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Empower Your Dynamic Workforce: How to Boost Productivity, Elevate Engagement, and Prepare to Meet the Challenges Ahead

The current global pandemic has resulted in big changes for business, accelerating digital transformation and precipitating a massive shift to remote work. Yet once the crisis is over, it's unlikely that we will return to what were considered "normal" ways of working. To thrive amid the pressures of a rapidly-changing environment, business leaders must find better ways of working that build paths toward greater employee engagement and productivity.

Key findings

Only 23% of organizations are prepared to win in the new world of work.

Organizations face dramatically different stages of readiness to meet today's challenges. Many are struggling to find the right approach and the right tools to make sure their workforce remains productive and engaged. Only the Leaders (23%) are fully ready to meet the challenge ahead, but other organizations can take a page out of their playbooks to take the lead.

Over half (55%) of workers are less engaged and less productive than they were pre-crisis.

The rapid move to remote work has been a challenge for many employees. They're facing distractions in their personal lives and feeling disconnected from teams they used to see face to face. In an attempt to stay productive, employees are diving headlong into digital immersion, yet many digital tools are causing productivity challenges for the workforce. These factors all add up to distinct and differing experiences across the workforce. Only 11% of workers are thriving in our new reality, while over half (55%) of all workers surveyed report feeling less engaged and less productive than they were pre-crisis.

IT foresees collaborative, connected, flexible tools becoming more important when it comes to supporting the workforce effectively.

Supporting and enabling flexible, agile teams across their organization is high-up on the list of IT decision makers. When asked which of capabilities will become more important in supporting employees' ability to work more effectively, 37% said tools supporting cross-functional collaboration inside and outside the organization, 35% said tools that easily and widely integrate with other key business applications, and 34% said tools to quickly build and easily adapt a new business process, workflow, or project design.

Companies must re-imagine the post-pandemic path to productivity.

While a return to "normal" is unlikely, organizations can learn from the Leaders who were prepared for the crisis and find better ways of working that lead to greater engagement and productivity. Organizations not already doing so should embrace and execute on their digital transformation strategies, rethink their longer-term workforce productivity technology strategies, and make workforce productivity and collaboration tools that meet the needs of IT and the workforce (e.g. a collaborative work management platform) a tier-1 priority.


Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in unprecedented changes for organizations, including a tenfold increase in the percentage of employees working remotely. This remote work is broadly widespread, new, and not temporary: 85% of employees are working from home at least some of the time and 67% rarely worked remotely before the crisis. At the time of this survey, 38% of organizations who put in place expanded remote work policies since the start of the quarantine anticipated those policies being long-term or permanent; since then, an additional study by 451 Research found that now fully two-thirds (67%) of organizations with those policies expect them to remain in effect long-term or permanently. (Source: 451 Research Digital Pulse: Coronavirus Flash Survey June 2020).

This rapid, long-term move to remote work has been a challenge for most employees, many of whom are embracing digital tools as a way to stay connected while working remotely. Yet many of these digital tools are causing additional productivity challenges for the workforce, rather than solving for the challenges of remote work, leading to distinct and differing experiences for employees. Just over 10% of employees are succeeding in the new world of work; the rest are struggling to figure out how to be as productive and engaged as they were before the crisis.

At the same time, IT is challenged with deploying new or existing technologies at scale to a distributed workforce, shifting priorities, and an increased risk of security threats due to distributed teams and rapidly scaling technology usage.

Given these challenges across the workforce and IT, it's easy to see why many organizations are struggling to find the right approach and the right tools to make sure their employees stay productive and engaged. In fact, only 23% of organizations are prepared to meet the challenges and positioned to win in the new world of work.

The good news is, organizations don't have to return to the previous state in order to support employee engagement and productivity, meet the needs of IT, and get back on the path to success.

67%
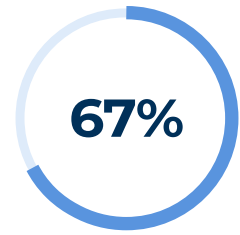
Two-thirds (67%) of organizations with expanded remote work policies expect them to remain in effect long-term or permanently. (Source: 451 Research Digital Pulse: Coronavirus Flash Survey June 2020).
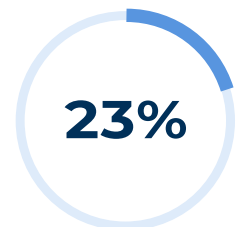
Learning from the Leaders

Organizations have implemented a broad range of long-term mitigation strategies, including temporary or permanent office closures (61%), universal work from home policies (38%), limitations on internal (62%) and external (59%) in-person meetings, and limitations or bans on travel (29%).

These strategies have led to a tenfold increase in the number of employees working remotely, leaving many organizations struggling to find the right approach and the right tools to help their employees remain engaged and productive. At the same time, IT is facing the challenges of increased security threats and rapidly scaling technology usage, so perhaps it's not too surprising that only 23% of organizations are prepared to meet this challenge.

Organizations face dramatically different stages of readiness

Organizations face dramatically different stages of readiness to face this crisis and move forward. Here's how they break down:

23%

Only 23% of organizations are prepared to win in the new world of work.

10% Skeptics
We're stable as a company and can just weather this. We're not too concerned.

20% Laggards
We know we should respond, but dealing with this isn't really in our DNA.

10% Converts
This has shaken us, and we will absolutely take action. We just aren't sure where to start.

37% Chasers
This surprised us, but we'll be okay with a more aligned view of where we need to go.

23% Leaders
We're good, prepared, and ready to ramp up to meet this challenge.

Leaders (23%) were prepared for the crisis and are ready to ramp up to meet the ongoing challenges of today.

Chasers (37%) were caught off-guard by the crisis but are confident that they can succeed with a more aligned view of where they need to improve.

Converts (10%) were shaken by the crisis, and know they need to take action — they just aren't sure where to start.

Laggards (20%) know they should respond but aren't really prepared to deal with this kind of situation.

Skeptics (10%) see themselves as stable as a company and aren't too concerned about the situation.

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Leaders are ready to meet the challenges ahead

Only the Leaders — less than a quarter of all organizations — are fully ready to meet the challenge ahead. What makes Leaders ready to take on the rapidly changing environment we face today? Leaders are much more likely to be tech early adopters that are currently executing on their digital transformation strategies.

They also know that their digital transformation strategy has an impact on workforce productivity: "High achievers" — those employees who report being more engaged and more productive since the crisis — are more likely to work for early tech adopters. Leaders are also significantly more likely to have prioritized workforce productivity and collaboration tools since the COVID-19 crisis commenced.

Taking a page from the Leaders' playbooks

Organizations looking to pull into the lead might try the following tactics from the Leaders' playbooks:

- Embrace and execute on their digital transformation strategies.

- Rethink their longer-term workforce productivity technology strategies.

- Make workforce productivity and collaboration tools a top priority.

- Find the right mix of tools to help employees be more productive and engaged.

- Increase spend on collaborative work management (CWM) tools.

To succeed, organizations can no longer wait to prioritize their digital transformations. They must find the right tools to support employees in becoming more productive and engaged in this new world of work.

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The human dimension is the key to success

The massive shift to remote work has been a challenge for many employees, including 67% of employees who rarely or never worked remotely before the crisis.

Employees are embracing digital immersion, yet many digital tools are causing productivity challenges.

In an attempt to stay productive and work effectively, employees are diving headlong into digital immersion: 51% anticipate increased usage of team collaboration tools, 39% anticipate increased usage of email, and 23% anticipate increased usage of content and storage sharing tools.

Yet many digital tools are causing productivity challenges for the workforce. Over two-thirds of employees (68%) face distractions from too many voice, video, messaging, and email conversations; 64% don't have the tools to quickly build and easily adapt new business processes, workflows, or project designs; and 52% don't have the right mix
of tools to be effective.

In addition, employees report feeling a lack of clarity around their work goals and responsibilities (59%), a lack of alignment with coworkers (53%), a lack of understanding the status of projects and initiatives they're working on (52%).

Not to mention the unique situation most workers find themselves in has led to distractions from employees' personal lives affecting their productivity: 68% report facing too many distractions in their personal lives to focus effectively on work.

The paradox of connectivity

There's also a paradox in terms of how employees are communicating. Employees report their number one challenge to productivity is the absence of daily in-person face-to-face conversations. At the same time, employees report that the number one improvement to their productivity would be to have more focused time not spent conversing with others. Over three-quarters would prefer doing fewer work calls, and 74% would prefer doing less email and messaging. Despite myriad digital tools, workers are struggling to work effectively.

Over half (55%) of all workers report feeling less engaged and less productive than they were pre-crisis.

55%
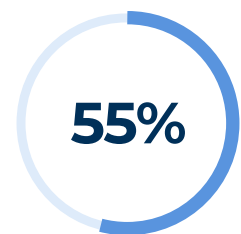
Distinct and differing experiences exist across the workforce

These factors all add up to distinctive experiences across the workforce. While some employees are succeeding, many need help staying engaged and productive remotely. Only 11% of workers are thriving in our new reality, while over half (55%) of all workers surveyed report feeling less engaged and less productive than they were pre-crisis.
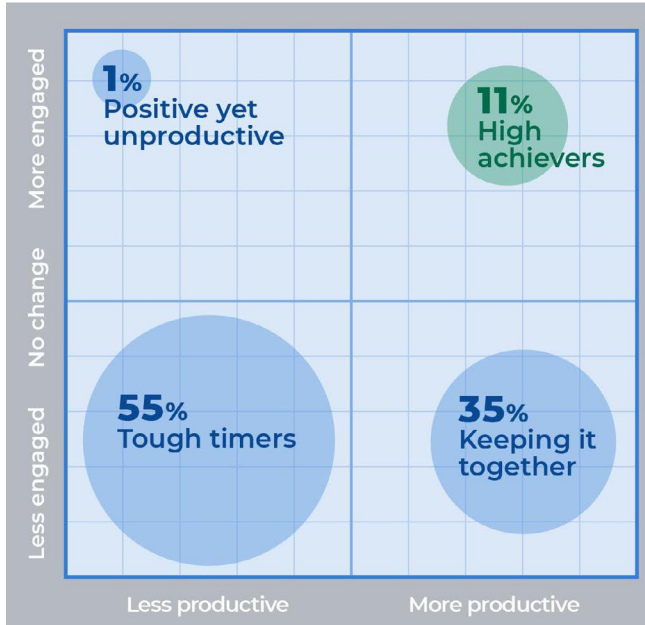
For organizations looking to succeed, it's critical to truly understand and support the human dimension of their business — the workforce — and empower employees to work dynamically, no matter which group they belong to:

- "High achievers" want a better way to improve their own effectiveness at work. Turn them into "overachievers" by giving them a platform to improve work effectiveness, especially through better focus, prioritization, workflow, and app integrations.

- Those "keeping it together" want to improve visibility across their team, and keep their team focused and aligned on goals. They're keeping it together through collaboration tools, but they'd prefer other options. Help them be more engaged with their teams with a platform that enables them to have visibility into their team's work and alignment on priorities and goals.

- Those who are experiencing tough times are struggling to feel engaged and productive. They are less accustomed to remote work and want to improve, but don't know how. Get them on the path toward "high achievers" with a platform that moves them beyond collaboration tools to stay focused and move work forward.

The best way to empower your employees is to give them the right tools to improve their own effectiveness, gain clarity into goals and priorities, align across teams, collaborate (not just communicate), and focus on the work that matters most.

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Think long-term about key technology investments that support employee productivity

IT departments have faced challenges of their own as they scramble to support the majority of employees who have transitioned to remote work. IT decision-makers report their biggest concern going forward is security threats (48%), followed by deploying new or existing technologies at scale (37%). A more distributed workforce, the rapid implementation of new tools and increased use of existing technologies, and remote onboarding and offboarding of employees are all elements that introduce vulnerabilities and increase risk to organization.

Accelerated digital transformations, the implementation of new policies and practices like remote work, rapidly changing business priorities, and evolving relationships with customers and partners are straining current systems. Over half (53%) of these decision-makers say current IT systems are only somewhat equipped to handle the requirements of new post-COVID policies.

To respond to these challenges, IT spend is going up across the board. IT decision-makers plan to spend more on team collaboration tools (61%), digital workspaces (49%), content storage and sharing tools (43%), project and work management tools (40%), and business process management tools (37%). But instead of enabling tools and applications that create unnecessary redundancy, it's critical to think long-term about the best way to support employee engagement and productivity.

Technology decision-makers rank three capabilities as becoming more important when it comes to supporting employees working effectively, going forward:

- Tools that support cross-functional collaboration inside and outside the organization (37%).

- Tools that easily and widely integrate with other key business applications (35%).

- Tools that enable business users to quickly build and easily adapt a new business process (34%), workflow, or design project.

Many IT decision-makers say that improving the workforce experience has become much more of a priority since the crisis, and many are also shifting their longer-term thinking as a result. When given a seat at the table, IT decision-makers can help inform your organization's digital transformation strategy and workforce productivity and collaboration strategy that empowers employees to work effectively, at scale.

53%
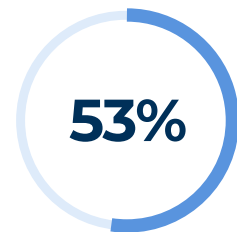
Over half (53%) of IT decision-makers say current IT systems are only somewhat equipped to handle the requirements of new post-COVID policies.

A way forward

A "return to work" isn't likely to mean a return to the way things were, but companies who embrace what comes next can find better ways of working and lead their employees toward even greater engagement and productivity. But old tools and ways of thinking won't get us there. To thrive amid today's pressures, organizations must empower their workforce to work dynamically.

How? By investing in their digital transformation, rethinking their longer-term workforce productivity technology strategies, making workforce productivity and collaboration tools a top priority, and finding the right mix of tools to help employees be productive and engaged, including investing in a collaborative work management platform (CWM).

A winning CWM platform for the enterprise can empower the workforce and deliver on the needs of IT and business leadership. Before you invest in a solution, make sure it addresses the concerns of your workforce and IT by asking yourself these questions:

Is it secure? Increased security threats due to distributed teams and rapidly scaling technology usage has IT concerned. Look for a platform with strong central governance and is secure by design to ensure that your data is protected.

Will it scale? IT needs to rapidly deploy tools and technologies at scale. Look for a platform that makes it easy to onboard teams — and that's robust enough to scale to meet the demands of dynamic growth as projects evolve into enterprise-wide initiatives.

Will it help the workforce align on strategic goals? Employees and line-of-business managers are concerned about alignment around company goals and priorities. Look for a platform that connects the entire enterprise, providing visibility into the work happening across the organization and aligning teams on strategic goals.

Can users quickly build new solutions — without help from IT? One of the top three productivity challenges for employees is not having the tools they need to quickly build and easily adapt new business processes, workflows, or project designs. Give everyone the power to design a solution that works the way they need it to with an intuitive, no-code platform.

Is it adaptable? To be productive, employees need to easily adapt their business processes, workflows, and project designs to respond to changing company priorities. Give people a solution flexible enough to adapt to the ever-changing demands of today's work with a platform that can evolve alongside the nature and scale of any project or initiative.

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Is it collaborative? Employees are struggling to collaborate effectively. They're missing face-to-face conversations, but distracted by too many voice, video, messaging, and email conversations. They're having trouble understanding the status of the projects and initiatives they're working on, and not always able to find the information they need. Give them a single platform that connects everyone — wherever they are — and centralizes all the decisions, conversations, files, data, and key information associated with their work, so the information they need to succeed is always at their fingertips.

Empower your dynamic workforce

Now is the time to think long-term about how to support employee engagement and productivity at scale. Find the right technology to help employees collaborate effectively across your organization, create their own solutions and workflows that integrate other key applications, and improve information flow across their teams and departments. Look for the most return from your budget with tools that are easy to scale and that allow users to ramp up quickly.

Leading organizations are leaning into digital transformation during this uncertain time and are well positioned to face what lies ahead. It's not too late for those who aren't — but they must move quickly to build their workforce a new path to productivity.

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Smartsheet is the enterprise platform built for dynamic work. Smartsheet empowers organizations and teams to dynamically plan, execute, and report on work to move faster, drive innovation, and achieve more.

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