COVID-19 - How to allow staff to work from home

Businesses that have already migrated their support functions to the cloud are perhaps in a better position to manage the increased demand for remote working that will inevitably come as Coronavirus continues its progress.

Those businesses that have not embraced remote working before might struggle with the cultural and behavioural changes required to implement such a policy under such difficult circumstances.

Lack of appropriate equipment (laptops) or licences to use certain software might cause limits to remote working. Lack of bandwidth might also cause problems.

However there are solutions available even for those businesses largely not yet in the cloud. Microsoft, Google, LogMeIn and Zoom all provide tools to facilitate remote working. Collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Slack provide video meetings, instant messaging-style conversations (helpful to create the feeling of being in an office whilst all working from home) and file sharing. These platforms can be run on any (relatively new) computer providing it has a camera and microphone.

The ability to share files is very important for finance departments, and secure portals have been in use by many firms for a while, including Microsoft Sharepoint and OneDrive, Dropbox and Google Docs.

However, whilst dealing with the immediate issues arising from Coronavirus, businesses should not lose sight of more routine security concerns. Security is critical whatever system is used to communicate.

Businesses should ensure that employees are not working at home on computers with outdated anti-virus software. Family shared computers are a particular risk. Much better, if possible, to require employees to work only on computers provided by the business.

Bandwidth was mentioned above as a potential obstacle. Stable and secure high-speed internet access is essential. The usual restrictions on public Wi-Fi networks, such as provided by coffee shops and the like, should apply. Using mobile phones and "hotspots" is one way to avoid public Wi-Fi and stay online.

It is clear that businesses not used to remote working will face cultural challenges and have to encourage change in behaviour to keep a happy workforce through trying times.

As always, communication is the answer here. Set up virtual team meetings regularly. Not only will this help ensure work is progressing as expected and avoid any last-minute delays to clients, but also will help staff feel connected.

Who know, this might just be the catalyst we all need (if for the very wrong reason) to change our working patterns for good.

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