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## Stay the Course: Virtual Workplace Remains the Path Forward

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For the evolving virtual workplace, 2021 was a year of starts and stops for many organizations, both large and small. Amid the worldwide health crisis, vaccine rollouts and COVID-19 variants, businesses are debating whether to return their entire workforces—or even just portions—to traditional office environments. The decision can be a controversial one, but it doesn't have to be.



Daily media headlines on the crisis highlight the impact it is having on the way forward for global organizations in particular. Should employees return to the office full time? Is it time to adopt a virtual-first or hybrid approach to the workweek? Should these changes be temporary or permanent?

Looking ahead, we believe the path forward is virtual. Across industries, we have the tools, IT infrastructure, security controls, analytics and—perhaps most importantly—the momentum to transform the workplace. Better still, we have 18 months of solid evidence that virtual workplaces enable employees in most jobs to perform well and deliver consistent business results, no matter where they are working.

## Virtual can be personal

The ability to foster collaboration and enhance productivity are top of mind for business leaders to keep their teams connected and engaged from anywhere. IT services companies have moved rapidly over the past two years to help organizations adapt to meet both their business and employee needs with speed and agility. By transitioning to a virtual-first model, companies can

empower employees to continue to have a personalized experience, driving collaboration and productivity, allowing them to work seamlessly and securely on any device, anytime and anywhere. Whether from a laptop docked with three monitors in a home office or from a tablet or other mobile device while on the move, a connected virtual workforce can still be an engaged workforce with the right processes, policies, and technology in place.

In the simplest terms, businesses can adopt a virtual-first approach with traditional communications services, workplace networks, and voice, video and audioconferencing solutions. Businesses need to drive adoption, streamlining and automating processes and policies to remove the friction that exists today. When issues arise, support resources must be able to help employees through a variety of channels—and on a 24x7 basis for global companies. Automation and self-service will help eliminate the IT burden of having to manage what used to be hundreds of offices globally to now potentially 100,000+ virtual home offices. On top of that, modern device management solutions can help employees easily switch between devices and virtual desktops. Seamless access to content, information, data, and applications empowers employees to work smarter—even more so than the traditional office environment.

The tools to work virtually have existed for a long time, but the mindset to create a more collaborative and immersive workplace experience is much more recent. The movement to virtual has forced us to use this technology and truly embrace new ways of working.

## Experience the data

We know that despite all the advancements, the move to a virtual-first model is still a tough sell on many fronts, even with some employees. This is why data is a key factor in helping organizations make these decisions. The employee experience is playing a larger role across most organizations and is a key factor for attracting and retaining talent. Traditionally, IT organizations have been able to deliver operational efficiencies and provide the data to prove it. Improving the employee experience, however, isn't always the same story. [Research from Qualtrics](#) recently found that employees' technology experience is playing a larger role in the overall employee experience, particularly as the digital workplace evolves. In fact, over 90 percent of CIOs believe the IT experience is important when it comes to attracting and retaining talent and building corporate culture.

In today's environment, visibility into employee sentiment is as important as the data that systems provide. We now have technology that can tell us what employees are thinking and feeling, what is working for them, what improvements they are seeking and so much more. Operational data, or O data, has existed for quite some time, but some of it has become rather antiquated. Ticketing systems, tools to determine how many people are using certain technologies or how machines are functioning, and other devices can tell us the basics on a screen.

Managers can sit in front of dashboards for endless hours to diagnose their operations, but that tells only part of the story. What we have needed—and now have access to—is experience data, or what we call X data. As organizations transform and rely on artificial intelligence and cloud-based collaboration solutions, we need to be thinking about the impact on the employee experience. This X data allows organizations to check the employee pulse—how their employees feel about their technology experience at work—and glean valuable, real-time insights that enable greater engagement, collaboration, and productivity.

For example, [Qualtrics](#) found a 15-point increase in employee engagement among companies that had transformed the workplace experience. That same research showed that companies with a modern workplace were 121 percent more likely to have employees state that they felt engaged with their employer.

New data sources are consistently becoming available to help in the decision-making process, and businesses are now empowered to leverage millions of data insights to drive greater engagement, collaboration, and productivity—and ultimately continuous improvements to the experience. The data can be drilled down in many ways, including geographically, to help leaders make better decisions that can be transformational, even for large multinational organizations. The power of X data benefits business outcomes and improves leaders' understanding of what is enjoyable for their people, helping leaders create successful, balanced, and productive teams, improve culture and employee engagement, and promote the well-being and satisfaction of their employees.

Business leaders can apply the same solutions to their customer base and analyze both X and O data to make strategic business decisions. This data can support business growth under any workplace model as well as turn the tide in the growing war for employee talent.

## But is it secure?

An organization can create a virtual workplace that achieves all its business goals, but without proper security, it's practically worthless. To effectively mitigate risk, enterprise IT leaders must evolve at the same pace as the rest of the business, applying the latest security techniques, real-time threat intelligence and response, artificial intelligence tools, and automation to move from reactive to proactive security operations. Security organizations often see the risks of new technologies such as the virtual workplace, and instead of acting as enablers of change, they react by saying no. But security and usability don't have to be opposing goals.

It's a continual balancing act. Even with security budgets growing in response to heightened threat levels, the security posture gap is widening for many. Identifying and managing risks to protect critical business processes and information assets while optimizing and prioritizing investments can be a challenge when moving to a virtual-first environment. It can be easy from the perspective of security to simply assume that having employees under the company roof makes them less prone to risk. However, this thinking is outdated.

As enterprises change their business models, security should be top of mind to keep the business safe while supporting the overall growth plan. Gone are the days when in-house IT departments could focus solely on securing company infrastructure. Fortunately, virtual workplace infrastructure can automate processes to prioritize threats, incidents, and potential vulnerabilities, so enterprises can identify and remediate security gaps quickly via automated workflows. Machine learning and AI-enabled tools can more readily identify attacks and emerging threats, removing a major obstacle to the modern virtual workplace.

As security perimeters become more fluid and data is accessed by numerous means and devices in modern workplace scenarios, it's no longer sufficient to rely on hard corporate network perimeters, protected VPNs, and trusted corporate devices. Reliable identity and access controls are crucial in this extended environment. Zero-trust approaches can help by focusing on protecting the data itself, whether it resides in a data center, in the public cloud or on an employee's laptop.

The same principles that apply to business transformation also apply to transforming security. Organizations must consider all relevant threat data that is available from systems, society, geopolitics, people, and processes. This wealth of data can help assess what is likely to happen, justify decisions and prioritize actions. IT security and the team responsible for it can no longer be considered a silo of the business; they must be linked to all business units. Basic security hygiene such as patching systems and managing identities requires a clear view of the enterprise and higher levels of coordination. This means security, IT and operations teams must adopt an end-to-end, integrated approach to protect and enable the business during large-scale digital change.

## The path forward

Business leaders need to take note: Workers want flexibility, and a virtual workplace is a major factor for many of them. In the Qualtrics research, 44 percent of respondents indicated they were likely to search for a new job in the coming year. Organizations that have the capacity to transform their workplace but steadfastly stick to the old way of working run the risk of being left behind.

The virtual workplace is quickly becoming one of the foundational principles for attracting and retaining talent, much like benefits packages. Employees want to work for companies that give them the experience and tools to do their best work, and they want the flexibility to do that work from anywhere. On top of that, we now can use X data to show the business the impact that the workplace has on culture, engagement, retention, and performance.

Leaders with a keen eye on a modern, virtual workplace should focus less on the tools themselves and more on the employee experience. Why? It's simple. The technology is already there. It is how your company uses this technology, manages processes and policies, and applies

operational and experience data that will determine the success of the modern workplace. Knowing this, your decision on the way forward toward this workplace will be much easier.

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