



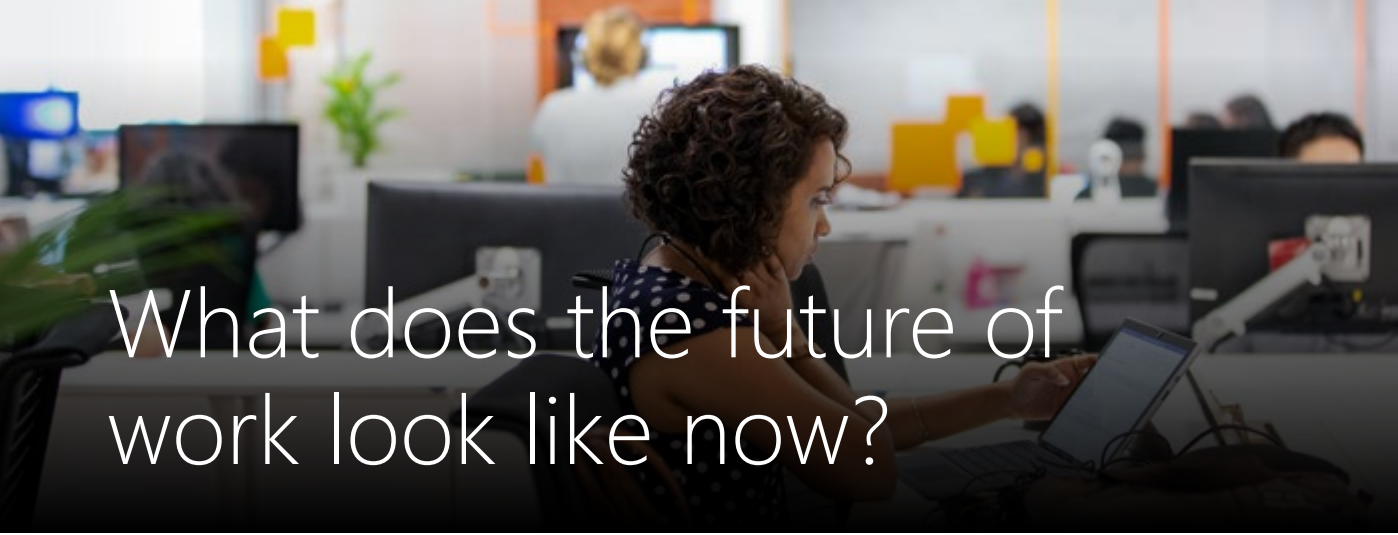
Transitioning Asia-Pacific to a New Normal of Work

In collaboration with  **Microsoft**



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What does the future of work look like now?

“As different parts of the world were hit by COVID-19, life and work were changed overnight for everyone,” Microsoft Head of Marketing at Microsoft Teams, Kady Dundas, said. “All of a sudden we’ve gone from working in conference rooms to working in living rooms, and when you do that you have a high dependence on video.”

“We know that we have about 200 million meeting participants each day, which equates to 4.1 billion minutes of meetings. Those data points show the tremendous movement to remote work.”


The COVID-19 pandemic has forced a dramatic rethink in how people and organizations work. With social distancing becoming a leading strategy in combating COVID-19, travel to the office or to client sites is being discouraged, if not outright banned. For these companies, the only solution to remain operational has been to enable work from home.

In a high-touch world, where we have been forced to operate in a low-touch mode, critical work functions such as individual productivity, team collaboration, organizational alignment and culture have been affected. How have Asia-Pacific’s legacy work styles been impacted by COVID-19, and what does the future of work now look like for the region in this new normal?

The following paper seeks to:

- Identify the impact of COVID-19 on legacy offices and work styles
- Review the role of technology, people and management in the new normal of work
- Share key themes that are shaping the new normal of work
- Provide insights on the future of work across Asia-Pacific





We are not returning to pre-COVID offices or work styles

“We have all had to adapt to this work from home environment very quickly,” Evangelist and Head of NEC Consulting at NEC Asia Pacific based in Singapore, Walter Lee said. “If there was one social lesson learned, it’s that we have all become more connected in a sense, because everyone – the whole world – is going through the same situation.”

While COVID-19 has been a shared experience across all nations, the responses and national challenges that arose have varied greatly across Asia-Pacific. While many organizations are increasingly regional in nature, COVID-19 has changed how some of them have interacted with their partners and clients in other countries across the region and around the world.



“Australia had poor Internet infrastructure that the government had to push hard to start improving,” Advisor at IBRS and Future of Work Expert based in Australia, Dr Joseph Sweeney, notes. “In places like India, however, phone infrastructure became so overloaded that they became even more heavy users of video conferencing. The Philippines had a much harsher push to get more people to work from home.”





Localized workforce challenges

Many of these markets face localized workforce challenges. Japan, Australia, and China, for example, all face rapidly aging populations, while nations such as Vietnam and India are transitioning to economies of high technical skills and a quickly emerging middle class. Governments and business communities were already looking to encourage workstyle innovation prior to COVID-19. However, the transitions brought about by the pandemic has acted as a catalyst for change, more so than an initiator of it.

The transition to remote working environments had been challenging for organizations, but not in the way many had assumed: the biggest challenge was in the rapidity of this transition. As CEO at Microsoft, Satya Nadella, said in Microsoft's April 2020 earnings call: "We've seen two years' worth of digital transformation in two months. From remote teamwork and learning, to sales and customer service, to critical cloud infrastructure and security—we are working alongside customers every day to help them adapt and stay open for business in a world of remote everything".

This transition has been difficult for many organizations and their employees in the initial term. As Chief Operating Officer at Great Place to Work® Institute based in China, Alicia Tung, said, "People are not 100 percent ready, in terms of their ability to apply technology into all daily communications. We are still hesitant right before we have a video conference because we want to make sure that nothing is caught on camera that shouldn't be. That's not about the technology, it's about us. We are just not familiar with the technology just yet".



A remote world

"Organizations need to give a specific and clear vision of where they want to be in terms of working styles. For example, a few companies in Silicon Valley went to their employees and told them that they would be working from home for the foreseeable future... and perhaps forever. That allowed the employees to prepare for the new normal. For many organizations throughout China, however, this was treated as just a temporary initiative, and so employees hadn't set up home offices. They try and work from the living room, while their kids are playing nearby. In the long-term that's what annoys people about work from home," as Great Place to Work® Institute's Tung said.

Historically, the challenge has been in motivating companies to enable the secure and collaborative environment required for remote working. For many organizations, that was placed in a "for later consideration" pile of IT priorities. Now, with the pandemic making that a top priority, organizations and individuals are reluctant to go back, and this will become the "new normal" - a recent Gartner survey found that 41 percent of employees are now likely to work from home at least part of the time post-pandemic.¹

The upshot to all of this is that in being pushed to the adoption of remote working, organizations may end up with a more productive, cost-efficient, and happy workforce, almost by accident. As noted in a report in The Australian Financial Review, more than two thirds of workers say that they are more productive when working at home, and one in three believe the switch to remote work has left them less stressed.²

Sources:

¹ Looking beyond work-style reform, The Japan Times, 24 August, 2018

² Vietnam's Future Digital Economy Towards 2030 and 2045, Data61, CSIRO AU, May 2019



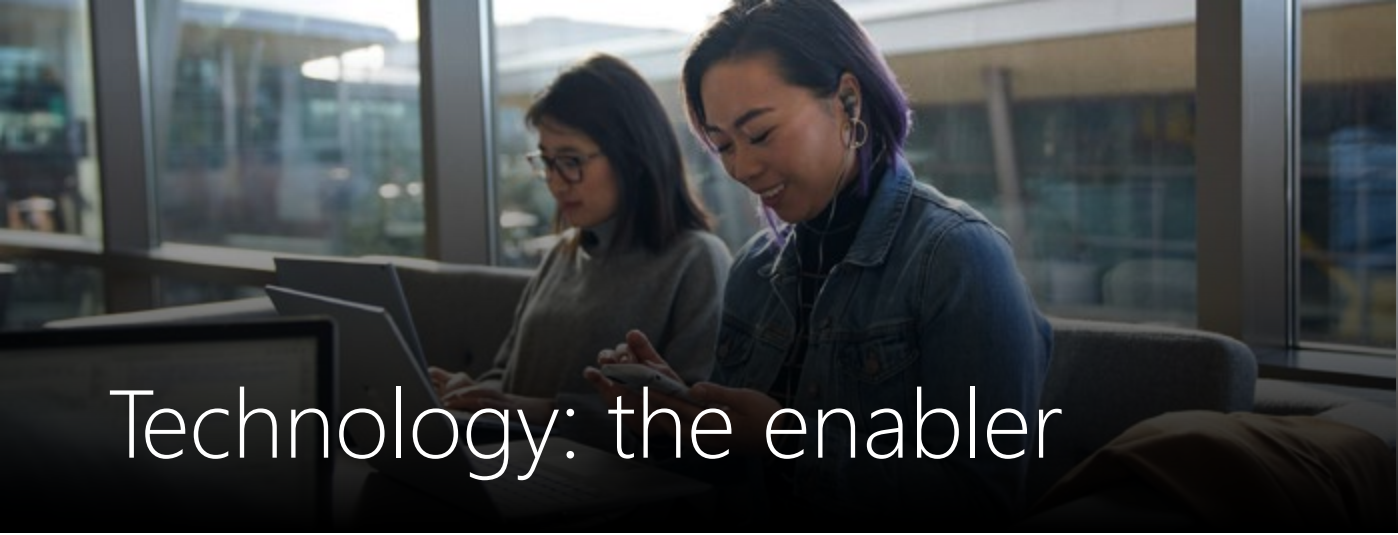
Conferencing and collaboration tools

It may also become easier for organizations to interact and work with businesses throughout the region, as a high standard of conferencing and collaboration tools becomes the norm. These tools are all organizations need to gain access to customers, partners, and new recruits in new and emerging markets, assisting those organizations with talent acquisition and business growth.

“The appeal is often due to the convenience of professionals being able to manage their own time,” Regional Head, Business Marketing at Maybank Kim Eng based in Singapore, Andy Khoo, said. “There’s less transportation and time spent on the road, particularly in countries like Indonesia, Thailand and India, where commutes can be long. For other places like Singapore, it’s simply that staff find they’re more productive when working from home.”

“I know I’ve become busier than ever before. I’ve always considered myself busy and travelled around a lot, now it’s non-stop teleconferencing meetings and getting a lot done. It’s a balancing act,” Khoo said.





Technology: the enabler

Unlike other transformation exercises in recent years, this COVID-driven transformation has not been through technology. Technology is the enabler, but as IBRS' Sweeney said, the technology side had been relatively straightforward.


"When COVID came and everyone had to start working from home, Microsoft Teams was an obvious and natural tool to push out," Sweeney said. "It was already there, and the environment is familiar to anyone using Microsoft 365. It skyrocketed."

"There are issues that need to be dealt with from a technology perspective – collaboration by nature results in the sharing of information, and that can lead to greater data leakage risk. Organizations are scrambling to retrofit policies and processes in place to address this, but there are tech tools to help with that too, such as Azure Information Protection."

At the minimum, organizations need to ensure that employees understand how to use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) for connecting to the office network and collaborating with their co-workers. Many employees would not have previously had VPN tools installed on their home devices, and the first step for any organization as they shift to a remote work environment is to walk the employee through the process of installing and using a VPN.

One other area where organizations might not be sufficiently prepared is the need to start building back-ups into communications. With traditional forms, we have contingencies without even thinking about it, but with technology it does need to be actively planned for.





“Everything I was doing on-premises, I am now doing remotely. From a technology point of view there has to be a back-up for everything. For example, if I’m in an auditorium and the microphone or presentation fails, I can shout,” Founder and CEO of MaxOffice Services Private Limited based in India, Dr. Nitin Paranjape, said.

“With technology, I have invested in multiple cameras and have two laptops which I can switch on immediately. In small set-ups, having a back-up wasn’t ever thought of, but now it’s essential to maintain communications”.

However, the challenge that many organizations face sits more on the people and the management. While it is true that collaborative technology is “easy” in execution, it also requires organizations to make some significant adjustments to how they think about work and how individuals, groups, and managers interact with one another.

As the Associate Professor, Management Discipline Group at the University of Technology Sydney, and Core Member at CBSI (Centre for Business and Social Innovation) based in Australia, Sarah Kaine, said, while many organizations were hesitant to adopt remote working, it often had nothing to do with technology limitations. “Often the reluctance to allow remote work has to do with a quite outdated concept of how managers need to manage – i.e. you need to be able to ‘see’ people to police that they are doing what they are meant to,” Kaine said.

Currently, there are people who remain uncomfortable with the shifting dynamics of how people interact. For organizations, there continues to be a need for change management in adjusting to new ways of working, focusing on the emotional impact of the change. “In terms of systems, we are ready,” said Great Place to Work® Institute’s Tung. China, having experienced epidemics such as SARS in the early 2000s, has been aware of the need to enable remote work and has been actively building continuity infrastructure through mobile systems and local setups.”

“As far as emotions are concerned, we’re not there yet,” Tung added. “But it is happening. In ten years’ time, if I were to make a very broad predication, I would say 60-40 in terms of working in the office compared to working remotely.”





Emerging trends in the new normal of work

Some of the emerging trends that organizations should be aware of as they plan for work, workforces and collaboration in the new normal:

The risk of burnout

According to IBRS' Sweeney, one of the consequences to all the negative talk around the economy and the rapid impact it has had on businesses is that people feel more stressed about their jobs. A common response to this is to "work harder and not switch off", and this is compounded by the lack of the physical divide between work and home life that had previously existed.

"Most people are working very long hours," Group Chief Technology Officer at Heals Healthcare based in Singapore, Paddy Tan said. "Lunch times no longer exist, and people tend to talk and communicate more frequently via meetings – we try to make the more important calls in the morning while people are fresher."

According to Maybank's Khoo, the sense of isolation also compounds the challenges and likelihood of burnout. "This whole experience has shown that everyone can work from home and if it's well planned and disciplined, the productivity level is great," Khoo said. "However, you can't do your face-to-face interactions. Human interaction still beats a lot of conference calls and it's that mindset that really needs to be addressed long-term. It's about mental wellness and healthy living."

Organizations also need to be mindful of the new perception of availability. Sweeney notes that those who have started working from home are fielding calls from their bosses late into the evening, where previously there was a hard line on what was appropriate for out of hours contact.



Concerns on career progression

Organizations are now finding that it is the “introverts” that are delivering while working from home, and the “star player” extroverts may no longer be in the spotlight. “The realization among managers is that collaboration makes outcomes far more visible. This is a tectonic shift in how business is done,” said Sweeney.

Ultimately, organizations will need to reassess how performance is measured, and while collaboration tools can measure activity, they cannot measure the value that an individual has brought to the organization.

In the short-term, this is going to create some discomfort within the organization, and it is important that leaders and the Human Resources unit be cognizant that there needs to be a change management program in place to establish the new way that businesses will assess performance.

Head of Marketing & Digital of Asia Pacific, Knight Frank, based in Singapore, Wendy McEwan, highlighted the concerns that many share about the impact that working from home on a more long-term basis will have on their career path: “There’s a lot of complexity that isn’t being accounted for with work from anywhere,” McEwan said. “Everyone is working from home right now, so we’re all on a level playing field, but as you go back to the office and have face-to-face meetings, you’re at a disadvantage.”

“Think about the diversity conversation, or the ability to be promoted. If you’re not in the office being seen by people one, two, or three levels above you, how are you going to be the person that they think of for stepping up to the next level?”

It will be up to managers and the HR and culture experts to build a new level of confidence within the organization that employees can be “seen” by their bosses and upper echelon even if they are not physically present.



The need for flexibility and empathy

As research has shown, one of the most common issues that people face when working from home is the difficulty in managing at-home distractions. Nearly half (47 percent) of respondents surveyed reported it as a challenge.³ Parents with young children can find themselves distracted with the need to perform parenting duties, for example. Pets might prove a noisy distraction when the office environment generally would not have those. The immediate environment tends to be a more distracting one, with neighbourly noise, cars, and other day-to-day home environment occurrences. A spouse may also be working from home and there might be a need to organize schedules around older children using bandwidth for their tele-education.

The sum of this is that organizations should do their part to help employees create a distraction-free environment (noise-cancelling headphones can be a particularly worthwhile investment). Further to that, managers and teammates should also adapt to be more flexible in the delivery of work and teach people to empathize about the challenges of working from home, as well as understand that regular hours availability might not be a given, as it would be in the context of an office environment.

It is also worth remembering that this is the first time where work from home has been a mandatory requirement at scale, and across cultures and regions. What is being worked through now will become natural to the working experience going forward as the next generation enters the workforce.

“Both teachers and students see many new possibilities,” Innovative English and ICT Teacher at Ritsumeikan Primary School based in Japan, Hidekazu Shoto, said. “Many students have now also experienced their parents working from home through the pandemic. We can see new opportunities for work-life balance.”

“Perhaps in the long run, this will help with human communications and time management too.”

Certainly the shift to working from home has created some new dynamics within the workforce, and rules around work philosophy and empathy between employees, their bosses, and the organization itself need to be re-adjusted. It would seem, however, that the majority of organizations and individuals see this as an opportunity to take a healthy new look at the way we work.

Sources:

³ TechRepublic Premium E-book: 250+ tips for telecommuting and managing remote workers





Tech preparedness and training

"I upgraded my home systems – I purchased an HD camera and a professional microphone," NEC's Lee said, highlighting one way in which the shift to remote work has necessitated the upgrade of people's technology environments and capabilities.

It is not just the hardware technology that individuals are upgrading to help them collaborate better. Many professionals are undergoing new training to push the boundaries of what they are doing with technology. "There have been people

who were resistant to change – it was usually the seniors, because they never needed to learn how to use technology. They always had IT support in the room when they needed it," MaxOffice Services Private Limited's Paranjape, said.

"There's a limit to how much IT support can be done remotely. However, people at all levels of an organization are now exploring technologies in more depth, and that has been the single most important key benefit for people," Paranjape added. "For example, people are now engaging in the simultaneous editing of documents over the cloud. That has boomed where people would previously email documents after meetings – things are getting done much more efficiently now."

Successful collaboration relies on more than a simple laptop and webcam running Microsoft Teams. Organizations need to consider everything from the residential Internet infrastructure, through to security best practices, devices, and the environment itself – many residential properties can have distracting ambient noise that can affect the quality of a conference.

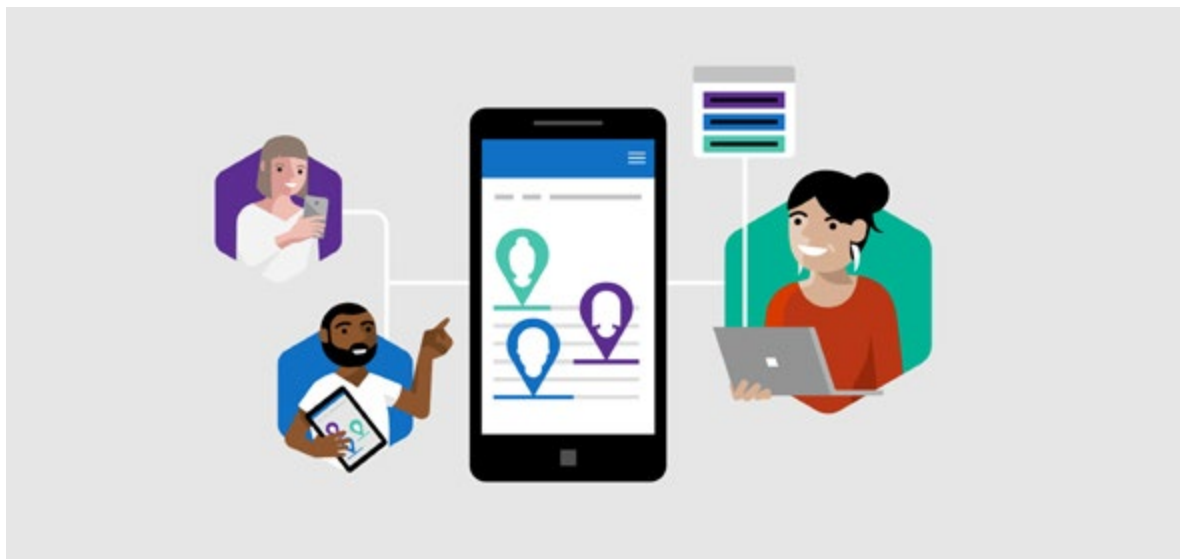
Microsoft Teams itself is quite easy to set up and run, as Sweeney noted. However, maximizing the use of Teams requires training for staff. Not just with regards to best practice use of technology - remembering the security concern and data that suggests around a third of all data breaches are caused by human error⁴ - but also in terms of etiquette and appropriate behaviour in the context of a conference call. The way that we work is changing, as Heals Healthcare's Tan, noted: "because you're in a more comfortable environment, you're going to be more open and able to get a real answer without a lot of dancing beforehand," and the rules around what is appropriate in this context are still being written.

Sources:

⁴ Hackers cause most data breaches, but accidents by normal people aren't far behind, The Conversation, 10 August, 2018



Healthcare agencies in Australia, for example, had been slow to innovate and adopt technology, but rapidly shifted to telehealth in response to COVID-19. Now it seems unlikely to shift back as the benefits of telehealth have been articulated.⁵



Education, meanwhile, was at the forefront of embracing digital interactions, and Asia-Pacific had a particularly effective response. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, for example, highlighted China, Singapore and Japan's response to virtual classrooms as particularly effective. "Teachers can remotely teach their students while they are home, using various platforms. Some 'virtual classroom' services already existed and have been deployed at scale in the context of the corona crisis."⁶

Financial services is another vertical that had a particularly effective response to COVID-19. A Deloitte report found that there will be a doubling-down on the speed of digital transformation that financial services organizations go through post-pandemic and in the coming months and years. They will rely more heavily on cloud technology, the digitization of client experience, and collaboration, so that financial services can have better business continuity strategies in place for the future.⁷

Sources:

⁵ 'The genie is out of the bottle': telehealth points way for Australia post pandemic', The Guardian, 12 May, 2020

⁶ Education responses to COVID-19: Embracing digital learning and online collaboration, OECD, 23 March, 2020

⁷ Deloitte: how financial services is responding to COVID-19, FinTech, 5 May, 2020



Incorporating a social element

Simply enabling video conferencing allows for communication, but that does not necessarily encourage innovation, creative flow of ideas, and camaraderie that makes an employee feel that they are a valued part of an organization. There are technology solutions that can encourage the social element, but here, too, organizations need to put the focus on the policy and company culture rather than the raw technology.

"It would appear that some companies have really thought about how to 'deepen' communication beyond the strictly necessary to include a social element, ensuring that existing bonds and relationships aren't compromised," UTS' Kaine said. "However, it seems this has worked with companies that already are reported to have a very positive employee culture. Trying to initiate social connections through technology when there is a toxic or non-collaborative culture would not be seen as authentic and would be unlikely to be successful."



For example, Microsoft's Dundas has incorporated a social element to her team collaboration that she believes has been an essential and effective way in keeping the teams motivated. "Every morning at 8:45am we jump on for an impromptu stand-up meeting just before we start our day together," Dundas said. "This is just a time for the team to come together and connect. It's really important for businesses to have both the habits and the tools to support that successful blending of work and life."





The future of work is now and hybrid

There are differences in how business cultures across the Asia-Pacific region are adapting to the new paradigms of work. In many cases, these are driven by the national government's own response to the changing nature of work – and not all organizations are currently successful with these approaches.

One such example is Ritsumeikan Primary School in Japan, which has had to find ways to respond to the changing regulatory environment around work that the government has been implementing. “We just started a new working time system, to follow the new labor laws in Japan,” Ritsumeikan Primary School's Shoto said. “With that in mind, and each teacher's individual circumstances at home, we had to think about how to match compliance with flexibility.”

Many sectors have been able to leverage existing government investments in technology and infrastructure to help rapidly shift to new ways of working. Japan's education sector, for example, has been benefitting from the government's planned GIGA School Program Support Plan, a project that looks to engage with the private sector to leverage 5G technologies and ensure that students have access to both devices and connectivity that allows them to better study online. As a result, students are being exposed to different ways of working and will bring that into the future workforce.

The regional social and cultural environments will have a considerable impact on how organizations approach the new normal of work. Those countries where traffic congestion leads to long commutes (India, Thailand, Japan) will find that more staff wish to work remotely when it can save them the commute. Meanwhile, countries with expensive real estate (Australia, Singapore) will find a financial benefit in transitioning to a model where office space is shared and cycled among employees that spend part of the time in the office, and other times working from home.

“To quote one office manager that I spoke to recently: ‘I don't think Australia will need any new office space for the next decade,’” IBRS' Sweeney said.



This is not to say that the office environment will disappear. There will continue to be reasons that people will want to work from an office, but this will be more flexible and fluid – an individual might come into the office some of the time, and then spend the remaining 60 percent of his or her work week working from home, for example.

The hybrid approach in the future of work reflects how the lines of work and personal life are blurring. Organizations that are not already in the process of developing policies to enable individuals to break away from the standard 9-5 hours, to become more results-driven rather than hours logged, and setting reasonable expectations around availability, will find that their organization struggles post COVID-19.

It is also important that organizations understand that an employee not being available during part of the day does not mean that they are unproductive. “During this time of remote work, people are working an additional one hour per day, we know this from our data,” Microsoft’s Dundas said. “The work week looks different though, with people doing childcare activities in the morning, and tending to log on later into the evening hours. We’ve also seen an increase in work done on weekends.”



“This points to a real shift in how we think of work getting done, and what the traditional work week looks like. The new normal will be hybrid in the sense of people working from the office and also at home, but it will also be hybrid in terms of the hours of the day and how much work gets done Monday through Friday versus the weekend. We’ve all learned the lesson about how productive we can be while also being flexible.”



Ultimately, technology is the enabler, but not the solution. Giving individuals access to video conferencing tools and cloud services for collaboration is crucial for the success of a remote working policy, but it cannot be the policy unto itself. In the mad scramble to keep the lights on through lockdown, business leaders simply enabled collaboration tools and built robust security strategy around it. As lockdowns continue to ease across the region, the next step will be a renewed focus on policy as we begin this hybrid new normal of work.

As Dundas noted, now that we are working remotely, we're ultimately finding that the benefits are too good to ignore. "Across industries what we're going to see is organizations take these learnings and new practices and pull them into the future."



For more information on how organizations throughout Asia-Pacific are transitioning to a new normal of work, [click here](#).



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