Redesigning the Office, One Virtual Workspace At a Time

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Having a staff of entirely remote or hybrid workers might have once seemed like a pipe dream, but it's very much a reality these days. The COVID-19 pandemic didn't cause this acceptance of working from home as the new reality; rather, it accelerated a series of digital transformations that have been promised for years. Now, remote or hybrid office workers are part of the fabric of the workforce and their presence in our computer screens is not as uncommon as they once were. According to recent research, 74% of survey respondents expect the majority of their workforce will remain remote for at least another year.

However, this widespread acceptance of remote work comes with a reality check: the office workplace isn't the same as the virtual workplace. Employees who have never set foot inside the corporate headquarters have different expectations and ways of working. This means businesses need to redesign and rethink their offices to match the new ways of working.

What trends should IT decision makers consider when it comes to technology? With a hybrid workforce, what considerations should one take into while designing the workplace? As remote working continues to gain a hold in the mainstream, the challenge for IT leaders will be to deploy tools that enable collaboration, rather than treating remote work as another extension of the office.

Embracing the Virtual Floorplan

With workers coming into the office only a few days a week (if at all), organizations will need new ways of thinking about the office. This is giving rise to the concept of a virtual floorplan — places where employees can meet and collaborate over digital channels. In the virtual floorplan workers gather based on work function or shared interests, as opposed to physical desk proximity. The challenge for IT leaders is to ensure teams have the tools they need to collaborate synchronously or asynchronously.

This isn't an easy thing and IT leaders will need to be aware of several factors. Different teams might use different tools, preferring one digital channel over another communication. There will be no one-size-fits-all in the virtual floorplan. IT leaders will need to take team preference into account when deciding which tools to roll out.

The Workplace as a Mirror Reflection of the Business

Technology is the glue that holds the future of work together. Without the technological advances and adoptions of the past few years, sending the majority of the workforce home with no loss of productivity

would be unthinkable. Virtualization allows people to gather no matter where they are.

Technology advances will require new ways of thinking about what the office is and how it can be used. Since the office is no longer a place where employees have to go, start thinking about how it can be reconfigured to be a place employees want to go. Rather than thinking of the office as the default place to work, organizations should start thinking about how to reposition the office as a place to exchange ideas, collaborate and socialize. Breaking down department siloes and encouraging collaboration has always been a priority of forward-thinking organizations. With workers now coming to the office for targeted reasons rather than everyday just because, organizations can be more thoughtful about how they use the office and the tech inside to encourage togetherness.

Minimizing Favoritism

The challenge with remote or hybrid workers every company faces is potentially having a workforce divided into two camps: the people who prefer to go into the office all the time and those that prefer to work from home, going into the office a few days a week (or not at all). The danger of this type of work delineation is for the remote/hybrid workers to be left behind for promotions, not privy to the social interactions that come with working in the office and not invited to conversations.

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Here, too, technology plays a role. By giving teams the right tools and encouraging their use, IT leaders can support managers with visibility into employees' work. Promotion while working remotely is possible: VMWare research found that of workers who were promoted while working remotely, 43% communicated daily with their managers over text chat, 41% over Whatsapp or text message and 30% over video calls. Managers will need these tools to ensure visibility into their productive remote workforce.

Conclusion

The office is no longer the default. But with that reality comes the opportunity to reimagine what the office can be and how technology can help. Organizations need to think about how their workspace can be reconfigured to encourage collaboration, socialization and the free exchange of ideas. Then, IT leaders will need to ensure the tools they have enable collaboration. While it's easy to reconfigure desk space, it's challenging to nurture a work culture that encourages collaboration while not leaving remote workers behind. Technology has gotten us this far; now we need to take the next steps.

All statistics taken from VMWare research unless otherwise noted. For more information, watch Navigating What's Next: The Redesign of the Post-COVID-19 Workplace *at vmware.com.*

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