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How enterprises shift to the remote-first approach

INTRODUCTION

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The Covid-19 crisis has hugely accelerated remote working – a trend already underway before the virus hit the UK.

By November, 2020, 31% of the UK population in employment were working at home exclusively[1]. Yet while many enterprises coped in the short-term, organisations must now think further ahead.

Many companies will have to shift to a hybrid model, where staff work from home or out on the road all or part of the time. Research[2] from the CIPD, the HR profession's organisation, shows employers expect that the proportion of people working from home on a regular basis once the crisis is over will increase to 37% from 18% before the pandemic.

Not only will less people be in the office full-time, but many offices will also be smaller than before the pandemic, as employers look to reduce overheads. The point is this – remote working is becoming an essential part of business life and each organisation needs to become remote-first in its IT strategy so it can adapt quickly and successfully.

That's easier said than done for organisations where resources are already stretched. If you are the person responsible for making your business or organisation remote-first, how do you go about it and know you are in the right direction?

That's what this how-to guide will address. Xcession has developed a uniquely successful system that addresses the most important areas for organisations shifting to remote-first, based on our experience of working with clients and industry best practice.

[1] www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/
healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/
coronavirustheukeconomyandsocietyfasterindicators/19november2020

[2] www.cipd.co.uk/about/media/press/home-working-increases

XCESSION REMOTE-FIRST APPROACH

The Xcession approach employs a bespoke scoring system and focuses on five main streams under the headings of:

Personal   Home   IT   Company   Transformation

This guide gives an overview of the Xcession approach. Any company or organisation wanting to explore the full methodology should contact: **info@xcession.co.uk**

In this guide we will cover:

- How to conduct a thorough, expert reassessment of your organisation's preparedness for the remote-first working

- Whether it is necessary to overhaul your IT and other policies

- Why you need to upgrade your knowledge base

- How you build in fast, effective use of knowledge database through self-service and the deployment of chatbots

- How you use AI to spot trends and pre-empt problems

//1 PAY ATTENTION TO THE BASICS FIRST

The basics of operating as a remote-first organisation are easily overlooked. You must ensure your employees working from home have all they need in terms of equipment and HR support.

i. Assess whether employees have the space and furniture required. Using the ironing board as a desk is all right for a week or two, but not even a medium-term solution. You may have to help out, supplying office chairs, for example, or at least by advising employees on space optimisation and lighting. Some employees may need reminding how to segregate work from domestic life in their homes. Your firm's customers may not be tolerant when they cease to gain the full attention of their contact in your organisation.

ii. Ensure all your employees have access to necessary hardware and required broadband speed. These are simple checks easily forgotten. Employees may be working from home with laptops that should have been replaced, or lack a second screen for more detailed work, or headphones. It's worth getting your employees to check their broadband, since it's common for complaints about malfunctioning hardware or software to be chiefly about poor broadband.

iii. Check your employees have the software and applications for their own work, plus collaboration, conferencing and teamworking. It's easy to assume everyone has Zoom, Teams, Slack or whichever platform you use and really knows how to use them. Run a check on training.

iv. Be systematic in ensuring employees have secure access to your systems whether in the cloud via an application such as Zscaler, or on-premises via your VPN. This is critical. Difficulties with VPNs have always dogged remote access, so it's important to know who is struggling and why that might be.

v. When they have problems or experience difficulties, make sure your employees know where to find help with acquiring or setting up all of the above. This is a very important point and is dealt with below.

vi. Run a check on the psychological and physical health of your workforce so they remain resilient and work in ways that best suit them. Recognise that many employees may still want to spend time in the office for mental health reasons or to avoid domestic difficulties.

> **You will then have built up an objective picture of your organisation's readiness and should have:**
>
> - An assessment of your organisational readiness
> - A list of hotspots and areas for focus
> - An idea of the model you see for the "new normal"
> - A set of initiatives to get there
> - List of risks to be addressed

//2 OVERHAULING POLICIES AND IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS

Depending on the outcome of the above process you will need to address the following:

Procurement

Speak to procurement and logistics so they can source and provide the right equipment and software to meet the new requirements of remote-first working. You will probably need to set up new systems for delivery of new or repaired hardware to ensure it happens without delay.

Data access and management

Redefine your data access and management – these are major areas that require close attention. Your data needs not only to be of high quality, it needs to be accessible to those who require it, and secure against those who would like to acquire it without permission.

On-boarding and re-drafting of policies

Rewrite your on-boarding policies so new recruits are up and running without delay and know what is expected of them in terms of working practices, IT and security. Consider re-writing IT policies within contracts to lay out the new ground rules for all your employees, including the rules governing BYOD. You cannot assume employees know or will follow your new policies unless you go through it all with them.

Internal communications

Redraft internal communications policies to recognise the new reality of most or many employees always being at home. They should not be second to hear important company news or announcements, for example.

Employee health and resilience

Ensure you have HR and wellbeing mechanisms to support your remote workers and avoid damaging isolation. This could mean upgrading your Employee Assistance Programme and ensuring HR have adapted to the new remote-first approach, not just with new policies, but with the technology to stay in touch and monitor employees. HR will also need training in how to use collaboration and engagement platforms optimally. Give your employees more control over their work and set-up, empowering them to resolve IT problems quickly themselves so they become frustrated and demoralised.

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Tasks for IT

- Update your service catalogue so your IT department knows itself inside out and understands what it is expected to deliver. This core area of IT service management will require the participation of stakeholders. An updated service catalogue will make for a more responsive organisation and is the foundation for your move to self-service.

- Where necessary, a thorough systems audit should reassess risk from a holistic perspective. This is a substantial task that may require external expertise.

- Providing access to your systems for your employees should be less of headache than even five years ago. Today's cloud-based systems and tools are better positioned for remote-working, but re-engineering and layering on of security may well be necessary. With so many workers accessing your systems remotely, security must be enhanced with new firewalls or other advanced solutions that do not inhibit the organisation's normal day-to-day operations.

- Resilience and redundancy must also be under the microscope as part of a radically upgraded business continuity policy. Many business continuity plans proved to be paper-thin once Covid-19 kicked in. They were formulated to address rare events such as floods or power failures and not health threats to the workforce.

- For key individuals within your organisation, business continuity may require key individuals to receive more than one laptop or broadband connection. In other circumstances, a thin client, cloud-based approach may be more suitable, making it easier to get things back up and running. Be open-minded about what works.

//3 KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND SELF-SERVICE

It's clear that informal, quick exchanges to provide IT fixes are less easy when employees are working remotely. This demands that knowledge management is updated and made as user-friendly as possible, with very close attention to quality and accuracy. This will also protect you against the departure or unavailability of employees with special knowledge of applications and fixes.

But you must also protect your IT and HR departments from the increase in tickets and queries they will routinely receive as a result of remote workers requesting kit, fixes and answers. Don't rely on phone and email – they occupy too much time and result in confusion and general inefficiency.

You need to give employees the ability to resolve queries for themselves, through fast access to knowledge bases. This can be through updated articles or videos. Videos work really well and are more popular with younger employees. A video will assist employees struggling with the use of a new firewall for remote work, for example.

//4 CHATBOTS

Many IT or HR queries can also be resolved through chatbots. In large enterprises, chatbots will be necessary to avoid overloading IT agents who themselves are working remotely.

Employees, for example, may have a basic familiarity with applications, but are accustomed to fast, trouble-free broadband and Wi-Fi provided by their employer in the office. When this is unavailable at home, they can use a chatbot to resolve unfamiliar problems which are in reality straightforward.

Chatbots are very dependable. They are available 24 hours and never leave for another employer, taking knowledge with them.

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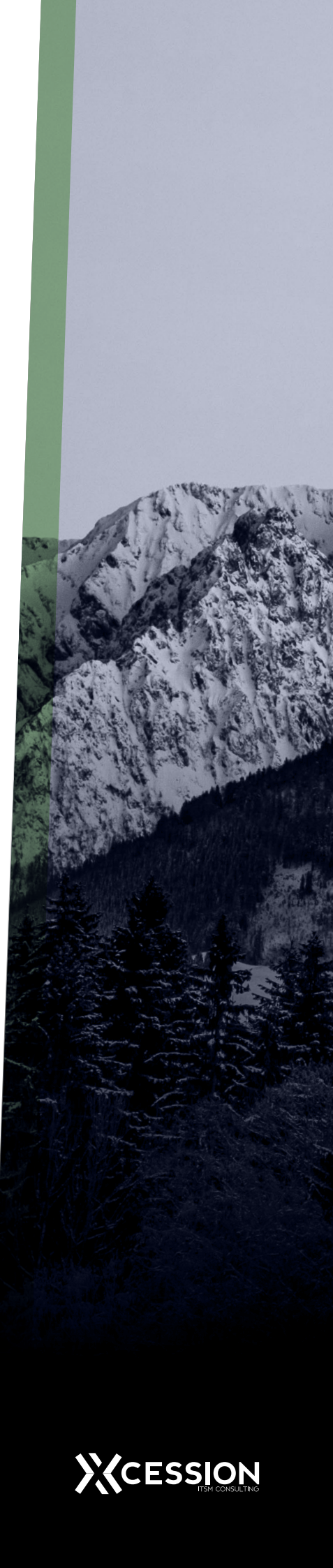
//5 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

There is a more advanced way of dealing with the increase in IT service desk tickets generated by remote working – AI.

This is not a futuristic technology but a set of solutions that provides new insight and fast resolution of everyday problems, freeing service desks to get on with more valuable work.

AI applications will automate identification of the most important trends from thousands of tickets, rapidly segmenting them into the right resolver groups, saving significant amounts of time and preventing major problems developing.

Machine learning parses and scans incident logs, flagging up emerging difficulties. It means your agents can take action to nip problems in the bud, protecting devices that have not yet been hit with an incident, or assisting employees before they begin to struggle with a problem that has erupted elsewhere.

Deploying AI solutions gives you major advantages, protecting IT and making your whole organisation far more efficient and robust as downtime is significantly reduced.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic has taught us all that remote working in some shape or form is here to stay. To be wholly effective, however, your organisation must become remote-first in its outlook and practice, using some or all of the steps outlined above. Otherwise you will be left behind by competitors, your workforce struggling with underperforming technology and outdated policies.

The remote-first approach delivers a more contented workforce and substantially lower overheads, with less travel and greater cloud-use contributing to greener IT. For many employees remote or hybrid working offers a better work/life balance and lower daily costs and hassles.

Each organisation is different, and approaches must be customised. But the approach outlined in this guide provides the surest means to optimise operations in the "new normal" of remote working.

To find out in more detail about the Xcession methodology and how Xcession can help your organisation become remote-first, contact **info@xcession.co.uk**.

ABOUT XCESSION

Xcession is an expert ITSM implementer, application managed services provider and consultancy.

With experience of working for major enterprises across the UK and Ireland, Xcession is vendor-independent, wholly customer-focused and highly committed to delivery, using the optimum mix of on-shore, near-shore and off-shore consultants.

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