, Cisco is there to help. This could be by securely extending the work network to your home, connecting a noise isolation headset to block out the barking dog or adding a desk-based video device to enhance your meeting experience.

It's also worth noting the remote-working environment is not limited to your home; you can join from your smartphone from a café, on a train or from anywhere else and enjoy the same great experience. And Webex can do this for up to 100,000 people anywhere in the world.

Once the current restrictions end, some people will naturally want to return to the office, which will change the experience again. Some users will be together in the office, some remote, some physically in the meeting room, some digitally in the meeting room. So how do you

bring this diverse working environment together? Will your head office, satellite offices, home offices and mobile workers all get the same great experience? And how do you provide a seamless collaboration experience that blends physical and digital?

Cisco's Webex devices bring your physical meeting rooms into the digital meeting. They are designed for better team collaboration, enabling you to conference, brainstorm and concentrate with ease. To meet the need of every office, we also have a device for every room, space and desk.

But no matter how smart it is, a communication platform that only works inside your business isn't good enough. You need a solution that also allows you to connect with your customers and partners, those outside your organisation. So Webex not only delivers a great collaboration experience for those inside the organisation, but securely connects those outside it too.

In particular, it's crucial that our contact centre employees have access to

Commercial feature

tools that will allow them to work from any location. They're the first point of contact for customers who need help or other services. And if you can't provide your customer with rich engagements when they need it, that customer could easily be lost.

Finally, security is without doubt the core of an effective collaboration platform. If you're digitalising meetings where you're making important strategic decisions, or sharing the intellectual property of your organisation, you need to be certain your solution is secure. That's why Cisco is firmly committed to maintaining our leadership in cloud security and our single platform approach means we provide strong encryption, anti-malware and data-loss protection across all environments.

That's all well and good, you might be thinking, but I don't have the money to invest in new tools right now. We completely understand, which is why we've set up a business resiliency programme that allows our customers and partners to defer 95 per cent of payments until 2021. That means you can still acquire the solutions you need for the long term, but without any short-term financial repercussions.

There's a lot to consider when selecting a collaboration solution. But as the pandemic recedes and communication becomes more of a blend of the physical and the digital, those businesses that make the right choices now will not only be well prepared for any future crises, but for the future of work itself.

For more information please visit www.cisco.co.uk/workfromhome

Five questions your collaboration provider needs to answer

Now the initial crisis has passed, business leaders should review their collaboration tools and ensure they're fit for the future, says **Craig Decker**, managing director of cloud and hosted, worldwide sales at Cisco. But what questions should they be asking?

01 Is your solution secure?
When the first wave of lockdowns hit, every business focused on making quick decisions and that was absolutely the right choice. They took action to help their people work from home and used whatever tools necessary to get the job done. But given that lockdowns and social distancing may be around for some time, they now need to ask: "Am I ready for what comes next?"

Evaluating the security of your collaboration tools is the first step in this process. If you're using a consumer-grade solution, for instance, your intellectual property and other valuable data could be at risk.

That might not have been your chief concern while you were trying to keep the business up and running, which is completely understandable. But now it's time to address these security issues by deploying an enterprise-grade solution such as Webex, which offers multi-layer security covering everything from participant authentication to content sharing.

02 What devices and experiences does it offer?
As distributed workforces become the norm, people will increasingly rely on the collaboration device they have in their home office. Odd camera angles and outdated equipment are a barrier to engagement. But with a partner that covers the entire collaboration ecosystem, from hardware to software, you can ensure all employees enjoy the same great experience.

A device with a large, high-quality touchscreen and an excellent camera and speakers, for example, offers a far more engaging experience than an outdated laptop or webcam.

Webex desk devices provide just this kind of experience. Their unified communications features can replace a desk phone and users can interact with digital whiteboards and annotate shared content. Every device also includes cognitive features such as virtual backgrounds, Webex Assistant, facial recognition and noise suppression, providing a superior, frictionless meeting experience.

03 Is it based around a unified platform?
Since the crisis hit, many employees have been using their mobiles for calls and conferencing, including internationally. But that's a costly stopgap solution rather than a long-term one.

It's time to think ahead. How will you be handling calls and meetings six months from now? And does your collaboration platform set you up for success in a world where more of your people are working from home? These are the kind of questions you should be asking now.

A stitched-together system that needs to be replaced further down the line, causing more disruption to your business and employees, simply isn't good enough. But with a unified solution such as Webex, you'll have a platform that covers all the devices, security features and collaborative tools you need to thrive.

04 Are you supported by a strong partner network?
We recently launched a $2.5-billion business resiliency programme that will help our 60,000 trusted partners navigate the financial impact of the coronavirus. One of the reasons we've done this is because we know how important our partner network is to our business and our customers. Because without these experts, it's incredibly difficult to take an enterprise on the kind of transformational journey that leads to more efficient, reliable and secure collaboration.

Our partners are the people who will help you understand what your human resources, finance, sales and marketing teams need to perform at the highest level, no matter where they're working. And they'll ensure the solution you choose offers the kind of continual improvements and longevity you need to succeed in today's world.

05 Do you understand the need for digital transformation?
Before the crisis hit, workforces were all over the spectrum when it came to their use of video, meeting and collaboration tools, as well as their understanding of how to work effectively remotely. But now every business is on a transformational fast track.

As lockdowns ease, you'll need to decide whether you want to slow down or speed up this journey. And while you may not decide to have everyone continue to work remotely, you'll need to retain that ability, not only so you're prepared for future crises, but so you're prepared for a future where people can work seamlessly from anywhere.

What comes next will also be as much about the human element of digital transformation as the technological one. For instance, what kind of training will you offer your staff to ensure they're getting the most from their collaboration tools? And does your partner have the kind of longevity that allows you to build your training programmes around them? At Cisco, we're constantly thinking about these issues. Are you?

For more information please visit www.cisco.co.uk/workfromhome

> " It's time to think ahead. How will you be handling calls and meetings six months from now?

Unified communications crucial in coronavirus era

Unified communications is now becoming a lifeline for organisations

The coronavirus has been a monumental catalyst for change in the way we all work, as offices, warehouses and high streets remain empty across the country

How businesses communicate and operate has had to evolve at lightning speed, fuelled by remote working. What would have taken years to articulate has occurred in as many weeks, with unified communications now becoming a lifeline for organisations. This is set to continue.

"In the last two months we've seen a vast increase in deployment. Companies are upgrading their solutions to include full, unified communications. Bringing video and audio conferencing, desktop sharing, data access, with both fixed-line telephony and mobile, integrated together under one roof," explains Alan Mackie, chief marketing and product officer for Gamma, a leader in unified communications.

"Access to an organisation's resources remotely via the cloud isn't a nice to have anymore, it's vital if companies are to survive beyond the pandemic. Right now, business continuity is at the top of everyone's agenda. Communications with clients and collaboration between workers must carry on unhindered if companies are to thrive. Staying connected, but apart, is crucial."

Unified communications are the new essentials. With more than 49 per cent of the UK workforce now working from home, according to the Office for National Statistics, employees are demanding new ways of doing business. Zoom and Microsoft Teams, both US imports, are now household names.

Yet one British firm is underpinning this huge shift in how we work, providing tools and services that are keeping the economy running and communicating during unprecedented times. Gamma has more than six million business users in the UK alone.

"We're the unified communications company few have heard of, in part because we mainly sell through a larger network of resale partners. Yet behind the scenes we're providing support to NHS trusts and central government in Whitehall, major banks and supermarkets, including many high street retail brands, large enterprises and over 140,000 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). We've been doing so since 2006, but never before have we seen such a shift in consciousness," says Mackie.

"In the last few months, many companies have put in place a sticking plaster to answer their communication and collaboration needs. That's why video-conferencing tools have gained a lot of press. Some might provide a good service, but they're short-term fixes. Businesses will need to integrate all their communication and collaboration tools into the bigger business picture, which includes payments, sales, customer relationship management (CRM) and more."

Many are now looking for flexibility because the future is uncertain and the landscape for business operations requires an agile and nimble approach. The good news is how employees work in an office can now be easily replicated when everyone is dispersed remotely, with little constraint in terms of access to resources and communications, both internally and externally. Such is the power of unified communications as a service, or UCaaS.

"We're seeing not only a convergence of touchpoints – mobile, video, sales calls and CRM – but also data. This allows business leaders to direct their effort going forwards. UCaaS via the cloud is particularly useful when it comes to managing people and gauging productivity. That's why we've seen demand grow," says Mackie from Gamma, which is also active in the Netherlands and Spain, and is expanding elsewhere in Europe.

"More companies are now looking at staff efficiencies. As we start to emerge from the pandemic and face a harsh economic reality, the C-suite will want to know how effective teams are in supporting customers and the business, especially with more flexible working. Therefore, they'll need to see assets all in one place and analyse them with the latest reporting tools."

> ❝
> **Businesses will need to integrate all their communication and collaboration tools into the bigger business picture**

The main challenge, particularly for smaller businesses, will be getting new customers. Vast numbers of companies have had to move to a digital-first approach. With shuttered stores and no in-person sales visits, the shift to online has fast-forwarded many into what they thought was the future.

A recent survey by Gamma of 400 IT decision-makers found only 18 per cent of UK businesses are thriving in the digital age, while 79 per cent agree getting business communications – telephony, mobile and network services – right makes the difference between surviving and thriving.

"This was before lockdown. The move towards integrated digital communications and collaboration is now on steroids. The competition is going to be fierce going forward. Everyone will have to work harder to get new customers or keep their existing ones and do it remotely. It's not just your business that's changed the way it works, but everybody else's has as well. The latest tools will be crucial," says Mackie, adding that Gamma has one of the largest fixed-line telephony networks in the UK and was AIM Company Of The Year in 2018.

Omnichannel communications is also a greater issue now and not just for bigger businesses and those in retail. SMEs in business-to-business sectors are seeing a shift as well. Sales can come from Facebook Messenger or Whatsapp, a web post or chatbots. Only having a fixed telephone line as a point of contact is not enough for many organisations.

"Everyone wants to communicate how they want to communicate. The challenge is how do you gather all that information together and have a single source of truth for the customer, when it comes via multiple channels? How do you support businesses that have to communicate in many different ways? They need to be able to deal with every request and cannot afford to lose any leads, especially post-coronavirus. This is where UCaaS comes in," says Mackie.

"If businesses don't have unified communications in place, it's best to do an audit first. What are your needs? Where are you today? Where do you want to be in the future? Finding the right unified comms partner is crucial. Everyone needs to make the right investment in these challenging times. The future is already here."

49%
of the UK workforce is now working from home

79%
agree getting business communications – telephony, mobile and network services – right makes the difference between surviving and thriving

For more please go to Gamma.co.uk

Gamma

Assembly / Getty Images

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Essential services in troubled times

Amid uncertainty and fear, many of us need a calm and informed person to answer our questions - just one of the reasons customer service agents have become indispensable in recent weeks

Rich McEachran

The coronavirus crisis has changed our relationship with money. Some will be struggling with bills, while others may have found themselves making emotional purchases and more may have been a victim of fraud.

Amid the uncertainty, contact centres have been a first port of call and customer service agents have been providing a crucial helpline for our mental and economic wellbeing.

"This has been a stressful time and we all need the peace of mind to know if we pick up the phone or send

an email that someone is there to help," says Sandra Busby, managing director at the Welsh Contact Centre Forum, an industry support network.

"In the early stages of lockdown, call times to centres increased by 20 seconds on average as the public wanted to chat about the coronavirus."

Call volumes and caseloads might be increasing, but this doesn't mean it's been business as usual for customer service agents. While some have had to adjust to working from home, others are still going into the office.

Research by the University of Strathclyde found two thirds of more than 2,000 call centre staff across the UK had asked their bosses to work remotely during the crisis, yet only 4 per cent of requests have been granted. Furthermore, eight in ten respondents working from their office admitted to feeling pressured into coming into work, while only a third said their employer was successfully implementing social distancing.

"I believe most contact centres reacted impressively quickly, but there will be a number that will be asking questions about how their technology solutions failed to enable their agents to work from home," argues Simon Black, chief executive of conversation artificial intelligence (AI) platform Awaken.

"How many companies lost sales because they could not speak to their customers? How many customers moved and went to a competitor because of poor customer experience? From a contact centre perspective, I think there will be a complete review of the technology that's in place."

Busby says she's seen contact centres running at 30 to 50 per cent capacity, an agent at every other or third desk, with deep cleans being carried out after every shift.

While there will be agents who are deemed to be key workers by their employer, there will also be designated key workers in non-essential roles. In the University of Strathclyde survey, 57 per cent had been designated as essential and are still working. However, only 18 per cent considered their line of work, including handling mortgage and credit issues, and

payment protection insurance complaints, to be of an essential nature.

The reason why contact centres are still requiring non-essential agents to come into the office is because they haven't been agile and quick enough to mobilise staff to work remotely.

Black says that contact centres will have been presented with a number of logistical and technical challenges. These will have included having to ship hundreds of desktops to home addresses, agents not having the sufficient bandwidth to perform their role and not having the adequate systems in place to log on to the company's systems securely.

"It's clear some businesses weren't ready to move their entire workforce to the home. They'll learn lessons from the situation," says Busby, adding that where businesses didn't have the right equipment, agents have even been asked to install security systems on personal desktops and laptops to maintain data protection.

Both Black and Busby agree things will need to change. Once lockdown restrictions have been eased, it's unlikely we'll see a situation where all customer service agents are office based. In fact, more contact centres may find themselves having to adapt to the concept of remote working.

"Each contact centre needs to consider what the new normal looks like for their business, interpreting how the rules work in their particular office space and working out the best approach to balance staff safety versus cost," says Busby.

The question for agents, other than those considered key workers, is whether they will prefer working from home for the foreseeable future or yearn to be back in the office with their colleagues.

So, how might the role of customer service agents change post-lockdown? A scenario we might see is more contact centres realising the
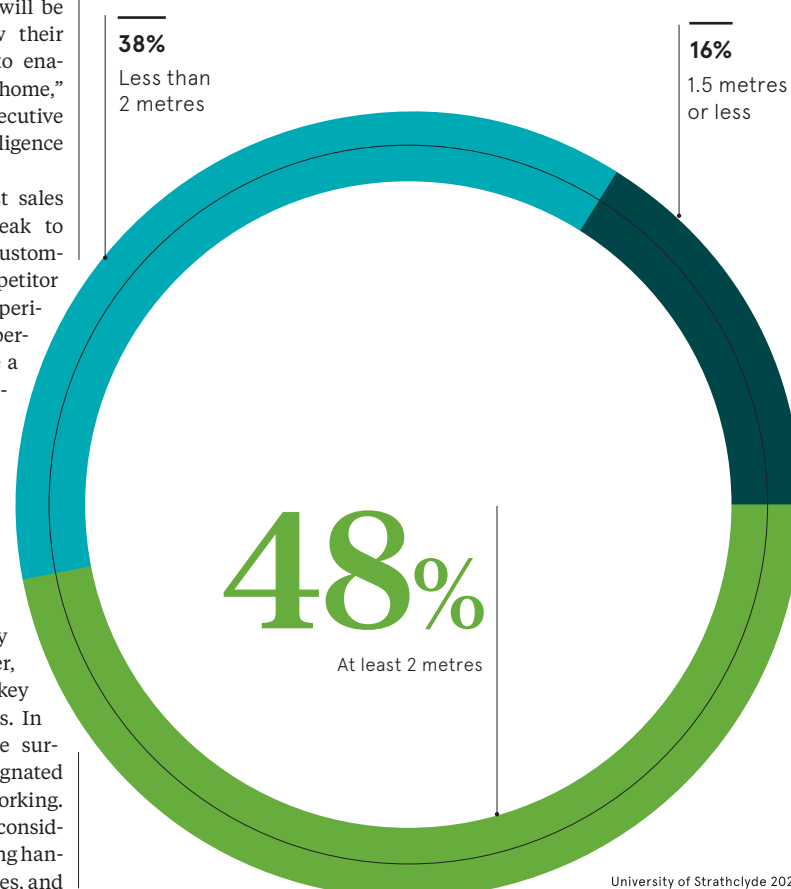
benefit of AI solutions, such as chatbots, to deal with routine and repetitive tasks.

This would free up time for agents, who can already be considered custodians of brand reputation, to deliver emotional value through their interactions with customers, according to Alex McCluckie, customer insights specialist, working primarily in the utility sector, and associate director at DJS Research.

With the COVID-19 crisis exacerbating daily struggles and leading to increased feelings of loneliness, vulnerable people are becoming more susceptible to scams. McCluckie believes contact centres may start to prioritise actively checking in on vulnerable customers. Agents could provide companionship and regularly communicate scam warning signs. This could potentially add significant brand differentiation.

"Customer service agents offer a key frontline of defence," he says. "Contact centres giving their agents licence to redefine more of their call-handling as empathy focused could be a small step towards adding emotional value and going beyond the provision of core services."●

> **This has been a stressful time and we all need the peace of mind to know that someone is there to help**

SEATING DISTANCE IN CALL CENTRES

38%
Less than 2 metres

16%
1.5 metres or less

48%
At least 2 metres

University of Strathclyde 2020

Finding new ways to connect

Business travel has been one of the biggest sector casualties of the coronavirus outbreak, but could use the setback as an opportunity to operate in new and better ways

Mark Frary

There has been little good news to celebrate during the coronavirus crisis, but the consequent rise of connected business is doing wonders for the planet. Millions of employees, who were previously commuting every day or travelling on business for their companies, are now working from home and carbon emissions are falling faster than ever.

In its *Global Energy Review 2020*, the International Energy Agency forecast emissions will fall by 8 per cent year on year because of the crisis, twice as much as the combined total of all previous reductions since the end of the Second World War.

One of the most obvious changes in working practices caused by the pandemic is the meteoric rise of video-conferencing services, such as Zoom, BlueJeans and Skype. On April 22, Zoom said it had more than 300 million users, compared to ten million before the crisis. As a result, almost every business has become a connected business.

Phil Perry, Zoom's head of UK and Ireland, says: "We are entering a new era for every element of our life and work. When employees are not able to get to the office and when teams cannot travel to see customers, we want to provide a platform for businesses to continue to be productive."

A 2019 analysis conducted by Zoom found that replacing face-to-face, in-person meetings with face-to-face Zoom video meetings,

among ten companies, saved an estimated 685,205 tonnes of CO_2, the equivalent of the annual emissions from almost 150,000 cars.

Many decision-makers in corporate businesses are now wondering whether connected business technologies such as Zoom can be used to replace business travel, helping reduce carbon emissions and saving companies money at the same time.

According to the Business Travel Association (BTA), which handles 90 per cent of the UK's managed business travel and whose members are travel management companies, such as American Express Global Business Travel, UK workers make 6.5 million business trips every year.

Clive Wratten, BTA chief executive, says: "What the pandemic has proven is video conferencing works, but that nothing beats human interaction." He notes that business travel contributes an estimated £220 billion to UK GDP every year.
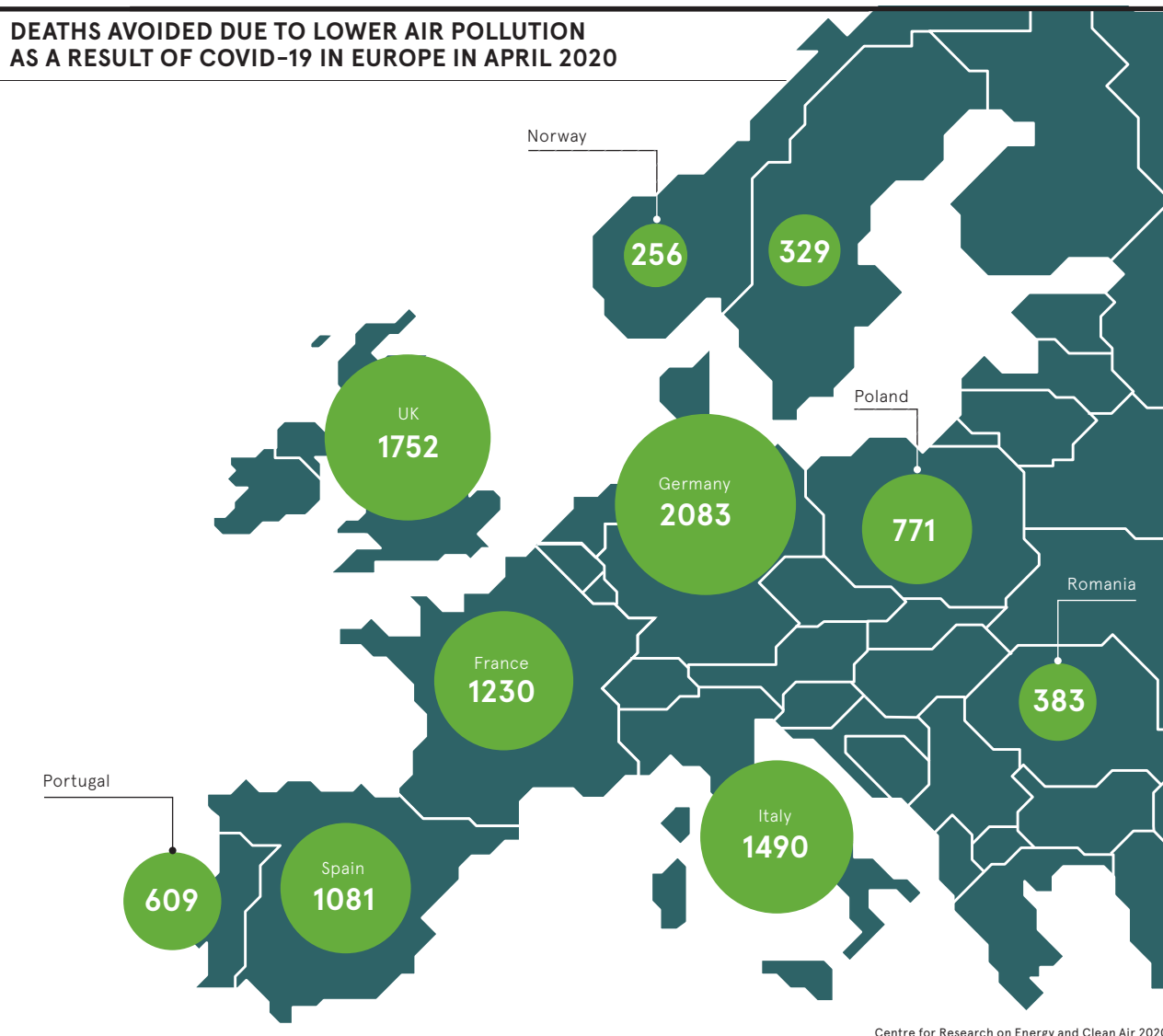
"The aviation industry has made huge strides on carbon emissions and it was really becoming a focus for corporates before the pandemic. On the other side, you can see the damage being done to economies by the lockdown. There has to be a sensible compromise and we are working in the industry to find more sustainable ways to travel."

Business travel managers and procurement professionals working for corporations that are members of the Institute of Travel Management (ITM) have been having weekly virtual huddles to discuss how business travel will resume in their companies after the pandemic is finally over.

At its most recent huddle, the ITM noted: "For those travel managers who were focusing on more measurable, tangible sustainability efforts pre-pandemic, they are taking advantage of a clean slate to initiate new sustainable policies."

Part of this might involve new connected business practices or technologies that guide employees to the smartest choice. The online booking tools that employees in many companies use to book travel may soon push you towards a video conference instead of a flight to New York. Meetings between employees of the same company in different parts of the world may well be the first example.

DEATHS AVOIDED DUE TO LOWER AIR POLLUTION AS A RESULT OF COVID-19 IN EUROPE IN APRIL 2020

Norway 256
329
UK 1752
Poland 771
Germany 2083
France 1230
Romania 383
Portugal 609
Spain 1081
Italy 1490

Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air 2020

The India Gate monument in Delhi, where the air quality index levels are usually 200 (anything over 25 is deemed unsafe by the WHO). Since the lockdown, levels have regularly fallen below 20

Bloomberg Creative Photos / Getty Images

COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IMPACT ON NITROGEN DIOXIDE EMISSIONS IN LONDON

London in March 2020, compared with March 2019

58 micrograms per cubic meter in March 2019

30 micrograms per cubic meter in March 2020
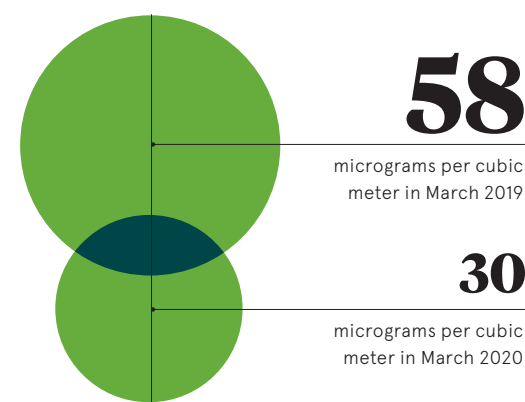
Defra 2020

The BTA's Wratten says: "Part of the travel management company's role moving forwards is to be a professional services company advising corporates on the best way to get return on investment from a requirement for a meeting. They will be saying 'I recommend a Zoom rather than getting on a train or a plane'."

Zoom's Perry believes the COVID-19 outbreak will be a catalyst for companies to rethink how many things are done. "Employees will now be used to remote working so things like training numerous employees in multiple locations coherently will be able take place successfully and easily online," he says.

The current crisis has also led to some companies thinking about a transition to becoming a connected

business and ditching traditional offices. In mid-May, for example, Twitter's chief executive Jack Dorsey told the company's employees they would be permitted to work from home permanently, even after lockdown ends.

Lewis Beck, senior director and head of workplace, Europe, Middle East and Africa, at commercial property company CBRE, says: "Over the last few weeks we have the seen the mass adoption of remote working as organisations have been forced to take their workforces virtual.

"The need for teams to spend time together will always be a crucial component of work. However, we will find that for some teams their dependency on the office will be reduced and some employees will want to continue working regularly from home.

"The new patterns around office occupation might mean some organisations need less space and, with the time people get back from less commuting combined with effective online collaboration practices, help to accelerate work cycles and make workers more productive."

Reduced carbon emissions are not the only good news to come out of the crisis as pollution has fallen too. Air quality research company IQAir says levels of particulate matter in ten major cities have fallen during the lockdown by up to 60 per cent from the previous year.

While not underplaying the human cost, the transition to connected business may outlast the pandemic and have potential long-term benefits for the planet.●

'Offices will still exist but, in the long term, employees simply won't want to work there'

T here has been no end to recent discussions of how we will work once this is all over. Many employees are enjoying the productivity benefits remote working brings, as they face significantly fewer distractions and have more spare time that isn't spent stuck on a train or behind the wheel of a car commuting.

Large shocks, such as the coronavirus pandemic, often pave the way for significant societal changes. After the shortage of young male labour following the First World War and Spanish Flu, more opportunities for women emerged, ultimately leading to the vote and a greater role in society. The Second World War brought forward the welfare state and the National Health Service.

My view is that the pandemic will launch the remote working revolution. We asked respondents to a recent UC EXPO survey: "When the COVID-19 pandemic is over what do you think will be the biggest change in the UC space?" Some 65 per cent selected: "A complete change of how offices operate" and asked "Will workplaces exist in their current form?"

The cultural barriers previously inhibiting this have been broken. Many companies are realising they can effectively work from home with the chief executive of Barclays saying big city offices may be a thing of the past.

But what will this look like? Will there be any offices at all? What about employee health and wellbeing? And where will all that money spent on expensive property go? Into technology?

If you can, yes you will work at home in the future. This is an obvious win for any business both in terms of cost and also for staff morale. Productivity levels will need to be monitored and you may see completely different management styles emerge.

Offices will still exist, but the old-fashioned past of having 7,000 people in one building will just not be possible in the short term to maintain social distancing and in the long term, employees simply won't want to work there. I predict the office will become a base where your team meets once every two weeks, holds strategy workshops and socialises together.

Remote working undoubtedly brings a sense of loneliness for some workers, particularly if they live on their own and are used to the buzz of the office. Expect employers to implement action plans to make the more isolated employees feel included as part of the team.

This concern is backed up by our UC EXPO survey results. When asked "What challenges do you think will become more prevalent if remote working lasts longer than currently expected?" 74 per cent selected the health and wellbeing of employees, 22 per cent more than other responses.

It would not be surprising to see some of this money funnelled into technology to support the new way of working, including remote working systems and home office setups. Many companies have implemented short-term plans to keep the lights on, often using free services provided by companies such as Zoom and Google.

But I do not predict a world where there will be a dramatic divergence with the money spent on property going into technology. Many businesses are under immense balance-sheet pressures right now and also tied into long-term commercial rental contracts.

To conclude, remote working is the next societal revolution. The office of the future will be no more than a base for meetings with some core functions operating there. More money will be invested in technology with a demand for enhanced user experience. Video calls will become commoditised, like emails, and mundane.

Perhaps virtual reality has a big part to play in the future in the home and remote-working environment. After all, I'm already a bit bored of the constant quizzes with friends on Zoom, aren't you? ●

Harry Chapman
Content director
UC EXPO

Assuring connectivity in an age of uncertainty

A secure, dependable and predictable network, wherever people are working, is vital as organisations in the connectivity ecosystem navigate a new world

I n February, UK-based telecoms and technology testing company Spirent Communications released its inaugural 5G outlook report which anticipated 2020 would be the biggest year yet for 5G. This was particularly the case for so-called standalone 5G networks that don't incorporate any elements of 4G and are best suited to meeting high-performance enterprise demands.

Just a few weeks after the report's release, the coronavirus outbreak was declared a global pandemic, national lockdowns were enforced and the business world all but ground to a halt. As a global market leader, Spirent took stock of the situation, anticipating a slowdown, but found some signs of the opposite scenario unfolding.

"In many cases, our customers aren't slowing down at all and some 5G deployment timetables are actually accelerating," says James Cater, vice president, Europe, Middle East and Africa, at Spirent Communications, whose testing, assurance and security solutions for next-generation devices and networks assure new services and safe connectivity.

"We attribute this to the high degree of uncertainty and market players positioning to accomplish as much as they can at this moment in case they are thwarted by another wave of the virus. But plans are being expedited to also meet emerging needs."

There is no doubt the connectivity ecosystem is facing huge challenges during the pandemic. Remote working orders have pushed demand for high-scale connectivity away from purpose-built corporate networks deployed in business districts and towards home networks in suburbs and rural areas where infrastructure is largely just consumer grade.

Meanwhile, as security endpoints grow with more workers accessing networks from home, attack surfaces are expanding, creating vulnerabilities.

Spirent is helping organisations worldwide keep up with spikes in connectivity demands and the evolving threat landscape. The company's security solutions proactively test networks for vulnerabilities, helping enterprise network administrators quickly locate and address network weaknesses.

It is also helping to assure the connectivity to these networks via its work with telecom operators, proactively monitoring for problem issues that need to be addressed before they impact customers. As mobile operators continue to expand subscriber bases that overwhelmingly comprise consumers to include more enterprises, high levels of reliability are an expectation, not a luxury.

Automation is central to Spirent's offerings, drastically reducing the number of manual hours required to test or launch new services, and freeing up the time of support staff to focus on higher-value tasks.

By automating testing and development, Spirent offers continuous

assurance to allow companies to be more comfortable with the level of service they are providing. This is wrapped in a layer of continuous security, which in a rapidly changing threat landscape is far more effective than deploying individual security products. In addition, Spirent addresses remote collaboration needs.

"Our lab and test-as-a-service offerings are shifting critical onsite support responsibilities within masses of physical locations and centralising them in the cloud," says Cater. "It really simplifies the relationship with our customers. Especially when social distancing and remote collaboration are so vital, the ability to test and provision new services remotely is an absolute game-changer.

"As our customers expedite rollout plans, they rely on Spirent to help them move forward quickly but safely. Firstly, we enable them to develop and get their products to market faster, but with the confidence that it is safe to move quickly. Secondly, we help them produce a higher-level product so they can take market share and drive profits for their board and stakeholders.

"And finally, our insights ensure they deliver their products and services to their customers as effectively as possible. Those insights come from decades of understanding how device manufacturers, equipment makers and operators around the world design and build products."

> In many cases, our customers aren't slowing down at all and some 5G deployment timetables are actually accelerating

For more information please visit
www.spirent.com

CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT

Staying connected in a crisis

Changed circumstances beget creative solutions and, with traditional avenues of customer service disturbed, businesses are finding new ways to stay connected with their customers

MaryLou Costa

With stores closed and traditional advertising channels unattractive, customer management strategies have taken a beating from the coronavirus pandemic.

Sales, communications and marketing teams worldwide have had to scramble to innovate in the face of the crisis.

But innovate they have and consumers are now spoilt for choice with creative content to inspire them, during and post-lockdown, and to stay connected with their favourite brands. This is how four sectors are fighting the virus:

Beauty

"Stay close to your customer and you won't go wrong," beauty icon Estée Lauder once said. And Lesley Crowther, vice president of consumer engagement for Estée Lauder Companies UK and Ireland, concurs saying being customer centric is now more important than ever.

With stores and salons closed, the group has developed new customer management strategies. It has increasingly turned to platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest, to leverage tools such as virtual try-ons, tutorials and video chat consultations for brands such as MAC, Aveda, Clinique, Jo Malone and Bobbi Brown.

MAC's new virtual try-on augmented reality filter has doubled the brand's online consumer engagement. Meanwhile, live content on Aveda's channels, featuring professional artists, has seen a 202 per cent increase in views week on week since lockdown.

"We are using sophisticated social media listening tools, machine-learning and other research techniques to better understand consumers' needs and adapt our content," says Crowther.

For L'Oréal, the crisis has led to a digital transformation acceleration, prompting a number of customer management innovations.

According to Lex Bradshaw-Zanger, chief marketing officer at L'Oréal UK and Ireland, the company has developed more than 20 new services, such as online skin diagnosis and personalised product recommendations, rolled out by 20 brands in 71 countries.

Ecommerce is a significant growth driver, increasing by 52.6 per cent and now representing nearly 20 per cent of global sales.

"New technologies are rewriting the codes of the beauty experience," says Bradshaw-Zanger. "We have always taken a multi-channel approach, but we are upweighting our investment in online services to build lasting relationships with our consumers."

Supporting salon partners has also been instrumental, by freezing payments, offering e-learning resources and releasing a *Back to Business* guide to support L'Oréal's 25,000-strong network.

"Hairdressing is the largest contributor to the British beauty economy, valued at around £6 billion, and salons play an integral part in communities," adds Bradshaw-Zanger.

Their ability to innovate has both businesses confident of a post-COVID bounceback. As Estée Lauder's Crowther says: "When retail stores reopen, we will be in a stronger position to further unlock the potential of omnichannel, as we have never felt so connected to our consumer base."

Travel

Maintaining goodwill with its most valued guests, Bonvoy programme members, has been a central customer management strategy for Marriott International.

The hotel chain moved swiftly to implement measures such as extending elite status, pausing points expiration and allowing its US credit card holders to earn grocery store points. It has also boosted customer-centric digital content with monthly emails featuring travel-inspired films, podcasts and virtual tours, as well as Zoom cooking classes with hotel chefs.

The group has pivoted its loyalty marketing programme from longhaul "dream" trips to road trips, escapes to the countryside and by the sea.

"We need to ensure we can deliver the kinds of experiences our members are looking for as they start to travel again. As time passes, people will venture further afield," says Neal Jones, Europe, Middle East and Africa chief sales and marketing officer for Marriott International.

A commitment to cleanliness and social distancing will be essential for the travel industry to recover from what Jones describes as "one of the biggest challenges of our lifetime", but he is optimistic.

"The pandemic has not only shifted travellers' expectations, it has fundamentally changed human attitudes and behaviours at a speed we've never seen," he says. "We're confident that as communities, businesses and economies start to recover, our members will want to travel again."

Automotive

German carmaker BMW adapted its global content strategy overnight, successfully setting up cross-departmental task forces that may well become permanent.

"This period has highlighted how frequent virtual communication has improved our understanding of the daily challenges in each market," says Jens Thiemer, senior vice president, customer and brand, at BMW.

To give its customer management strategy a more emotional connection, new programmes such as its *BMW Today* YouTube show and *Changing Lanes* podcast have been launched amid a raft of social media initiatives.

"The key change was communicating with an appropriate tone and message, while increasing output across our channels," says Thiemer.
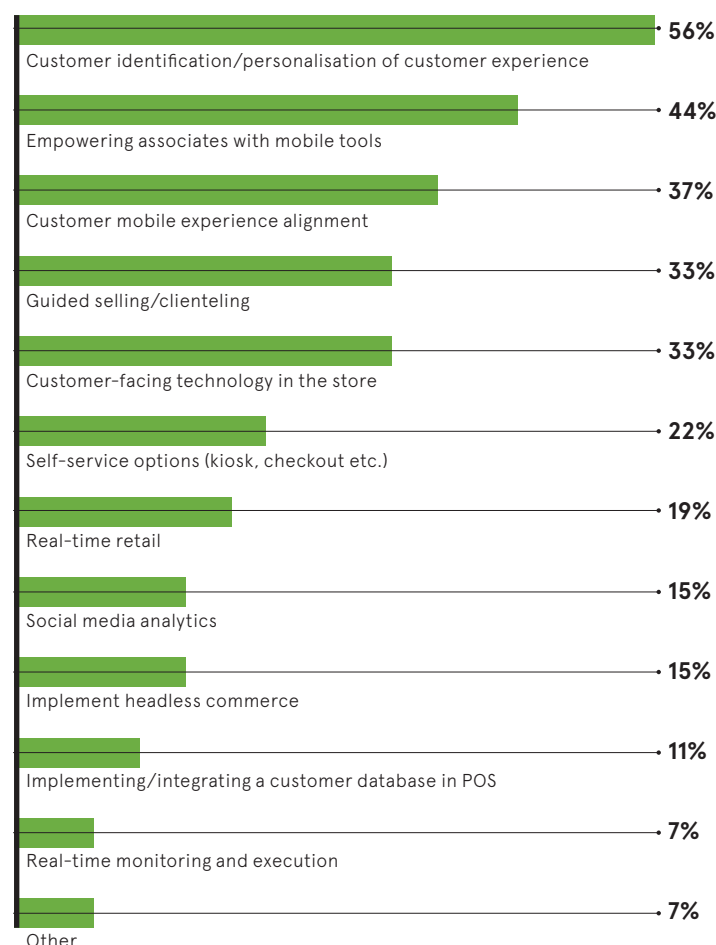
Perhaps BMW's biggest marketing and communications innovation is establishing itself as a major player in e-sports, tapping into its surging popularity in the absence of traditional sporting events. It has partnered with five of the world's top organisations to run pre-tournament challenges on social media and streaming platforms.

The initiative is so far yielding good results, says Thiemer, and is enabling BMW to follow a new direction in sport sponsorship, while exploring new approaches to creative content.

ARE RETAILERS' PRE-COVID PLANS STILL RELEVANT?

Consumer engagement initiatives planned for 2020 by North American retailers

Initiative	Percentage
Customer identification/personalisation of customer experience	56%
Empowering associates with mobile tools	44%
Customer mobile experience alignment	37%
Guided selling/clienteling	33%
Customer-facing technology in the store	33%
Self-service options (kiosk, checkout etc.)	22%
Real-time retail	19%
Social media analytics	15%
Implement headless commerce	15%
Implementing/integrating a customer database in POS	11%
Real-time monitoring and execution	7%
Other	7%

Retail Consulting Partners 2020

Hospitality

Having a firm handle on renewed brand purpose has inspired restaurant chain Leon to maintain customer connections against the threat of closed doors.

It converted stores into mini-supermarkets, offering both click and collect and delivery, and launched Feed Britain, providing restaurant-quality ready meals and seasonal produce via home delivery. This has been accompanied by *Leon at Home* cooking content on social media.

"We believe we have a key role to play in helping as many people as possible access food," says Leon Restaurants' sustainability and values director Kirsty Saddler.

"Our Feed Britain online platform helps people access restaurant-quality food and helps save the food industry. The produce available was previously destined for restaurants, hotels and first-class airport lounges. It provides a route to market for suppliers and helps reduce concern over empty supermarket shelves and reduced availability of online delivery."

All profits from Feed Britain during COVID-19 are being donated to Feed NHS, which Leon launched in March to raise £1 million to supply half-price meals to NHS staff, with the support of other restaurants including Dishoom, Wasabi and Farmer J.

Keeping its sense of purpose front and centre has helped Leon put competitive rivalries aside. "We realised this wasn't about us, but about delivering as many meals as possible to NHS workers," says Saddler. ●

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