THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO

Managing Today's Hybrid Workforce

During the Covid-19 pandemic, companies, teams, and individuals succeeded in pulling off the biggest 'lab test' of remote work ever. The question that many companies are asking now is: *what does the future of work look like?*

The pandemic has forever changed how we think about and organize workplaces, and the future of work is here. Surveys and studies indicate that the new model is a 'hybrid' approach. Employees with the option of working remotely and/or in some kind of flexible arrangement will do so. And, they will spend part of their time in some kind of environment that puts workers together in physical proximity, whether it's the traditional office setting, a co-working space, or something else.

Our perspective is also informed by the fact that we led our own company through this pandemic and helped many companies equip themselves and their people for a remote work arrangement.

Here are a few conclusions we've come to:

- The pandemic showed that successful and resilient companies are flexible.

- Success in the remote work scenario required a people-centric approach. It also required leading people through change.

- A people-centric approach to managing dispersed and mobile teams to positively impact business outcomes can help a business succeed.

- Key enablers of a people-centric flexible organization include (1) reliable technology and tools to enable connection and communication and (2) the ability to provide an environment where individuals can thrive. Clearly, when individuals and teams thrive, the business thrives.

This paper contains key findings about the future of work, why it includes a 'hybrid' model for many organizations, and emerging needs and suggestions for technology, policies, leadership, talent, and personal productivity.

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WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD OF WORK

While not everyone wants to stay remote, many workers want - and have asked for - some flexibility. Although few companies have implemented policies that make remote work permanent or long-term, most Human Resources (HR) leaders say their organizations will offer more work location flexibility coming out of the pandemic.

Going forward, nine out of ten organizations will combine remote and on-site working, according to a McKinsey survey of 100 executives across industries and geographies.[1] The survey confirms that productivity and customer satisfaction increased during the pandemic.

A Gallup report based on input from the company's CHRO (Chief HR Officer) Roundtable agrees, saying that "flexibility within a framework —which includes a hybrid model—will be the go-forward option used by many organizations.[2]

What Does the Future of Work Look Like?

As mentioned earlier, a hybrid workplace will be a common approach going forward. Simply put, it's a mix of off-site and in-person work.

It might consist of one to three days on-site to foster teamwork, connection, cohesion, and to build and maintain culture. Some organizations continuing their hybrid work model are planning intentional office days or purposeful in-person team gatherings. Beyond the obvious benefits of getting people together, there are less tangible and even *in*tangible benefits such as the building of trust. There is even great value in the *un*structured time together that happens around the structured meetings or gatherings.

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What Are Some Key Post-pandemic Takeaways Companies are Sharing?

The pandemic flexed companies' resilience 'muscle,' and they're stronger for it. If another pandemic or some kind of natural disaster strikes, the hybrid-equipped company is prepared to keep business open and functioning.

There is a cost advantage to a remote or hybrid workplace. With fewer people needing space full-time in a corporate office, companies can downsize their real estate. For many workers, the office becomes sort of a 'turnaround' setting more akin to a co-working space, where people come and go, sharing a common workspace where no particular desk or office is permanently assigned.

If a company downsizes its office space, periodic gatherings or meetings could be accommodated at larger rented venues such as co-working offices or events centers.

Paying less for real estate, a company could provide or subsidize a subscription to a local co-working office that is closer to employees' homes to give them a more 'formal,' professional environment in which to spend part of their week. These often either provide daycare or are located near one, which helps parents of young children balance work and life.

Most leaders—especially in Human Resources—view hybrid and flexible workplaces as a potential recruitment and talent strategy. They have seen companies be successful by accessing a broader talent pool and making a flexible/hybrid work model an incentive for top performers to stay.

Gartner's research concludes that by 2030, the demand for remote work will increase 30%, largely due to the preference for remote work by Generation Z.[3] Social distancing because of the COVID-19 pandemic pushed us forward, and many organizations are shifting to some kind of remote or hybrid work model.
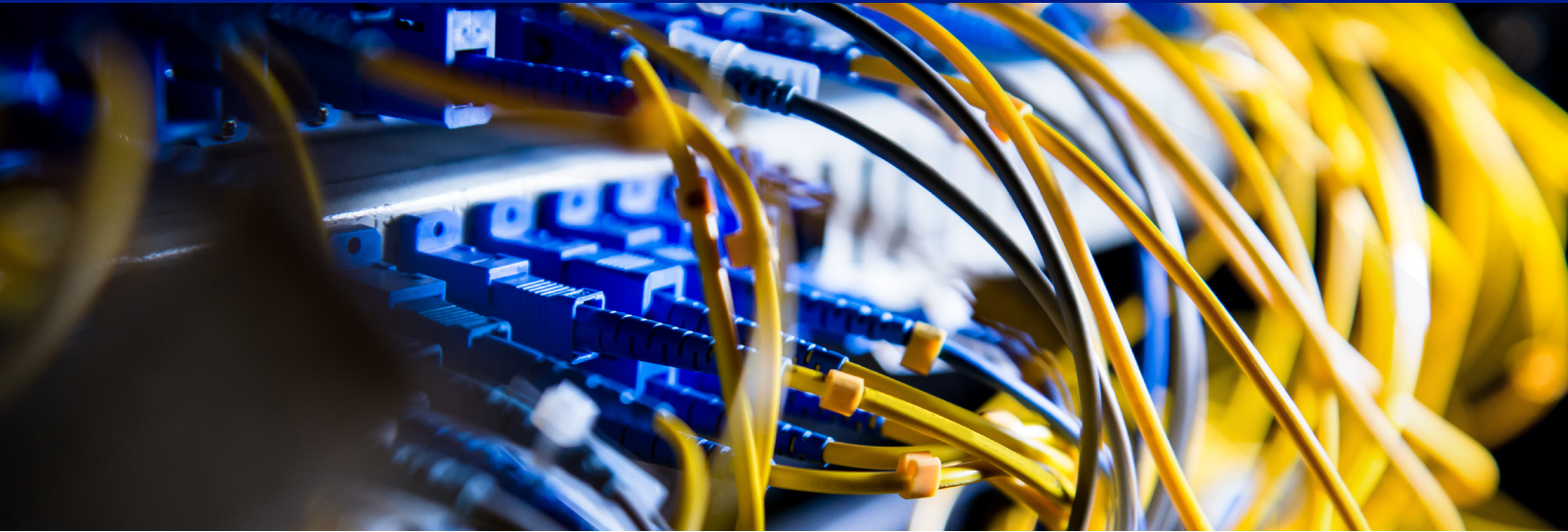
TECHNOLOGY

If flexibility and people-centrism were key productivity and success factors for companies that thrived during the pandemic, how can enterprises ensure long-term success with a hybrid workplace model? What does it take to equip a mobile employee and connect the enterprise?

A Fusion Connect and AT&T commissioned IDG survey of IT decision makers in May 2021 provides some insight.

According to technology decision makers, the IT components that have been instrumental in **boosting productivity** are:

- Collaboration tools (54%)

- Web conferencing (51%)

Top investments they plan to help **accelerate business** post-pandemic include:

- Cloud (63%)

- Network security (62%)

Tackle the Connected Hybrid Enterprise in Stages

Businesses that put infrastructure in place for remote teams during the pandemic are at an advantage. They already better off, now, in terms of flexibility and preparedness. Still, there may be opportunities to bring technology and corporate infrastructure closer to full maturity, something we call **The Connected Enterprise**.

Step 1: As IT departments look ahead, their first step is to evaluate and decide what to do with any makeshift fixes instituted to enable a pandemic-induced mass work-from-home model.

Step 2: Next, plan and institute a go-forward connected enterprise infrastructure that provides technology tools for seamless communications with employees, customers, and trading partners, inside or outside the organization. And underpinning it will be solutions to ensure the performance and security of applications, networks, and connections.

One Company's Journey to the Connected Enterprise

For its own connected enterprise, Fusion Connect charted this path:

Best-in-Breed	Hybrid	Platform
Strategy to purchase the "Best-in-Breed" technology solutions.	**Strategy to mix a "Best-in-Breed" technology solution with a "Platform" as the foundation.**	**Strategy to purchase a single "Platform" technology solutions.**
Factors:	Factors:	Factors:
• Requires additional integration resources	• Integrated core with separate point solutions	• Highly integrated
• Low information flow	• Some information flow	• High information flow
• Training for each solution	• Training more complicated than the "Platform" approach and less complicated than "Best-in-Breed"	• Common functionality accelerate adoption and training
• Overall TCO trends higher than "Platform" solutions	• Some solutions have a higher value and are more mature than the "Platform"	• Overall value increases as the full platform is implemented
• Loosely coupled with moderate barriers to change, additional integration required	• Core tightly coupled with additional integration	• Tightly coupled with high barriers to change
• Premium cost	• High cost	• Optimized cost

PRE-PANDEMIC ━━━━━━━━━ DURING ━━━━━━━━━ POST-PANDEMIC

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Chart a Go-forward IT Strategy

Consider a few insightful findings. Survey data makes it clear that IT architecture that will improve employees' connectivity and security and enable them to work from practically anywhere is critical. **The top three 2021 investment areas identified in the IDG Rapid Response survey are Cloud-based applications, [Network Security](#), and Cloud hosted/Cloud managed services like [hosted phone](#) and [collaboration systems](#).**

Goals for Your Connected Enterprise

A connected enterprise supportive of a hybrid workplace will:

- Maximize value
- Improve availability
- Provide visibility
- Enable secure connections from anywhere

Guiding Principles for Choosing Hybrid Workplace Technology

A key enabler of a people-centric approach to managing remote and hybrid teams is reliable technology that empowers people to connect and collaborate across distances.

Therefore, when equipping people for longer-term hybrid working arrangements, it's valuable to assess both teams' and individuals' technology needs and provide what they need to do their jobs well—and productively.

Here's our summary of findings and recommendations for doing that:

- **Equip people for success.** Match the hardware with their role and its demands, their work style, and personal preference. Consider giving everyone a budget for things like a second monitor, a webcam, headsets, and desk chair.

- **Take a hard look at both hardware and software** and weigh the value and benefits of standardization. For ease of administering hardware, and to take advantage of bulk buying discounts, does it make sense to have one or two standard PC laptop models and one or two iOS models? Fusion Connect, for example, recently provided new hardware to about 66% of the company and aligned everyone on the same software platforms for efficiency and ease of doing business.

- **Discover which files and apps employees** use to perform their jobs and devise a plan for them to remotely access and share data in a secure manner. Cloud-based apps are inherently available—where there is internet—outside of company offices and networks. Files or programs stored or running on a desktop in the office are more difficult to access.

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- Every organization will need to decide which option for **extending remote access** makes the most sense for their situation. A traditional VPN may be an easy option, though newer virtual desktops offer advantages.

- **Enable reliable, fast Internet service at home**. If an employee does not have reliable internet access at home, consider providing an LTE wireless solution.

- **Ensure continuity of voice communications**. Do employees use physical phones? What options do they have for using their business extension remotely? Can they access their business line via a software-based unified communications app in place of their physical handset? Is it wise to have people use their personal mobile as their primary phone in place of a business extension?

- **Assess call centers.** Remote work is an attractive option for companies that operate contact centers. An important consideration will be how easily the contact center solution scales across multiple locations and number of users. Can agents and supervisors be trained virtually?

- **Consider web conferencing capabilities.** What is the current service capacity, and how will it handle an increase in usage or number of meeting participants? Does web conferencing service offer all the features your remote workforce needs? Are free conferencing services everything they claim to be?

- **Consider whether cloud-based apps for collaboration and productivity might be a good fit.** These hosted business applications not only help increase efficiency, collaboration and teamwork; they also reduce the IT burden of deploying, managing, and maintaining them on-premises. Examples of subscription-based, fully managed, secure productivity applications include Office 365, Hosted Exchange, and Hosted SharePoint.

Companies that helped managers learn to lead differently during COVID-19 and created 'micro-moments' of connection and engagement were the ones that experienced the largest productivity gains during the pandemic.

(McKinsey: The Workforce of the Future)

HUMAN RESOURCES, PEOPLE MANAGEMENT, AND CULTURE

A successful remote or hybrid work program builds upon a strong foundation. Supervisors may need new kinds of assistance. Best practices, guidance, and occasional help from Human Resources business partners will help supervisors effectively manage people and participation in a hybrid work environment.

Having standards and guidance in place will also help employees know what is expected. Every organization will need to thoughtfully and creatively consider how to instill and maintain company culture regardless of people's work surroundings.

Policies and Guidance

Publish policies and guidance. Remote work policies might include eligibility criteria, an approval process, and timekeeping guidance. Just as done for on-site work situations, establish guidelines for remote work attendance, availability, and work hours. Human Resource teams should be well-versed in the policies, and hold coaching conversations about successful remote work. Also develop training sessions for new employees and another for supervisors.

The HR team and company leaders will need to balance employee feedback with the objectives and goals of the company "as well as the company's infrastructure and resources," suggests a report from the Gallup CHRO Roundtable. According to the report, many HR leaders have concluded that decisions about the future of remote work "aren't a matter of policy as much as a matter of culture."[4]

Maintain Connection and Foster Company Culture by Being Intentional

Working out of the office reduces employees' organic ways of interacting with others, which can lead to lower overall engagement. Managers are increasingly burdened with making sure that employees feel connected, engaged, and trusted.

A regular cadence of top-down communications is extremely valuable. Many companies implemented virtual all-hands calls. The head of Fusion Connect recorded a weekly video that was shared company-wide.

Be sure to institute structured listening and feedback methods, which are even more important in a remote or hybrid work scenario. Change can be difficult, but organizations can overcome some of its negative effects by incorporating employee and leadership feedback into remote work practices, policies, and management style.

Examples of successful structured methods include:

- Conducting annual employee surveys

- Having periodic touchpoints with leaders at various levels of the organization to discuss the hybrid work program, its strengths and issues, and regularly solicit feedback from employees.

- Forming employee engagement committees can help generate ideas and be another source of employee input and feedback.

With planning, some spontaneity, and the right collaboration tools such as Unified Communications and video conferencing software, organizations can keep the lines of engagement open, and productivity high.

Provide Practical Training

Employees—especially those who interface with anyone outside the company—may need a refresher in remote work nuances. For example, lead a training course that covers dress code and best practices for leading a video call or presentation.

The shift to a hybrid workplace has prompted more managers at all levels to address the issues that affect overall performance. This includes finding ways to engage, motivate, and manage remote workers and leaders.

Establish Standards of Engagement

Working remotely doesn't necessarily remove one from constant distractions or disruptions. In a Forbes article, Brent Gleeson shared, "Remote work becomes more efficient and satisfying when managers set expectations for the frequency, means, and ideal timing of communication for their teams."[5] He shares examples that may be familiar to anyone who made the move to working off-site: using videoconferencing for daily check-in meetings and Instant Messenger (IM) when something is urgent.

He also suggests that it's helpful to "establish expectations on the best times of day for team members to reach their manager … and the manager to reach each team member."[6]

Trust Employees

Managers have often equated face-time with productivity and accountability. That need not be the case. Many companies report greater productivity among their teleworkers as compared to their office workers. For example, "Best Buy, British Telecom, Dow Chemical, and many others show that teleworkers are 35-40% more productive."[7] So, employee productivity is not about bodies in seats. It's about time management and trust. Work together to determine priorities. Find out what challenges employees face and how to help them get their jobs done.

Set Communication Expectations

Model availability, frequency of contact, responsiveness, and updates. On group conference calls make sure remote attendees have ample opportunity to speak. They may need to interrupt because they cannot "read the room." Be deliberate about connecting with people – by phone, email, IM or video conference. It helps establish trust and accountability. Different companies or teams may need different management tools, like hosted applications, to stay connected and confident about employees' productivity.

Pay Attention

It's very easy to be distracted by email. Or to feel the tug to multitask while on a conference call. Don't. A manager's time, in particular, with remote employees needs to be focused. Listen and give full attention. Body language is lost when everyone is remote, so listen and look for other signals. With HD quality audio phone systems, one can pick up a sigh, or sound of frustration, or a happy tone.

Be Spontaneous

It's human nature to engage. In the office, people drop by to ask a question, chat while making coffee in the break room, and spend the first few minutes of a meeting sharing weekend plans. There is structured and unstructured contact, and managers should engage in unstructured contact with their team. Instead of always emailing remote employees or only having phone calls for 1:1s or project meetings, managers might try a casual daily check-in by phone, IM, or video call. Consider the kind of engagements that occur in an office environment and how technology to recreate those engagements in a virtual world.

Find Ways to Maintain Motivation, Engagement, and Team Spirit

Use tools where employees can see each other face to face; there is an opportunity to chit chat, get to know each other, and foster camaraderie. Success is attaining the same quality of engagement from an employee two states away as someone two cubes away. Encourage remote employees to be in office for team or company-wide events if feasible.

And while in-person events are ideal, companies may still need to hold some off-site/virtual events. Here are a few ideas that worked for Fusion Connect during pandemic lockdowns:

• Online Office Games (play virtual games)

• Virtual Contests (like "most interesting collection", best Halloween costume, etc.)

• Webinars on Health & Wellness

• Virtual Talent Show (include family members)

Investing in Leadership and in Micro-connections Leads to Productivity

Did your company help managers learn new leadership skills during Covid-19? Invest in leaders who can motivate employees wherever they are and support the small connections between colleagues.

According to McKinsey's survey, organizations with the biggest productivity gains during the pandemic all supported "small moments of connection or engagement among their employees, moments in which coaching, mentorship, idea sharing, and co-working take place."[8]

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TALENT

One thing that didn't change during the shift to remote work was a company's reliance on the talent and skill of its people. The pandemic brought to the forefront the need for extreme levels of adaptability, and it required workers and leaders alike to make decisions rapidly, innovate, and adopt new technology. But more than these, the wholesale shift to offsite work prompted the need for new social and technological skills.

Following are several tips company leadership can apply to help their talent thrive.

Help People Address the Inevitable Challenges

Although there are several benefits of remote work, it can raise a vast array of issues and challenges for employees and the people who manage them. From staying focused to screen fatigue, employees can struggle to find their remote work 'zen.'

Acknowledge the Real Possibility that People will Feel Isolated

For some people more than others, remote work can be isolating. Team collaboration and communication time can help. So can building in intentional personal chit-chat at the beginning and/or end of meetings.

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Help People Keep a Healthy Work-life Balance

Nearly 70% of professionals who transitioned to remote work because of the Covid-19 pandemic say they now work on the weekends, and 45% say they regularly work more hours during the week than they did before, according to a survey of 2,800 workers by Los Angeles-based staffing firm Robert Half.[9]

And while workers may find it tempting to work around the clock, it's helpful to set regular working hours and maintain a balance. Here's how:

- Set aside a physical space for working, separate from the rest of the living space

- Develop "Do Not Disturb" signals with family like a closed door, hand signals, or headphones on

- Consider a membership at a co-working space to clearly delineate the separation between work and home

Foster Team Collaboration and Communication

It's hard enough to hold productive in-person meetings, and when everyone works from home, it becomes even harder to stay on the same page and communicate effectively.

Emails, phone calls, and even video calls remove much of the nuance from how we communicate. It's easy to misinterpret messages when the nonverbal context is missing.

Avoiding misunderstandings in a remote work setting requires everyone to double down on their professional communication skills, which includes:

- Regular check-ins to confirm priorities, timelines, and tasks

- Recap action items and pertinent details such as due date at the end of a call, conference, or email

- Use project management and collaboration tools like Microsoft Task Planner to keep track of deliverables

Regularly Discuss Tips and Best Practices for Productive Remote Work

During the Covid-19 pandemic, people in one work group took turns on their weekly team call sharing tips for working productively at home. They borrowed ideas found online or gleaned from their personal experience. Taking 5 or 10 minutes during a team meeting to talk about the 'what and how' of successful, productive remote work can pay big dividends.

Keep Technology Trip-ups at Bay

Even if the company equips remote workers with the essential files, apps, and tools they need to be productive, sometimes the unexpected happens: there's a disruption in internet service or a computer update begins right before an important web conference.

With some pre-planning and a little help, each work-from-home employee can be equipped to handle the small surprises, including:

- Know how to access the IT helpdesk

- Create a contact on their Smartphone for their conference bridge access number for quick and easy dialing

- Have a backup mobile hotspot device or cell phone plan that allows tethering to use as a backup in case of an internet outage

- Allow the use of a backup computer or make sure that employees have their smart phone securely set up to access work email if their assigned work computer malfunctions

Develop and Maintain Healthy Habits

Personal health may be the last thing one considers when knee-deep in meetings and projects. Doing good work starts with feeling good. Everyone can keep an eye on their own well-being with some ideas like these:

- Encourage isolated individuals to set aside time with friends and/or family outside of work to develop and deepen relationships

- Set calendar reminders to eat a salad or take vitamins

- Block off breaks for physical activity such as a quick online workout or a walk around the block

- Try free mindfulness apps like Calm or Headspace to recenter during a busy day

- Use a personal wearable device to prompt you to stand and move at regular intervals

- Change work location and posture. Try a standing desk or stand at your breakfast bar, for example.

PERSONAL PRODUCTIVITY

Here are some great starter ideas of practical ways to stay focused and on-task for productive remote work.

Have Regular Touch-point But Don't Overfill the Calendar with Meetings

A LinkedIn article points out how remote work has boosted the number of meetings people hold, in part because the ad-hoc, unplanned 'over the water cooler' discussions simply don't happen when people are spread out in home offices.[10]

One-on-one and team video calls help everyone feel connected, valued, and engaged in something bigger than themselves. It also helps form a perspective on business goals, customers, and so on. Broaden the conversation by inviting different department heads to present an overview of their team, its objectives, and recent accomplishments.

Try the 2-minute Rule

If a task takes less than 2 minutes to complete, do it without delay. This helps churn out "wins" throughout the day that make one feel good, further increasing productivity and motivation. Plus, it prevents numerous small tasks from piling up.

Make the Most of Calendar and To-Do Apps

Do you need approvals from the execs you just asked to review that important document? Set a calendar reminder to follow up with them two days from now. Did a colleague just request something that you can't tackle until after you're done with three hours of back-to-back calls, but you're afraid you'll forget? 'Snooze' the email to re-appear at the top of your Inbox three hours from now.

There are numerous apps and myriad ways these tools can help people stay organized and consistently productive.

Organize Your Day, with Consideration for Your Own Biorhythms

Start each day with a short planning session, listing and prioritizing your tasks, projects, and calls. You can make this list using pen and paper or an electronic notepad. When you finish something, you can refer to your list rather than wracking your memory to remember what's next important.

End each day checking off the items you completed. Then, the next morning, start your day's to-do list with yesterday's incomplete items (assuming priorities haven't shifted overnight). Some people pair this practice with their calendar and actually block specific time slots for particular tasks or projects.

If possible, make work fit you. If you have an energy lull every afternoon, try doing your creative and mentally intensive work like writing or strategizing in the mornings. Save less intensive tasks like clearing out your Inbox or placing follow-up calls for later in the day.

Avoid Overworking

Even though only 25% of respondents in the Joblist survey reported burnout from working from home, remote work can nevertheless lend itself to overwork.[11] The cause, at least in part, is the fact that work (via laptop and phone) tends to always be with you. Contrast this with an office setting, where you might take short breaks to chat with colleagues in the hall, step out to grab a cup of coffee, or walk your recycling down to the copy room.

Your mind can't produce at its best if you are driving hard with intense focus for 8+ hours 5+ days a week. Mixing in some less intense work tasks and periodic breaks will help avoid burnout and produce better results in the long run.

Take a moment to call or text a friend. Stop for 15 minutes to listen to a podcast or make progress on a professional development course. Stop and brush your pet. Wipe the coffee rings off your desk and clean your laptop screen. Or step into your backyard for a short meditation session. These activities will give you breaks from the intense thinking and doing, helping you stay focused, productive, and happier, long-term.

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"AS-A-SERVICE" AT YOUR SERVICE

Digital transformation is accelerating faster than ever, with technology needs seeming to evolve every 12-18 months. With the rapid adoption of a hybrid workplace model, businesses are finding the best way to meet challenges are with "as a service" solutions. Managed Networking and SD-WAN, hosted voice, all the flavors of Software as a Service, and cloud-based productivity apps, enable businesses to deploy and scale rapidly while supporting work-from-anywhere.

Fusion Connect equips organizations for transformation by helping employees securely connect and communicate.

ENDNOTES

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