APAC Insights #3
The New Normal:
Home as the New Workplace
Discussion Summary

23 September 2020

Internet Society

1. Introduction

The APAC Insights series[1] brings together thought leaders and subject matter experts to share views and insights on current issues related to the Internet and its use in the Asia-Pacific region. Each session takes place on Zoom and is broadcasted live on Livestream,[2] Facebook[3] and Periscope.[4] A Q&A segment provides an opportunity for attendees to ask speakers questions.

The APAC Insights #3[5] held on 23 September 2020 was hosted by Rajnesh Singh, Regional Vice President of Asia-Pacific, and featured Phillip Raskin, Founder of Work is Play Inc. with over 20 years of communications experience in the technology sector.

The session explored the ways the workforce has adjusted to the new work-from-home environment and the role technology has played in the adjustment. The session discussed the wide range of challenges with working from home, including the lack of access to sufficient bandwidth and appropriate devices, the lack of digital skills, cybersecurity issues, juggling work-life balance and isolation at home, and dealing with work overload, meeting fatigue and over-controlling supervisors. In the session, Phillip provided five philosophies and five practical tips to help workers function better in the work-from-home environment.

The next section provides a summary of the conversation.

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[1] https://www.internetsociety.org/events/apac-insights/

[2] https://livestream.com/internetsociety/apacinsights3

[3] https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=356182962175285&extid=IirluwXlupprPetm

[4] https://www.pscp.tv/ISOC_Live/1jMJgXwMbRexL

[5] https://www.internetsociety.org/events/apac-insights3/

2. Discussion Summary

In the current pandemic, organisations have had to adjust to new ways of working, and many of us have been forced to work from home for several months now. Working from home, or remote working, telecommuting and teleworking have been buzzwords since a decade ago, but this trend never really materialised until the pandemic when countries imposed lockdowns. Enabled by the Internet, the pandemic has fast-tracked organisations' technology adoption to work online.

Some organisations have thrived and found new ways to work with the technology, embracing the new normal. As some countries emerge from lockdown, these organisations are contemplating that this may be the way of working for some roles and jobs in the future. Others, however, have struggled to cope because of poor Internet access, lack of digital skills or rigid work cultures.

"This transition to working from home is entirely dependent on the Internet…there's no other way to do it."

~ Rajnesh Singh

What is clear is that digital technologies are vital for working from home. Without access to enough bandwidth to handle streaming connections for virtual meetings and the "right" devices for productivity and collaborative applications, one simply cannot work remotely. Basic connectivity, devices and speeds are insufficient for work.

Conversations about the digital divide have taken place for years now, but the pandemic has placed a spotlight on the need for urgent action to bridge the gap. Countries with high-speed connections are creating applications and services based on the infrastructure that they have, but these applications and services do not work optimally for those with low connectivity. It's a wake-up call for governments to prioritise the building of the Internet infrastructure as access to the Internet will define success or failure in the new normal. Work from home is only going to work if the Internet infrastructure is in place.

"Connectivity is the key cog in digital transformation."

~ Phillip Raskin

Besides connectivity and access to digital tools, workers are faced with a multitude of other challenges from finding and setting up a place to work at home, dealing with work expectations, to coping with isolation. These multiple challenges are evident from the varied set of questions posted by participants prior to and

during the sessions who asked about ways to juggle the demands of work and home life all in the same place, ways to convince our boss that we are actually working when we are at home, and coping with long working hours alone. Very often, there is the misconception that because we cannot travel, we have all the time in the world, and as a result, the workload becomes greater than ever.

Many of these issues require relationship management and the shift from a regimented and highly structured work culture to a more flexible objective-based one. For example, focusing on what has been achieved rather than on the amount of time spent working. A key challenge is changing the perception and work practices of other colleagues and your supervisors. One strategy is to find ways to gain their trust. Generally, supervisors are over-controlling when they are insecure and feel pressured to deliver. If they can be reassured that outputs are being delivered and objectives are being met in a timely manner, they are more likely to ease control.

The pandemic has accelerated the shift to more flexible work styles, but there may be a generational barrier that will take time to change. It is important to engage in discussion with supervisors and colleagues on workload and develop realistic objectives. However, such discussions may not be possible in some cultures and for those in junior positions.

We are social beings and we thrive on interactions with other people. Working from home can be isolating and the water-cooler conversations in the office cannot be replicated online. But it is possible to schedule social and informal interactions, such as online happy hours and trivia nights, or as lockdowns ease, weekly lunch meetings. These events are important for staying connected and building relationships.

Other key considerations that organisations need to invest in is the reskilling and upskilling of the workforce to work from home, and in cybersecurity. On the latter, many offices have provided virtual private networks (VPNs) and cybersecurity guidelines. Previously, cybersecurity at work was the responsibility of the organisations' IT departments. Now, Internet service providers as well as individuals also have a role to play in ensuring online security.

Based on Phillip's own experience of working from home and coaching others to work effectively from home, he shares five philosophies and five practical tips.

"The five philosophies or ways of thinking that can really help are essentially about how you share your information, how you set your limits, how you work together on documents, how you think about others, and how you break it all down and start again."

~ Phillip Raskin

Five Philosophies

1. Share information asynchronously

Waiting for meetings to share not only wastes time, it means actions are taken in the interim without full information. Break out of the habit of providing updates in meetings, and reach out to your colleagues ahead of time via email, messaging apps, shared sites or other collaborative tools in text, powerpoint slides or video formats. This allows your colleagues to digest the information when they are ready, and meetings can then be used for resolving problems and other more productive things.

2. Set limits clearly, thoughtfully and repeatedly

When the separation between work and home becomes blurred, you may feel pressured to be available all the time. Therefore, it is important to set limits and boundaries for home and work activities. Figure out the time ranges for working that are best for you, and repeatedly communicate them with colleagues. Reject, reschedule or revise requests that fall outside of your set limits. Others working online may be on different time zone or circumstances – being mindful of the diversity of situations your colleagues are in is also important.

3. Use shared and live documents

Shared and live documents can simplify documents management, and avoid the need to keep track of multiple emails and document versions. A suitable platform will depend on which one you and your colleagues can have easy access to. For example, a multinational company is using one Google Sheet to list all the priorities. A challenge is the lack of interoperability between platforms and the wider adoption of open standards for documents. For example, a document created using Microsoft Word still has compatibility issues when accessed from a non-Microsoft platform such as Google Docs.

4. Understand others' information needs and priorities, and reframe accordingly

Provide information according to what the person needs, rather than provide general and a lot of information that the person will need to sift through to find the information needed. Summarising and distilling information also benefits you as it reduces information clutter. A useful exercise is to role play what each person in the chain might really need – it takes five minutes and you can have fun with it.

5. Break processes ... and make new ones

If the process is more than six months old, it was made for the old way of working. Many "established" practices of weekly meetings and monthly reports can be streamlined. Don't be afraid of change, re-examine what you are trying to achieve and test new ideas out.

Five Practical Tips

1. Work in chunks (such as 90 minutes) with built-in gaps away from the computer to do human, animal or plant things. It is important to build in breaks as we will lose focus when we are tired.

2.   Irregular meeting times force us to take breaks, such as setting meetings at 2:05pm and ending them at 3:40pm – allowing breaks between meetings.

3.   Give yourself a break, emotionally and literally. Be gentle with yourself and your colleagues.

4.   Utilise the digital technology available for home working. If low bandwidth, consider pausing video when you are not speaking, and downloading powerpoint slides ahead of calls.

5.   Use VPNs and mind your online security, keep in contact with IT.

Although working from home is the new normal, it is not the normal that we choose to live in. First of all, the home has not been built for working. Most homes do not have a study/office space and the digital infrastructure in place for work. Yet, a lot of people are still trying to replicate the physical working environment in the online work environment but some things cannot be done, like the human interactions that being office-based delivers. However, there are new ways of doing things online that could work better, and we need to continue to experiment, learn-by-doing, adapt and adopt as the work-from-home environment is still evolving.

The pandemic has brought to the fore the critical role that the Internet plays in enabling the global economy to function. This is why it is more important than ever to protect the Internet and ensure that the Internet remains open, accessible and secure for everyone.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in this report are those of the speakers and may or may not reflect official Internet Society positions.