Hybrid work models in heavyweight sectors: Are they using the right collaboration tech?

By Andrew Bourne
22 Dec 2023

The information and communication technologies (ICT), finance, and real estate sectors, while not the largest industries in South Africa, are still heavyweights in their own right. In 2021, the country's ICT sector recorded R243.6bn in revenue, while finance, real estate, and business services sectors contributed an estimated R1.09tn to the country's GDP in 2022.

Andrew Bourne, Regional Head - Africa at Zoho Corp

In the coming years, these industries will have a pivotal role to play in South Africa's economic development and growth, as well as the country's ability to compete at a global level. However, a major technological bottleneck that the businesses in these sectors are facing today are modern collaboration and productivity issues that are emerging due to remote work environments maturing and turning into a permanent work option.

A shifting workforce in need of technological reform

Nearly every organisation in every industry has undergone significant workplace transformation over the last few years. According to Zoho's _Collaboration and Productivity Trends_ report, 42% of South African enterprises currently employ a hybrid work model, while 2% have adopted a fully remote model in 2023. Only the ICT, finance, and real estate sectors seem to offer fully remote roles in the country. Additionally, 53% of employees within the ICT sector, and 46% in the finance and real estate sectors work within a hybrid environment.

This shows businesses in these sectors are adopting hybrid or remote work models to meet the changing expectations of employees. Some of the typical benefits of these newer work models include reduced distractions, time optimisation, greater creativity, and improved employer value proposition for companies.

Too many apps in the mix

However, remote work environments come with their own challenges. In order to build a hybrid or remote workplace that truly works for distributed teams, organisations are pushed to employ several applications that enable employees, teams, and the company leadership to communicate easily and collaborate with one another.

In fact, the Zoho report found that in the ICT sector, 50% of employees used between one and five apps, 44% used six to 10 different apps, and 6% used over 11 apps on a daily basis to conduct work. Within the finance and real estate sectors, 69% of employees used one to five apps, 26% used six to 10 and 6% used more than 11.

This kind of a 'too many apps' situation can often lead to a fragmented communication and collaboration ecosystem, leaving employees overwhelmed with digital fatigue, redundant apps, context switching, disjointed user experiences, and too much information siloed across numerous platforms.

When asked about the most effective measure that can help improve the productivity of their teams, 23% and 31% of the employees from the finance and real estate industry and the ICT sector, respectively, said that having quick access to contextual, cross-application data is important. Furthermore, 36% of the employees from the ICT sector said that switching between too many apps to get work done actually puts their business at a competitive disadvantage.

That's why it's important for organisations in these industries to gain a holistic view and understanding of how time is used, how people communicate and share information, and how teams function to understand what their employees truly need and identify the right tech that can help workforces collaborate effectively, hold asynchronous communication and sustain productivity levels.

Enabling meaningful engagement

When your teams are distributed and collaborating remotely, it is critical that their well-being is prioritised to prevent mental fatigue and burnout that would drive down productivity, creativity and innovation. Rather than requiring them to always be online and available, businesses should focus on, for instance, allowing them the space and trust to finish their tasks at their convenient time before the deadline.

Asynchronous communication (communication that does not occur in real time), has a key role to play in building an effective remote collaboration setup that's also considerate towards employees' time and availability. For example, business teams should have the option to respond to requests as and when they can, and share information when it's ready. Using the right tools that offer such provisions allows employees more flexibility at work and the facility to create their own schedules that strike a balance between collaboration and independent work so that they're not bogged down by constant communication.

Positive impact of the right collaboration tools

Typical tools that a remote worker needs for their everyday work include project management systems for effective time management, digital whiteboards for spontaneous brainstorming, document storage and management systems for organised file-keeping, instant messaging tools, and other asynchronous communication tools that allow employees to share their thoughts through text chats, voice recordings, screen recordings and action items as and when they want. However, it's crucial that all these tools seamlessly interoperate to provide the user with a unified experience and smooth flow of information across different apps to enable work continuity and context.

With the right collaboration and communication tools, organisations in industries like ICT, finance, and real estate can facilitate more focused work with fewer interruptions and better planning, thereby empowering their workforce to unlock higher productivity levels. This can also enable increased agility and innovation for these businesses, and help them transform into power growth engines for the South African economy.

ABOUT ANDREW BOURNE

Andrew Bourne is Zoho's regional manager for the Africa region and is based in Cape Town, South Africa. He has more than 15 years of experience in sales and marketing and has spent the last five years focusing on the implementation and testing of various business technologies. He is very passionate about Zoho and has exceptional insight into the business and marketing world.

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