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The Future of Workplace Communications

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Over several days in the spring of 2020, workers got up from their desks, carried their laptops to their cars, and went home in anticipation of returning once the pandemic fizzled. Two years later, many have never gone back.

The mass exodus of America's offices represents a major acceleration of an existing trend: as new generations enter the workforce, they expect companies to facilitate hybrid preferences. Companies have had to make swift progress in adjusting our working norms in ways that would have been hard to imagine prior to 2020. Something I have found myself saying more often is that work is something you do, it's not a place, and this statement is true now more than ever.



The [latest global survey from Statista](#) finds that 73 percent of employees want remote work options to remain after the pandemic, and in 2021, [22 percent of companies reduced their office space](#) to fit with the new norm of remote work. Our collective new office structure requires flexibility, scalability, and agility, with the need to keep an increasingly distributed workforce engaged and productive.

As water cooler meetings and break room banter have transformed into instant messages and video calls, everyone is eyeing the future of workplace communications and discussing the trends that will shape how we connect now and in the future. To me, it's a question of collaboration. How will teams collaborate, and what technologies will evolve to accommodate remote work options to the extent required to keep all employees engaged, productive and on the same page? Here are four trends I predict will rapidly develop in the coming year to shape the future of workplace communications as we know it, from unified communications to remote team security.

Next-level features in video platforms

Video platforms will continue to improve their functionality and collaboration features. Even when working remotely, employees crave the face-to-face interaction that video brings. In the second quarter of 2020 as the effects of the pandemic became clear, Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet had a whopping [479 million installations](#), up from 147 million the previous quarter. By 2024, in-person meetings will drop from 60 percent to 25 percent, according to [Gartner](#). With the prevalence of hybrid work, it's already a near certainty that most meetings have at least one work-from-home user logging on, and [87 percent of employees report feeling more connected to their team](#) when using video. Why? With [65 percent of communication being nonverbal](#), the ability to see team members and gauge their body language clues are key. So, in a conference room of 20 people, how do you engage the employees joining remotely?

Cameras and microphones will continue to get smarter to facilitate this task, and many video platforms already have features that automatically switch focus to the current speaker. Microphones are tending that way, too. While noise-cancelling headphones are already common, smarter microphones will become more prevalent. The distraction from your coworker shuffling papers on their desk or your boss's dog barking will soon be nominal thanks to the prominence of new noise cancellation rollouts from most collaboration tool companies. These new technologies, along with the focus on enhanced collaboration within the platforms themselves—think file sharing, breakout rooms, the ability to tag coworkers in chats, and app integrations—are the newest in a long line of video platform technologies focused on enhancing collaboration that we'll continue to see as platforms compete for top billing.

Unified communications to streamline operations

The number of platforms being adopted to accommodate collaboration among dispersed teams is at an all-time high, and so are the number of devices workers now use to complete work. By 2025, an estimated [18.22 billion mobile devices](#) will be in use. Workwise, as far back as 2012, [75 percent of workers](#) reported using more than one device for their job and 54 percent reported using three devices or more. Considering the prevalence of using personal cellphones even so far as to join a meeting from the school's pick-up lane or local park, I'd bet a 2022 survey would reveal closer to a 100 percent response of multiple-device usage for work.

Through those devices, we have so much data hitting us in so many ways—emails, instant messages, meeting invitations, files saved on multiple platforms, voicemails, texts—that it's natural to ask, how can these communications be streamlined? That's where unified communications (UC) assists, and it will be a term we'll continue to hear more frequently in 2022.

Rather than adopting four different platforms for messaging, video calls, email and file sharing, companies look to UC to streamline the process through features like workflow automation, standardized communications APIs and interoperability. Unified communications as a service (UCaaS) adoption has exploded, with the [latest IDC report](#) showing 29.2 percent market growth between 2019 and 2020 and revenue growth of 24.9 percent, putting the value of the UCaaS market at a whopping \$47.2 billion at the end of 2020.

When companies are looking for a UC, it's important to evaluate platforms based on the functions they offer and the actual application for your teams. If your UC will allow you to host video calls, enable desktop sharing, and collaboratively work through flow charts, but lacks a messaging component that's key to your day-to-day communications, then it's not the platform for you. Not every UC is right for every company, so finding that one platform that checks all the boxes and provides quality service and interoperability are hallmarks of a winning UC platform.

Advances in AI to automate processes

No, the robots aren't coming to take your jobs as some prophesized, but they are proving beneficial to companies looking to automate tasks that can free up workers for the types of tasks computers can't truly complete, like strategic planning.

When it comes to how AI is playing a role in workplace communications, much of it has to do with the enhancement of natural language processing. Computers are getting smarter at processing meaning, developing emotional intelligence, and delivering accurate results to queries. If you're looking for a real-life example, look no further than [Facebook and its automation of content via AI](#).

This type of AI comes in handy for breaking down language and accessibility barriers in the workplace as well. We now can use on-screen closed captioning to translate messages in real time. This means I could be speaking English during a meeting and my message can instantaneously appear in German, Italian, French, or Spanish—you name it. It also opens the world up for serving employees with disabilities. Note-taking is also becoming a largely automated process being rolled into video conferencing software that has the ability to identify talking points, action items, key dates and ideas.

Facial recognition features that allow employees to join meetings without signing in and chatbots being optimized to aid employees in finding files and answering commonly asked questions are just a few other examples of [the increasingly long list of meeting functions](#) that can also be attributed to the genius of AI improving our automation and collaboration.

Increased security focus for BYOD

The final trend—security—hasn't gone away since the inception of the Internet. As companies adopt AI-driven tech, UC platforms and allow employees to perform work from personal devices, companies should always think: "What is the impact on security?" Like unifying their communications, companies should address remote security by unifying their security software to best protect employees working from anywhere and consider data protection across the entire network of UC-enabled devices—yes, even personal devices or for bring-your-own-device policies.

With new ways of working come new threats. One prominent example made headlines in April 2020 when [more than 500,000 Zoom credentials hit the dark web](#) and we even have new terms emerging like [Zoom bombing](#) to prove the relentlessness of hackers. Alongside swift adoption of

new communications platforms, security is changing just as fast to keep pace with an increasing number of cybersecurity threats. For video conferencing platforms in particular, additional requirements like two-step authentication and endpoint protection can help prevent attacks.

For companies willing to embrace the changes brought about by the renaissance of remote work, 2022 is an exciting time to evaluate and improve work processes and begin to realize the benefits of UCaaS, enhanced automation, collaboration tools and technology investment. Those that harness new technologies while also accounting for enhanced security measures needed to protect an increasing number of devices connected to company assets will be the companies we turn to as examples on how to approach the future of workplace communications.