



Employee Engagement and the Future of Work:

Digital Foundations for Our Most Important Resource



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The pandemic changed how we work overnight. The move to working from home, mandated social distancing and other remote work models were put in place for good reason: to protect the health and safety of the Canadian population. Prior to COVID-19 businesses were already on the journey to flexible work styles. The pandemic has accelerated these trends and all signals point to this being permanent rather than temporary for many organizations.

Consider the view of Philippe Johnston, Director General of Digital Services for Transport Canada and President of CIOCAN, [who stated](#), "I never want to go back to work in an office". This is a bold statement coming from a leader in the public sector where employees rarely worked at home prior to this year. Mr. Johnston echoes what many business leaders and employees are thinking today as they look ahead to the post-pandemic economy. Big tech companies like Twitter and Shopify have announced working from home will extend well into 2021 or even permanently.

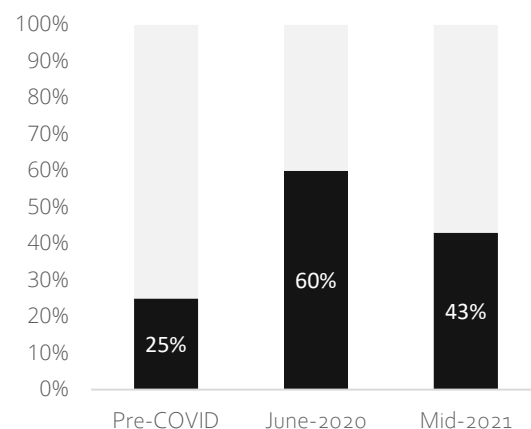
An IDC survey of Canadian businesses in August 2020 revealed the following trend regarding the proportion of the employees working from home at least part of the work week:

- Pre-COVID: 25%
- June 2020: 60%
- Mid-2021: 43% (projected)

Beyond 2021, IDC Canada believes the proportion will generally remain in excess of 40%. While this projection is subject to some variance, what's clear is that we don't expect it will ever go back to pre-COVID levels.

Over the past 8 months organizations have adapted to maintain business continuity – some with more haste than

IDC Reported and Projected % Working from Home



others. Organizations quickly found and implemented various tools to support employee collaboration and productivity, many taking advantage of low cost trials of new cloud applications. In this flurry, many have also unknowingly taken on more risk to their organization, including by allowing employees to operate outside their secured network, use unsecured Wi-Fi networks, and use their own devices; IDC research shows that 44% of employees use their personal phone for work, 37% use their personal laptop for work, and 1 in 5 wireless access points are aftermarket devices. What's more alarming is that 19% of Canadian organizations have experienced an increase in cybersecurity incidents since the beginning of the pandemic (and that's just what they're aware of).

As the dust settles, free trials expire, and we look to the Next Normal, it's time for business and IT leaders to take a step back, plan out how their business needs to run, invest in the right technologies, explore alternatives, and ensure their environment is secure to protect from rising cyber-attacks.

As mentioned in my [previous blog post](#), we know that business in the 'next normal' will be increasingly enabled by digital technology. What does this mean for how and where their work will get done? To help answer that let's look at IDC's 3 dimensions of the future of work.

I. Work Culture – how the work gets done.

This dimension focuses on the distinctive values of an organization, its talent management practices and how effectively they achieve and retain a highly engaged and motivated workforce. A recent IDC global survey revealed that mature employee experience programs (such as engagement surveys, meaningful rewards and recognition, and diversity and inclusion initiatives) result in greater employee productivity. Moreover, large organizations were 11% more likely to see increased demand for employee experience solutions, with mid-sized organizations projecting greater spending overall. Companies across all industries are increasingly adopting a borderless and agile culture. Online communities and platforms are being used to acquire skills and capabilities. Talent sourcing models are expected to evolve and move toward a quicker, virtual, and task-oriented mode of working. COVID emphasized trends in digitization that are expected to continue into the future, with the need to abandon paper and share and operate entirely electronically. COVID has also reinforced the importance of staying connected in both a network and human sense. Employees have jumped into using collaboration tools and we've seen a huge rise in video conferencing usage, more pronounced for internal communication but rising for external communication as well. With shifts in the way we work spurred by COVID here to stay, business leaders need to ask themselves – Why are we doing this and are we doing it the right way? Metrics that go beyond traditional productivity and ROI considerations, focus on worker motivations and what drives them to stay engaged, and measure skills such as problem solving, design thinking, and collaboration will be crucial for organizations to measure their overall performance and define their work culture.

II. Workspace – where and when they do the work.

Businesses increasingly need – and employees expect – a connected, secure work environment, independent of place or time. During the early part of the pandemic, the top three networking challenges stifling Canadian organizations were: insufficient bandwidth for employees; insufficient VPN capacity; and higher customer demand for digital services. If we project that upwards of 40% of the workforce will work from home in the coming years, this puts tremendous pressure on the infrastructure, security and applications required to support remote employees. This has big implications for every aspect of business, including space planning and real estate decisions. The number and size of sites will likely be reduced, impacting technology decision-making and expediting existing trends in cloud adoption. Work anywhere also drives the need for formalizing security practices and rethinking risk management. The future workspace is a flexible and highly connected secure working environment in which workers enjoy mobility, collaboration, and reliable access to the resources they need to contribute and innovate with ease. Failing to equip workers with modern tools and resources prevents workers from reaching their full potential and may lead to their frustration and eventual departure.

III. Workforce – who does the work.

Even prior to COVID, filling the skills gap was top of mind for Canadian organizations. More than 1 in 5 Canadian organizations have deployed new technologies to augment their employee skills. Robotic process automation (RPA), often referred to as software bots, were being used by 22% of organizations in late 2019. Similarly, 25% of Canadian organizations have adopted at least one artificial intelligence (AI) solution. These "digital co-workers" are often used to handle repeatable mundane tasks and enhance productivity; for example, responding to requests for employee onboarding documentation or basic password login resets. Due to the gains in productivity, cost efficiency, and continuous improvements in technology, we expect investments in RPA and AI to continue – these can only solve a fraction of organizations' labour needs. Fortunately, a future of remote working is putting some new solutions on the table for organizations. Openness to and having the technology to support remote working means organizations can unlock access to a larger pool of talent beyond their region or borders. It also means the opportunity to take advantage of the outsourced business functions model; marketing in the form of agencies has long been a commonly outsourced function. Other less traditionally outsourced functions are now on the rise as more businesses are adopting an outsourced IT mentality. Of the rise in outsourcing solutions, we see IT as an especially strong model for businesses to leverage. Modern businesses demand 24/7 uptime. Rapid technology changes are challenging for businesses to keep up with unless their focus is IT, and IT demands a breadth and depth of skill that is only achievable at scale – and that scale is available from a Managed Service Provider. IDC Canada research indicates that the top 3 reasons that businesses are choosing a Managed Services Provider are: (1) to refocus IT staff on more strategic tasks; (2) improved technology availability and uptime; and (3) better protection against security threats.

You don't need to build your future alone.

We're in the midst of the most disruptive period in our lifetime. The feeling of uncertainty permeates all levels of the organization from front-line workers to IT leaders to business owners. The notion of "never going back" that I introduced in the [previous blog](#) is true when it comes to work. Millions of Canadians will not return to the office for the foreseeable future. Building, enabling, and retaining the experience and skills to successfully operate business will continue to be the challenge and one that organizations don't need to handle alone. The right technologies for employee productivity and engagement and the right artificial intelligence for process automation will be paramount in empowering your business.

It's time to transform your business for the future. Successful businesses will rely on experienced advisors to create flexible, secure, connected, hybrid workplaces of the future, leverage consumption-based models from partners, and look for opportunities to outsource business functions that can benefit from scale. Look to a Managed Services Provider as a trusted advisor to help support transformation, employee engagement and the future of work.

READ PART 1 >
Preparing for the 'Next Normal':
The Rising Importance of Digital Tech and Consumption-Based IT



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Tony Olvet is Group Vice President of the research analyst team at IDC Canada. He is responsible for managing the services and research direction of the technology market analysts in Canada. Mr. Olvet is also a member of IDC Canada's Senior Leadership Team. The analyst team that Mr. Olvet manages helps technology vendors, IT professionals, and business executives make fact-based decisions on technology marketing, deployment and strategy. He has researched and presented on a variety of industry topics including mobility, cloud computing, and top executive technology priorities.

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