Effective Remote Work with Microsoft Teams

INTRODUCTION

Various travel restrictions and quarantine measures undertaken by organizations, cities and countries to combat the COVID-19 outbreak have caused uncertainties and disruptions as 'on premises' business operations are either suspended, being run in limited capacity or have entirely moved to a virtual workplace. In organizations where remote working capabilities or operational processes were not fully pre-planned or established, this has caused a critical need to equip and train employees on the use of workstream collaboration solutions that can enable them to perform their job at home. These technologies include unified communications, document management, file sharing, meeting solutions, and productivity suites.

While the expectation, or at least hope, is that workforces will eventually return to physical onsite normalcy, business leaders are seeking to improve team coordination and performance by removing barriers that impede collaboration to drive organizational resiliency against world-impacting events. Many organizations are already accelerating their migrations to Microsoft 365, and for those already on the Microsoft platform, end-users are being empowered to rapidly adopt digital applications, specifically Microsoft Teams. Teams is the hub for team collaboration in Office 365 that integrates the people, content, and tools your team needs to be more engaged and effective – to make remote working the new norm. Whatever the reason, if your organization has moved to a remote work operating model, there are many different considerations you must include for your short-term migration and end- user adoption planning.

Quest has extensive technical experience in this area. We have first-hand knowledge of a successful remote working business model. Many of our employees normally work from home, so we have mastered the cultural aspects necessary to ensure efficient and effective global operations. Over the past couple of weeks, we have fielded many requests from clients and partners to provide advice on various aspects of remote work. We have prepared this white paper as an initial collation of our best practice recommendations.

RECENT RISE IN WORK FROM HOME

For many people and organizations, the future of work is remote.

Different studies come to very different conclusions about the scale of the current remote workforce. Precise data is hard to come by, however, recent world news reports all point in the same direction: millions, if not billions, of people are newly working from home today, and we expect that many will remain so as business operations continue to shift to become primarily or exclusively virtual.

This shift disrupts the traditional workplace, employment models and work relationships. The way many organizations operate and collaborate must now align with the new reality of where, when, why and with whom we will work. The physical disconnect of businesses and their stakeholders will require adoption of new technologies in order to maintain continuity and provide better future experiences for all. As remote work from home is fast becoming a fixture of the digital work environment, CIOs are quickly planning and adopting modern virtual workplaces and collaboration strategies.

DEPLOYING TECHNOLOGY FOR WORKFORCE DIGITAL DEXTERITY

For organizations large and small, public sector or private sector, global or local, it's no longer a question of whether they should implement Microsoft 365 services. It's a question of which ones, in what order and how. The most common questions we hear from our clients revolve around two high-level questions:

1. How should we plan our roadmap for implementation? Which Microsoft 365 plans or services should we implement, in what order, and what key steps should our organization take during the planning, design, deployment, change management and support phases?

2. What technical challenges will we face, and what are the pitfalls? What do the experiences of other organizations that have implemented Microsoft 365 services tell us about the difficulties that we're likely to face, and how can we avoid or mitigate these issues?

3. Microsoft 365 is a diverse, growing platform, and organizations are moving beyond the core services to offerings with Microsoft Teams to jumpstart their remote workforce.

4. To help boost this growth, in early March, Microsoft announced an enhanced version of the free Microsoft Teams product — removing restrictions to the number of people who can join a team and offering additional features usually reserved for paid users. Microsoft also revealed that it was offering a six-month free trial for the premium tier of Microsoft Teams. With Microsoft Teams more than doubling the number of daily active users from 20 million to over 44 million in the five months between November 2019 and March 2020, it's clearly emerged as a crucial tool for those who work from home and for increasingly distributed workforces.

Microsoft Guidance: Comparing Microsoft 365 Plans

TECHNOLOGY PREREQUISITES TO GET YOU THERE

The technologies leveraged to enable a remote working environment are not foreign or new concepts to the broader audience reading this whitepaper.

However, there have been several recent innovations in the space and newer styles of remote work have emerged recently, so this section will walk you through the enablers and your technology options to support your remote organization.

To set some perspective, while the goal is minimal disruption, user behaviors may need to change to get the most out of a remote working situation. As a common example, in an office scenario, some users may tend to center their world around their device. This behavior manifests as saving documents locally, then moving them to a collaboration space, or emailing documents back and forth with minor changes (and file name changes) in order to collaborate, iterate, and finalize. While these behaviors can be effective in an office where you're easily connected to everything and will always be using the same device every time, that reality shifts when moving to a remote work situation. The mentality to embrace when working remote is to treat your device like a lightbulb. If something

were to happen to it, you should be able to move to a different device and continue to work.

Your technology enablers should support this type of design, so your employees can stay productive regardless of whether they're on a corporate device, or a personal device (BYOD), including laptop, tablet or cell phone.

So, let's break this down into focus areas:

Getting Set Up, Working with People, and Working with Systems.

Getting Set Up

This is the table stakes part of the enablement. In order to work remotely, people need to login and connect. To enable your employees to continue to access your technology systems, they should be able to connect their laptop or mobile device to their home network, authenticate to your corporate identity provider, and begin accessing their applications and data stores.

Enabling external access for devices to identity providers will support this section. For on-premise Active Directory implementations, VPN technologies have existed for decades, DirectAccess has been available for several years now, and more recently Azure AD and hybrid Azure AD can support remote identity authentication and access.

If you leverage one or all these technologies, you should assess their rightsizing for the amount of office workers who are converting to remote workers. This would mean evaluating the numbers of domain controllers which are accessible via VPN or direct access, assessing the number of users/devices leveraging Azure AD or another third-party cloud identity provider (such as Office 365, Google Cloud, etc.).

Microsoft Guidance: Sizing your network bandwidth for your VPN/VDI connected users to consume Teams while remotely connecting

Working with People

Most of your recently displaced workforce will need to work together. If they didn't need to work together, they likely would not have needed to be in an office to begin with. In order to stay effective while in a remote work situation, they would require some collaboration tooling to support their connection with colleagues and data. This supported by some organization change and different ways of working (which is covered in a later section) will keep them effective while working remotely.

The most common technologies that support collaboration are email, chat and messaging, global address lists (GALs) and calendaring, meetings and audio/video conferencing, collaborative document systems (including coauthoring), and screen sharing. Access to these capabilities can get your workforce highly productive quickly, giving you much needed time to sort out access to more difficult systems such as line-of-business applications. The other good news is that many of these solutions are cloud-based, making them natively remote work friendly.

If are you already a consumer of Teams, Slack, or Zoom, you'll be familiar with many of these cloud capabilities. Extending access to them and validating your licensing situations can help you quickly enable collaboration of your newly remote workforce. If you are currently not consuming a cloud-based collaboration platform, please follow Microsoft's guidance to understand how you can quickly enable your workforce.

Microsoft Guidance: Adding meeting and conferencing workloads in Microsoft Teams

By example, Exchange on-premises deployments can be extended to Office 365 in a hybrid mode to allow for access to your existing email system within a reasonable amount of time and without requiring a full environment migration to enable access. From there, Office 365 as additional capabilities to allow instant access to voice and video capabilities, coauthoring document collaboration, and chat capabilities.

Keeping employees effective will require you to also present access to their data. This might mean moving data from file servers or document repositories locally into something that's externally accessible or cloud hosted. Migrating file content from Windows file shares to SharePoint Online sites or Teams

sites will help users stay effective and not require 100% internal access to your systems.

Lastly, if you work consistently with business partners outside of your organization, setting up relationships in common collaboration platforms will greatly reduce the amount of disconnection when being remote Enabling Office 365 users as guests will allow you to collaborate on documents and share group chats. Also, enabling free/busy calendar availability lookups between organizations and synchronizing Global Address Lists will make it easier to find a time they can collaborate. Being able to simply schedule time to talk based on calendar availability cuts down on a lot of back and forth communication and gets you straight to working together effectively.

Working with Systems

Once your enabling systems are configured and sized correctly, you should evaluate the systems, application, and data that your userbase must consume in order to stay productive. At the most basic level, this will mean their productivity applications (such as Office 365/G Suite, Teams/Slack, etc.), line-of-business applications (SAP, Epic, NetSuite, Schlumberger, Solidworks, etc.). Enabling access to these can be done through a few solutions.

VPN technologies will allow your employees to leverage a corporate, or personal device to access your network as if they were in the office. This would require them to install any software required to access your core business applications, such as Office, SAPGUI, etc. If your employees are able to take their devices with them, this typically suits most needs and isn't required 100% of their workday, as a lot of users won't require access to corporate resources for all activities in their daily workload.

Virtual desktop/application virtualization technologies are at the opposite end of the spectrum. These allow your employees to use any device capable of connecting to them, to leverage a virtual environment, which is internal to your corporate network. This would require the least amount of exposure of applications to external networks but would require the heavier tax of running a full corporate-connected device as a virtual machine within your network (or hosted in Azure). For several heavily internal organizations, ones with very high data loss prevention requirements, this might be a quicker, more fit-for-purpose capability for your needs.

If you're planning on connecting employees through your existing corporate network infrastructure, leveraging VPN or VDI type technologies, you may want to evaluate the impact on the local network and connectivity to the voice and video infrastructure. The Microsoft Team's network preparation article provides some good guidance on network sizing and load testing for VPN/VDI traffic consuming voice and video while leveraging existing collaboration technologies.

Application gateway technologies allow you to expose some or all your applications, in a secure way, to external connectivity. This is typically something you'd deploy to applications that are a low risk to expose externally, have high volumes of users that need to connect to them, and those users might also need to be highly mobile. If you use these currently, you should evaluate any load imbalance issues you might have. If you're currently having difficulty serving up a set of applications to your recent-work- from-home userbase, utilizing an application gateway might be the route for you.

EFFECTIVE ADOPTION OF A REMOTE WORK BUSINESS MODEL

From a business perspective, the adoption of a remote working model should ideally enable the organization to function as least as efficiently and effectively as an 'on-premises' model. Furthermore, it should ensure that the quality of the customer experience is maintained or even enhanced. Whether the adoption of the remote model is a long-planned change, or a short-term business continuity response, the organization should aim for a positive outcome.

From our experience achieving this requires success in four distinct but interrelated areas. Let's think of them as 'hierarchy of needs':

1. **Technology:** The remote working solution must provide a comparable environment for the users to the 'on premises' model. This is especially important in terms of access to applications and data, response times, and 'quality of service'. A user will respond positively to working remotely if they can reliably get to the core applications and data needed to do their job.

2. **User Environment:** Attention must be paid to the physical environment for remote working, especially when it becomes a permanent solution. While a laptop on the kitchen counter may work temporarily, long-term remote users will be more effective in a dedicated space, properly lit, preferably with some separation from other household activities. If they are often on voice or video calls, users also benefit from quality headsets and monitors.

3. **User Confidence:** Moving to a remote model often involves using new products to communicate and collaborate with co-workers. A lot is written about 'user adoption'. From our point of view, assuming that the technology works, the key to adoption is user confidence – the confidence to use a new application, especially when it replaces a product they have used for a long time, and subsequently the confidence to explore new features and functionality. That confidence comes from an overall comfort level with technology and the provision of generic training and context-specific support.

4. **Organization Culture:** Many facets of company life change with the adoption of a remote work model. From our experience, three aspects are worthy of special attention.

- **Internal communications.** Effective internal communications are important in all organizations but especially in a remote model where people lack the opportunity to see and hear from their managers and business leaders in person on a regular basis.

- **Peer to peer 'social networking'.** When working remotely, it is difficult to develop close relationships with others: trusting coworkers, understanding their perspective, and tolerance of their minor mistakes are all more difficult. That can undermine effectiveness, especially in tasks where collaboration between different departments is needed.

- **Celebrating success.** Celebration is naturally a shared activity. While we can take quiet satisfaction in some things, to celebrate goals we've achieved, we need others.

RESOURCES

Today, Binary Tree offers a full range of products and services to accelerate your work-from-home initiative. Whether you're looking to migrate to Office 365 or between Office 365 tenants, our software and services can move your users, email, public folders, directories, and applications content while enabling your users to continue to collaborate and work remotely as you migrate.

NEXT STEPS

Leverage our 10+ years of experience in remote work, cloud computing, and Office 365 migrations for insights and solutions that you can put into practice right away.

LEARN MORE

For more information, visit us at www.quest.com/binarytree

> "At Quest, we've successfully used Microsoft Teams and Yammer to help us with each of these aspects."

ABOUT QUEST

Quest creates software solutions that make the benefits of new technology real in an increasingly complex IT landscape. From database and systems management, to Active Directory and Office 365 management, and cyber security resilience, Quest helps customers solve their next IT challenge now. Around the globe, more than 130,000 companies and 95% of the Fortune 500 count on Quest to deliver proactive management and monitoring for the next enterprise initiative, find the next solution for complex Microsoft challenges and stay ahead of the next threat. Quest Software. Where next meets now.

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