Leaving lockdown: What will happen when offices become an option again?

As lockdown slowly starts to ease, business leaders must decide whether they will return to their offices, and if so, do they bring back all employees or work on a part-office and part-remote model from now on? It will be a different decision for every business, and so *Intelligent CIO* spoke to seven technology experts across multiple industries to get their thoughts on what should be the top considerations based on their predictions for the future.

Precautions for the office

Returning to the office has more than just physical implications – Richard Cassidy, Senior Director Security Strategy at Exabeam, encourages organisations to prioritise their security too. "As we plan for a new normal, we need to consider how we can better support our security teams and automate as much of the more time-intensive and mundane tasks as possible. But we also need to rethink Security Operations Centre (SOC) practices – the attack surface is far greater now and IoT security is a bigger risk vector than ever before. The home office is the new corporate cubicle, and security teams will need to detect anomalies from home networks, users and devices.

"Key to this is a foundation of behavioural analytics that can help detect attacks and automate incident response. This frees up security teams enormously by using existing datasets to detect anomalies across the entire estate and monitor critical assets to find early signs of suspicious activity."

"While the COVID-19 pandemic has put many businesses into survival mode, it has also accelerated a range of – particularly digital – workplace trends," said Liam Butler, Area Vice President at SumTotal. "As restrictions on society continue to be lifted and the business community takes stock of these changes, we are realising they have gone far beyond simply absorbing the economic impact. For many industries and business areas, the measures have opened up a more sustainable, effective and collaborative working environment.

"Businesses will be engaging with customers, employees and other businesses in very different ways, placing more emphasis on genuine human connection in the absence of physical travel and in-person engagement. The question for every business now is how do we foster that trust and community spirit – between colleagues, managers, customers and suppliers – in a more dispersed, digital and fundamentally different world."

Rich Pugh, Chief Data Scientist and Co-Founder of Mango Solutions, identifies how data analytics can help organisations increase agility and velocity. "According to a

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recent survey of 300 analytics professionals, conducted by Burtch Works and the International Institute for Analytics, 43% of respondents stated that analytics is at the front of their activities helping their organisations make major decisions in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

"If different departments have embedded analysis teams, supported by off-the-shelf or customised tools, and they can model the outcome of multiple situations at

different points on the development and supply chains, organisations will be better equipped to address potential risk and make informed plans to handle all likely outcomes. Better still, insights generated by data analytics teams can be shared across departments and with the company as a whole to ensure everyone knows the warning signs to look for, and the best courses of action to help the company succeed."

The cloud is a silver lining

Cloud solutions have proved invaluable, particularly for the finance industry, according to Simon Bull, Sales Operations and Business Development Manager at Aqilla. "The biggest problem for the finance department, particularly if it's traditional, is that it will likely be stored on a hardware server on-premises, due to the sensitivity of the data. With the repercussions of the pandemic still very much present, the complications that go hand-in-hand with on-premises hardware have been noticeable.

"Post-pandemic, organisations are going to have to seriously review their finance software and begin to opt for cloud-based finance platforms. CEOs will turn to the finance department first for support with this, so accounting systems need to be able to support this business need. Every organisation needs finance software, and so having a cloud-based accounting and finance solution will mean that the finance department can work fully from home, if necessary, while being able to support increased agility with the latest company data."

Martin Taylor, Deputy CEO at Content Guru, reveals how the cloud also supports remote working for contact centres. "I expect we will see most contact centres looking at how they can adopt a cloud-first approach that allows agents to work from wherever they are based, so they can future-proof their business models against situations like this in the future.

"Those that decide to move to cloud-based technology platforms may discover that, since operations can continue to run just as smoothly with home-based agents, flexible working may be a viable option for their staff. We may see more and more contact

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centres allowing agents to work flexibly, taking some shifts from home to fit around family and domestic commitments, for example by logging in while the children are at school. Flexibility and agility will be key, and a true cloud solution ensures that the location of an agent no longer matters."

The rise of online retail

The retail industry has particularly suffered from social distancing, said Bob Potter, CEO at SentryOne. "The IT systems of these paused businesses will suffer first, because with limited staff or many on furlough, customers are experiencing 'error' or 'try again later' messages on their websites because of system overloads.

"However, what we are already seeing, and will continue to see, is that those retailers with online services will emerge from this as the strongest in the competition. People are buying products online more than ever before, meaning that those businesses are making more profits. Therefore, it is crucial that businesses such as retailers prioritise their database management. Impatient customers shopping online will happily choose a different site if their first choice isn't loading, and with physical stores bringing in very little, if any, profits during this time, when the pandemic starts to recede it will be those with the most efficient online service which come out on top."

Rob Shaw, Managing Director EMEA at Fluent Commerce, considers how retailers can prepare for two types of in-person shoppers. "The first will jump straight back in as if nothing has happened – they may even be shopping more enthusiastically than before – and a second, who will be

more cautious. Focusing on the cautious shopper, in practice, means following government guidance and creating a safe instore environment.

"Savvy retailers should add store stock to their distribution network, with services like ship from store or kerbside collections to draw down excess instore stock. This also means they can fully stock their stores without the risk of losing the value of the stock. That way they are prepared for the opposite scenario as well: customers suddenly ready to go in and shop and 'make up for what they didn't have' as we have seen in some markets that are now reopening."

As everyone watches carefully to see how the lockdown measures start to ease, businesses need to start thinking now – if they haven't already – what changes will best help them survive. ∎

Rob Shaw, Managing Director EMEA at Fluent Commerce