RingCentral

Collaborative communications for the new high-tech workplace

RingCentral

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Executive overview

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In the COVID-19 era, with a majority of employees working off-site, high-tech organizations have leaned into communication tools to maintain business continuity and improve virtual team collaboration. But other significant technology concerns and business objectives have emerged amid fears about eroding productivity and diminished employee or customer engagement, which together have become both a driving force of company strategy and a stress test for communication tools and tactics.

Early in 2020, the priority was staying in touch with workers via video conferencing. The pandemic led to a meteoric rise in the adoption of video-based communications ($4.1 billion in 2020, up from $3.3 billion in 2019).[1] And that in turn led to fatigue of employees exhausted by spending endless hours on camera—working in a fishbowl.[2] The lesson: video is pivotal to sustaining company culture, but too much of any single mode of communication may create burnout and lower engagement.

The past year presented arduous trials for every organization—though arguably high-tech organizations were better prepared than most. Only 12% of businesses felt completely prepared for remote work when the pandemic struck.[3] In some ways 2020 marks the transition to a workforce shift: the percentage of worldwide workers who are permanently working from home is expected to double in 2021, from 16.4 to 34.4%.[4]

What should high-tech organizations looking ahead a year or more prioritize for their communications platform strategy to maintain business continuity on a global basis?

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[1] TechRadar, Gartner, June 2020
[2] Harvard Business Review, Apr 2020
[3] Gartner, March 2020
[4] Enterprise Technology Research, Oct 2020

Workplace flexibility. It's been widely reported that many employees will either move away from tech hubs such as Silicon Valley or alternate between commuting to offices and working from home. This hybrid work location model may spell doom for legacy, on-premises PBX systems, which are unable to effectively support a remote work environment or meet the formidable challenges of collaborative communications.

Collaborative stacks.

The key to long-term success with communications platforms? IDC recommends developing a collaborative stack and a collaborative culture that can tie into enterprise apps and also elevate employee engagement.

Unified communications. Looking ahead, high-tech organizations will embrace unified, cloud-based communications platforms that feature both asynchronous and synchronous means of collaboration. A collaborative communications platform is not all about message, video, or phone—it's about switching between them seamlessly. According to Mason Sanders, Senior Director, IT Experience Group, Red Hat, the key question is "How do we get better at using all three in concert to drive the right interaction, at the right time, to deliver the right business result?"

Facing communications challenges

Facing communications challenges

During this new work-from-anywhere era, high-tech company managers have looked to communications solutions to help sustain productivity, improve employee engagement, and replicate on-site meetings and collaboration.

But organizations with a proliferation of communications apps have faced other management concerns, such as an inability to scale, managing app overload, plus the lack of a common employee experience. Did you know that 69% of your employees will waste up to an hour each day navigating between apps?[5]

In fact, enterprises grappling with app overload, or disconnected apps, face:

Productivity loss. If you have different apps for message, video, or phone, you spend costly time switching between apps, you can't automatically log calls, and you may not have a call history for IT compliance or troubleshooting. Worst of all, the apps simply don't work well together.

Low customer engagement. A lack of integration with business apps often leads to increased customer wait time. You may not be able to retain sensitive data on employees or customers. And you're unable to capture analytics during or after calls to drive communication insights.

Bad user experience. Lacking a common and engaging user experience alternating between message, voice, and phone apps, tech-savvy users may explore other non-sanctioned options, complicating IT's mission, particularly in regulated environments.

Poor ROI. Onboarding new apps is not only costly, but it's expensive to train teams on new apps.

Sensibly, 66% of workers report that they want a single platform for all of their communications.[6] That's undoubtedly because 50.3% of employees say that difficulty communicating and collaborating with both colleagues and external stakeholders is a key issue for their business.[7]
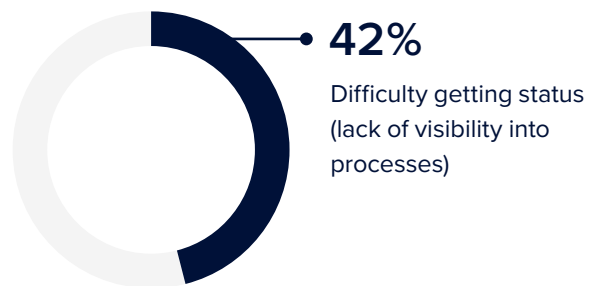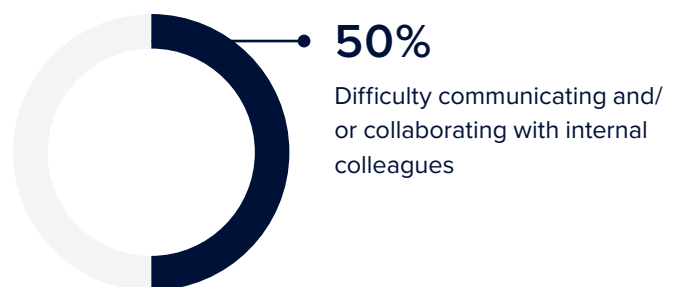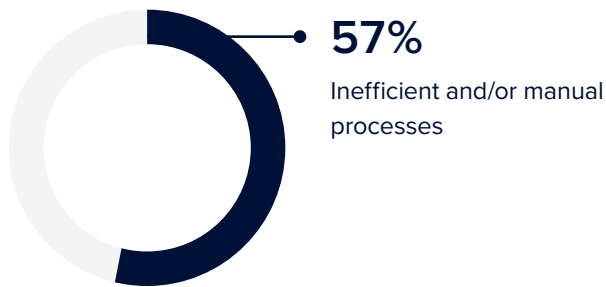
[5] CIO.com
[6] RingCentral
[7] IDC: Future of Work, Worker Survey, December 2019

If they can't collaborate effectively amongst themselves, imagine how difficult it is for employees to collaborate with customers or external stakeholders. In IDC's December 2019 Future of Work, Worker Survey, the study finds that nearly three in five enterprises are saddled with inefficient or manual processes. Many point-based communications solutions fail to integrate with enterprise apps such as Salesforce or even single sign-on services such as Okta.

Top communications issues[8]

57%
Inefficient and/or manual processes

50%
Difficulty communicating and/or collaborating with internal colleagues

43%
Difficulty communicating and/or collaborating with external stakeholders

42%
Difficulty getting status (lack of visibility into processes)

[8]   IDC: Future of Work, Worker Survey, December 2019

Given these challenges, it's not surprising that many organizations feel unprepared to transform their tangle of disparate communications solutions into an integrated, collaborative communications platform. It simply won't work. The alternative is adopting a seamless, cloud-based unified communications platform, built to support an engaging, virtual workplace experience for high-tech workers.

Pro-tip: Asynchronous vs synchronous collaboration

When you think about group collaboration, you may picture a brainstorming session held in a conference room with participants capturing ideas on a white board or on giant sticky notes. That's synchronous—or real-time—communications. But these days, group collaboration is just as likely to happen in a threaded discussion, asynchronously, over a period of time. Which is better? The answer is you need both to be successful. Getting everyone into the same room at the same time may always be valuable, but with a distributed workforce, it becomes a lot less likely.

Engagement, productivity, and collaboration

Engagement, productivity, and collaboration

Engagement, productivity, and collaboration are possibly not the first words that spring to mind for any of us when we think about a communications platform. We might think about messaging, video, or phone capabilities. Yet, viewed strategically, those three words tell an important story about the past, present, and future of communications for high-tech organizations.

Engagement. How are employees holding up under the weight of the work-from anywhere mandate? The initial results weren't encouraging. In June, Gallup reported that employee engagement experienced its most significant drop since 2000, sliding from 38% in May to just 31% in early June.[9]

Tech companies in particular understand that elevated employee engagement is an absolute necessity because there's little to prevent the highly prized talent you recruited from jumping ship or becoming unproductive. Teamwork, even for virtual employees, matters deeply to global high-tech employers. A September ADP Global Workplace Study showed that workers on a team are 2.6 times more likely to be fully engaged.[10]

Significantly, the same ADP global study found that although engagement had dipped from pre-pandemic levels, 20% of virtual workers were fully engaged, compared to just 11% of office-based workers. Undoubtedly, the flexibility of working from home, particularly during a pandemic, is driving higher employee satisfaction and with it, greater productivity.

A Gallup article in late October[11] conceded that burnout has increased during the pandemic but identified key learnings about how to manage remote employee engagement: "Even more encouraging are our data that show fully remote workers can have astoundingly high engagement when they have a good manager and organizational communication that helps them feel connected and supported."

Productivity. Although many sectors of the economy have been hard hit, working from anywhere has not undermined productivity in equal measure. A September 2020 study of 1,200 global CIOs indicated that 48.6% believe productivity has improved since workers began working remotely, compared to 28.7%, indicating a decline in productivity.[12]

9   Gallup, July 2020
10 ADP Global Engagement Study, 2020
11 Gallup, Oct 2020
12 Enterprise Technology Research, Oct 2020

Connected employees help right the ship. In mid-November, Alphabet CFO Ruth Porat said that while Google saw a summer dip in employee productivity, it returned to pre-pandemic productivity levels after instituting a variety of measures including more training, surveying, and frequent employee check-ins.[13]

Collaboration. How do you make employees feel like they're on a productive team when they're disconnected from the office? The top step organizations can take, according to the Society for Human Resource Management, is to "prioritize communication." Ultimately, however, organizations are building toward the fifth step on the list: "Demonstrate a collaborative culture." That's where a collaborative communications platform can make a significant difference.
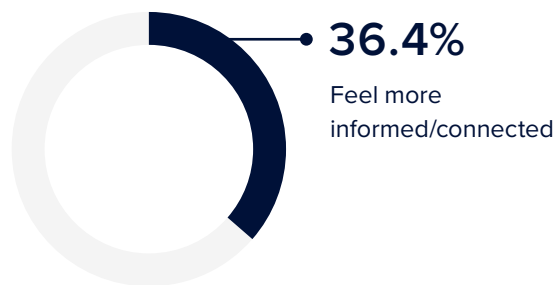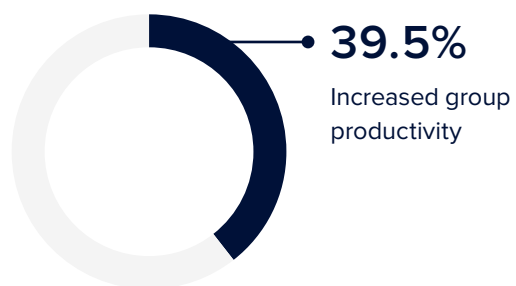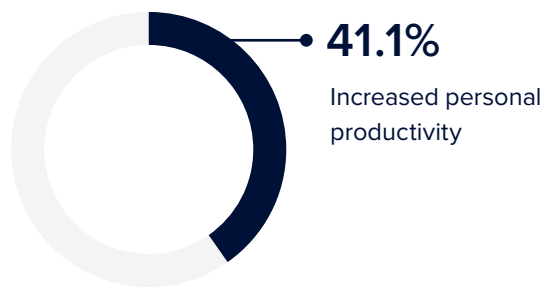
[13]   CNBC, Nov 2020

The Society for Human Resource Management recommends 5 steps for engaging remote employees during the pandemic

1. Prioritize communication
2. Set clear expectations
3. Recognize good work
4. Encourage work-life balance
5. Demonstrate a collaborative culture

One of the valuable, if hard-earned, lessons of 2020 is that emphasizing collaboration pays off in multiple ways, reports IDC. Not only does collaboration improve the efficiency of information sharing, but workers also become more productive, and employees feel more informed and connected. This is why team collaboration has become an imperative for tech companies.

Top 5 benefits of collaboration[14]

45.5%
Real-time information

41.1%
Increased personal productivity

40.3%
Saving time

39.5%
Increased group productivity

36.4%
Feel more informed/connected

[14] IDC North America Annual Collaboration Survey, January, 2020

Welcome to the virtual workplace

Welcome to the virtual workplace

Prior to the work outside-of-the-office mandate, many young tech workers, including millennials and Gen Z, had never worked remotely for a sustained period of time. Some tech companies canceled their much-coveted summer internships, while others such as Google shifted their program online.
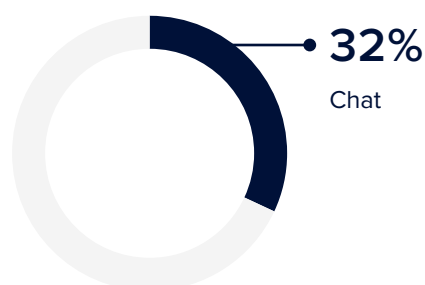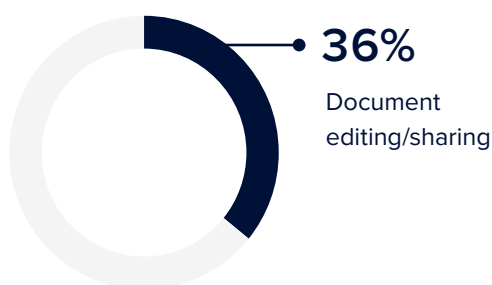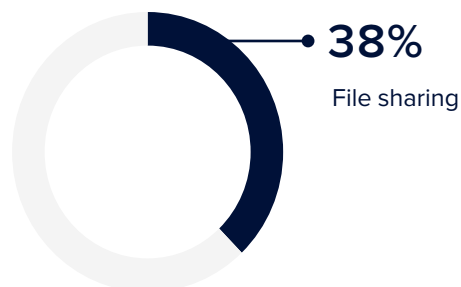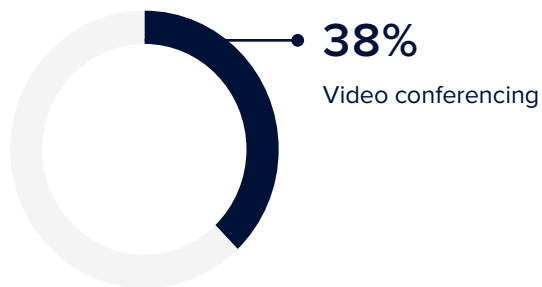
While some tech companies dispatched their knowledge workers with little more than a laptop, others took a more thoughtful approach, attempting to rethink business processes such as team or company meetings. Fortunately, that's often worked: many employees have responded well to two-way communications with town halls, managerial check-ins, and even occasional fun and games, online classes, and cocktails.

Amid increasing awareness of the phenomenon of video meeting fatigue, where employees endure lengthy and mentally exhausting video conferences, it's clear that replicating on-site experiences requires adaptations. Yet, one tech executive recently told us that his CEO will not accept a conference call with anyone who does not turn on his or her camera. So, some changes will take time.

"It's a matter of trust and openness. No one's going to share their best idea if they don't feel safe."

—Wayne Kurtzman, IDC Research Director

Time saving collaboration benefits[15]

38%
Video conferencing

38%
File sharing

36%
Document editing/sharing

32%
Chat

31.6%
Audio conferencing

[15] IDC North America Annual Collaboration Survey, January 2020

Overall, tech companies have been among the first to both recognize and accept that the rise of the virtual workplace is more than a temporary change—and getting it right may provide long-term competitive advantages stemming from improved employee engagement, retention, and productivity.

What are the hallmarks of a successful virtual workplace?

- Enabling your employees to seamlessly shift between different modes of communication—messaging, video, and phone, with collaborative spaces and file sharing—from any place, any device, at any time.

- Empowering your IT department to tap APIs that integrate their unified communications platform with key enterprise apps and services for productive customer or employee experiences. For example, customer information stored in Salesforce can automatically appear in a phone tool because of this integration.

- Results that show improvements in areas such as employee and customer engagement, productivity, and ease of internal or external collaboration.

However, many organizations have been hamstrung during the pandemic by siloed point solutions that fail to facilitate the entire spectrum of collaborative interactions. Sometimes, tech workers choose to brainstorm ideas via video, but, more often than not, they prefer to exchange threaded messages or share files.

Even worse, tech workers have often been forced to waste up to 60 minutes daily juggling multiple communications apps—incurring extra steps, which undermines their focus and productivity.

For tech companies, these are issues of rising significance. Among the hottest tech trends for 2021 is TX, or total experience, a concept that Gartner says looks at the intersections between customer, employee, and user experiences as a way to elevate overall business results. TX builds upon unified communications to deliver optimal experiences, even for a distributed workforce. Mastering the virtual workplace experience will become a competitive issue for tech organizations long after the pandemic is under control and employees adapt to a hybrid work routine.

Field insights: A software company adapts
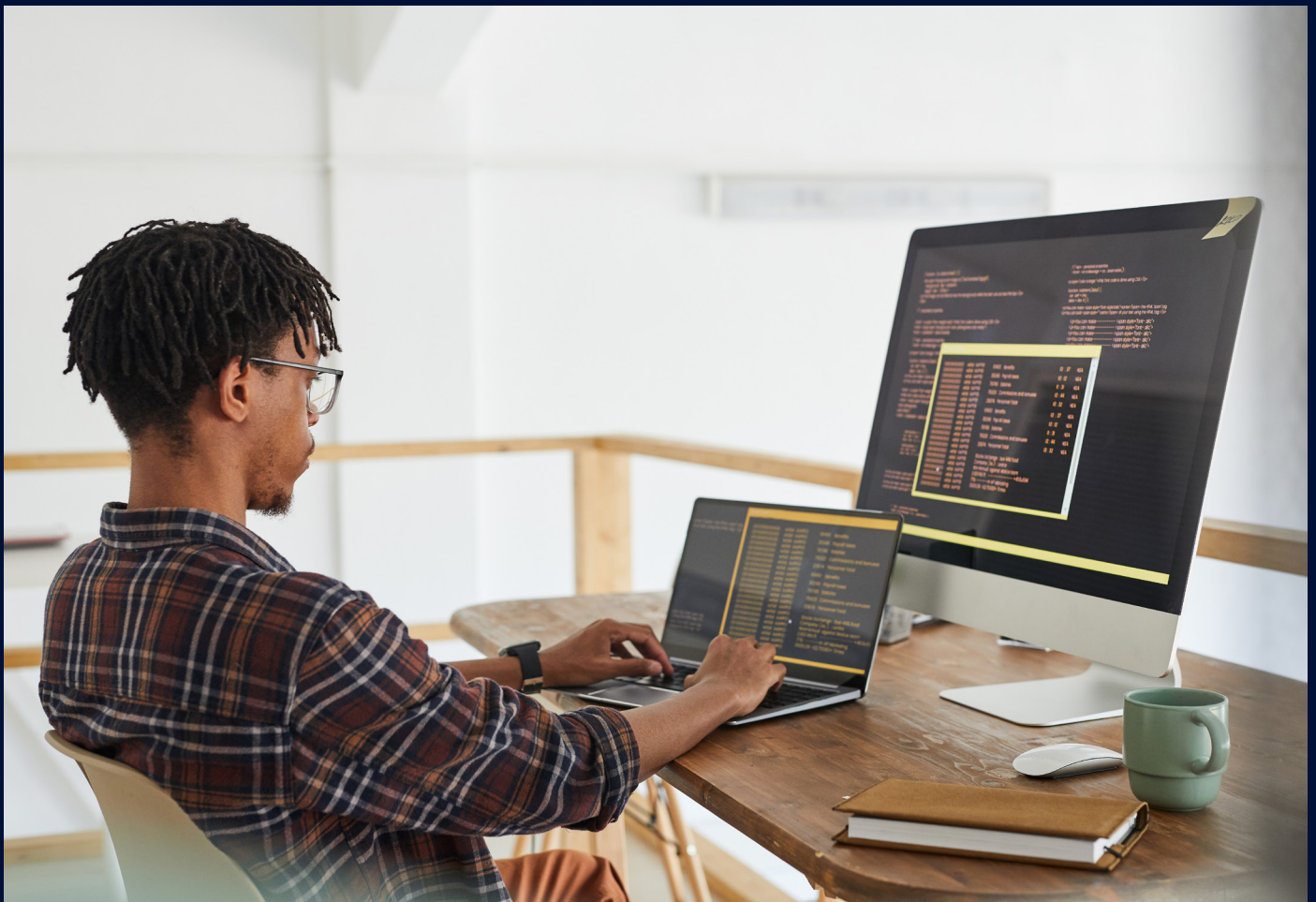
Field insights:
A software
company adapts

An executive at a large global enterprise software company told us that prior to the pandemic, 30% to 40% of his fellow employees were already working remotely, often from home. This year, the open source company has been so successful at collaborating remotely that they're reimagining the purpose of many of their 100+ global locations.

To optimize their facilities for the new "hybrid" work model, with employees coming on premises as needed, or part-time, they may curtail "me" space in favor of more "we" space for on-site collaboration. Picture fewer desks with more conference space.

When the software company rolls out a collaborative communications platform, rather than rely upon top-down executive support, they will instead seek out "digital champions" who can persuasively evangelize the benefits of the experience to their teammates. High-tech employees, especially those who once traveled extensively, may relish learning how to replicate customer-facing experiences remotely through collaborative communications platforms.

Remote possibilities

Remote possibilities

How have high-tech organizations adjusted to the need to manage nearly everyone working remotely? In a survey conducted in April and May of 2020, Nemertes Research sought to determine the impact of the pandemic on the near-term and future plans of high-tech organizations. Managing remote employees was identified as their biggest organizational challenge, and the data also confirmed the widespread and rapid shift to the cloud.

IDC's Wayne Kurtzman says that "in building a collaborative culture, managers have to be more facilitators" rather than act in a "command and control" manner.

High-tech organizations that achieved a successful implementation of video and collaboration technologies didn't just deploy their apps and hope for the best, according to the Nemertes study. High-tech companies that set visual communications and collaboration business goals reported achieving measurable success in areas such as cost savings, revenue increases, and productivity gains

The study identified three main high-tech organizational goals:

- **Driving revenue.** Create new products/services/revenue streams. Improve customer retention and sales opportunities.
- **Reducing costs.** Lower capital and operating costs.
- **Improving business processes.** Do things faster or more efficiently.

The Nemertes Research Study[16] found that the average improvements by successful high-tech organizations, resulted in

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$240,000
Annual savings

$399,188
Revenue gain

23.8%
Productivity improvement

As work-at-home plans rapidly accelerated in 2020, high-tech organizations not only adjusted to the new conditions, they sought to improve the company bottom line by leaning into potential real estate savings and relying on video conferencing to help reduce travel.

Yet, even successful high-tech organizations have faced challenges such as increasing spending to provision more hardware in support of WFH efforts. Some WFH employees have experienced poor Wi-Fi, poor workspaces, or video quality issues. Organizations achieving success in these areas were twice as likely to reimburse employees for upgrading their internet connectivity.

Overall, the pandemic experience has yielded some positive impacts for high-tech organizations. What's the most impactful change? Nearly four in five companies report that the use of workplace collaboration technologies is a change for the better.[17]

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[16] Nemertes Visual Communications and Collaboration: 2020–2021 Research Study, June 2020

[17] Nemertes Visual Communications and Collaboration: 2020–2021 Research Study, June 2020

What the data says

What the data says

2020 marked the year when pandemic-induced office shutdowns spurred many organizations to invest in team collaboration solutions. Indeed, 95% of North American enterprises have increased the number of their employees using conferencing platforms this year, reports IDC. Team collaboration blends voice, video conferencing, messaging, and file sharing functionality.

The investments enable "technology parity," said IDC's Kurtzman, in which "every worker can be connected on any device from anywhere."

Team collaboration solutions: IDC[18] North America vs worldwide projected post-COVID technology spend

Adoption of Team collaboration solutions

North America	96%

Worldwide	56%
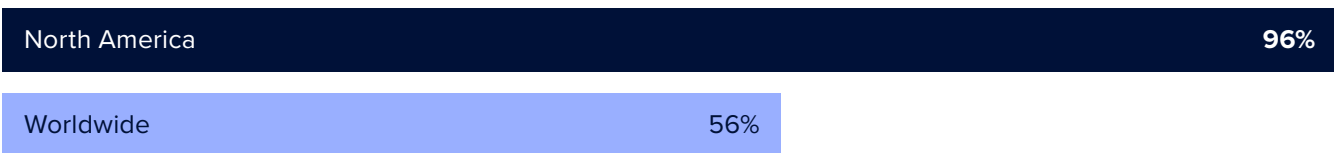
Adoption of Video conferencing applications

North America	90%

Worldwide	53%
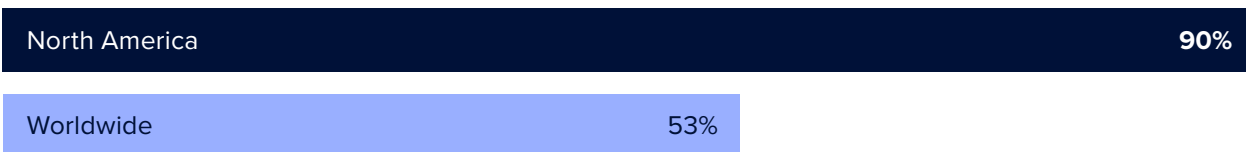
Adoption of Content sharing and collaboration

North America	77%

Worldwide	44%
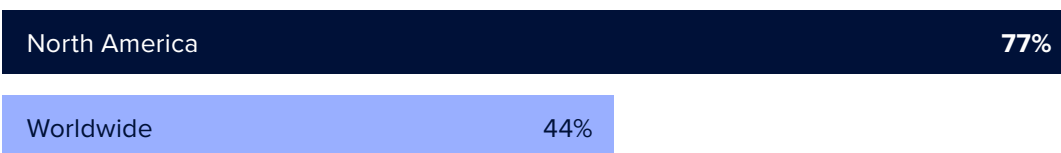
[18] IDC COVID-19 Impact on IT
Spending, August 2020

Field insights:
A tech hardware company collaborates virtually

Field insights:
A tech hardware company collaborates virtually

When the pandemic struck, a large global tech hardware designer and manufacturer was forced to take any number of safety measures and precautions, but perhaps its most challenging decision concerned the postponement of its Kaizen event plans. The company had planned to fly all of its globally distributed engineering teams to convene in one location for a one-week, in-person session focused on achieving continuous manufacturing process improvement.

Would the Kaizen event work in a virtual setting? The executives determined that video meetings alone couldn't replicate brainstorming techniques such as sharing large sticky notes. And they wanted virtual conference rooms for small group sessions too.

The executives also realized that several months prior to the pandemic, the team had deployed RingCentral MVP™, a communications platform built for collaboration. RingCentral MVP not only successfully hosted the Kaizen event, but the company now believes it can reduce team travel in the future.
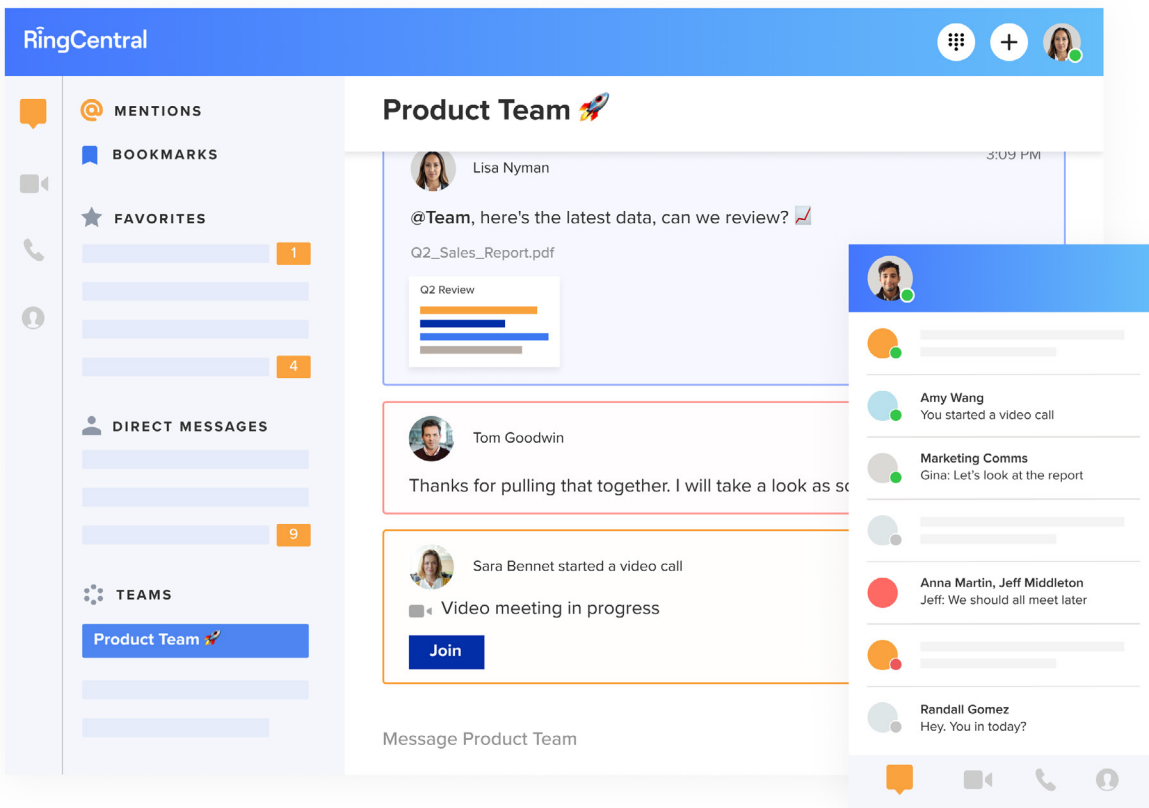
A collaborative stack in the cloud

A collaborative stack in the cloud

The cloud is rapidly replacing legacy, on-premises PBXs because, of course, in the tech space, not every employee is on-premises and the cloud presents the most efficient way to increase uptime, boost security, and enable automatic updates. For these reasons and more, while 33% of companies have already switched to cloud-based communications, another 38% of businesses surveyed by Frost & Sullivan intend to follow suit.[19]

Cloud transformations have been particularly hot this year, especially because organizations have diminished interest in fixed assets—favoring OpEx over CapEx—such as legacy, on-premises technology. In turning to unified communications as a service (UCaaS), high-tech organizations embrace a scalable solution to manage their changing business requirements.

By choosing a modern cloud architecture, high-tech organizations can deploy a collaborative stack, one capable of API integrations with other key enterprise applications such as Salesforce, Okta, Jira, Microsoft 365, or Google Workspace. A collaborative stack not only boosts employee productivity, but it can also improve customer outreach by:

- **Speeding up sales**—integrating messaging, video, and phone with CRM and other essential productivity apps all in one workspace

- **Strengthening customer support** through an inbound and outbound contact center

- **Resolving issues faster** by reaching experts instantly as needed via messaging

- **Expanding customer reach** by supporting customers on any device and any channel, including voice, chat, email, SMS, and social media

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[19] Frost & Sullivan, cited in UC Today, July 2020

IDC's Kurtzman said that a collaborative stack can help mitigate business risk by establishing security, governance and compliance. "When you add it to the content layer and comms layer, it develops superpowers," he said in a recent RingCentral high-tech roundtable. Building in application integration can produce a "mean savings of 30 hours per week," and he adds, "that's pretty powerful."

Mitigate risk with a collaborative stack and culture[20]:

- Messaging
- Conferencing
- Telephony
- Team collaboration applications
- Office suites
- File sharing
- Systems of record integration
- Communities and social media
- ML/AI with integrations

Ultimately, collaborative unified communications technology drives higher productivity, streamlines work experiences, and better meets the expectations of both customers and employees. High-tech organizations must consider impactful ways to optimize employee and customer experiences—particularly as virtual workplaces become the norm—serving both groups as efficiently as possible.

[20] IDC Unlocking Collaboration in the Workplace, Doc # US47072820, December 2020

The unified platform experience

The unified platform experience

Discerning tech-savvy workers—particularly team leaders—expect best-in-class experiences from a communications platform. They won't settle for poor quality messaging tools, tolerate low-res video, or murky sound quality. Yet, separate best-in-class communications platforms often lead to disconnect. And your IT team would rather not waste time supporting a jumble of communications apps any more than your coworkers want to switch between a gaggle of different tools.

What a waste

CIO.com reports that 69% of workers waste up to an hour each day navigating between apps, amounting to a waste of 32 days annually. Maybe that's why 68% of UCaaS buyers say that all-inclusive capabilities are crucial to their purchasing decisions, according to Frost & Sullivan.[21]

For IT teams, a cloud-based collaborative communications platform presents a multi-faceted application that puts every employee on the same page— anywhere and in real time. And it provides a direct way to build a collaborative communications stack with APIs that enable productive integration with key enterprise applications—providing the right data at the right time.

[21] Frost & Sullivan cited in UC Today, July 2020

- A unified communications platform becomes an enterprise hub for important collaboration information, including conversation histories, shared links, shared files, online statuses, workflows, and project/task management—all easily searchable and accessible from anywhere on any device.

- A unified communications platform is a cultural hub, where important everyday interactions, collaborations, and workflows occur either formally or casually. It provides the digital equivalent of an open room, where everyone is theoretically accessible, enabling direct conversations between employees from the boardroom to the (virtual) reception desk—no matter where they're located or what communications device they're using.

While the number of permanent remote workers may double in 2021, the new normal is a hybrid workplace. If history repeats itself, high-tech organizations will be among the first to master this new paradigm and achieve effective team collaboration whether employees work on-site, off-site or a mixture of the two.

For high-tech organizations, advancing workplace innovation means replacing non-performant or non-integrated communications apps with a scalable, unified-communications-as-a-service platform. Make communicating and collaborating in the new normal exceed everyone's expectations.

For more information, please contact a sales representative. Visit us at ringcentral.com/high-tech or call 844-569-2989.

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