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Silver linings from 2020, for the future of work

Introduction

"When the winds of change blow, some shelter, others build windmills."

This was the philosophical viewpoint of Okta's Jesper Frederiksen, Vice President & General Manager EMEA, when discussing the effects, the Covid19 pandemic has had on the way we work, with four technology leaders from Bourne Leisure, Wellcome Trust, Fujitsu and The Hut Group.

Jesper Frederiksen
VP & General Manager
EMEA, Okta

The metaphorical storm clouds that 2020 brought, undoubtedly contain business-critical silver linings. These will affect the way we all work going forwards in a positive manner. That was the general consensus from five leading technology directors who recently participated in the Okta-sponsored Hot Topics series: *"Dynamic Work: Reimagining the Workplace".*

Pre-Covid19, these five technology directors were focused on maintaining a productive workforce, a secure system and building an agile culture. So how have these priorities changed and which of these changes are here to stay for the foreseeable future?

Guy Mason
CIO, Bourne Leisure
Group

Eileen Jennings-Brown
Head of Technology
Wellcome Trust

Cathy Mulligan
VP and Region CTO of
North & West Europe, Fujitsu

Joanna Drake
CIO
The Hut Group

Necessity has driven unprecedented rates of digital and cultural change

Guy Mason, Bourne Leisure Group's CIO, responsible for well-known brands such as Butlins, Warner Leisure Hotels and Haven Holidays, reflected on the forced pace of change within one of the UK's most prominent players in the holiday and hospitality industry.

56%
Never worked
from home before

55%
Felt they had the
necessary equipment

"We've created in three weeks what would normally have taken 18 months," Mason declares. *"Our technology team is very familiar with the aspects of remote working – the technology, the mindset – and they've exploited technology to up our entire company's productivity."*

Necessity seems to have supercharged collaboration and remote access projects. Frederiksen corroborated this feeling with Okta platform customer data from the first six weeks of the pandemic, with collaboration and VPN apps filling the top four places of fastest-growing apps deployed in 2020. Fifth place was occupied by Proofpoint's security training app, reflecting a positive understanding of the need to balance agility with security education among Okta's customers.

Historically Security and IT teams may have attempted to balance security and agility by limiting both the amount and rate of digital change. Organisations can't do that though, when significant change is suddenly forced upon them. They have to adapt, innovate and educate. Swim with the tide, rather than drown trying to hold it back.

The workplace changes have to be cultural too, alongside the technology provisioning. According to Okta's recent New Workplace Report, 56% of EMEA workers had never worked from home, so for millions this was a seismic shift, and at a time when anxiety levels were already elevated by the health crisis facing the country.

On average only 55% across EMEA felt they had the necessary equipment, so there remains much still to improve going forwards.

Almost overnight, more responsibility and trust had to be given to individual workers within organisations, to keep them operational and productive. Including cyber security education for the new remote workforce. Human error remains the number one cause of data breaches, so with so many workers now operating outside the traditional corporate perimeter the risks multiplied exponentially.

"We have had to overcome challenges to become agile," said Mason. *"In normal times you create user guides or quick start guides, ways of working, before rollouts. But here we've quickly shipped off laptops to any team members who needed them and generated a self-help, peer-to-peer community [of learning]. It's a better result we've found than top-down leadership, actually."*

The security team at Bourne has actually grown under lockdown as they balanced the trade-off between an agile workforce and a secure work environment. But roles have also had to evolve. *"Before, we were heading to more rigid roles and responsibilities. Now I can see we've demonstrated that agile isn't restricted to building online [platforms] and applications,"* Mason explains, *"You can apply it to [any business]. Agility is a mindset. Post-Covid19 will be different to pre-."*

It's the age of individual digital empowerment

This sentiment of individual empowerment was echoed by Cathy Mulligan, VP and Region CTO of North & West Europe at Fujitsu. *"Digital technology should now focus on the human; enabling human beings to be better, more productive, at what they do."*

29%
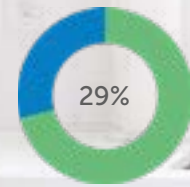
Want to return to work full-time

Mulligan observes poignantly that work is the largest social event in which we participate. Therefore leaders – technology or otherwise – have to employ pastoral care into both their remit and the current workplace.

"In the last three months we've had to transform to the same effect as the last two years," Mulligan explains, *"What was impossible suddenly became necessary; staff are now implicitly trusted to work from home. What does that mean for the future of work? It means some staff working permanently in the office, some permanently at home and still others a blend of the two."*

This concept of a new hybrid workforce, convening when required for more structured office meetings and interactions, but driven by the optimal productivity location of each individual, looks set to end the, one-size-fits-all, five day a week work culture.

Frederiksen agrees, saying that post-Covid19 most people will want to keep their newly inherited flexibility, citing Okta's New Workplace Report, which revealed only 29% of EMEA workers want to return to the office full-time. Frederiksen believes that organisations will have to trust in their workers to adhere to security policies and be productive. In addition, they will need to build a technology structure that is seamless, easy-to-use and very secure. That is what Okta can help deliver.

Within Okta he adds, there is no culture of micro-management. They hire professionals, define their expected outcomes, then give them the freedom and digital tools to work the way that they feel will be most productive. It's perhaps easier for cloud-based businesses, but Frederiksen believes that, with Okta's help, it's easily possible with legacy systems too.

Remote working can't be defined just by technology
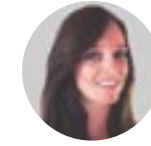
Eileen Jennings-Brown, Wellcome Trust's Head of Technology, believes that the concept of remote working requires further definition beyond the technological. As an industry, she feels that we are too quick to point to groups accessing systems online, disparately, and label it as remote working.

31%

Miss having a dedicated workspace

49%
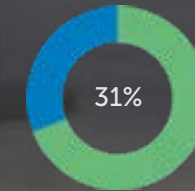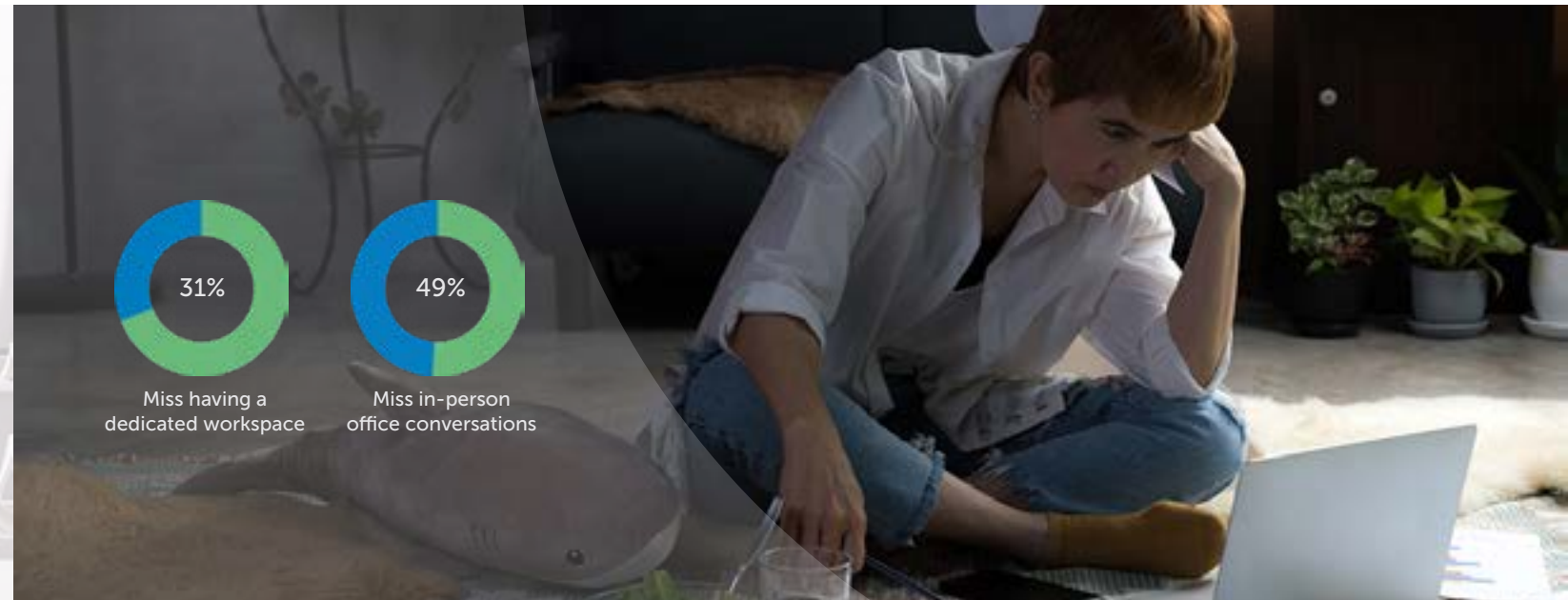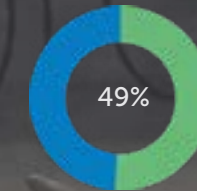
Miss in-person office conversations

Considerable personal compromises have been made to allow individuals within organisations to work from home right now: childcare, mental health, productivity, privacy, to name but a few. So, for many fielding those compromises, the term 'remote work' feels like an oversimplification of the emotional realities. Although workers have tasted life without the expensive commute, and been around their families more, there are mixed emotions around remote working.

Frederiksen points again to Okta's New Workplace Report, revealing that 31% of EMEA workers miss having a dedicated workspace, and 49% miss the in-person conversations which the office environment provides. There's undoubted conflict here when the lines between work and home life become blurred and confused. The cultural adaptation may take more time to adjust to, than implementing the technology that enables remote working.

Two years ago, Wellcome embarked on a digital transformation. Its mission was to move to a new operating system so the entire workforce could work with greater agility and independence. *"We wanted our team to work more effectively. That's underpinned by a philosophy to empower people to make their own decisions"*, said Jennings-Brown.

Wellcome's actions were incredibly prescient: infrastructure was moved to the Cloud; and a new CISO hire built a security team for Jennings-Brown's digital team to work alongside.

Security has unsurprisingly jumped to the top of the agenda everywhere. A universally trusted remote workforce also creates unparalleled attack areas for those wishing to exploit the speed with which organisations have had to integrate and deploy new technologies.

Entering an era of contextual access and Zero Trust

On the subject of trust, Okta's Frederiksen talks about entering an era of Zero Trust, when it comes to security - one where no one is effectively trusted until proven otherwise. Okta delivers this Zero Trust Security for its customers using multiple contexts, including remote location, device, time and the nature of individual digital requests, to assess levels of risk and deliver seamless appropriate checks, blocks and responses. Frederiksen gives an example:

"If I log-in from a cafe here in Copenhagen and I want to access my company wifi, it will be a very seamless experience for me because that's deemed a low risk transaction. I'm not trying to access anything critical. Whereas if we see an attempt to access into the P system, from an unknown device, connecting from a high risk country, we may decide to block that altogether or certainly enforce multiple levels of security checks. As you move to a Zero Trust world you have to consider how you provide contextual access. It can't be a binary yes/no on security. It has to be a gradual model that takes into account the user, the state of the device, the location you are coming from, the time of day and of course ultimately, what is the service or the application you are trying to access."

The concept of the corporate perimeter has perished as the global workforce has dispersed further in search of more productive places to work. Given the sudden increase in the potential threat surface, the shift in focus must be to that of identity. This echoes the themes already discussed about accommodating each workforce member's preferred device and location to maximise their personal productivity.

A trusted workforce, protected by Zero Trust Security

Joanna Drake, CIO of The Hut Group agrees, *"Our staff should be able to do their job from any device, anywhere."* Something that as an organisation THG had been working towards for 18 months prior to the Covid19 crisis this year. This allowed them to not only cope well, but actually relish the challenge created by the sudden departure to remote working.

With staff based all over the world, in many varying roles, flexibility was the key driver that led THG to proactively pursue their digital transformation programme.

"We had this vision that a device becomes a dumb thing, and everything is on the cloud," Drake explains, *"So, we forged ahead with Office for the web and Single Sign-On and Multi-Factor Authentication via Okta. We were doing lots of things, so that it didn't matter where you were in the world, or what device you were on."*

In addition, THG had already nearly completed secure zero-touch provisioning of services to staff globally, so were able to accelerate this programme when lockdown arrived. This allowed them to continue growing where other businesses stalled or receded in the new circumstances.

In essence, the transformation was simply taking the digital access behaviours we have become used to in our wider consumer lives and bringing them into the corporate environment in a seamless and secure manner, which Okta enables.

"People use MFA for their banking or service accounts," Drake explains, *"They almost think it's weird that we didn't do it at work. So, from a training and adoption perspective, people felt it made sense."* Simplification of the technical language and keeping the benefits in line with daily consumer expectations helped speed up the leadership team buy-in.

Dynamic Work emerges from the dark clouds.

Necessity is the mother of invention, and it appears that 2020 has accelerated workforce potential to be more agile and productive, from any location on any device, whilst staying secure.

Dynamic Work, as we call it at Okta, may just be the biggest silver lining that emerges from the dark clouds of Covid19.

Watch the full interview with Jesper Frederiksen here.

Read the full report: 'The New Workplace Reimagining work after 2020' here.