

10 Predictions for the Workplace 2021

Mrinal Rai



INTRODUCTION

As we come closer to the end of an extraordinary year, we need only look around us to see the massive disruption it has brought to the workplace. Even before the global COVID-19 pandemic hit, enterprises were making progress on a journey toward enabling a digital workplace. The pandemic has accelerated these moves, and organizations are undertaking many transformation initiatives that otherwise may not have happened for some time. For that reason, many of the workplace trends we **predicted at the start of 2020**, before the spread of the pandemic, have in fact materialized.



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As we consider the evolution of work and the highly anticipated new future, we expect the following trends to shape the workplace in 2021 and the coming years.

- 1. The rise of the remote work management office:** While most enterprises were successfully able to transition their global workforce to a remote working environment, they are now evaluating new challenges and approaches to sustain this arrangement. Multiple studies and ISG's own experience suggest that, under normal circumstances, enterprises would not be looking at a 100 percent remote working environment in 2021. They would be interested in a mix of remote and in-office workers in 2021. To sustain a hybrid in-person and remote working culture, enterprises may look to build a remote work management office to enable workplace technologies and facilitate the change management needed to support such an environment. Best practices for a healthy remote work environment will include gamification, mental health assessments, and periodic cyber security training and assessments.
- 2. A focus on analytics, data, data and more data:** Tools that measure workplace technology performance generate an immense volume of data, including data from devices and applications such as uptime, device health and proactive issue detection. My Analytics from Microsoft Office 365 and other collaboration software also provide user behavior data highlighting tech adoption trends. In addition, periodic assessments for user satisfaction and engagement can generate actionable insights. Enterprises will be needing to leverage data coming from all such possible sources to determine the effectiveness of their workplace policies. Workplace services contracts in the future will include customized experience level agreements (XLA) based on these insights.



- 3. Collaboration solutions focused more on employee engagement than enabling technology:** The pandemic has driven unprecedented use of workplace productivity and collaboration solutions. Virtual meetings and conferencing have increased across channels, and major software solution vendors have rapidly deployed innovative features to assist with changing employee needs. As enterprises continue to build a hybrid working environment with an emphasis on remote working, there will likely be increased use of collaboration, communication solutions and supported integration coming from a diverse set of vendors. Collaboration and productivity solutions will offer greater standardization and integration with business applications, resulting in higher employee engagement.
- 4. The lasting effect of changing workforce dynamics:** Even before the pandemic, technology in the workplace was becoming increasingly democratized. Low-code, no-code solutions can enable digital dexterity and adroitness for users by allowing business users to become “citizen developers” and develop applications on their own. This will be on the enterprise radar going forward, as expectations for employees and gig workers grow. Solutions that address the inherent security and management challenges will get the most attention.
- 5. Increased focus on cyber security:** As more and more end users work remotely on unsecured networks and non-managed devices, **security has become a critical element** for the workplace. Enterprises will need to embrace **technologies such as password-less identity access management, mobile threat defense (MTD) and zero trust security**. An increased interest and adoption of artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled technologies will help organization better understand user behavior, intercept malicious attempts and predict security incidents.
- 6. Greater adoption of cloud desktops and two DaaS models:** One silver lining of the pandemic was that 2020 finally proved to be the year of virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI). Many enterprises have leveraged or are considering deploying cloud-based VDI at scale – otherwise known as desktop-as-a-service (DaaS) – to increase user flexibility, improve security and reduce costs. Other organizations are using a second DaaS model – device-as-a-service – to provision devices to end users’ remote working locations and manage the entire device lifecycle. The coming months and years may see a rise in implementation of a combination of both DaaS models that may involve deploying virtualized cloud desktops on flash storage-based devices such as Google Chrome.



7. **“Appifying” business processes and automating workflows:** The pandemic has led many organizations to look anew at their existing business models and operations. And, for some organizations, this transformation has led to an increased focus on appifying business processes by creating and modifying legacy apps that can be accessed on any device or platform. It also involves automating workflows and integrating multiple enterprise applications into a single interface through application programming interfaces (APIs). This will affect the way workplace technology is accessed and managed. Instead of interacting with multiple applications requiring different credentials, users will access a single-entry point for their digital workplace with all integrations managed in the backend.
8. **New use cases for augmented and virtual realities:** The pandemic has led organizations to experiment with ways that augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies can assist their workforce. Manufacturing plants and labor-intensive workplaces as well as organizations that face the challenge of training front-line workers will need to pay attention to this field. With advancement in technologies in this area, we may very well see Star Wars-style hologram-based communications.
9. **A new focus for on-premises employee well-being and health monitoring:** The COVID-19 pandemic is far from being over, and a major part of the next year will see continued focus on health precautions and social distancing norms. As many offices open and allow some portion of the workforce to work on premises, technology will be instrumental in ensuring proper contact tracing and distance monitoring. Solutions such as body temperature screening, mask compliance monitoring and occupancy analytics will be in immediate demand.
10. **Contracts that reflect the way workplace services are permeating the business:** This year saw a clear shift from the workplace being primarily technology centric to being primarily business centric. We can see clear distinction between traditional end-user computing (EUC) support services and managed digital workplace services, which focus on the impact of end-user tech on particular business operations. Although traditional EUC support will continue to exist and will be critical in enabling remote workers’ access to technology, most managed service providers will differentiate themselves by providing services that help enterprises make the best use of technologies that solve with real business needs. Because workplace services are likely to offer less traditional infrastructure support and more business support, we expect major restructuring or renewal of managed workplace services contracts in the coming years.



There is little doubt that 2021 will see a continuation of the hybrid-remote-in-person way of working, but we do not expect this hybrid trend to continue forever. Once the pandemic is controlled and situations stabilize, we will likely witness whole new ways of working, including greater co-existence of bots and humans in the workforce and user behavior analytics that feed recruitment and appraisals. One thing is certain, we are likely never to return to the old ways of working.

ISG Provider Lens™ Digital Workplace of the Future – Services & Solutions Archetype Report 2020 defines new workplace services buyer types emerging from the COVID era and helps enterprises navigate the workplace services market for the future. [Contact us](#) to find out how we can help.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Mrinal Rai is the principal analyst for Digital Workplace and Conversational AI. His area of expertise is digital workplace services, enterprise social collaboration and conversational AI both from a technology and business point of view. He covers key areas around the workplace, end user computing domain and conversational AI viz., modernizing the workplace, enterprise mobility, bring your own device, virtual desktop infrastructure, managed workplace services, service desk, enterprise social software, content/ team collaboration, chatbots and intelligent virtual agent platforms. He has been with ISG for last 8+ years and has more than 13 years of industry experience. Mrinal works with ISG advisors and clients in engagements related to chatbots, virtual assistants, workplace modernization, social intranet, collaborative workplace, cloud-based virtual desktop infrastructure, end user computing and service desk.



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