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Three Things to Consider as You Prepare Your Business for a Hybrid Work Environment

Gina Sanchez
Industry Principal, Global Network Services

In Partnership with
Colt Technology Services and Ciena

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Introduction

In a COVID-19 world, organisations were impelled to turn to digital technologies to augment or replace traditional ways of interacting, learning and working. As we inch our way back into normalcy, businesses need to know what that means. What aspects of our pandemic work-life should continue? What does a work environment look like now? What is it going to look like in the next couple of years?

The office has expanded to residential apartment towers and leafy suburbs, to summer homes and co-working hubs. According to Frost & Sullivan's latest global survey of IT decision-makers (ITDMs) conducted amid the pandemic and completed in December 2020, 83% of IT decision-makers worldwide expect that at least one-quarter of their employees will work remotely at least sometime in 2022.[1]

In the pre-COVID past, accommodating remote or travelling workers was a temporary or part-time issue. Soon organisations will have to build a sustainable way to support a hybrid workforce. When asked about the impact of COVID-19 on their organisation, 55% of ITDMs mentioned they are highly impacted by the lack of appropriate bandwidth and technology tools for remote workers.

Businesses nowadays must ensure that the sizeable proportion of remote workers—regardless of where they set up their laptops—maintains the same levels of productivity and security as their in-office counterparts. This means businesses will need to focus on three pillars: a flexible network; cloud-based collaboration tools; and consistent security.
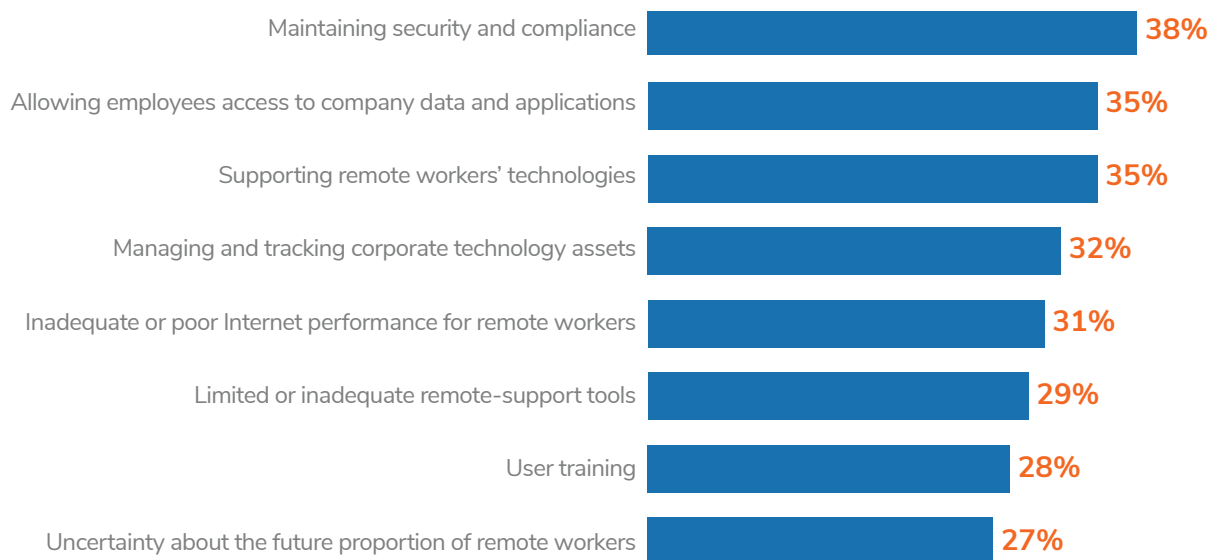
> **Businesses nowadays must ensure that the sizeable proportion of remote workers—regardless of where they set up their laptops—maintains the same levels of productivity and security as their in-office counterparts.**

1   Top Predictions for the 2021 UCC Market, Frost & Sullivan, 2021.

Business Challenges Associated with a Hybrid Work Environment

COVID-19 accelerated the pace at which organisations are embracing hybrid working. Only 3% of survey respondents said no workers in their organisations are expected to be fully remote in the future, which means a very large percentage of enterprises will be facing the challenges that arise when trying to support highly distributed virtual teams in a hybrid work environment.

Biggest challenges with regard to supporting remote work

Challenge	Percentage
Maintaining security and compliance	38%
Allowing employees access to company data and applications	35%
Supporting remote workers' technologies	35%
Managing and tracking corporate technology assets	32%
Inadequate or poor Internet performance for remote workers	31%
Limited or inadequate remote-support tools	29%
User training	28%
Uncertainty about the future proportion of remote workers	27%

Source: Frost & Sullivan

Security is, not surprisingly, the main challenge for ITDMs when supporting remote work. Followed by the necessity to provide employees with remote access to business applications and key data; empowering them with the right technologies to facilitate their job and collaborate; all of these in a high quality, flexible environment.

Additionally, as businesses consider different office re-opening possibilities, the need to connect the in-office workforce with remote employees requires enterprises to re-think and re-design the workplace.

35% of decision-makers selected "Adapt to new work modes" as the top key digital transformation objective that has been accelerated as a result of COVID-19. Hybrid working is the need of the hour, but it comes with both technology and people challenges.

Technology challenges

- While businesses are being pushed to embrace remote work, the truth is many are not well equipped to provide their remote workforce with the appropriate tools to enable a high-quality experience and support optimal levels of productivity. This includes ensuring that business apps are regularly updated, devices have adequate security protections, and data and apps are consistently backed up. 36% of IT decision-makers list "supporting remote workers' technology" as one of their top three concerns.

- As employees are geographically dispersed, teams access corporate networks, applications and resources both via corporate-owned and personal devices. This may force organisations to put in place a bring-your-own-device (BYOD) strategy to support multiple types of devices and manage the policies/governance regarding the use of consumer vs. company-issued devices. Risk management and governance policies are difficult to maintain with BYOD. Companies remain responsible for compliance with data privacy and sovereignty regulations, regardless of where employees work.

- A highly distributed workforce translates into an increasing use of public networks. Both fixed and mobile internet connections as well as unsecured Wi-Fi create additional risks of security breaches. The global pandemic created an upsurge in phishing attacks and high-level data breaches, which reinforces the need to guarantee security for employees and companies.

People challenges

- 2020 will forever remain in our collective memory as one of the most unexpected and impactful years in history. Repercussions of the global pandemic touch every human being at multiple levels: personal, emotional, professional. The resultant widespread uncertainty not only affects businesses in economical and operational aspects. Employee productivity and motivation are unavoidably impacted by apprehension and anxiety:

  o 56% of ITDMs report that COVID-19 created low employee morale and engagement

  o 24% cited "improving employee engagement" as a key objective for digital transformation

- While virtual video conferencing tools are key to stay connected and collaborate, employees are experiencing tiredness and exhaustion linked to Zoom fatigue and related-type conditions

- Businesses are concerned about experiencing a drop-off in innovation and productivity when employees are not face-to-face.

Three Considerations to Support a Hybrid Work Environment

As businesses reframe their workspace to thrive in the post-pandemic era, here are three critical considerations:

1. Your network is the lifeblood of a hybrid work environment

Just as walls and floor space define a physical work environment, the network defines your digital hybrid environment. The network connects employees with the data and applications they need to do their jobs and connects customers and partners to your business. Additionally, in the hybrid work environment, you need to connect dozens or hundreds of far-flung work locations far from the corporate network, as well as all your business locations.

This requires proper planning and strategizing. Choosing the right network solutions and architectures empowers your IT strategy to support current and future IT developments that, in turn, support business goals.

But not all network service providers are prepared to meet the snowballing and dynamic needs of enterprises. Be sure your provider's network is built on an intelligent, software-based infrastructure that enables programmability, automation and analytics.

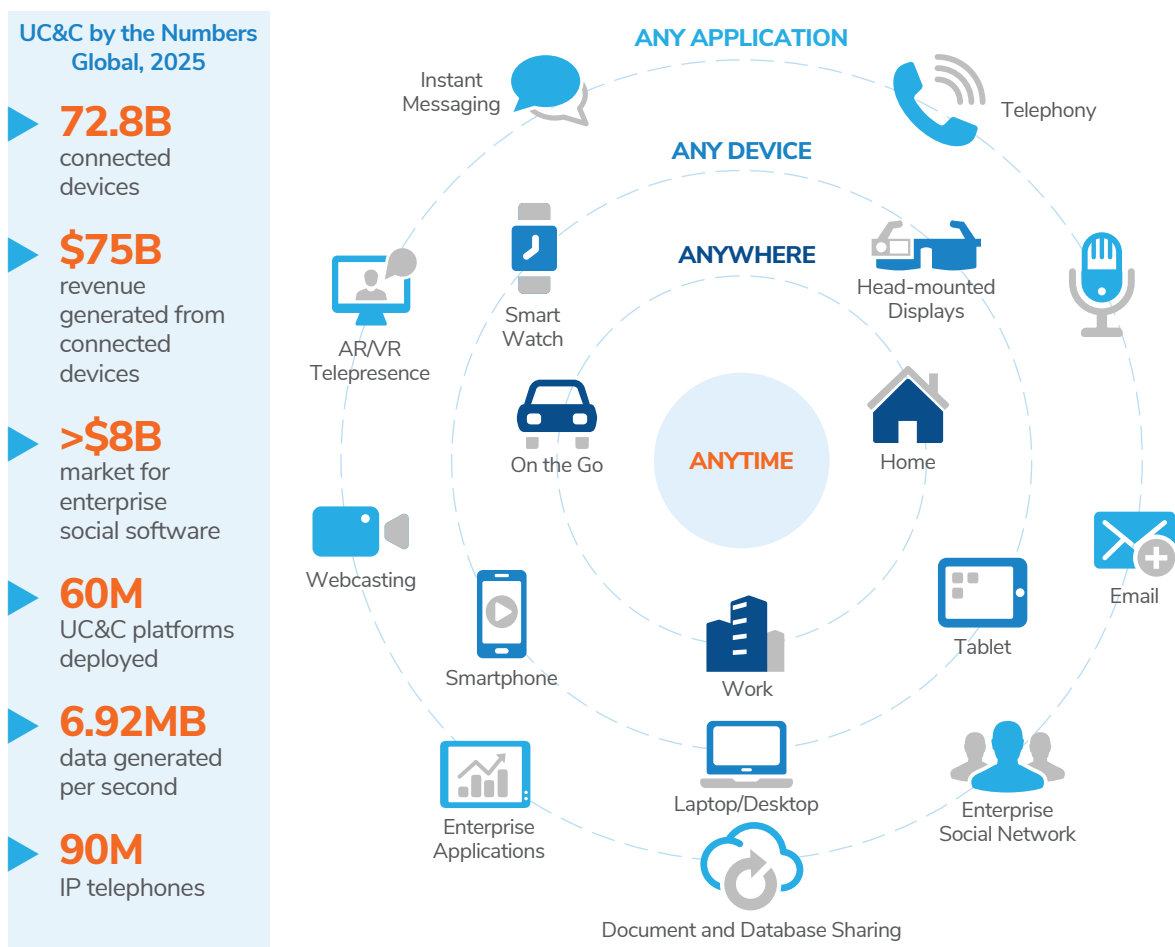You will need to fortify your business network to achieve:

- **High-capacity**—Ensure your network can handle a massive increase in traffic to and between your data centres and cloud:

  - Hybrid multi-cloud environments require high capacity networks to facilitate not only the connectivity between instances but direct cloud links that considerably improve user experience

  - High capacity networks support the growth in bandwidth-hungry enterprise applications (e.g., cloud applications and video conferencing tools)

  - Back-to-office activities will also require additional bandwidth provisioning for video and collaboration tools. According to bandwidth modelling completed by Colt Technology Services, even at an in-office occupancy rate of 60%, bandwidth requirements are likely to increase by 50% driven by video demand alone

- **On-demand scalability**—Ensure your network can scale to your needs. Allowing your business to align capacity with usage, speed deployments, improve performance and decrease costs

- **Low latency for improved application performance**—Support business applications that are increasingly specialised and time and performance-sensitive, with low latency and highly reliable networks

- **Flexible routing and traffic prioritisation with SD-WAN**—Leverage all available network technologies at your business locations (MPLS, Ethernet, cellular, broadband Internet) to optimise costs and application delivery

- **Control**—Give your network team centralised visibility across network components, with the ability to make changes to configuration or accounts via a self-service portal

- **AI-aided performance**—Ensure consistent app availability and performance via an intelligent network that anticipates and routes around congestion and self-heals when problems occur

•   www.frost.com

2. Your employees need cloud-based collaboration and productivity tools

High-quality audio, video and one-click content sharing and collaboration at scale are urgent necessities in a hybrid work environment, as are straightforward, user-friendly solutions.

People have talked about the Future of Work for some years now. However, circumstances have accelerated the journey. We face the future, now. Assisted by the appropriate tools, today's employees, regardless of their location, must be able to complete activities, communicate and collaborate with any team member ubiquitously.

Unified, Borderless Communication & Collaboration

UC&C by the Numbers
Global, 2025

▶ **72.8B**
connected devices

▶ **$75B**
revenue generated from connected devices

▶ **>$8B**
market for enterprise social software

▶ **60M**
UC&C platforms deployed

▶ **6.92MB**
data generated per second

▶ **90M**
IP telephones

ANY APPLICATION

Instant Messaging   Telephony

ANY DEVICE

ANYWHERE

Smart Watch   Head-mounted Displays

AR/VR Telepresence

On the Go   **ANYTIME**   Home

Webcasting   Email

Smartphone   Tablet

Enterprise Applications   Work   Enterprise Social Network

Laptop/Desktop

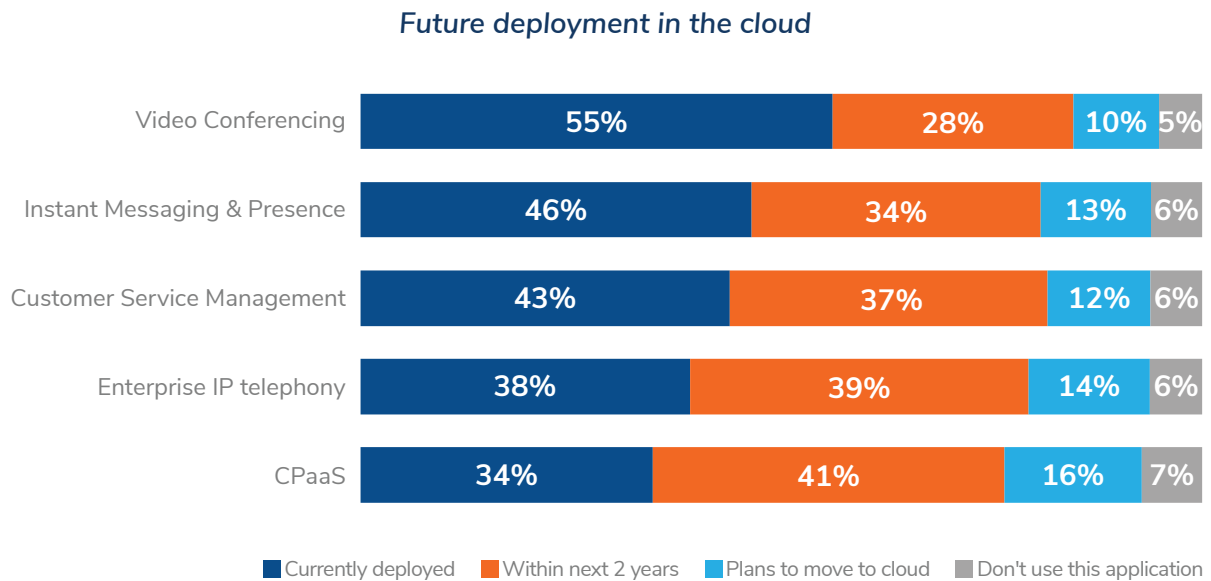Document and Database Sharing

Source: Frost & Sullivan

Businesses are implementing cloud-based Unified Communications & Collaboration (UCC) solutions, to facilitate employee engagement and maintain productivity in a hybrid environment.

The most common UCC capabilities include instant messaging and presence, unified messaging, audio conferencing, web conferencing, softphones, UC software clients and video conferencing. The need is not only for remote workers; 74% of ITDMs say it is critical for frontline workers to work collaboratively with teammates and customers.

Frost & Sullivan survey data shows that the majority of organisations has currently deployed or will deploy cloud UCC services within the next two years:

Future deployment in the cloud

	Currently deployed	Within next 2 years	Plans to move to cloud	Don't use this application
Video Conferencing	55%	28%	10%	5%
Instant Messaging & Presence	46%	34%	13%	6%
Customer Service Management	43%	37%	12%	6%
Enterprise IP telephony	38%	39%	14%	6%
CPaaS	34%	41%	16%	7%

Source: Frost & Sullivan

By supporting effective cloud-based UCC solutions, IT decision-makers expect to realise the following benefits:

- Gain operational efficiency/workflow automation (cited as a benefit by 36%)
- Enhance office worker productivity (30%)
- Support worker or customer safety (30%)

A hybrid work environment requires the right network integrated UCC solutions to provide:

- **Pay-as-you-go pricing** aligning costs with usage

- **Consistent user experience** for remote and office-based workers across collaboration tools, conferencing, messaging and voice

- **Simplified management** to support enhanced monitoring and control of connected devices and applications in a complex hybrid work environment

- **Integrated voice capabilities**, enabling enterprises to reduce costs and streamline management by shifting VoIP communications to the video platform

- **Data management** required to maintain data privacy, especially with the use of immersion technologies like Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and Holographic Telepresence to enable enhanced collaboration

3. Leveraging corporate digital assets requires end-to-end security

Data is the new currency, supporting the achievement of business goals including growth, innovation, productivity, efficiency and improved customer experience. 75% of businesses say "relying more on data analytics/AI to make decisions and improve operations" is a top strategic goal.

Nevertheless, however important data is to enterprises, collecting, processing and storing exponential amounts of data is in the best of cases challenging. The hybrid workplace only adds to those challenges, requiring the business to deal with large volumes of data in multiple formats and from multiple sources, in most cases unstructured—e.g., video files, emails, messaging, and documents.

A hybrid work environment introduces challenges related to data security and availability:

- Data created on user endpoints (personal devices) may not be sufficiently protected

- Data transmitted over the public internet is at risk for breach or loss

- Data gravity; that is, high volumes of data that are difficult to move or back up because of limited network capacity—causing problems with data integrity and resiliency

- Data-intensive applications, like Analytics and AI-based models, can have performance issues if network latency is intolerable

As businesses hope to get the most out of their data, in the form of real-time insights and support decision-making processes, they need to effectively manage and protect the data consistently across solutions, networks and infrastructures. An end-to-end solution requires secure access to be enabled at the edge where users are and data is generated and continue to the cloud.

To ensure end-to-end protection and availability of your data in a hybrid work environment, look for a network solution that:

- Provides multiple security layers, both at the edge and in the core of the network— including firewalls, Distributed Denial of Service protection, encryption and gateways

- Anticipates and responds to evolving threats, including cyberattacks

- Enables regulatory compliance for data protection

- Supports your AI and analytics workloads, with high-bandwidth sufficient to move petabyte scale data between data centres and cloud

Conclusion: Assessing Your Network for Hybrid Workplace-Readiness

The workplace has forever changed. The COVID-19 pandemic catapulted individuals and businesses into the digital era, disrupting whatever definition we used when we referred to a workspace. The hybrid work environment, where employees, regardless of their location, have high-quality access to the tools and information they need to carry on their work, connect and collaborate with other team members, in a seamless, fully secure, uninterrupted way, is here to stay.

As you assess whether your network can support the needs of a hybrid work environment, consider these essential points:

- ☑ The network is the foundation that supports all digital transformation projects, including hybrid working. **Choose a network service provider that offers high-capacity bandwidth, accompanied by scalability, low latency and end-to-end security**. An intelligent network will provide the flexibility, visibility and control, app performance and cost effectiveness you need.

- ☑ The current hybrid workplace needs require cloud-based collaboration tools. **Look for a provider that enables you to integrate and manage the collaboration and communications tools that will keep your employees connected and productive**.

- ☑ A highly distributed workforce will augment the security challenges already faced by enterprises. **Be sure your provider offers a range of security solutions to protect your corporate data assets from the edge to the cloud**.

Make sure you empower your workforce with the hybrid workplace they need. With the right network services partner, you can ensure seamless access to applications and tools and a high-quality user experience, while protecting employees and your business.

For more information on how Colt Technology Services can support your transition to a hybrid workplace, visit https://www.colt.net/solutions/hybrid-workforce/

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