Digital transformation is top of mind for SA companies

As lockdown continues indefinitely, the continued need for support of remote workforces raises questions around companies' state of digital transformation and readiness to provide that support in the long term.

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While remote working has worked well, South Africa still has a long way to climb up the ranks of overall digital readiness in so far as the level of technological availability and adoption are concerned.

The level of importance of digital transformation

Most South African companies (94.5%) recognise the value of digital transformation as a critical aspect of business, especially those in the retail, healthcare and automotive industries. Defined as the use of digital technology to streamline business processes, these companies regard digital transformation with great importance. These insights and more were provided by a study conducted among 400 enterprises by World Wide Worx for Cisco South Africa - Remote Working in South Africa 2020.

There is, however, a stark contrast of fantasy versus reality. While the need for digital transformation is widely deemed very important, only 37% of companies across the board had a fully rolled out digital transformation strategy at the start of the Covid-19 crisis and were thus fully prepared for a swift transition to the new norm of remote working.

As companies readied their workforce to be able to work from home, how far they were along their digital transformation

journey made them significantly better prepared for the Covid-19 crisis and the shift to working from home.

No real detailed plan for remote working

In pre-pandemic circumstances, most businesses were likely to continue lagging with regards to their digital transformation agenda as some (41.5%) of them either did not have an existing strategy in place or had one which was still only in preparation stages.

The Covid-19 crisis required that businesses fast-track an area of their digital transformation – their remote working strategy. Before the start of lockdown, in March 2020 in South Africa, a little less than a quarter (23.5%) of companies actually had a detailed strategy for remote working.

Nearly half (49%) of companies noted a heavy shift in their data security strategy to accommodate remote working, the largest shift being in the engineering & construction, information technology and automotive sectors, at 64%, 62%, and 62% respectively.

Agility is key

"This pandemic reinforced the importance of digital agility for instances when the unexpected happens. Agility is the ability to adapt and respond rapidly to events and changing conditions. So, whatever happens, the show can go on, thanks to digital enablement," says Garsen Naidu, country manager, Cisco South Africa.

"Having a good digitisation strategy, prepared in advance of a crisis, has never proven more essential than during this era. Covid-19 has also shed light specifically on the complexities of remote working. Now companies realise the importance of having their workforce able to work efficiently from anywhere."

Cloud software rated a great enabler of productivity

Remote working has proven to be a success overall, so much so that 38% of companies are willing to allow employees to continue working from home beyond lockdown. It would not be possible without the various tools of work powered by cloud computing. These tools range between video conferencing, workspace, task management, instant messaging and other forms of communications, collaboration and productivity tools.

Almost three-quarters (72%) of businesses have credited cloud software as being very helpful with respect to productivity during lockdown. Employees have been able to easily remain productive and in synergy while working remotely.

When it comes to video conferencing, 9 out of 10 businesses use more than one video conferencing solution. The same goes for other tools used for remote working in a single category, which are being used simultaneously. 43% of businesses use at least 2 different workspace tools, while 51% of businesses use 3 document management tools and 3% use more than 5 task management tools.

The adoption of multiple tools of the same kind within the same organisation shows that people recognise that no two platforms are the same and varying features and factors lead to different preferences. This can present complexities however, as the flow of work and engagement can tend to be unsystematic. An ideal remote working setup must create the best possible unified and seamless working experience for all employees.

Remote work in the future

Before the pandemic crisis, remote working was largely an exclusive work option available to select employees. According to insights from *A new perspective on the modern workplace*, a Cisco report, now an average of 4.7 times more people are working from home compared to before the pandemic.

The level of digital transformation and digital readiness will be huge determining factors for remote working setups for South African employees beyond the Covid-19 crisis. Over a third (38%) of businesses have indicated they would allow their employees to work from home after the pandemic is over. This willingness and readiness to incorporate a more permanent remote working setup into the work culture may be closely linked to the fact that nearly the same number of businesses (37%) currently have a fully rolled out digital transformation strategy and are therefore in a position to allow further remote working.

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