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# Anywhere, anytime: Lessons learned from the frontlines of distributed work

Together, apart

Most businesses have had to implement some form of distributed or remote work practices in recent months. How is technology helping us collaborate across these distances in new and better ways?

From April this year, nearly 1.6 million Australians, laptops and monitors in tow, headed out of the office to begin their working lives anew at home.[1] Companies now had to quickly pivot their technology and people management practices to suit this new environment.

This large-scale phenomenon represents an accidental experiment with the concept of 'distributed work', where staff are geographically dispersed and the central office becomes an ICT hub.
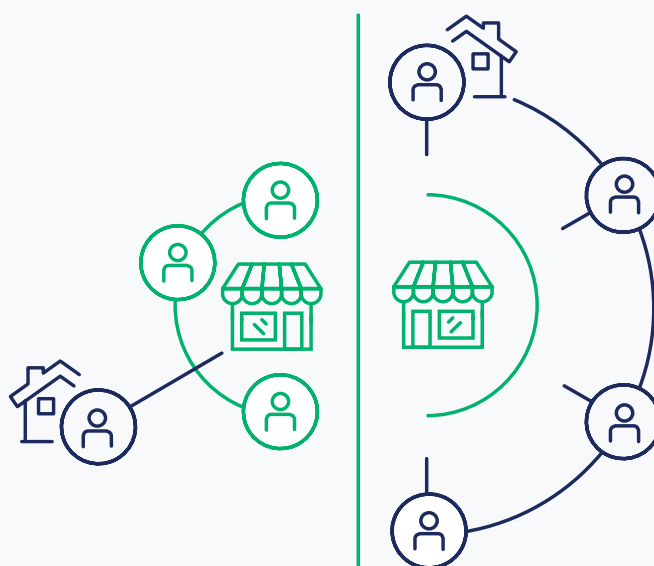
Remote work vs distributed work

Pre-pandemic, some of us may have had a day here or there working from home, but very few did so all the time – one global study puts the number at only 13%.[3]

13%

Pre-COVID

Since COVID-19 hit, that number has practically flipped, with a global Gartner survey finding an estimated 88% of organisations have either required or encouraged employees to work from home.[4]

88%

Since COVID

When does the scale tip from remote work to distributed work?

Put simply, remote work refers to a system where a few individuals work remotely while the majority of the workforce is on-site.

Distributed work, on the other hand, is when the majority of an organisation's workforce is off-site and employees can be based anywhere.[2] An example is Automattic, the company behind popular website building platform WordPress. Its 1250 staff work in 77 countries in a distributed way and only come together for periodic face-to-face catch ups.

New business norms

While many Australian businesses are unlikely to move to a completely distributed format, it's likely they will transition to a hybrid model, with a larger proportion of staff working from home some or most of the time, even if lockdown measures ease.[8]

Business and technology consultant James Dellow, of Chief Technology Solutions, says the move to distributed work has upended many business orthodoxies.

"Leaders in business weren't convinced that people could work this way and the most important lesson is that it's possible. It shows that people are very adaptable," he says.

"The lesson moving forward is that whatever happens, organisations really have to invest in becoming more digital in their operations."

Dellow believes that "as much as possible, [businesses] should be moving to 'digital first' as opposed to digital as an after-thought."

SMBs get digital

In the past, small- to medium-sized businesses (SMBs) have been less quick to adopt a fully distributed work model, whether through inclination or lack of technological knowhow. But very suddenly, the future is coming to them.

Working from home has been an ad hoc solution for many businesses, notes Ewan Reid, head of channels ANZ at Dropbox.

"In the first couple of weeks of lockdown many businesses were winging it. But we are seeing how businesses, having done this for a while, are looking at improving work from home to make it long term, and [at ways of making] their employees more productive," he says.

In fact, cloud computing and cheaper digital tools have allowed companies at any size to run fully remote or distributed workforces.

"After COVID, we saw a migration into the cloud, whereas before they might have been sitting on the fence about the issue with a preference for keeping data on a file server in the office," Reid says.

"The gravitation to the cloud has meant it has been seamless to set their workers up remotely, [giving them] access to their information and work."

Setting up for success

While technology such as efficient internet connectivity and the right collaborative tools help enable remote and distributed work, running a distributed workforce might not come naturally to some.

5 tips for sticking the transition

1

Use cloud collaboration tools:
Functions like file sharing, real-time collaboration on documents and project management are easier for a distributed workforce when done in the cloud. There's less friction, and it's easier to maintain visibility over what everyone is working on. Just be sure to take into consideration that there are some pitfalls to using only the free version of these tools; it can be nice to try before you buy, but if it's something you'll use long term, consider investing in the paid version, especially as there will be benefits when it comes to factors such as security, data integrity and enhanced features.

2

Encourage behaviours that prioritise security:
As data becomes more mobile and as more work happens off-site, it's critical that work practices are supported with robust guidelines that address all aspects of network security – from applications used to device policies and more. Establish protocols for using personal devices, as well as a process for offering remote support and troubleshooting. By fostering a culture of responsible and trusted decision-making in regards to choice of network and use of collaboration tools, your people can act as a first line of defence to minimise the chance of an incident.

3

Give workers choice:

While deadlines are often set in stone, staff need flexibility on how and when they achieve their goals. "If you have a workplace that has truly embraced distributed working, you have to have a different model and you have to have systems and processes that allow for people not to be sitting at their computers all at the same time," notes Dellow. Business leaders and owners need to facilitate a collaborative environment, where workers have a say in how and when work is done, and the tools that are needed to do the job.

4

Keep everyone feeling like part of the team:

Working remotely means people can feel isolated. They may miss incidental interactions, those 'water cooler' moments with colleagues that not only create social cohesion but allow creative ideas to emerge. In the absence of regular in-person interactions, more organisations are focusing on how to bring these experiences online, with a global survey finding 47% of businesses view improving employee collaboration and productivity tools as their key priority.[3] There are various cloud tools, plugins and apps that can facilitate interactions between people remotely, which encourages sharing ideas and brainstorming.

5

Ensure a secure network environment:

It's a fine balance between security and ease-of-use when implementing any of the above, but there are a variety of options available to help IT teams execute secure dispersed collaboration tools that are also easy to use. A secure network sets a strong foundation, so consider implementing technologies like a virtual private network (VPN), with additional features like multi-factor authentication for a proactive approach to security and risk management.

Case study:
Wellcom[7]

The creative process is a team affair; it takes time and effort in brainstorming, whiteboarding, prototyping, planning, production – all working together on a common goal.

So what happens to a business when that process is suddenly disrupted? Media company Wellcom was faced with this challenge when the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to shift to an entirely new way of working almost overnight.

The team handles huge amounts of data and content, and as with most client-based businesses, internal and external collaboration is a crucial part of the process. Wellcom set up a cloud-based solution through Dropbox that centralised their data and provided secure access across the employee network. They were able to extend this to clients as well for project reviews and approvals.

What began as a challenge for Wellcom has become an opportunity for the business. It's meant the team can now be more agile, work with even more people and give their staff more freedom to work how they want.

Please note that Wellcom is a customer of Dropbox and is not connected to services over the **nbn**™ network.

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For more help staying on track in these disrupted times, visit the Australian Business Continuity website.

Sources

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