



Remote Working: The New Normal

Coronavirus lockdown gives a glimpse of the future



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Remote Working: The New Normal

Coronavirus lockdown gives a glimpse of the future

In the space of just a few months, the world has been turned on its metaphorical axis. Government policy has been made at breakneck speed to limit the spread of coronavirus. Businesses and public sector organisations have been knocked sideways. Of those that survived, nearly all have had to alter the way they and their employees work.

The impact of Covid-19 is mounting, politically, economically, culturally and socially. But while many yearn for a return to normal, others are considering what the new normal could, and should, look like.

Although the full ramifications for business are not yet clear, the lockdown has provided clear evidence that many companies and contact centres can continue to operate, while the majority of staff stay home to work.



ONS survey showed 49% of adults in employment in Great Britain worked from home during lockdown, compared to a similar survey which showed that only 5% of the workforce worked mainly from home during 2019. Between January and December 2019, less than 30% of the workforce (32.6m) said they'd worked from home at any point.

Ref 1

A successful work from home experiment?

Urged by ministers and public health officials to stay home to protect lives as part of the lockdown across the UK, more people than ever have worked from home.

A survey by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) showed that in the ten days up to April 13th, 2020, 49% of adults in employment in Great Britain worked from home. That's in stark contrast to an ONS survey in 2019, which showed that only 5% of the UK's 32.6m people in employment worked mainly from home. In the period between January and December 2019, less than 30% of the UK workforce said they'd worked from home at any point.



Some organisations will have found the enforced period of remote working a successful experiment, as they managed to continue relatively smooth operations, perhaps even thriving, while staff worked from home. Other businesses which were less prepared will have been left desperate for employees to return to their offices and get back to full working speed, partly because reliable and secure remote working options were absent when the UK lockdown was put in place, virtually overnight.

The ONS survey suggests that more than 80% of businesses which continued to operate in the fortnight after lockdown took additional steps to manage their workforce as a result of COVID-19. But many businesses, including contact centres (see page 8), insisted that their staff continue to come to work during the lockdown.

Growing numbers of organisations and contact centre operators may find, as they crunch the numbers in the coming weeks and months, that remote working offers opportunities for growth which their rivals have already seized. This may provoke a broader shift in corporate thinking. Others, rather than pressing ahead with a planned move to larger premises in a costly new office block, might discover savings can be made by turning this unexpected foray into home working into a long-term strategic shift.

A study by IBM in April 2020 appeared to signal a shift in attitudes towards home working, with growing numbers of workers less willing to use public transport. Among 25,000 US adults, 75% also wished to be able to work more often from home, and more than half – 54% - wanted it to be their primary way of working.

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Back on this side of the Atlantic, a survey of GB and EU employers by Willis Towers Watson, suggests 15% considered that home working as a result of coronavirus had had a positive impact on productivity, with another 15 percent saying there had been no impact. Only 3% of employers thought there had been a large negative impact.

As a result of the novel coronavirus pandemic, and for a multitude of reasons, remote working could become the new normal.





Moving on from the Covid-19 pandemic.

The coronavirus pandemic sent shockwaves through the business sector, in Britain and around the globe. The financial impact for individual businesses and diverse sectors across the entire economy is still being assessed.

Forced to adapt to an unprecedented set of lockdown rules, many organisations – among them key contact centres – struggled from the outset to keep employees connected from home because of inadequate resilience planning, outdated technology or poor network systems.

Thousands of UK organisations were not set up to deal with the lockdown fallout and were left scrambling to keep operations afloat. Many firms will have made swift decisions, for the right reasons, to cope with the coronavirus outbreak, but without the time or space to properly understand the impact of some of those crucial decisions.

As a result, they may have failed to utilise the best systems and technologies available to them and, with the benefit of hindsight, will find some of their decisions could hinder rather than assist their remote working processes and employees.

As organisations took urgent decisions about how best to hold their meetings online, using an array of different platforms – Zoom, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, etc – a string of security concerns and privacy issues emerged over some video conferencing systems. Within some organisations, as different departments chose different systems there will have been little time for thought about the way in which those platforms would integrate into the office network or systems, or how they might impact data security and GDPR regulations.

In the haste to make swift decisions, many will have plumped for technology which, at the time, was considered best for their organisation, given the circumstances, but may have inadvertently opened their network security to unsafe and insecure practices because of the way in which employees access systems remotely.

The rapid nature of the lockdown in Britain turned normal boardroom decision-making on its head. These decisions could have crucial consequences for business outcomes in the future.

With the dust settling, and businesses getting used to the new landscape, organisations up and down the country must now set aside time to review their lockdown decisions as part of a joined-up digital transformation strategy.



15%

of businesses thought home working as a result of coronavirus had had a positive impact on productivity

Ref 4



Some organisations will be further on the technology curve than others, but all should be considering whether they have made the correct calls and have robust systems, legally compliant processes and best-in-class platforms to weather the worst storms in future.

Businesses should consider whether their infrastructure was able to quickly and seamlessly scale up or down to meet their new needs appropriately, and if not, why not? Was long term remote working embraced when decisions were made or was a sticking plaster used to get through the current crisis? Do the systems and consumer applications integrate effectively with each other, and the available unified communications tools, making day to day working practices more, not less, efficient? When employees or contact centre agents work from home, can their work be monitored and analysed effectively to make sure processes are being followed, and customers are being treated well?

Organisations which have already embarked on digital transformation strategies will testify that deep thinking on all aspects of the journey reap the most rewards.



How might the new norm look?

Working from home is here to stay. It will become a regular feature of weekly life for more employees and contact centre agents than ever before.

The UK Prime Minister has said that social distancing may have to remain “for the long haul” with employers urged to maintain the 2m rule in many offices. Public health policy could also result in a series of lockdowns, if coronavirus spirals once again. Public health experts already suggest that global pandemics are likely to occur more often.

That means businesses, public sector organisations and contact centres, need to be better prepared, utilising technology to bridge the gaps, while remote working must be embraced as a central pillar of organisational strategy.

Remote working has helped to prevent the spread of coronavirus. But in less disease-stricken times, it allows employees and contact centre agents greater freedoms, provides a better work-life balance and brings a raft of other opportunities.

There are considerable benefits, for businesses and public sector organisations, of encouraging greater numbers of employees to work from home. It means savings can be made on office space and the associated costs of business premises.

Remote working can help to build greater resilience into a business, because staff are spread across different locations and are not reliant on office space. Their working environment is secure, cloud-based – meaning operations are theoretically, ‘always on.’

Because of the cloud-based environment, greater opportunities arise for sharing technology, office premises, contact centres and even personnel, with other organisations.



However, remote working also raises a host of different challenges for businesses and employees alike.

The lockdown will already have thrown up a range of tricky issues, particularly for human resources departments. These include the need for human and social interaction and cohesive team spirit, for which public video conferencing can often be a poor substitute.

Social distancing has thrown a spanner in the works of our everyday life – our working routine, face to face collaboration, team building, staff meetings, even social events. While we were all unprepared for the full realities of lockdown life, many have now discovered that without adequate preparation and processes, remote working can make it difficult to collaborate, to work in teams and to share organisational culture.

It requires effort to create a remote office culture, teambuilding and strong collaboration. It needs robust and resilient network security and cloud technology, efficient management and file sharing tools and much more creative thinking about hosting a staff get-together to celebrate a business win, when you can't simply head to the pub.

Embracing the remote way of life

Lockdown life has doubtless created those who like and those who hate remote working. Some will have become used to the unusual experience, others might have changed their minds one way or the other as the weeks rolled on. Those views will have been shaped, in part, by the tools at their disposal.

Many employees will have missed their normal office environment, where they are able to track down colleagues to discuss a tricky issue, and where useful chats are held over the water-cooler.

Managers may also have struggled as lockdown limited their ability to monitor employees and team workflows and found that they lacked the systems to remotely monitor productivity. This needn't be the case.

For organisations of all shapes and sizes, embracing the new norm requires investment in appropriate technology systems and tools to provide staff and managers not only with the means to cope, but to enhance their working environment and transform business outcomes.

It means building organisations and businesses which are agile, flexible, digitally resilient and can withstand external trauma such as enforced lockdowns and economic turbulence with up-to-date technology systems and processes.



It is essential that secure, cloud-based solutions are joined up, fully integrated and work seamlessly for those working in the office and remotely. This means:

- Providing staff with the best collaboration and teamworking tools – to promote better ways of working internally and with partner organisations.
- Remote monitoring which allows detailed analysis of staff and contact centre agent productivity and emerging issues.
- Workforce optimisation, performance and metrics tools.



With these solutions in place, businesses will find it easier to withstand unexpected events.

Remote working also allows organisations to collaborate easily and to react quickly to demand, whether it's adding or reducing capacity or taking and sharing overflow capacity with partners.

This type of shared community cloud and digital technology service is being pioneered in Wales, where FourNet's 'Connecting Wales' initiative enables all public sector organisations – from councils to health boards – to share new technologies, unified communications, omnichannel contact centres, dual language services and even workforce optimisation tools. Seamless technology integration and cloud-based contact centres enable agents to work from home, some in remote rural communities where jobs are scarce.

Delivering the appropriate tools for your employees to work securely and remotely, when the need arises, leads to a happier workforce, more engaged teams, increased job satisfaction and retention, higher productivity and a better work life balance. It also means less commuting time – a bonus which reduces the risk of your employees becoming unwell from germs picked up on public transport, lowering the likelihood of sick days.

The new normal – virtual contact centres

Given the correct technology, contact centre agents working for businesses of all shapes and sizes can be enabled to work remotely. Although many organisations permitted and even encouraged staff to do so during the lockdown period, a significant number of contact centre businesses insisted on employees turning up to the office.

A national survey of contact centre workers, carried out by Strathclyde University in April 2020, found that four in five agents were required to attend their office despite COVID-19 restrictions. Two thirds (64%) who were office-based at the time reported that they had asked to work from home but 26% were refused, 70% were awaiting a decision and just 4% had their request agreed.



64%

had asked to work from home

26%

had their request refused



While it's understandable that many contact centres were unprepared for lockdown, the ease with which virtual contact centres could be established was illustrated by the extra-ordinary speed and efficiency with which FourNet enabled remote working for utility giant innogy/npower. The company had never previously required remote working.

Within just eight days of the UK lockdown being imposed, FourNet - working with innogy's internal IT team - assisted 2,000 employees to work from home, with full functionality, including voice recording, and workforce management (WFM) tools. In regular times, such a wholesale move would normally take 12 weeks.

Since FourNet provides a fully Managed Service solution for innogy, there was no additional cost to the utility company for the switch to remote working.

Across the board, whether agents are working for blue light services or dealing with sales, complaints, admin, or payments, they should be able to work as efficiently in a virtual contact centre as they can from an office - provided they have the correct technology and fully integrated systems to assist.

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, the South East Coast Ambulance Service (SECAmb) non-emergency 111 service was among those experiencing unprecedented call volumes. It's 111 agents were already enabled with remote working tools, which were swiftly put into action. But SECAmb also wanted its own IT team to work from home during the peak period. With FourNet's expert assistance, the request was complete in just 48 hours.



Howard Jeffery,
IT Services Specialist



As part of SECAmb's response to COVID-19, the Trust needed to urgently and dynamically enable clinical and 111 contact centre staff to work remotely and provide a social distancing solution when in the office. Additionally the Trust required an urgent increase in its contact centre ability to undertake 111 call-backs. The Trust faced challenges as it did not have the required infrastructure within some locations staff needed to be relocated to.

As part of their rapid response to this critical need, FourNet were able to provide One-X agent licences from Avaya to support this critical requirement and were able to extremely quickly implement additional SIP Channels to enable to Trust to manage the significant increase in call volumes. This enabled staff to undertake critical services from those locations within offices which didn't have the physical infrastructure to support the traditional wired PC/ Desk phone model.

FourNet's support, service and delivery teams kept in regular contact with the Trust to ensure we were supported in the ever-changing and challenging situation caused by this unprecedented situation.



Contact centres with remote working capabilities pre-lockdown will have fared much better than many of their rivals. But could they have done even better? Did all of their agents' systems integrate with each other or was time wasted each day with outdated applications and endless screen switching?

Operators who were unable to work seamlessly through the coronavirus outbreak should be considering their options and planning for the future now.

Enabling contact centre agents to work remotely can help reduce office costs, cut agent attrition, improve work-life balance and cut sickness. With the right tools, managers working from home are just as able to monitor and analyse calls and workloads.

Virtual contact centres with agents and managers working remotely can include:



- Multi-channel platforms - capable of handling calls and digital (email, webchat, SMS, social media) inquiries across multiple geographic locations.
- Call recording - automatic monitoring of calls for internal and external issues and failures by detecting irregularities, types of conversation, keywords, tone of voice. Flags abusive customers to supervisors, identifies best practice, training requirements and need for 'bad day' agent debriefs.
- Speech and text analytics - insights across all customer and agent interactions. Enables managers to see how calls and customers are being handled, as well as how agents are being treated. Identifies where agents are struggling with limitations in applications, policies, procedures and other components.
- Quality Assurance (QA) - improve agent satisfaction by enhancing consistency of QA by identifying different required call types as opposed to random call selection.
- Workforce management (WFM) - For managers, it helps accurately predict workforce requirements and makes real time adjustments, which improves employee scheduling and matching of workloads, while also providing flexibility for agents. For agents, it allows flexibility by providing preferable work schedules, enables easy shift swaps and holiday demands and simplifies requests for time off and additional hours.
- Collaboration and conferencing - best in class tools for integrated collaborative working both internally and with partners, desktop sharing, secure file sharing, secure audio and video conferencing systems.
- Self-service AI - Automated voice, chatbot and instant messaging to respond to low complexity, low-risk citizen with no agent intervention.
- Secure cloud solution - enables virtual contact centres across multiple sites to maximise capacity for shared services or as a potential overflow service, when resources or agents are stretched.



Technology solutions to deliver successful remote working

FourNet can help you with a raft of complex decisions you'll need to make about the most appropriate technology solutions to allow your business to thrive in the new normal.

For successful remote working, we offer a range of unified communications, technology and managed service solutions, including:

-  **Community Cloud** shared technology via secure cloud, maximising workflows, keeping data secure, enabling staff to work resiliently from multiple geographic locations simultaneously.
-  **Secure audio & video conferencing** virtual meeting rooms for front and back office staff and contact centre agents, delivering robust high-quality engagement technology, for staff and customers. Also enables social and team-building activities for remote staff.
-  **Secure collaboration tools** ensuring team spirit is maintained, with easy and safe instant messaging, file-sharing and management tools integrated into one platform giving you a connected and collaborative workforce wherever they are.
-  **Quality management** Automated omnichannel quality management processes which provide a range of tools for managers, from scoring evaluations to assigning training. Shifts resources from manual monitoring and management tasks to higher-value activities.
-  **Intelligent Managed Services** provides for reduced costs of technology support, longer and more flexible hours of service support and reduces the risk of key IT staff being ill simultaneously.
-  **Workforce engagement tools** help promote a better work life balance, permitting flexible scheduling, holiday allowance and self-service which reduce the quantity of mundane and repetitive customer engagements and allow resource to be shifted to higher value activities.
-  **Flexible UC and Agent desktops** allowing users the ability to communicate from any location
-  **Gamification** builds team cohesiveness and boosts motivation. These tools can help engage and incentivise employees to perform better based on key performance indicators. Also satisfies core psychological and motivational requirements both for individual workers and teams.

All of our solutions are integrated to work seamlessly with each other, eradicating unwieldy technology silos with no need for employees or agents to flick between screens, browsers and applications.



References

1 - [April 3rd to 13th, 2020](#) – ONS survey showed 49% of adults in employment in Great Britain worked from home compared to an ONS survey showing that only 5% of the workforce worked mainly from home during 2019. Between January and December 2019, less than 30% of the workforce (32.6m) said they'd worked from home at any point.

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2 - [A national survey of contact centre workers](#), carried out by Strathclyde University in April 2020, found that four in five agents were required to attend their office despite COVID-19 restrictions. Two thirds (64%) who were office-based at the time reported that they had asked to work from home but 26% were refused, 70% were awaiting a decision and just 4% had their request agreed.

3 - [A May 2020 study](#) conducted by O2, ICM and YouGov showed that UK employees appear reluctant to give up working remotely after lockdown ends. 33% of respondents expected to work from home at least three days a week after lockdown, and 81% expected to work remotely at least one day a week.

4 - [A survey of GB and EU employers](#) by Willis Towers Watson, suggests 15% of businesses thought home working as a result of coronavirus had had a positive impact on productivity, with another 15 percent saying there had been no impact. Only 3% of employers thought there had been a large negative impact.

5 - [A study by IBM](#) in April 2020 showed growing numbers of workers (48%) less willing or unwilling to use public transport because of coronavirus transmission. Among 25,000 US adults, 75% also wished to be able to work more often from home, and more than half – 54% – wanted it to be their primary way of working.

6 - [A survey of CFOs and Finance Directors](#) by Gartner in March 2020, showed that nearly three-quarters intended to move at least 5% of their on-site workforce to permanently remote positions, post-COVID19. Nearly a quarter of companies said that more than 20% of their workforce would remain remote.

7 - [In a separate Gartner analysis](#), in April 2020, HR leaders said that 41% of employees were likely, post-pandemic, to work from home at least some of the time.



Thank you

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