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The Modern Digital Workplace: Seven Trends that are Driving Change

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Introduction

Factors like remote work, the emergence of the gig workforce, and the changing nature of work itself are forcing enterprises to rethink their employee experience. This is driving investment in systems and services that allow employees to stay connected to their business infrastructure and one another, and support networks with greater resilience across more locations and devices. ISG examined the implications of this new trend, and how enterprises should approach workplace services as they evolve to become more employee-centric.

This idea of employee-centricity, for the purpose of this paper, includes not only the traditional notion of direct employees of an enterprise, but also the extended workforce such as contractors or gig workers. This employee-centricity starts with the premise that a workforce works best, and is most productive, when their needs for workplace services are fully understood and effectively met.

Enterprises must partner with their providers for workplace services to examine how their employees are engaging with these services. They must also strive to enhance the experience of all employees through continuous improvement and advancement of the workplace so that employees are always able to do their jobs at the highest level.

This paper examines the characteristics of the modern workplace and seven important trends shaping it, and what that means to the design and delivery of workplace services that can lead to a superior employee experience.

Characteristics of the Modern Workplace

Every workplace exists at a cross section of what an employee needs, and what a business can provide. For employees, the modern workplace is one where employees increase their productivity by maximizing their connectivity and minimizing their downtime. For enterprises, realizing those goals means adopting collaboration tools, a hyperconnected, hybrid design for their office, and the resilient service infrastructure needed to keep them all running.

There are a few common themes and services for a successful and supported, modern office, including how to:

- Expand the options available to employees for how they work.
- Create a personalized experience taking into account different working styles or preferences.
- Provide the technology products or solution to make such experiences possible.

Broadly, the modern workplace is defined by two types of diversity – in devices and of location – with each carrying different implications for related workplace services.

1

Location diversity

For remote work to be possible and productive, work tools need to be available irrespective of location. This is also true for a workforce that is increasingly global, not tied to physical offices or workplaces, and expects the same experience wherever they access the workplace from. The basis for this capability is a service architecture that is dedicated to providing services and capabilities that share common elements on a platform. The elements that make this architecture possible are the first step towards excellence in services like virtual desktops, collaboration boards, and document management, and communication tools that include workplace conferencing, chat, and social networks.

2

Device diversity

There are now more devices and tools available to employees, all of which can contribute to personalizing employees experience and, therefore, their productivity. But an increase in devices also increases the management burden on IT. This translates into a need to scale support processes. Often this means embracing models like cloud-based field service management, tech bars, kiosks, tech vending machines, and depot dispatch centers to aid hybrid work-from-home and office cultures, and the concomitant inventory management systems needed to enable them. It also demands a commitment to learning about, and supporting cutting-edge devices as they grow more popular, like virtual reality headsets.

The importance of connectivity cannot be overstated. ISG research discovered that over the course of 2021, business infrastructures were supporting over 800 million new home offices worldwide. That growth was accompanied by an almost 1,000 percent increase in demand for conferencing, communication and collaboration tools in the same year[1].

ISG investigated the state of remote work immediately after the pandemic[1]. That report showed losses in productivity were often attributable to the fact that the technology deployed to help them work from home was reportedly "unsatisfactory, not well supported or connected, and issues take longer to solve." To enable remote work, companies need to have the support services that their employees need in place so that they are able to maintain a common standard of productivity in home offices.

The accompanying case study of NTT DATA details a partnership with Independent Health to establish a work-from-home model which also improved their workers' response times by 67 percent. It is an illustration of the importance of connectivity, tools to aid worker productivity, and the potential to improve employee experience and overall business outcomes.

In transitioning to a virtual desktop model, Independent Health changed the design, setup, and service of their workplace. They addressed an external crisis with a remote workplace solution focusing on connectivity, tools to aid worker productivity, and an improvement in both levels of service and availability. This illustrates the modern workplace, and the opportunity it provides to transform a space beyond the immediate or urgent responses that were taken by many enterprises during the last two years.

Case Study: Independent Health

NTT DATA partnered with Independent Health – a healthcare provider in Buffalo, New York which provides health plans for around 350,000 people in Western New York – to create a modern workplace.

At the start of the first coronavirus quarantine, Independent Health transitioned to a virtual desktop model to enable work-from-home offices, working with NTT DATA to evolve from a traditional desktop-based model. By moving to a secure, centralized Citrix infrastructure with automation features, they managed to enable remote work for 1,100 over the span of two weeks with no loss of service for customers.

This upgrade came with increased productivity. The automation eased their workflow and employees reported less downtime in the new system. Their response times increased 67 percent.

The upgrade also came with improvements to their service desk. Before, it was a standalone service that only functioned during regular business hours. Upgrading that desk to an integrated 24-hour model helped them improve their satisfaction ratings to 3.8 out of 4 and improved their closure rates such that 75 percent of incidents were resolved on the first call.

These upgrades were initially motivated by the pandemic, but the improvements to how their employees accessed work, the tools they used, and the support they received, made it a modern, more productive, workplace.

Trends Driving the New Workplace

As enterprises and employees adopt the technology to enable the modern workplace, we also see greater development in the technologies and systems which powers and enhances it. Seven important trends, and the technology driving them, are shaping the modern workplace, creating new implications for the employee experience and, consequently, the overall evolution of workplace services.

Trend	Technological Drivers	Impact on Employee Experience
 **Hybrid Everything**	Design and support were not a priority after the initial coronavirus quarantine, when enterprises had to urgently shift their workplace services and infrastructure to enable employees to work from home. As remote work becomes a long-term reality, technology and products have rapidly and radically evolved in the last 24 months. This makes a strong case for enterprises to design the right combination of connectivity, collaboration, and security tools necessary to enable employees working from the office or from home.	With 45 percent of the U.S. working from home at least part time, according to Gallup, this factor has transformed the employee experience by allowing them to customize their environment to fit their needs. It also ensures that whether or not companies are in the office, or working remotely, they are both getting an equitable experience, and have the means to realize high quality interactions and co-creation activities, of the kind that traditionally happened face-to-face. For example, if a hybrid team is having a meeting where some people are present, and others are remote, their meeting tools should be designed to deliver the same quality experience at any location.
 **Zero Incidence**	On the small scale, this means investing in technology that streamlines work—platforms that predict, identify and proactively correct errors, or which generally extend the life of a device. With a greater number of devices in play, this also means designing a support system with a wide area of coverage. On a larger scale, it means infrastructure investments that keep people reliably connected to their work and their coworkers.	This speaks to the fact that the less downtime an employee has, the more productive they will be. Effecting an infrastructure that prioritizes the reliability is a clear path to set a workforce up for success, while also eliminating frustration.
 **Device Proliferation**	Investing in connectivity does not stop with making sure a person's laptop can securely connect to their company network—it means processes must be developed to make their phones, tablets, and any other devices able to communicate with each other, with all the necessary platforms to do their jobs, and with their coworkers, as seamlessly as possible.	While multidevice has been a norm in offices for a long time, the new trend has been how enterprises realize it as a means for a work enablement strategy. It also creates the opportunity for employees to use their own devices, expanding both access to work tools, and enhanced personal preference.

Trend	Technological Drivers	Impact on Employee Experience
Hyper Automation	RPA and AI solutions are an increasing investment area; automation solutions and service providers reported an average annual growth of 19 percent in 2021, and expect a minimum 20 percent growth in 2022, globally[2].	A growing investment in automation reduces the friction on an employee by eliminating manual tasks and reducing the need for human oversight.
Human-centric design	The trend of human-centric design can be easily extended to the employee experience based on the wider availability of technology products and services which make it possible.	Investing in employee needs enhances their experience, enabling improved productivity. From a design standpoint, it means building products that fundamentally account for things like customizability options, improved connectivity, and more of the features which expand an employee's toolkit.
Immersive Experiences	The metaverse is a rapidly emerging as a driver with significant potential to impact the future of work through digital worlds and precursor technologies like augmented reality. In particular, these technologies are growing in prominence because of the benefits they provide to a decentralized organization, like a remote office.	Metaverse platforms impact the employee experience by supplementing, or otherwise providing a benefit to services that were traditionally offered in-person, increasing the capabilities of a decentralized workplace. Data shows that face-to-face interactions create important opportunities for collaboration; a metaverse service like a virtual meeting room can make it easier to replicate that experience even when they are not at the same location.
Digital Workplace Security	Security in general is an important priority for any company, but there is a specific interest in investing in security systems designed to serve a hybrid workforce. As companies transition to this model of work, they need to ensure that their new infrastructures are as well protected as their old ones, if not better.	Preventing a security breach keeps employees from suffering downtime due to a compromised, but necessary system, or lost work. It also creates a more positive environment by ensuring their privacy and safety from hostile actors.

Understanding the Gap Between Potential and Current Achievement in the Modern Workplace

The modern workplace is not just about enabling the correct suite of underlying technologies. Creating a system that services a workforce demands feedback from employees about whether the implementation is working as intended.

An NTT Ltd. survey[3], showed many companies failing to implement these technologies to their full effect. It found that 90 percent of organizations recognized the value of these employee experience-focused workplace trends as a strategic asset, but only around 38 percent reported that they were satisfied with their capabilities in that area.

This achievement gap is not uncommon for new technologies, and sometimes does not close until the technology matures. But employee input has a role to play in that maturation: the dissatisfaction of the early users, and their vision for how to implement that technology, tends to drive the direction of how the technology evolves. That speaks to the importance of not just designing workplace services to meet the needs of employees, but to ensure that an enterprise is receiving feedback, and that that feedback is calibrated in a useful way.

The metrics that govern the delivery of such services between the enterprise and the employee, and between the enterprise as a client and an external provider of workplace services, can be an issue, sometimes eliding the opinions of the end users. Service Level Agreements (SLA) govern most workplace services in the current market. But they are not necessarily calibrated to create end-user feedback, or actionable insights into how a product is being used. They are a measurement of the minimum viable deliverable service, and so primarily reflects facts about the service's existence—not how the users are experiencing that service. An SLA may show that a tool is functioning as designed, for example, but it will not reflect how many employees are using it, how frequently, and if they are satisfied with its outputs. That may create the appearance of a helpful service, even if every employee disliked it, or believed they could increase productivity with a different resource.

The Potential for XLAs to Increase the Focus on Employee Experience

Experience Level Agreements (XLAs) are one potential answer to address how metrics sometimes omit employee feedback. These measure the outcome of a service, rather than detail of the service per se. Practically speaking, these agreements call for information like how often a service was used, or how it improved a user's workload. Or it may measure user feedback through sentimental analytics, surveys and interviews.

Whatever is being measured, the end goal is data that reflects the impact the work had on a company. By using XLAs to govern the work between an enterprise and their provider, companies may get a better view of how their workers are using the available services.

Embracing XLA may be one way to get an edge in the market as well; ISG found that only 15 to 30 percent of U.S. clients sign managed service contracts for workplace services with XLAs that center around specific digital experience of end users[1].

Example XLAs

XLA area	Key Measurements
Usability of Productivity Applications	• Measured threshold times for common tasks in applications. • Computed daily per user and averaged to set a benchmark average score.
User Sentiment	• Tracking the number of times positive feedback was provided at the end of a user-initiated transaction. Then, how many times a user initiated a transaction. • Alternately, using an AI-tool to indirectly estimate sentiment based on multiple channels of interaction. • Compiled per user and averaged across all users within a given persona.
Automation Effectiveness	• Tracking the number of interactions with a net average reduction in turnaround time, compared to the number of user interactions that required a manual intervention. • Baseline levels recorded and measured every quarter. Annual improvement tracked over start-of-the-year baseline.
User Research Score	• Structured interviews across multiple groups once every quarter. • Quarterly tracking of the survey scores, with a formal report.

Conclusion

The modern workplace has come to be defined by those workplace services that deliver a superior employee experience, and where employees are able to customize their resources according to their needs. The idea informing these changes is that employees work best when they have all the tools they need, working in the way they need them to work. That is one reason why we see a greater diversity of devices and locations in the modern workplace, as employees introduce new methods and contexts to aid their productivity.

It also means companies are investing in technologies that support those efforts. Seven trends in particular – hyperautomation, hybrid everything, zero incidence, device proliferation, human-centric design, security and the metaverse – demonstrate how employees are making the most of decentralized, hyperconnected technologies, and the option to work remotely, or on their own devices.

But key to that support is an understanding of what employee needs are, what services will fulfill them, and how they should be deployed. It is why managing digital experiences through an XLAs can be a key difference in understanding if employees are getting all that they can and working to their true abilities. It is the first step in a cycle of continuous improvement and advancement. In the current era, that increasingly sees employees connected to a resilient business infrastructure, as well as one another.

References

[1]ISG Provider Lens™, "The Future of Work – Services and Solutions." Oct. 2021.
[2]ISG Provider Lens™, "Intelligent Automation 2021 – Services and Solutions." Dec. 2021.
[3]NTT Ltd, "2021 Global Workplace Report."

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