

# Boosting the Productivity of the Mobile Workforce with Next-Generation Technology

Had this paper been written only 20 years ago the title would have been different. It would have gone more along the lines of 'Creating a Mobile Workforce with Next Generation Technology'. Today the use of technology has become so prevalent, and the technology itself so sophisticated, that it has become a given that members of a workforce will, at some point, work remotely. In fact, the concept of what a 'mobile workforce' even is has become blurred. For instance, record numbers are now plying their trade from home. Indeed, the *Office for National Statistics* found that in 2014 those grafting where they sleep accounted for 13.9% of the UK workforce, with over three quarters believing they have a right to work from home. Furthermore, international employment and recruitment firm *Adecco* found that 81% of today's workforce wish to escape the 9-5 office routine, in favour of flexible hours and locations. Not everyone is finding this shift plain-sailing though. According to a report by the *Business Performance Management Forum*, existing IT provision simply does not meet the challenge of managing mobile workforces. Among the key issues it uncovered were:

- 71% of respondents said the percentage of remote workers was increasing at their organisations
- 86% said their IT departments felt increased pressure to support mobile and remote workers
- 41% said their firms suffered business disruptions because of ineffective support

Essentially the workforce is already mobile, but the technology to support it efficiently isn't always being deployed properly, if at all. Here we will explore two of the most current technologies available today, and how they can revolutionise how your mobile workforce is used.

## Home from Home

With the surge in people doing business from home, a good place to start is to look at how technologies can be deployed to ensure that your home-based staff are as connected as possible.

## Working in the Cloud

Undoubtedly the revolution powering the productivity and connectivity of the home-worker is cloud-based internet. Using private infrastructures, employees at home can log onto work systems, and contribute to and update files and documents in real-time instead of constant back and forth emailing. Cloud technology has already made an enormous impact on businesses and employees. It keeps growing and innovating, giving companies more opportunity for worldwide domination. It's now possible to employ somebody who lives on a different continent, and provide them with access to company systems, documents, and

procedures. The cloud has enhanced the concept of the home office, by enabling workers to call a train, plane, or tropical island their desk.

### ***Logging hours***

Historically, the concept of an office was to make sure staff were clocking in and out, and putting the appropriate number of hours in. The cloud gives businesses peace of mind, knowing where their staff are, how many hours a day they're putting in and, more importantly, how efficiently a task is being completed. Employees who are working from home can now log into time-tracking apps, such as Cube Anywhere, OfficeTime, or Harvest. This will send information back to managers and can even detect idle time. It's also ideal for home workers who can sometimes become distracted by their surroundings. It breaks time down into easy-to-digest chunks that can be recorded and checked.

### ***Performance measurement***

Employees who work from home or in remote locations would often feel a disconnect between themselves and the office. It would be hard to observe tasks completed and assess performance. The cloud gives employees a way to measure their performance by communicating more frequently and efficiently with the organisation. Home workers need feedback and motivation just as much, if not more so, than an in-office member of staff.

If you have sales reps on the road, ensuring you have sales-performance management information that's easily obtained through any device is imperative. It gives the rep a clear indication of what their goals are, how they've performed so far, and what their future targets look like.

### ***Access to files***

Cloud technology gives homeworkers 24-hour access to important files and documents. Before the cloud existed, it would have been crucial for remote workers to make frequent visits to the office to obtain documents and information. This is no longer an issue. As long as the home worker has the correct software, and security information to log in.

Access to files on the go eliminates the need for frequent travel, which cuts down on costs for business owners. It's also far more convenient for homeworkers and gives them a better home and life balance. Cloud enables a company to offer flexible working to employees, which is an attractive feature.

### ***Collaboration of documents***

Many companies sight collaboration of ideas and intelligence as recipes for success. Gathering up many talented people with different points of view can be a winning combination. Back in the day, this would mean everyone sitting around a conference table or brainstorming over a flip chart. The cloud has made it possible for the same talented people to brainstorm, create, develop and finalise projects over the internet.

The same document can be shared and edited by anyone involved. It could be at different points in the day due to time differences or everyone working together in real time. Although

it may be a good idea to schedule in various meetings in incremental stages, they can be few and far between. It saves on travel costs, inconvenience and gives you access to the best brains across the globe.

### ***Communications***

It's not possible to run a successful business without clear and efficient communication between all staff members. Homeworkers shouldn't be left out of the equation. Cloud technology enables communication channels that are quick, easy to use and accessible by all. Your employees may be spread out, but you can create a real 'in the office' feel by utilising these channels.

This level of communication will ensure all staff members receive memos, updates, policy changes, feedback on individual work, and motivation from the top. It also gives them a chance to feedback to the office and gives managers critical updates on their workload.

Cloud technology has not only increased the percentage of people who now work from home, but has made the concept viable for all.

### **The Unstoppable rise of VoIP**

Voice-Over-Internet protocol, known as VoIP, is a quickly evolving technology that helps people communicate in ways not seen before. Far from being just a consumer-targeted technology, VoIP also provides a variety of benefits for businesses who utilise remote employees.

#### **VoIP Makes Working Remotely Easy**

In the past, it was difficult to allow staff to work from home, or remotely. After all, the worker needs the same hardware and software set up at their home, and it could prove difficult to remove this access if the company and employee ever parted ways.

Fortunately, cloud and VoIP technology have simplified the process. Companies can now have their telephony systems hosted in the cloud to let users access the system from anywhere with an Internet connection. Thanks to the practice of services as a software, or SaaS, managers can also establish their company networks and essential software hosting all in the Cloud.

Essentially, everything a worker needs to do their job is becoming accessible away from the office. They can even access their work line from a mobile device and desktop phone. It might be legitimate to ask why employers would bother to make such an investment but once the benefits have been established, it becomes obvious why they would and indeed should.

As with any widely-used technology, companies find a variety of advantages from using VoIP to allow employees to work remotely, and employers gain just as much out of the transition as their workers.

### ***Economical***

Compared with traditional PSTN telephony VoIP is much cheaper, to the point most users consider their calls to be free. Because calls are carried within the existing internet

subscription, there is no additional charge when you make them, no matter where the call is being made to. The savings on travel and expenses are also considerable. Once an employee has a VoIP enabled handset, they can communicate with business partners and clients all over the world from their kitchen table, with full video conferencing features as standard. This puts an end to fuel and meal allowances, cost of flights and hotels.

### ***Flexibility and scalability***

Both concerns for modern businesses and both accommodated with a VoIP system. No matter where your workforce happens to be; in a hotel, on the road, working from home, they can both make and receive calls to and from their PC, tablet or phone using the VoIP infrastructure. The ease with which subscribers can be added and removed from the system, and the ease with which the system itself can be integrated into devices means you can also have as many or as few users as you want with little, if any, additional cost.

### ***Call quality and reliability***

Concerns regarding the quality of VoIP calls are now a thing of the past. Next generation VoIP systems guarantee near 100% uptime and better network prioritisation now means high definition calls are often standard, and certainly of a comparable quality to traditional PSTN analogue telephony. Should a remote worker be relying on PSTN telephony, there is always the risk that unforeseen damage to lines could render them uncontactable. With VoIP's far superior disaster recovery options this risk is all but negligible.

### ***Interactivity***

Conference calling is easier; video calling is an option which has now extended to video conferencing, so every caller is visible. The function even comes with tools to manage the conversation itself. Important calls can be recorded at the touch of a button, and should the recipient of a voicemail want to scrutinise the details of the message, they can choose to have voicemail put into transcript and received as an email. Forgetting the already mentioned cost benefits, this interactivity means remote workers can skip from one meeting to another at the touch of a few buttons, without time being wasted getting to and from physical meetings.

### ***Security***

With calls travelling down the internet highway, it's understandable that concerns may arise as to security. Again, this is a fear that is largely redundant. Contemporary encryption means calls are far more secure than they once perhaps were, meaning remote workers can have sensitive conversations without the fear of lines being hacked or in some way, maliciously tampered with.

Beyond these benefits, virtual phone numbers, free of area codes, are available as are virtual receptionists, and better hold music. All reasons as to why a third of SMEs have already made the switch, and have converted their legacy telephony to VoIP solutions.

## **Conclusion**

It is understandable that particularly SMEs are cautious about investing in new technologies when their primary concern is performing their service to the best of their abilities, and increasing revenue. They are also bombarded with advice about what they should be investing in. It can all seem confusing. The fact remains though that to always be connected and have your staff able to work from any location effectively makes a dramatic difference to a company's overall performance. The cost of upgrading is also less than many companies imagine. The sheer uptake now of cloud and VoIP based solutions shows, better than any literature ever could, that these are solutions well worth the investment.