FUTURE OF WORK AND ENDPOINT SOLUTIONS.

How COVID–19 pressed the fast forward button for Canadian organizations.
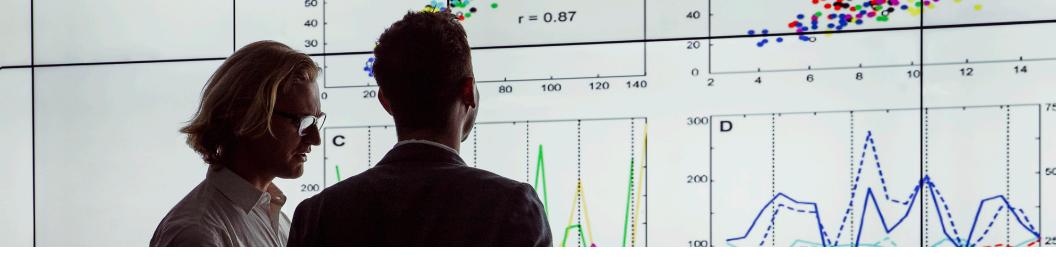
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CDW commissioned a survey with Angus Reid to examine the intersection of endpoint solutions, their impact on the future of work and other trends that Canadian IT professionals are seeing on the front lines. The joint consequences of already exponential technology development paired with the rapid shift to remote work has many implications for Canadian organizations — both near and long-term. Given the landscape, it's imperative that organizations understand how to use new tools to anticipate employees' needs, improve productivity and ultimately meet the evolving needs of consumers.

The world of work is changing. As new and more efficient tools are developed, it's important that organizations do not view the future of work as a single moment of change, but rather as an ever-evolving opportunity to streamline legacy systems and processes to ultimately improve employee experiences. Organizations should also recognize the bottom-line impact of investing in the future of work today. If employees are provided with versatile tools that make their jobs more efficient, they will ultimately be able to satisfy customer needs more effectively, driving loyalty, engagement and profitability.

While Canadian organizations are at different stages in their endpoint solutions journey, the COVID-19 pandemic expedited the urgency for change across the board. Some organizations were prepared for this rapid remote pivot, and some others adapted quickly. However, some organizations were left behind and struggled to deploy new technology and endpoint solutions to enable remote work.

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CDW's Key Findings:

· Our survey found that nearly all (94 percent) of organizations value the evolving technology available to improve the employee experience and streamline their day–to–day tasks

· Prior to COVID–19, employees' ability to work from home varied significantly. Nearly one–third of respondents (31 percent) worked from home one day per week at most, while 34 percent of those surveyed were not permitted to work from home at all. Only eight percent of respondents worked from home two to four days per week

· Most organizations faced business continuity issues as a result of the pandemic. Slightly more than one–third (35 percent) of respondents stated their infrastructure was prepared for the transition to remote work and that employees were still able to complete their tasks, while 17 percent of respondents said they faced significant challenges in the rapid transition to working from home

· Cybersecurity was a headline issue amid the pandemic as there was an increase in new devices on company networks, creating more opportunities for attacks. Only 37 percent of organizations see their organization's endpoint device deployment as secure by design, while nearly one quarter (23 percent) adopted new endpoint security solutions to secure their network in the current environment

· Most organizations provide training and resources for cybersecurity and company–owned devices, however they are lagging in training and resources for cloud security and BYOD (bring–your–own–device), as less than half provide any training or resources for cloud security (47 percent) and BYOD (36 percent)

· Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation is expected to have a continued impact over the next five to ten years, as roughly half (52 percent) believe automation will increase efficiency and allow employees to do more meaningful tasks in support of organizational growth

As consumers, we've become accustomed to technology that provides information at our fingertips. As employees, we've come to expect the same level of flexibility and access. Organizations are beginning to realize that with the proper tools and investment, employee productivity can remain the same or even improve — regardless of location. At its core, the future of work hinges on providing employees with tools that will make their jobs easier. With COVID–19's influence as the great remote work equalizer, it's important to assess how far Canadian organizations have come and what the future holds.

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What is driving the change?

Today's workplace is a dichotomy of a before and an after of COVID-19. However, even before the pandemic forced organizations to go remote, the internal power structure was changing. In the past, employers dictated the terms of available workplace technology. At present, the thinking has become more focused on collaboration, as organizations increasingly recognize that success, attracting great talent and retention are directly tied to providing environments that satisfy individual employee needs.

One of the many ways to attract top talent is by providing tools that promote flexibility and employee autonomy to efficiently share documents and collaborate, regardless of location. Cloud is one of these widely adopted, collaborative solutions. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of IT professionals surveyed state their organizations are utilizing some combination AWS Cloud (29 percent), Google Cloud (37%) or Microsoft Azure (43 percent) for their deployments. Of the remaining third (35 percent), IT professionals at small businesses and government organizations were the least likely to use a combination of these popular cloud deployment tools. These solutions and other cloud technologies have helped ensure business continuity for organizations in the current environment and provided employees with flexibility prior to the pandemic.

BYOD and company-owned/liable devices are also a hallmark of the shifting workplace landscape. The majority of Canadian organizations (82 percent) permit these kinds of devices to their corporate networks, reflecting an expanding organizational perimeter that provides employees with greater autonomy. Of particular note, 52 percent of respondents' organizations permit BYOD.

Fortunately, the importance placed on the future of work is also recognized within organizations. The same survey found that 94 percent of IT professionals believe their organization values the evolving, available technology that can improve employee experiences and streamline daily tasks. While the number of outliers is small, it's crucial that these organizations recognize its value and potential. The longer they wait, the more difficulty they will have in adopting these new solutions as it would require greater overhaul of their network infrastructure and a steeper learning curve for employees.

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Adapting to our new normal

While the recent pandemic upended our day-to-day lives, some organizations were able to adapt quickly and ensure business continuity. Roughly one-third (35 percent) of respondents believed their organization was prepared for all employees to work from home to complete their tasks, but unfortunately, 17 percent indicated they faced significant challenges. The common difficulties faced were configuration challenges (70 percent), IT support challenges (51 percent), deployment challenges (39 percent) and asset management challenges (39 percent). Now that the volatile start of the pandemic has stemmed, organizations who have moved to remote work are adapting their device purchasing strategies. Nearly one-third (29 percent) of respondents indicated their device purchasing has increased, with an additional 19 percent noting their purchasing has diversified.

As nearly one-third of respondents stated remote work was not permitted prior to COVID-19, it's no surprise that some organizations faced challenges related to this transition. Common reasons for this hesitancy include the challenges of measuring employee productivity (50 percent), endeavouring to portray a level of professionalism (44 percent), attempting to maintain an industry standard and employee engagement (41 percent) and encouraging employee collaboration (40 percent). However, with the forced shift to remote work for many organizations, some of these doubts are being assuaged. Most respondents (59 percent) noted that collaboration is becoming an increasingly important part of day-to-day, undoubtedly supported by diversified endpoint solutions.

In addition, the pandemic has acted as watershed moment for many organizations' mentalities around office centrism, as 11 percent of respondent stated all or most employees will continue working from home and just over half (52 percent) believe they will still have flexibility to continue working from home when health officials allow a return to the office. With a majority of employees anticipating continued flexibility in their future workplaces, it's essential that organizations take note and remember that a return to normal environment shouldn't mean going back to the way things were.

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The continued importance of cybersecurity

Regardless of world events, malicious actors will look for any opportunity to breach organizations' networks or take advantage of vulnerabilities. The shift to remote work provided a unique opportunity for these bad actors, as cybersecurity was an unfortunate afterthought for many organizations.

The increase in BYOD devices corresponded to an expanded attack surface, considering BYOD doesn't always have the same security protocols as company-owned/liable devices. As the remote landscape is expected to continue, the lack of protection for BYOD is a major ongoing threat to organizations. Just over half of the IT professional respondents in our survey (52 percent) believe they have strong cybersecurity programs in place to protect BYOD or company-owned devices. While 39 percent believe there is room for improvement with no significant concerns at this point, organizations should consider the importance of proper employee training to mitigate security issues.

Concerningly, nearly two-thirds of organizations (64 percent) don't provide any training or employee resources for cybersecurity on BYOD. On the other hand, three quarters (75 percent) have training and resources for company-owned/liable devices. This highlights that although progress is being made, there continues to be a disconnect between the perceived and actual threats of cybersecurity. Furthermore, 17 percent of respondents indicated their business was slowed because of the need to adopt better endpoint security solutions, while 10 percent faced significant challenges due to legacy endpoint security solutions.

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Cloud(y) with a chance of AI/automation

As cloud and other technology solutions have now been widely adopted and have impacted how organizations function, automation is likely to have a similar impact on the future of work within the next decade. Among the IT professionals surveyed, the prospect of the impact of automation on the workforce is largely positive. Most respondents believe it will increase efficiency and create more meaningful work, with nearly half (49 percent) stating that automation will allow colleagues to be more efficient and do more work in less time, and 41 percent of respondents believe it will reduce errors. While one-third (29 percent) expressed that job automation would decrease the number of employees, only 12 percent were concerned that automation would replace their role in the organization.

The sentiment around AI was more mixed. The majority of IT professionals surveyed had a positive outlook on the future of work with AI, believing it would enable employees to work entirely from home and live in different cities (35 percent) or that it will grow their workforce (20 percent). However, one-third (35 percent) felt that AI would reduce their workforce, while just over one quarter (28 percent) do not believe it will have much of an impact.

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WHAT WE'RE SEEING
IN DIFFERENT INDUSTRIES

Government and Crown Corporations

Respondents in government and crown corporations are likely to face challenges on the future of work journey. IT professionals are less likely to say their organization highly values the evolving technology available to improve the employee experience (only 38 percent).

The public sector was heavily impacted by COVID-19, as 20 percent noted they faced significant challenges in the rapid transition to working from home. Legacy solutions were largely to blame for public sector frustration, which was the highest among all industries surveyed. One-third of those surveyed in government and crown corporations were most likely to cite significant challenges in getting all employees online and able to work during the pandemic — also the highest among all industries.

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Business and Professional Services

Traditionally the most receptive to new ideas and technology, business and professional services lead the pack when it comes to future of work innovation, as 80 percent of respondents indicated they use cloud deployments within their organizations, the highest among all sectors. Nearly all (90 percent) of respondents said their organization permits the use of BYOD or company–owned/liable device connection to corporate networks, the highest among all industries.

Most respondents within the sector had an existing work from home policy for employees, and nearly half (45 percent) noted their organization was able to quickly adjust. 51 percent cited there were some challenges in employees' ability to continue working during the pandemic, listing configuration and IT support as the top challenges. Almost two–thirds (62 percent) stated employees will have flexibility to continue working from home when health officials allow a return to work, the second highest among all industries. IT professionals in this sector were most likely to be concerned about technology adoption and their own future, as 15 percent fear the impact automation will have on their position, the highest among all respondents.

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Education

Interestingly, this sector relied heavily on employees utilizing their own devices to perform their daily tasks, as nearly three quarters (73 percent) indicated their organization allows BYOD connection on corporate networks, compared to the industry average of 52 percent.

Education also faced some challenges amid the pandemic, as 53 percent noted there were difficulties in employees' ability to continue their work at home. Concerningly, only 39 percent of IT professionals in this sector are confident in the cybersecurity program they have in place, which was the lowest across all industries. 52 percent of respondents cited budget as a significant barrier to adopting endpoint solutions, the highest across industries, compared to the average of 33 percent.

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Healthcare

This sector is somewhat resistant to change, as IT respondents were less likely to say their organization highly values the evolving technology available to improve the employee experience (38 percent) than the survey average (51 percent). Furthermore, only 41 percent stated their organization utilizes cloud deployments and were also the least likely to provide training and resources for cloud security updates (24 percent).

The work from home order also brought some challenges, as 56 percent noted issues in employees' ability to continue working from home during the pandemic. Pending recommendations from health officials, 41 percent of respondents believe coworkers will be expected to return to the office.

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Financial Services

Unsurprisingly, this sector is at the forefront of utilizing technology advancements. Of those surveyed in this sector, over three quarters (80 percent) indicated their organization highly values evolving technology to improve employee experience. Additionally, 80 percent indicated their organization uses cloud deployments. Respondents in this sector are also confident in their cybersecurity practices, as 72 percent of respondents said they have a strong program in place to prevent breaches, the highest across all industries.

Our survey found this sector was the least likely to be impacted by the shift to remote work due to COVID-19, as 64 percent believe their network infrastructure was prepared for remote work and employees were still able to complete their daily tasks. Lastly, this sector has high expectations for AI and automation as 43 percent believe it will grow the workforce, compared to the industry average of 20 percent.

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Where do we go from here?

Regardless of whether Canadian organizations are open to it or not, new and more efficient solutions will come to bear, and employees will want to use them. Organizations who can adapt to the changing marketplace and use these tools to recruit top talent will see improvements in employee productivity and to their bottom line.

To take the next step forward, the three takeaways we recommend for organizations are:

1. **Recognize the link between new digital solutions and employee productivity.** Just because a task has been completed at your organization one way, doesn't mean it needs to remain in that system. Organizations who can adapt and utilize technology to streamline processes and improve employee performance will realize the benefits both internally and externally.

2. **Cybersecurity must be considered when implementing new technology.** With the increase in BYOD tools and rapid use of new solutions during the pandemic, organizations often overlook the cyberthreat implications, which can result in potentially disastrous security consequences.

3. **Organizations need to recognize the work/life flexibility that employees desire and provide the virtual or office environment they want.** Employees need to be heard. Our landscape is changing, and the pandemic has proven that most employees can do their work with the same efficiency remotely. Organizations who can provide flexible work environments will see increased success and brand affinity from both employees and customers.

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