

[COVER STORY]
WORK-FROM-HOME

COLLABORATED WE STAND



While we had the technology to create a mesh of remote workers, COVID-19 pushed its adoption at an unprecedented scale. Here is how companies in India are dealing with it

BY JATINDER SINGH

At the outset of 2020, nobody would have thought that the world would be facing one of the most difficult times since World War II or any of the known health crisis within a few months. It would have seemed improbable that the entire human race would be engaged in an uphill battle against a contagious virus with no cure and COVID-19 bringing public life to a standstill.

Amid government's lockdown measures to contain the virus spread, many businesses are finding it difficult to meet their contractual obligations despite their best intention. Holding face-to-face meetings have become unworkable, uncertainty is palpable, and work-from-home has become the new normal.

In such a scenario, when communicating with clients and employees has become more significant than ever, adoption of good technology and availability of uninterrupted connectivity is the only way that can help businesses survive and sail through such challenging times. It is interesting to note that the telcos faced an unprecedented 40-45% surge in the demand for data volume during the initial week of the lockdown, with a majority of this spike happening because of remote working.

Optimizing remote work tools

Amid the ongoing pandemic, besides accomplishing work-related projects, employees are dealing with stress

and anxiety, and hence need uninterrupted access to data connectivity and seamless platforms so that they can share their ideas and grievances. This has compelled organizations across the globe to utilize digital tools and solutions—from web conferencing and e-mail to mobile collaboration suits and virtual event platforms—to engage their employees, protect their health and ensure business continuity.

Virtual collaboration tools are being used not only to enable employees to work together remotely on everyday work-related tasks, but are also empowering organizations to conduct coordinated sessions such as weekly meetings, workshops, training, fun activities, and yoga sessions for employees in multiple locations.

"The ability to stay connected, collaborate, and get secure access to all work-related documents remotely has become more critical than ever. Organizations are also taking appropriate measures to keep track of their employee's health and well-being. These have become the core to ensure that business continuity and connectivity is maintained, and work continues," says Vinay Bhartia, India's head of Lark, a remote collaboration solutions provider company.

Zoom, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Cisco WebEx, Slack, Lark, Google Meet are some of the prominent collaboration tools being used by enterprises



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across sectors to stay connected with their remote teams (see Voice&Data Top 5). Many of these tools are also equipped with real-time language translation solutions, helping global organizations connect effectively in a global virtual environment.

During this lockdown period, Raritan is ensuring that its customers are not left behind and is constantly providing support on different platforms for easy communication and service. “We are using Office 365 Teams, teleconferencing, and Bx8 video conferencing tools for customer interactions. We have also ensured remote maintenance of their systems, along with collection and saving of video snapshots from equipment for viewing and sharing device status with multiple users,” says Anjani Kommisetti, Country Manager, India & SAARC, Raritan & Servertech, a power, access and control solutions provider.

Because of the lockdown many companies are forced to shut down their local offices, logistics, shipments and deliveries. Yet, despite these challenges, many are still able to create opportunities due to effective remote work management policies. “We have suspended field operations as per the government directives and are mitigating the impact via mobility solutions. Our senior management is continuously in touch with our employees via videoconferencing solutions to minimize the disruption in business processes,” says Mangesh Wadaje, CEO, Highbar Technocrat Limited, an enterprise business solutions provider.

The company is helping its clients to cope with this complexity through many best practices and cloud-based tools such as ERP, electronic Document Management Solution (DMS), business intelligence, IoT and CRM.

But are all employees comfortable with these tools and work-from-home concept?

“Understandably, it is a new experience for many, and we are adapting ourselves to respond in the most efficient way. Apart from last-mile connectivity to ensure customer delight, the insurance sector must unite to find solutions and new ways to interact with customers virtually. Strengthening of Salesforce tools is also a must. The collaboration platforms need to look beyond communication and file sharing, evolve to enable business and operational process visibility,” says Mohit Rochlani, Director – IT and Operations, IndiaFirst Life Insurance Company Limited.

There are also companies like Anmol Feeds who have their own challenges. The company manufactures livestock feed, which has been categorized as an essential commodity and exempted from the lockdown. “Our team from the office has been working from their respective homes to ensure continuity in every aspect of the business. Apart from phone calls, we use mobile apps like WhatsApp to communicate with every employee of the company. Further online meetings are scheduled using videoconferencing tools like Zoom. We are also using a dedicated toll-free number for

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taking up orders and ensuring no there are no hiccups in fulfil the market demand,” says Amit Saraogi, MD, Anmol Feeds.

Choosing the right solution

Like any technology implementation, every collaboration tool has its own benefits and limitations and may not appeal to all sectors alike. According to industry experts, one should not expect a collaboration tool to do wonder even if it is the best in the market. It is important for every organization to use its own discernment before deploying any such tools.

“With work from home being a new normal, it is imperative that you deploy the right set of tools to keep distant teams connected on a day-to-day basis, for ensuring business as usual. Digital collaboration tools definitely help the teams but these may be specific to organizational requirements and may differ from one to another,” elucidates Alok Malik, Associate VP and Head of Global Information Security, GlobalLogic.

While deploying any technology solution, businesses also need to ensure that the tools are suited to work in the existing IT infrastructure of a company. It is also important to consider factors such as organizations’ security ecosystem, service support, ease of use, employee understanding and manageability while selecting the platform.

For many enterprises catering to hospitality and travel, these are overwhelming times. “Work from home as a policy is commonly followed by our teams in times of personal need but when we implemented a self-quarantine policy for team members, it seemed almost difficult to function. Time like this, where the entire office across the cities including our sales team who are majorly on the field will work from home is something we never imagined,” says Ankit Mehrotra, Co-Founder and CEO of Dineout, a dining out and restaurant tech solutions platform.

The new-age company says it is leveraging tools such as Google Hangouts, Slack, Trello, and Google Meets to enable work-from-home and to ensure business continuity.

However, for online and digital company like ADDA that provides app-based management solution for gated communities the transition was relatively easier. “From the very beginning our system has been crafted in such a way that we can attend to our work from anywhere and at anytime. This foundation is coming in handy today. The ADDA app has in built systems to ensure going to an external platform to communicate with the support team is not necessary,” says San Banerjee, CEO of the company.

CallHealth Services, which provides healthcare consultation through its online platform, also has a similar story to share. “Our platform by design is enabled for virtual engagement for both internal and external meetings. We have different home-grown solutions for managing our Contact Centre inbound and outbound calls, for managing our audio and video consultations between doctors and customers, and for managing internal collaboration through chat, audio, and video mediums,” highlights Ratnesh Sharma, the company’s Partner Ecosystem and Chief of Human Resources Operations.

Security is the key

One of the important questions that many organizations had to think about was their preparedness to open up the entire information and data infrastructure to multiple, external home- and mobile-networks, which in turn can prove to be a security nightmare. While many of the new-age organizations, including IT and services companies and start-ups, were comparatively less worried, a majority in the manufacturing sector and those with higher headcounts and multiple operational teams had a bigger task cut out for them.

“Being FY closing, it was critical that departments are able to work together seamlessly. It was also important to



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Adarsh Noronha, Director-Indian sub-continent, HubSpot

ensure that we continue to service our partners without disruption,” says Neeraj Mehta, Head of Corporate IT at Apollo Tyres. “While opening our core restricted area for operations from home, we had to take utmost care about the protection from possible data leakage. Users were advised not to download data on their personal machines and all large queries, and report creations are being monitored by the Business Applications Support teams.”

His concerns were echoed by Sterling & Wilson’s Chief Information Officer Manoj Deorukhkar: “The sudden lockdown meant that many employees did not have their laptops to work from home and there was no way for them to pick it up from the office. Hence, employees started using their personal computers. This prompted us to quickly come up with Use Your Own Device (UYOD) policy, with necessary precautions, to ensure continuity of work.”

“This large scale (almost 100%) shift to work-from-home had a massive implication on IT security posture, especially on network and application security. This involved revisiting our security policy, processes, and tools,” he added.

“For resources without a laptop, we made arrangements to handover the devices with only the required software. These have been configured in a way that no new software can be installed without the approval from the admin. We also ensured that data transfer access using USB was disabled,” R Mohan, Chief Innovative Officer at FIA Global said.

Most of the organizations that responded to the Voice&Data survey indicated that they facilitated Virtual Private Network (VPN) to all remote-workers to ensure seamless and secure access to business and critical applications like ERP and CRM. “While we are using several tech tools for our internal and external communication to maintain transparency in work, VPN connectivity and Citrix log in is helping us manage work desk at home and provide global support,” says Shivaji Chatterjee, Sr. VP and Head of Enterprise Business at Hughes Communications India.

Reports also indicate government organizations were not behind in quickly ramping up their infrastructure to enable remote working. The Goods and Services Network (GSTN), for example, provided VPN for its 1,700 tax officers across India to enable them to work from home. This enabled the officers to process over 10,000 new GSTN registrations and about 8,000 refund applications during the first 10 days of lockdown until 3 April 2020.

Planning for business continuity

While many enterprises had already spotted the future of work early and were ready to deal with the situations like lockdown, several others were caught off guard. A virtual meeting is a good idea to dodge disruptions, however only for those who are prepared for this sudden transition.

“We had decided to move to a work from home scenario, even before the lockdown, which—looking back—proved to be a smart move. We had identified such employees who did not have a reliable internet connection

“We had anticipated that people would have connectivity issues as they move out of the cities and back to their home towns.”

Aftab Ullah, Chief Operating & Delivery Officer, Brillio



and asked them to procure internet devices such as a WiFi or a portable internet connection such as JioFi. We ensured that our employees have access to at least two different networks at their respective places,” says Amit Aggarwal, Co-Founder and Director of Effectual Services, an advisory firm offering IP support solutions.

Situation like this presents loss of productivity and low employee morale due to lack of continuous face-to-face interactions and discussion when the workplaces are active. Moreover, the market sentiments are expectedly low, and uncertainty is looming large. For many companies, existing customers have either asked to temporarily discontinue their services or make payment considerations. The absence of a strong business continuity plan can, hence, make it really difficult to keep your workforce motivated while staying afloat in the business.

According to Aftab Ullah, Chief Operating & Delivery Officer of Brillio, it took the organization five working days to implement 100% WFH across all its offices globally. “We were fully on the cloud, had laptops for all our people, and most importantly had an organizational culture that had previously been very flexible with WFH. Of course, we had to augment connectivity infrastructure for our people, especially since we anticipated that people would have connectivity issues as they also moved out of the cities back to their home towns,” he said.

Industry experts point out that business continuity planning should be built with a sense of urgency and empathy. “To ensure the health and safety of our employees and of the communities, we serve we closed all global offices and implemented remote working all across the organization. We are in the process of evaluating if anything requires shutting down. However, we are maintaining business continuity and disaster recovery plans focusing on preventing outage through redundancy of telecommunications, systems and business operations, and rapid recovery strategies in the event of an availability

or performance issue,” says Adarsh Noronha, Director of Indian Sub-Continent at HubSpot.

Understandably, due to the current travel restrictions and work-from-home policy implementation, companies are experiencing higher traffic on their digital channels, requiring them to grow their IT capabilities. “We’ve had multiple all-hands meeting globally, daily stand-up routines that cover the entire firm, and digital channels like WhatsApp groups, Teams and Slack channels to make sure that everyone is hearing directly from the leaders and the leaders are able to rapidly change policies and support for our people as we all adjust to this new normal,” says Ullah.

It is important that organizations which started late should also look at providing virtual training for those employees, who may not be at ease with working from home. It’s equally important that the technology is used to engage employees, not just from a work perspective, but also to conduct team-building activities in these stressful times. “As far as the work environment is concerned, we have virtual cafes setup where employees hang out, share a cup of coffee together etc. This is a ‘water cooler’ zone that we are trying to create. We also have a separate Slack channel where we share jokes, memes, etc to keep the laughter going during such stressful times,” says Kavita Viswanath, GM of Jfrog (India), a company that provides DevOps solutions and platforms for enterprises.

It is likewise important to note that in such conditions, the overall risk to the data also gets increased. This may require organizations, especially who are new to the remote work culture, to revisit some of their policies, evaluate and upgrade latest technologies and identify areas to ensure a secure work from home experience of their employees.

“Our business continuity planning efforts are mainly concerned with keeping the organization’s business operation intact while ensuring every individual’s safety. We have allowed work-from-home for all employees,

Tech practices for the remote workforce



GET SUITABLE COLLABORATION TOOL: Supporting employees to work remotely by providing them access to the best collaboration technologies and tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, Skype, Yammer, Google Hangouts, WhatsApp, GotoMeeting, Slack, Flowdock, Google Docs, and Quip, among others.



PRIORITIZE COMMUNICATION PLAN: During tough times like these, communication is paramount, be it internally amongst employees or with customers. Ensure daily check-ins with teams so that work continues to progress without any hiccups.



PROVIDE WORK ESSENTIALS: For resources not possessing a laptop or work essentials, organizations should arrange to hand over the devices installed with only approved software, configured with all security measures.



ENABLE WEB SUPPORT: Ensure that the technologies deployed such as laptops, private corporate networks, or even employee communications and collaboration tools are at par to support our workforce working remotely for extended periods.



PROVISION DATA CONNECTIVITY: Talk to your connectivity service providers to ensure uninterrupted network connectivity supply from their end. Ensure taking various technical measures for network connectivity and provide redundancy through datacards and mobile connectivity.



PROVIDE REGULAR TRAINING: Leverage virtual training tools, and a transparent reporting mechanism to ensure that employees work is fully visible, and they stay highly productive during this time.



ENACT STRONG POLICIES: Implement strong policies to ensure that all critical data remains within the company's IT perimeter and doesn't go out unless it is absolutely required and is approved by the relevant management team members.

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Mangesh Wadaje, CEO, Highbar Technocrat Limited



be at the branch locations or at centralized support office and meticulously planned the entire strategy and executed the same in a minimal timeframe providing the necessary remote infrastructure to all employees. In fact, despite being the financial year-end, our business operation went on as usual, like any other normal day," says Malaya Kanta Barik, General Manager IT and CISO, Shriram General Insurance Co.

Getting ready for the future

Over the next few months as we come out and fight this crisis, organizations across the world are expected to gain solid experience and take in how remote processes can be done effectively. Clients are also expected to gain meaningful comfort with remote ways of working. Social media is playing an important role too, and many companies are constantly available on their social media platforms for customer interactions.

Sensing slowdown in business, many companies are utilizing the time to innovate and rework their strategies for the future. "We are using this time to rework on our business strategies and research designs. We expect to develop advanced products when the market opens for business. We are also leveraging our social media channels to keep in touch with our existing and prospective customers," says Tarun Bhutani, Managing Director, AMANI, a mobile accessories company.

Many start-ups and technology providers are also offering extended trials to their solutions to keep their customers engaged and help them cut costs during these times. "Regarding new clients, most organizations are reluctant to experiment with new technologies during the uncertainty. We have tried to cushion this by giving all new customers a free two-month trial to ride this storm and experiment with the product," says Siddharth Goenka, CEO and Founder, Aiosell Technologies, a Bengaluru-based B2B startup that leverages artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) for dynamic pricing and revenue optimization of hotels.

Similarly, leading technology company Salesforce has made some of their technology solutions free for the next couple of months to help their customers and partners navigate through the crisis. The company recently launched Salesforce Care rapid response solutions to help users stay connected to their employees, customers and communities. Besides, it has also made available Quip Starter, a suite of collaborative platforms, to any business and is providing access to Health Cloud for healthcare systems experiencing an influx of COVID-19 requests.

In its report 'Coronavirus People Technology Path', Deloitte notes that the current crisis is a big opportunity for organizations to accelerate into the future of work. According to the point of perspective, many of the major technology shifts proposed are either underway or should be underway for many organizations. As the current crisis unfolds, there is an opportunity to accelerate these efforts.

"The key is to enable present workarounds and use this as an opportunity to shape the future ways of working, which are more efficient, effective and collaborative, beyond the boundaries of the function and the enterprise," Deloitte adds.

Given the history of such pandemics, remaining focused, calm and human-centric behaviour should guide most organizations through the new normal. In the long-term, however, according to the industry experts, the lessons learned from the temporary crisis will present an opportunity for organizations to create a more resilient workforce, with a focus on employee health and well-being, enabled through a new perspective on the digital workplace. 🌟

With inputs from Shubhendu Parth

This report was prepared based on insight from over 35 industry and enterprise experts, some of whom have been quoted, while inputs from others have been presented as interviews and columns in the print and on V&O website.

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