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WFH? RTO? WFA? What’s Next for IT?

by TJ Johnson

There has never been a bigger need to ask the right questions, invest time in sifting through the massive amounts of information available and listen to the concerns of users. Sharing those questions and concerns may help relieve some anxieties and provide a way forward in addressing the next challenges for IT.

WFH

The scramble to get everyone WFH was accomplished in record time with minimal disruption for most people. IT teams were praised for how well they handled everything. The disaster recovery plans worked, equipment got deployed, the initial crisis was managed, the duct-tape held things together and complaints were manageable. There were and still are the issues with bandwidth, connection to networks, support of personal devices and the security of those devices, and of course the Zoom/Skype/Teams/Webex/GoToMeeting challenges. There were all the WFH challenges that were outside IT's control, along with staff furloughs or cutbacks, salary cuts, budget cuts, project delays and cuts. Plans were made for RTO in some capacity.

There were other successes as well - Even sceptics of WFH have found it successful for their attorneys and staff, and are now embracing it as a long term strategy. The refrain most often heard is "We thought less work would get done and the opposite has proved to be true!" Lessons were learned and workflows evolved that should have been changed years ago. Many of these will be capitalized on moving forward.

BUT... It's not all roses. The sticky on the tape is beginning to fail. Cracks have begun to appear in the veneer. What people tolerated through a crisis is now uncomfortable. As things drag on and as other impacts are felt, and as the future is less certain, the discomforts of WFA will continue to multiply and will need to be addressed where they can. When people lose control of major aspects of their lives, they do their best to take control of what they can, tempers fray, and people lash out. The place where people work, and the technology to support that work, are front and center of their work experience, so that's where they focus. We in IT perform critical services to keep our organizations working, with no expectation of getting anything back. Yes, there were kudos for getting the workforce functional at home quickly. But now, the complaints are rolling in and there are not answers to some of the challenges yet. It's hard to keep the long hours, trouble-shooting and problem-solving for users day after day, knowing there may be little positive in return from those users.

Back to the questions we should be asking and the questions users are asking. Following are just a few of the questions that are popping up in roundtables and client discussions. Some are the same-old, same-old, maybe with a bit of different flavor, and some are fresh and scary. The questions and concerns vary depending on the size of firm and the amount of financial support the firm invested in WFH and is willing to invest in allowing people to WFA (Work-from-anywhere). We've seen huge differences in the types of questions based on location - country, state, city.... Where staff use mass transit for

access to the office the questions are very different than for those in smaller centers where people drive to work. There's a big divide between firms where the managing partner never stopped going into the office and assumes everyone will be back with him as soon as they are allowed to, and the firms where the management is supporting a largely distributed workforce on at least a semi-permanent basis. We'd love to hear from you with questions to add to this - we'll keep updating it as a resource.

Equipment

Questions run across a spectrum, with most centering around how much equipment the firm has and will provide for people WFH or staggering their work between home and an office. On one end, people were asked to use their own computer equipment to do their work at home, so the main question is around how long is that sustainable? Can you support the equipment long term, are there security concerns, and what happens when that equipment fails and they can't afford to replace it? At the mid-point are firms that provided lawyers with laptops and loaned equipment to staff for home offices. The question there is how do you deal with the loaners if people are only coming into the office on a staggered basis and how do you maintain the loaner equipment when they bring it back? On the other end of the spectrum are firms that supply laptops to everyone, with monitors and other peripherals and printers provided for home AND office, so they only have to take the laptop back and forth with them. The questions there are totally on the ROI of that approach and the support for all that stuff.

Other questions are around how you deal with application and operating system updates, upgrades and installing new applications. And there are the ever-popular questions around how much information to provide to users, how much they can and will absorb, and managing their expectations for support of the equipment, no matter who owns it or where it resides.

Infrastructure

- How virtualized are you, what are your plans to virtualize your current systems? There are lots of questions on tools like InTune and others that are not dependent on infrastructure.
- How well is remote access working for users? Are you planning to keep or change Citrix?
- If your telephone system is old school and users have either firm-owned cell phones or their own with a reimbursement policy, do you have unlimited data or are your cell phone bills sky-rocketing?

Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity

- Having effectively tested your DR and BC plans in March, are you reviewing and updating them to be ready for the next time they are needed?
- You can probably now justify the cost for some of the extras you wanted in the DR plan but the question is whether that money

can be allocated with all the other budget concerns going on?

IT Staffing

- Are you surviving with reduced staff and reallocating IT resources?
- How do you manage the in-office work that has to be done?
- Do you have COVID protocols for going desk-side for support, or dealing with home office visits?
- What's the new IT training strategy? What's the plan now that the trainer has been furloughed, as we are still planning the big rollout and expect everyone to get training remotely?

Projects

- How many projects have been axed at least for this year? What does that jeopardize?
- How are you prioritizing the projects that are still on the books?
- What about the big projects (financial system or DMS upgrade) that are now delayed, how will you resource them internally and what's the plan for the supplier's resource reallocation?
- Are new projects appearing from nowhere?

Security

- Do your security policies cover BYOD?

- Are your home offices secure?
- Is your firm now allowing everyone in the firm to connect to the network on their smartphones and tablets?

Workflow and Automation

- Are you able to review manual processes and eliminate, simplify or automate some of them?
- How are you capturing the improvements users are making on their own out of necessity, and leveraging those across the firm?

Quality Assurance

- Are you being asked if IT can do all the testing for the MS O365 rollout because it's too hard to get users to do it when they aren't in the office?
- Are users finding ways to install programs on their computers at home, which haven't been tested with your environment?

Strategic Technology Planning

Is now the right time to review and re-write strategic technology plans? Seems like most firms are answering yes. Some of the questions around long-term strategy are around supporting client relationships, dealing with a long term distributed workforce and "Cloud First":

- Unified communications and collaboration platforms - should these be added or expanded or leveraged in new ways?

- Office space - how much technology should be built into current spaces and how can it be flexible to adapt to the office space needs that are rapidly changing?
- Supporting a distributed workforce - How should remote access be ramped up? What virtualization strategies can we implement?
- “Cloud first” - How far up the priority list can this be moved? Is the ROI there yet with fewer security concerns related to hosted options and the overall cost of housing systems on premise continuing to rise? Which systems come first, and what follows? Is Desktop Management (patching, application deployment) through hosted methods can alleviate on prem infrastructure limitations, first, then major systems (DMS, Email, Financial)?

Organization Culture

Questions to ask around organization culture are numerous, centering around the culture of the firm as it was in 2019 and the sociological and psychological impact of needing to keep physically distant. We are tribal after all! Questions for IT relate to how we can use technologies to mitigate the lack of in- person networking, meetings and events. And don't forget the culture of your IT team (even if that's just one or two people), how will you keep that team together when you can't be together?

And let's not forget change fatigue. How much can your users take, especially when they are working more on their own little islands?

What's Next?

We don't and can't know. It was really a fallacy that we ever did know what was coming. Most of us were comfortable in our routines and made change slowly. Now we have to be ready for anything. Let's all question and listen and share. I think we will all need a good supply of duct-tape for awhile yet.

Post Script - My Story

I have WFH for 18 years, traveling with my office in my backpack. I carry a laptop, an iPad, two iPhones, chargers, a small camera, speakerphone and mouse. I can access the Olenick network from anywhere, anytime and I have local copies of everything I need when I don't have WIFI access. I have apps for faxing and scanning. I have the full Adobe product, so I can do OCR and I can use Adobe Sign. I have really good noise cancelling headphones. I've bought houses and completed complex legal deals while I was in other countries. At home, I have an office with extra monitors, a TV, a keyboard, a great office chair and desk, a cup warmer and a bird feeder outside the window. It is idyllic for what used to be less than half of my work life spent there, while my husband worked outside the home, teaching in schools. Since March, I've been seeing it in a new light, granted with first world challenges (we have no children in the house). My husband brought his classroom into our home. We cleaned out and converted bedroom beside mine. He conducted classes and tutoring sessions for his students with a document camera and multiple monitors and laptops. For a few weeks we joked about the HR issues we encountered - his loud voice, each of us

walking in on the other on a Zoom call, dealing with deliveries and barking Chihuahuas, and the line-up for the microwave. Then we got more serious about how to really make it work longer term. I'll be spending a lot more of my time WFH, so I've reorganized the room so the camera doesn't show anyone walking past my door, bought a new chair, considered a new larger monitor, changed the paintings hanging on my walls to provide a more interesting background for video calls, and bought a lot more birdseed for the feeders outside. School's out for the summer, so there are fewer HR issues until September. But what happens then? We don't know how much time my husband will WFH and how much will be in the school. And we have no control over that (none of us do). So we wait and we make plans for various contingencies, and we focus on our family culture and making sure we take care of one another. **ILTA**