

Bringing multifaceted hy

Since lockdown, evidence of the success of home working has piled in from across the UK with big implications for ICT providers at the forefront of the workplace revolution. As the dust settles on what has been a crisis, last month's Comms Dealer online Insight Session held in association with 8x8 provided a focused conduit of perspectives that together define the key elements of what we now call strategic long-term hybrid working solutions.

We are seeing a web of connections develop between the key elements that make up the new hybrid working environment, including UCaaS, CCaaS, productivity, AI and analytics, hybrid cultures and mental wellbeing, to name a few. Now, businesses are investing in people-first initiatives, not in physical offices so much. They are spending on dispersed individuals working from home, their quality of life and maintaining company culture, just as much as productivity. And the channel is in the absolute frontline of enabling this shift.

"There's no going back now," stated James White, Director of Marketing, Virgin Media Business. "Our everyday has changed forever and as a result we expect to see organisations

continue to invest in digital transformation. According to our research with the Cebr there is a £232 billion opportunity to grow the UK economy over the next 20 years. It's about moving forward and choosing the right technology to harness the best that's come from this challenging time. In fact, 46 per cent of customers we spoke with plan to continue to work in a flexible way. UCaaS and CCaaS are the tools that make this possible."

Transformational

No one could call the impact of Covid-19 on how most organisations operate as anything but irreversibly transformational. And Covid-19 has exposed how relevant the evolution of comms technology has been, from top to bottom, with the next phase of development being a blend of UCaaS



Graham Kedzlie

and CCaaS. "We see the emergence of contact centre features blending into UCaaS," observed Graham Kedzlie, Regional Vice President, EMEA Channel Sales – Wholesale, 8x8.

"We've seen behavioural changes in the public sector and NHS specifically where there is huge demand now for combined services.

"Many more customers are buying UCaaS and CCaaS at the same time. Rewind 12 months and our combined platform business was circa 18 per cent of overall revenue. In the last quarter

Getting UCaaS solutions out to market is fundamental to our success and we're scaling up enablement."

It is game, set and match to those who long advocated cloud technology. But ICT investment and planning post-Covid-19 needs proper scrutiny. Just as clear is that organisations, including resellers, cannot refuse to change with the times. "Our customers were sent into a spin a year ago and as an industry we reacted with the right types of technologies," said Richard Betts, CRO, Charterhouse.

"It's about delivering information to the fingertips of workers wherever they are. The integration of the 8x8 platform with Microsoft Teams has opened up another huge market opportunity for us. The combination of an

46 per cent of buyers bought UCaaS and CCaaS together. Even Gartner hinted that one day there'll be only one Magic Quadrant, a blend of UCaaS and CCaaS.



James White



Richard Betts

Hybrid solutions into focus

integrated solution sets us apart and offers the functionality that customers need. We're probably going to end up with people that will come to the office not to work, but to meet."

Strong demand

Betts predicts high demand in new office environments as most of the customer's LANs will not be capable of running all of the required multimedia. "For a lot of companies cyber security set ups may not cope with this new technology," he added. "The hybrid office environment will challenge even existing office situations, regardless of size. There's going to be a requirement for technology upgrades to cope with it all."

Nick Aikman, Channel Sales Manager, 8x8, agrees that a hybrid vision must underpin how businesses communicate after the pandemic. "Functionality doesn't stop at the doorstep of any office," he said. "There's been a big cultural shift as previously there may have been reticence to let people work remotely. This is a real sea change. It's

now about video. We use it on our mobile devices and desktops. That's a big shift."

All the components of an organisation's strategy should be tested against Covid-19, both in the private and public sector. And all those impacted by the pandemic should be under examination from their ICT provider partners. But the way partners approach the market is evolving, observed Rob Merhej, Regional Vice President EMEA, Avant. "Some partners ask us which vertical they should be going after with UCaaS," he explained. "But we shouldn't be targeting specific verticals

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because everyone is going to be doing this at some point. I firmly believe that at least 90 per cent of all businesses will move their communications into the cloud. Let's not

pigeonhole ourselves. This is a revolution that's going across any business and a lot of the time their challenges are the same."

For resellers, indecision on next steps shows a lack of grasp over their destiny. The success of home working has all but wiped out memories of remote working doubters pre-pandemic. But the current demand has exposed a need for deep reviews in ICT procurement. Stephen Mackarel, Managing Director, Workair, commented: "The real challenge is how to understand the customer, their pain points, and how to use voice as an

integrator into the business ecosystem to streamline the customer journey and remove costly, ineffective internal business processes. That's where the magic is."

Mackarel believes that people sub-30 years of age will not even consider joining an organisation that doesn't enable a hybrid type solution, meaning that the as-a-service model impacts significantly on strategy from the point of view of HR policies, which are no doubt top of mind for one business cited by Mackarel.

"One of the largest insurance companies in Ireland, which is a more traditional type of organisation, has closed its office and will reopen in 12 months time with only 40 per cent capacity," he



Rob Merhej

added. "That capacity will be hot desking and meeting space. That's a huge change for an organisation like that. With people expecting to be able to work from anywhere, you have to have an ecosystem that's cloud-based. From a strategic point of view, bringing your whole ecosystem into the cloud is key."

Out of office

The home environment is now the high profile theatre of work, with the same roles but not subject to the same in-office practices and cultural mood music. "Mental health and wellness are fundamental considerations with remote working, so is culture," added White. "A study by Gartner highlighted that 54 per cent of home

workers say their primary challenge is the feeling of being alone. It's now about how you use technology to create a culture that is hybrid. At the moment, it's virtual. But as we move forward it's going to become much more hybrid. That relies on making the right technology bets and pairing that with a clear understanding of how you're going to use that technology, how it helps your people deliver a great service culture, and how it helps leaders to lead virtually."

A common feature of emergencies is that decisions are taken that would not normally be merited, like the wholesale shift to residential working environments a year ago. Although people are

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Nick Aikman



Stephen Mackarel

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working remotely they are far from out of touch, but negotiating the hands-on management of people and the Big Brother jungle of staff monitoring has become a sensitive challenge solved by key components of the technology mix.

"I've been asking agents how the move affected them," said Joe Murphy, National Channel Director EMEA, 8x8. "The overriding feeling is that it's been a good thing. But an agent dealing with an unhappy customer won't have a supervisor sat next to them as protection. A remote working facility that offers that protection will give people a lot of confidence. It's about outcomes. Now, you can't physically keep an eye on people all day. So you've got to find a way of making technology work for you. That's been driving the adoption."

A pandemic should not legitimise over-the-top staff monitoring at home, and a bias is emerging in favour of technologies that actually make the process more personal and productive, according to Merhej. "How long you've been on a phone call means nothing," he said. "With all the tools we have now there is meaningful data. While you can't get away from the Big Brother aspect, the key thing is

actionable intelligence, not just about time on the phone or other basics. It changes things when users get something actionable, something real, not just a note saying you've spent one hour less on the phone than the guy next to you.

"AI is built within the tools, enabling criticism to become more constructive with informed feedback from management. Communicating feedback via channels like texts or chats makes for a softer approach. People are more receptive to advice, rather than in an office where you're pulled away from a desk and put into a meeting room. It's almost real-time, which makes it less stressful and more effective."

In this context, transparency and trust go hand in hand, noted Tom Cotton, Agile Workspace Technical Director,



Adam Hart

of fish," he stated. "People never like to log in and out for breaks, and there may be more pushback from within their own home. So combining trust with modern techniques of monitoring produces better results and outcomes. Giving contact

trust them to get on with the job, then you need to be able to coach them. Analytics helps achieve that."

UCaaS pivotal

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, the UCaaS piece has also become ever more important, believes Hart. "It's the intersection between mobile connectivity and UC, and when you get that right with a customer it makes them sticky," he said. "But forward development and continuous improvement is absolutely vital. I see vendors that have stopped developing and the product is falling behind. Also key is marketing support, deployment support, and enablement in terms of sales,

training and deployment training for our partners."

There is no longer any debate – the move to home working shows only one thing, that any reversion to 'normal times' would be counterproductive. "This situation has been forced on all businesses," said Betts. "Whether they have a flexible view or not, they've had to approach work in a different way that has made them understand that staff can be trusted to be productive as long as you give them the tools to do the job. They probably deliver better results than when chained to a desk in a nine-to-five environment. You don't need to be in the office to do a good job." ■

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6 Degrees. "To monitor somebody in their own home is a different kettle

centre agents access to view statistics on themselves is important to allow them to self-manage. This is a better way to measure outcomes. Therefore give them access to the analytics so they can see what you see."

Measuring up

Adam Hart, Head of Cloud & Connectivity, Zest 4, added: "This is a delicate area. Customers don't want a Big Brother situation, but at the same time they want to measure their staff. This comes down to trust and analytical tools. If you're having to monitor staff on a day-to-day basis, then you probably don't trust them. But if you fundamentally



Tom Cotton



Joe Murphy