Companies leverage technology to manage remote workforce

By ANDREA DECKERT

There are several ways local companies can best use technology to help cope with the challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic, according to area information technology experts.

Jeffrey Reinholtz, director of client experience at Innovative Solutions, says the past couple of weeks have been chaotic as companies scramble to find the best way to do business with a remote workforce.

Reinholtz

As they adjust to the current situation, however, they are starting to see what can be done to improve the work environment.

"I don't know where we'd be right now without it," Reinholtz says of technology.

A number of businesses have options they can turn to in this time as they transition to a remote workforce, he says. They include leveraging Microsoft Office 365 and Amazon Web Services, both of which provide cloud-based software for working remotely.

Businesses can also turn to video capabilities through applications such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

While the majority of companies already have these applications in place, some have not used them until now, Reinholtz says.

These applications have many advantages, he says, including safety measures embedded into the technologies and the option to use them on a variety of electronic devices.

"People are able to use these cutting-edge offerings on lower-end devices," Reinholtz says.

Technology is also helping drive growth in industries ranging from telemedicine to online grocery services such as Instacart.

Reinholtz sees opportunities for additional industries. For example, auto dealers can customize vehicles online, while those in the heating, ventilation and air conditioning field can have a customer show them a problem via online video applications. Realtors can conduct online tours of homes for sale.

Online learning is also being uti-

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—Alvin Rodriguez

lized in a way that goes beyond textbooks, Reinholtz says, noting his sixth-grade daughter recently had a ballet lesson with her teacher and fellow students over Zoom.

Reinholtz also plans to use technology to throw his son, who is turning eight soon, a virtual birthday party.

"It won't be exactly the same, but we can all share in the moment," he says.

With the increased online presence at more firms, now is the time to be vigilant about online predators who will use this time as a prime opportunity to try to hack into a company's systems, he says.

It is important to be hyper-aware about where an email comes from and not to mindlessly click on any links or open attachments until one can verify they came from a trusted source, Reinholtz says.

Be especially cautious about getting any correspondence requesting you change a password or if you are asked any personal information.

"Nine out of 10 times, if it's important someone will call you and not send an email, especially now," he says.

When the pandemic is over, Reinholtz is interested to see what happens next in the business world. He wonders if companies will downsize space and allow more employees to work remotely, especially if it worked during the current crisis.

"I'm excited to see what types of innovation come out of this," Reinholtz says.

Rodriguez

Alvin Rodriguez, senior solutions strategist at iV4, agrees there are a number of ways technology can be used to help companies and their remote workforces.

He is helping clients implement technologies, including Microsoft Office 365, and notes Sharepoint is one web-based platform being heavily used along with the presence capability on Microsoft Teams, which indicates the user's current availability and status to other users at the company.

"You can't walk down the hall at the office and see if your co-worker is available, but you can see it virtually," Rodriguez says.

A number of workers are also using the video options available online, including Rodriguez himself.

"It gives that in-person feel and is more engaging," he says.

Rodriguez says iV4 put together a training guide when businesses started implementing work-from-home practices that would help companies learn about their technology options and help implement them.

That implementation can be done on a range of devices, from phones and tablets to laptops and larger workstations, he notes.

Like Reinholtz, Rodriguez agrees these web-based applications have a number of security measures built into them and he cautions users to still take advantage of safety features, such as multi-factor authentication, to keep hackers at bay.

With a number of people in a home using the internet, Rodriguez says bandwidth issues may occur. To help, he suggests checking with one's internet provider to make sure the bandwidth is where it is supposed to be under the plan.

Another option is asking for a bump in bandwidth, which many providers are offering, or work out a schedule at your home to have people go online in shifts so the system does not become overloaded.

Rodriguez believes the current situation will impact businesses in the long-term, with some companies possibly re-allocating funds toward disaster preparation.

"This event has changed the way

that companies look at how they do business and how they view disaster recovery,' he says.

Smith

Justin Smith, president and chief operating officer at Brite Computers, says while online collaboration has been around for some time, companies now are embracing it more than ever.

That includes Smith who has considerably increased his video conferencing usage, including having an online video meeting with the high school baseball team he helps coach.

Brite is doing its part by offering free IT consulting and advice to support local businesses.

Those services include providing relief to organizations with critical need or those who simply have questions about navigating the security, stability and scalability of their new work environment, as well as the technology and social challenges that come with it.

Brite has also held webinars and has tips on its website to help businesses navigate the increased online world in which they find themselves working.

"Small businesses need to help other small businesses," Smith says.

With more people working remotely, businesses are increasingly exposed to online predators, Smith says.

He has seen an increase in COVID-19 related phishing scams, validating the need for email security and increased user awareness training.

"Effective endpoint and web security becomes even more critical as individuals scour the internet for vast amounts of information on unmanaged devices and/or outside the protection of traditional on-premise network security," Smith says.

He believes the way businesses are currently using technology during the global pandemic may enable a different way of working in the future, but Smith does not want it to totally replace in-person interactions.

"I miss seeing my employees and customers face-to-face," Smith says. "I hope that never goes away."

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