BEYOND COVID-19

Will recent experience
transform the digital future?

Computacenter

A NEW STEADY STATE

As the summer draws to a close and the immediate response to the impact of COVID-19 has stabilised into a new steady state of working, many organisations are taking stock on the year so far and assessing how the turbulence of 2020 will shape their ongoing business and IT strategy.

The year was set to be challenging even before the virus took hold; with an uncertain BREXIT outcome on the horizon, planning to manage the risks and capitalise on the opportunities that the new UK status might bring was moving up the agenda – particularly for the IT department where location strategy, data residency demands and the ongoing collaboration of global ecosystems began to alter digital transformation plans.

COVID-19 has undoubtedly accelerated some of those changes that organisations were already making, or perhaps intended to make in the longer term – changing business as usual to something much more unusual. For many companies, having proven their ability to adapt in recent crisis conditions has given confidence that navigating the UK's exit from the EU might perhaps not be quite so challenging after all, or at least by comparison.

Computacenter has fared well through the first part of 2020. We executed our own business continuity plans at pace, and in parallel played at times a vital role in those of our customers, many of whom form part of the UK's Critical National Infrastructure. COVID-19 changed the shape of demand across all industries, our own included, and we were privileged to be able to help all our public and private sector customers adjust to maintain their operations and keep their people safe.

Service needs shifted materially, with many office and campus based transformation programmes placed on hold to meet the immediate needs of a now predominantly remote workforce. New, novel IT user communities have been created in a matter of weeks, including a new home-based GP workforce, and over 250,000 underprivileged children across England – both of whom Computacenter equipped throughout the second quarter of the year to meet the immediate societal need.

Unwieldy decision-making processes that have in the past thwarted some of the customers that we work with suddenly became flexible and agile. Typically protracted contract negotiations were executed at breakneck speed, and policy and regulatory changes were introduced overnight. We've always been proud of being led by our customers' needs, which drives a high degree of responsiveness in our central engines and autonomy within the teams that work alongside our customers; despite this inherent pace of execution, we too found new energy and velocity as we began to transform our services to meet the new needs of our customers.
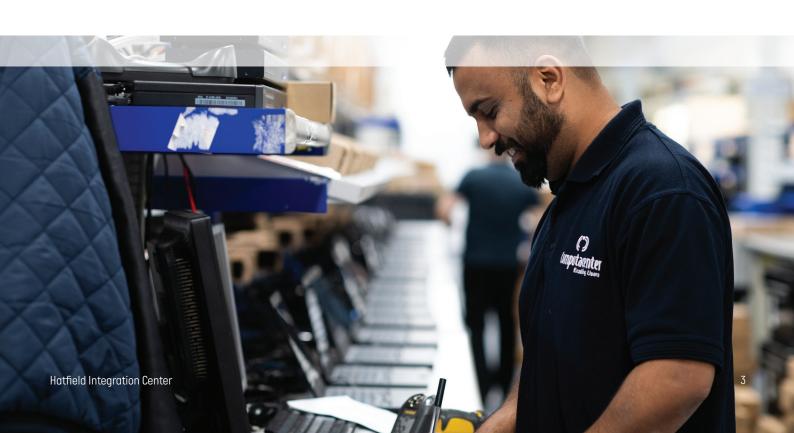
THE IMMEDIATE CHALLENGE – HOW BIG, HOW BAD, HOW LONG?

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"Unprecedented" has been the buzzword of 2020 (with "can you see my screen?" the catchphrase hot on its heels). It felt like everything that happened throughout late March, April and May was unprecedented. The level of uncertainty that rippled through industries was alarming; how long would this go on for? How much change was needed to minimise disruption? How much worse will it get?

Our engagement with our customers shifted focus almost immediately. At the core of our breadth of IT service capability we are IT-user centric – our Digital Me portfolio of services is designed around equipping, enabling and empowering employees to be the best they can be – but suddenly we needed to keep people safe as much as we needed to help keep them productive.

There were some obvious emerging needs that we needed to change to address. Maximising the throughput of our logistics and configuration centers in the UK was vital in handling the massive surge in demand for home-working equipment. At the peak of the crisis, we configured more than 11,000 devices and shipped 27,000 items in one 24-hour period to a single customer. This isn't just unprecedented – it is unparalleled in the UK.

Our vendor and service partnerships were tested as massive demand put strain on the global supply chain. Our relationships proved paramount in helping our customers execute, and we're very proud that this experience has strengthened those partnerships further.

Hatfield Integration Center

We developed new, flexible services to support new workstyles in less than two weeks. Industrialised and robust, they will no doubt form part of our suite of offerings for the long-term:

HOME DELIVERY

While a number of technical projects were put on hold whilst organisations addressed their new priorities, for many organisations in the midst of Workplace transformations activities continued but needed to be executed in a new way. Client device upgrades to Windows 10 still form a significant part of our Workplace portfolio and requirements emerged to facilitate this at home. Leveraging both our logistic and configuration centers for pre-staging of devices, as well as the emergence of 'out of the box' configuration solutions such as Microsoft Autopilot, we have been able to continue large scale throughput of Client upgrades to individuals home addresses. We have resolved the significant logistical challenges of processing thousands of shipping locations, as well as data protection issues pertaining to GDPR to enable important projects to continue and conclude, setting secure foundations for the future.

REMOTE SUPPORT (REMOTE EXPERT/TECHCENTER)

One of the key trends of the past few years has been the emergence of the TechCenter facilities; 'Genius Bar' type solutions that can provide advice, support and repair services to users in a much more personal and engaging way. With offices now closed, a significant support channel for users was eliminated, and with many users now working remotely that have never experienced this, threatened to leave them exposed from a support and usage advice perspective.

To meet this need we quickly identified that the technologies that have now become pervasive in our remote working life - Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business and Zoom for example - offer a powerful way for us to continue to engage with users, using video calling to achieve the personal intimacy that we strive to deliver. We have redeployed on-site staff into remote modes of operation and are now able to provide software and application fix, as well as general "how do I?" type guidance for users via this channel, easing load from the traditional Service Desk.

As part of our roadmap, we are transforming what was a Most Viable Product (MVP) solution into a strategic component of our Workplace 'AssistMe' portfolio, offering closer Service Desk integration, virtual queue and other features.

MAINTENANCE AND SWAP AT HOME

With the lack of proximity to users and devices, the more traditional maintenance and break/fix services are compromised. To resolve to this need initially, we quickly introduced a home swap capability, building upon many of the principles in our Home Delivery service to allow us to quickly resolve hardware issues by exchanging the user's device. Whilst from a purist perspective a device swap may not always be the right fix, challenged by social distancing there were immediately few other ways that we could keep users productive if they experienced a device issue. Our logistical capability allowed us to offer this service and scale it, so that our customers users suffered minimum downtime in the event of a device problem.

Again, building upon this MVP with a more strategic solution for an enduring way of working, we have been piloting supporting technology to allow us to better perform our maintenance support. Exploiting AR/VR technology we are better able to identify and diagnose issues remotely, allowing us to exercise better judgement as to whether a user fix can resolve the problem, or whether a physical intervention or device swap will be required.

Much has been made of the shift to home working, but this only addressed a fraction of the UK workforce; after all, one cannot build a jet engine or drive a train in a spare room at home. Flexibility in contract terms and identifying technological solutions to support social distancing were equally vital in helping those that could not work from home, work from work safely.

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PLANNING FOR THE SHORT-TERM OUTLOOK – OPTIMISING NOW

So we find ourselves here today. There's a new autumnal chill in the air. Children are returning to schools and the office doors are opening to bring personnel back into the collaborative spaces that just a few months ago seemed vital to the productive operation of most businesses. Within our client base, the traditional office-based workforce won't be returning en masse, with businesses repatriating between 8-40% of their employees into their normal place of work, and not all of those on a full-time basis.

The 'hybrid' workforce is emerging, bringing new challenges with respect to equipping, connecting and securing working solutions that change shape on a day to day basis. Where the second quarter focussed on employee welfare and remote collaboration, the last few months have driven new conversations about optimising the investments made earlier this year and providing a scalable and secure platform for whatever comes next.

Demand for security posture assessment is on the rise – and with that comes opportunity to rationalise and consolidate vendor landscapes to optimise a standard security model across the IT asset estate. Likewise, the appetite for cloud-based consumption is increasing – perhaps because the old need for line of sight was eviscerated when everyone was sat on their own, at home.

We're helping our customers to establish whether the investments they have made to simply keep going over recent months are temporary – in which case how do those organisations release the capital to reinvest in their strategic objectives? – or a new platform for business change and growth. There isn't a consistent answer. For some, the success of remote operation is driving location strategy, including relocating head office presence from expensive hubs in London, or simply closing low-traffic locations entirely.

Other industries have seen material detrimental impacts that won't disappear in the short-term. Transport, hospitality manufacturing and high street retail have all seen fundamental change that will reshape their way of working, demanding innovative ways to identify and establish competitive advantage in a challenging outlook.

CREATING LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY – INCREASING AGILITY AND DRIVING GROWTH

It is difficult to predict just how material the experiences of 2020 will be in shaping the long-term IT needs within the UK. Most of our customers haven't fundamentally changed their digital strategies. Some have accelerated, some have slowed down, and spend is being prioritised based on specific industry needs. But it doesn't feel right now that the predictions and trends that were anticipated nine months ago are significantly different because of such unprecedented change.

This doesn't mean that there is no change, however. The relationships organisations hold with their customers have changed. There is a new intimacy, a sense of having come through something together. New collaboration with broader stakeholder groups has emerged. We have seen this across our clients, with greater business stakeholder proximity and new conversations that go beyond IT needs; organisations are sharing their experiences across industries to learn from one another's successes and mistakes.

The contract dynamic is changing too. This was happening to an extent already with the rise in XaaS and consumption billing, but with the continued uncertainty and the need to change at pace, flexibility and cost optimisation in sourcing and service contracts are likely to be key themes for the future.

More change is on the horizon. Throughout the remainder of the year and into 2021, we are told to expect further local and regional lockdowns, which will put further pressure on organisations trying to balance their hybrid workforce solutions.

The end of the year brings a new status for the UK, which we now approach with cautious optimism. This year has shown us that our people are resilient and adaptable, and the relationships organisations hold with their customers, partners and suppliers can be powerful, and often even more so during periods of change and when there's a new need to be met.

QUESTIONS
FOR THE PANEL

What new services made a difference during recent months?

What new challenges have been identified as you begin to evolve your way of working?

Are there challenges or opportunities for which the IT industry could provide better solutions?

How has your experience over recent months impacted your long-term strategy for sourcing?

What did you learn during this period that you want to retain in your future way of working?

Computacenter is a leading independent technology partner, trusted by large corporate and public sector organisations. We help our customers to Source, Transform and Manage their IT infrastructure to deliver digital transformation, enabling users and their business. Computacenter is a public company quoted on the London FTSE 250 (CCC.L) and employs over 16,000 people worldwide.