

INCREASED ONLINE FATIGUE FACED BY REMOTE WORKERS

With some employees reporting struggles with home broadband or mobile coverage and their facilities not suitable for working from home during the pandemic, others have experienced fatigue with less chance for downtime during the working day and feeling pressure to be 'always on', according to the findings of a recent survey by the Irish Computer Society.

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the move towards more remote working by ten years in the space of a few weeks, according to Jim Friars, CEO of the Irish Computer Society. "We will never go back to the way we worked before" was the message from Ireland's top Chief Information Officers (CIOs), during a recent online forum meeting at the Irish Computer Society to discuss their concerns and share insights on the prospect of remote working becoming the new normal for Irish workers.

So, how have Ireland's CIOs coped with moving entire organisations to remote working? "Digital tools allow staff to keep connected to each other and have enabled many sectors of the economy to continue their work. However, shifting work patterns onto new digital tools at such a rapid speed has had serious implications for organisations," Friars noted.

In relation to the biggest challenges faced by IT teams during the sudden shift to remote working, the Irish CIOs report an increased focus on additional security especially with regard to the use of remote desktops and Virtual Private Network (VPN) connections.

CIOs now also realise that systems need to be more resilient, leading to backlog issues that were not a priority before now getting fixed. They also claim that networks need to be optimised to get the most from services such as WebEx.

Supporting staff working remotely has meant an increase in the amount of process documentation and optimisation particularly for helpdesks and those with poor digital office skills. The varying quality of broadband services, home routers, Wi-Fi dongles and services means that all users need a certain level of bespoke support, increasing pressure on support teams.

ONLINE COLLABORATION

The Central Bank's CIO Louise Dennehy and Head of IT Strategy Linda Harmon led the survey research on behalf of the Irish Computer Society's CIO Forum. "Overall, Irish CIOs



Online meeting fatigue is a common complaint among remote workers.

report that the move has been a positive one; IT systems have enabled IT teams to hit the ground running and have worked well," noted Dennehy.

"Most CIOs mentioned that the core infrastructure was already in place and networks and firewalls were already set up for remote access. It is really useful for CIOs to know how others are dealing with these challenges. You never stop learning in IT," she added.

The following tools chosen by Ireland's top CIOs when it comes to online collaboration dominated the responses (MS Teams – 66%, WebEx - 33%, Zoom - 32% & Skype - 32%) with most officers citing multiple tools in use across their organisations. However, tech leaders have also pointed out that 'you can't beat the phone sometimes'!

"The unimaginable speed of the move to working from home for many office workers has meant that a patchwork of software options came into use," commented Kevin Cooney, Chair of the ICS CIO Forum.

"A number of CIOs mentioned the use of multiple video conferencing solutions with an overlap for different use cases.

This has impacted their ability to offer streamlined support and has led to issues as users struggle to adapt to meetings on different platforms.”

GREATER EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY

Due to the nature of video communication, the duration of meetings has increased. There’s no longer a chance to pop over to someone’s desk, so meetings offer a chance to be ‘face-to-face’. The people and process side of remote working has had mixed results. On the whole, employees reported to be productive when working from home.



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The pandemic has offered teams a chance to ‘reset’ their communications and with an increased emphasis on engagement with staff, including surveys, regular check-ins and topic-based chats, which has let to morale being kept high in teams,” said Friars.

“However, communication in meetings such as traditional stand ups is more difficult. As we are all experiencing, the pace of conversation has slowed and team chats are more stilted as we end up talking over each other.”

Some staff also reported struggles with home broadband or mobile coverage and their facilities not being suitable for working from home. CIOs are also acutely aware of the wellbeing of their staff, as employees are experiencing fatigue with less chance for downtime during the working day and feeling pressure to be ‘always on’.

DODGING THE COMMUTE

Overall, the opportunity to avoid the commute is appealing to staff. As reported in a recent TechBeat survey two thirds of employees expect to continue to work from home.

CIOs are well aware that continued working from home will be a core part of future business plans. Remote working has placed a higher reliance on VPNs and firewalls than originally designed for. But CIOs are well prepared for the unexpected, and these issues are not insurmountable.

CIOs are also preparing for the challenge of replacing staff and on-boarding new recruits in the ‘new normal’. Overall, they have shown that IT teams have great resilience and ability to cope with such a different situation.

The pandemic may have pushed us to innovate differently and earlier than may have been originally planned but coping under pressure is what IT does best.

As one of the CIOs mentioned, “there’s nothing like a crisis to force through innovation and changed ways of working”.

Results of Survey from Ireland's top Chief Information Officers:

1. Microsoft Teams and WebEx are the most common online meeting tools;
2. Increased workload for IT departments as helpdesks and office staff require additional support;
3. Online meeting fatigue is common among remote workers;
4. New way of working has prompted renewed engagement with staff, keeping morale high;
5. No chance of things going back to ‘normal’ as CIOs develop roadmaps with permanent changes and staff continuing to work remotely.



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