

The Anatomy of Rebuilding & Recovery

A CEO LOUNGE INITIATIVE

Driving Efficiency in the Age of Distributed Work

In conversation with



Amit Madhan
President & Group Head- IT & eBusiness, Thomas Cook India



Anjani Kumar
CIO, Strides Pharma Science



CR Srinivasan
Chief Digital Officer, Tata Communications



Feroz Khan
CEO, DigiFlynt



Jai Daga
VP - Technology, Sony Pictures Networks India



Paritosh Anand
VP & Group Head - Analytics, Reliance Industries



Rajeev Sridhar
MD, Infoblox (India & SAARC)

Associate Partner:



Support Partner:

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Driving Efficiency in the Age of Distributed Work

The pandemic among many things has also been a catalyst in hastening work from anywhere for the knowledge-based economy and organisations that did not have remote working on their agenda. Distributed work ecosystems have notable advantages including low costs, minimal real estate, exposure to a global talent pool and the freedom of choice. They also come with concerns of client data privacy, network security, communication issues and the lack of a codified virtual social framework. This leads to employees and organisations grappling with challenges not restricted to infrastructure. In this virtual rendezvous, stalwarts across industries come together to discuss what drives efficiency in the age of distributed networks.

Words by **Divya Sista**

A steady movement of working from shared spaces, homes or coffee shops was gaining momentum in the second half of the past decade with the rise of better, faster and more accessible network technology. Rigid workspaces, 'time on floor' tracking and compressed work schedules were being questioned by employees and management alike. This has paved the way for a distributed workforce with flexible workflows,

timelines and locations. The employee is no longer bound by the old workplace constraints but has a choice to come to the physical workspace or work from anywhere.

There are companies whose work policy was born out of the open network movement, where the organisation does not mandate employees to work from a certain location. Tech giants like Yahoo and IBM were pioneers in the mobility movement, where employees could

plan earlier and work from home or a fixed location. The United States government, too, has adopted distributed working to a certain extent, and employees report increased productivity and better work-life balance.¹

The benefits are plenty, and the pandemic provided the right push but gave organisations little time to prepare. Businesses found themselves switching off on-site work and shifting to remote working overnight. This has quickly metamorphosed into a human resource issue as well as a tech-infra challenge. Coordination, productivity management, burnout and emotional well-being were soft concerns organisations found themselves against; while lack of security, bandwidth, and ergonomics were tangible challenges that needed immediate redressal.

DISTRIBUTED NETWORKS AND THE TYRANNY OF DISTANCE

Information infrastructures and by property of extension, distributed networks are inherently discredited with the tyranny of distance be it in logistics and supply chain, workflow management, or computing

models. The theory² proposes that any capability available freely and accessed remotely loses its edge from a competitive standpoint. Distributed networks and agility can never go hand in hand was the popular opinion, and between the two, distributed network computing took a backseat. However, the distributed network models to facilitate workflows have progressed from an ease-of-work, good-to-have idea with advancements in technology, communication and network infrastructure to a *necessity* due to the pandemic.

“When we look at how organisations moved to the concept of work from home, it was not an evolution — but for a large number of them, it was because the pandemic drove it. It was no longer tenable to work from offices where the density of people was around one person per 40 square feet,” explains CR Srinivasan, Chief Digital Officer, Tata Communications.

The model wasn’t readily embraced because of predominant HR (human resources), regulatory and productivity complications — socialisation, team building, trust, brainstorming,



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productivity, managing time zones and immigration, among the others. There are also several infrastructure and security issues like bandwidth, connectivity, hardware availability, cloud migration and data security. Organisations forced into remote working had to streamline work, handle the spike in sudden infrastructure demands, manage resources and cater to new IT (information technology) budgets.

“IT cost budgets span between 1 and 5 per cent of the total budget depending on the cost, but post-2020, companies have started investing more. There has to be a collaboration between users, tools and technology for everyone on the network. As a chief information officer, even if the budget shoots up by 25 per cent YoY, this is a priority that needs investment. For instance, measuring the performance of an employee in a remote working environment — you need some sort of an AI-enabled tool that can help with that aspect. The underlying infrastructure needs to be developed keeping infosec and cybersec [information security and cyber security] in view so that, when people are connecting from different networks and devices, there is no compromise with the data, network or the system,” says Feroz Khan, CEO, DigiFlynt.

Anticipating network needs, communication requirements and justifying technology while in transition to a distributed model is a challenge in itself. The challenge for many can also be monetary. Every company may not have pockets deep enough to invest in

such largescale and rather complicated change, particularly, for the long term. “These are confusing times for a lot of companies. It’s still too early to call the shots. Nobody knows how things will pan out in the next 2-3 years. Many companies do have constraints in terms of near-term funding. Not everyone, unless if it is a big multinational, will have the funds to have a digital-first or cloud-first architecture, no matter how willing they may be to do so. Today, it’s more about how you react to various situations,” says Paritosh Anand, VP & Group Head – Analytics, Reliance Industries.

“While we keep up with an almost shape-shifting landscape, as norms and regulations constantly change, it becomes extremely difficult to indicate the exact network needs. There are projects that businesses would like to focus on and communication and networking needs should not come in the way of their implementation. This is the backbone but also the background of the business, and we cannot lose sight of deliverables, quality, revenue or new initiatives while concentrating on creating a distributed network,” opines Rajeev Sridhar, Managing Director, Infoblox (India & SAARC).

Telecommuting, work from home and work from anywhere were on the rise with the increasing millennial workforce who prioritised flexibility, freedom and fun. Organisations of all sizes were slowly adopting the distributed model — large legacy organisations to make a difference to the status quo, or start-ups simply because it was the natural thing

to do. Many businesses adopted remote working with guardrails to ensure it was democratic and manageable.

"Every company has some form of digital transformation going on at a varied pace. With the gig economy setting in, the predictions were that by 2028 a large part of the workforce would be working remotely. That has been accelerated by almost a decade," submits Anjani Kumar, CIO, Strides Pharma Science.

THE CIO'S CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

The fundamental roadblocks in implementing distributed networks, barring infrastructure and regulatory aspects, hover around the aspect of channelising communication and budgeting. Establishing communication plans eased most soft-skill challenges like the lack of coordination, teamwork and transparency, while "CIOs and CTOs are getting more business-centric, and going beyond just looking at the structure, keeping things running and staying connected," says Khan.

"They are also looking at ensuring

BCP is set up so that the business works seamlessly even in a hybrid environment, ensuring that partner/customer experience remains the same even when operating remotely. They are also looking at creating resilience through enabling the environment and empowering business — pushing themselves to think beyond keeping the application, data centre and network up and running," he explains.

Technology, social media and communication have all been drivers that are constantly changing perceptions and mindsets. The pandemic has been a stimulant in this situation, and in some cases, there is no going back to pre-pandemic days and ways. "Some gears that have been shifted are permanent. Video KYC with virtual diallers, virtual agents or internal audit going paperless and still staying in line with every regulation — this has eased business functions, improved customer experience, and some made us more efficient in ways we didn't know we were capable of," says Amit Madhan, President & Group Head-IT & eBusiness, Thomas Cook India.



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Integrating employees and existing systems into distributed working models is vital to its success. The change in how the organisation views technology can itself be a step in this direction. “The change has been positive,” says Jai Daga, VP - Technology, Sony Pictures Networks India. “There’s been a shift in the mindset of organisations in how they look at IT — from a support function to an enabler to a business driver — irrespective of the industry. We see a shift from traditional waterfall systems where approvals took 2-3 months, 10-12 rounds of presentations and so on. That time has reduced significantly today,” he says.

Kumar of Strides Pharma Science can’t agree more: “Until last year, IT was seen by most companies as just a function. They didn’t think of IT as something that brings in value. But now I see a sea change. Companies are actually looking at IT to solve business problems.”

That said, change management can be difficult from a human resource perspective — it is immensely difficult to replicate every interaction virtually, especially non-verbal cues, leading to confused communications and innumerable lost-in-translation moments. For the CIO/CTO too, there

are non-negotiable areas of data and security which makes their job to balance a precarious one — a balance that needs to be maintained between business empowerment and security.

The pandemic is a reminder that organisations, lives and people can be forced into a new normal all of the sudden. How effectively the organisation steers this ‘situation’ and takes it beyond to generate value is the nexus, from where it can either sprint ahead or stagnate.

“The pandemic suddenly opened up a Pandora’s box that the CIO/CTO hadn’t given much thought to because of the scale of remote working. Traditionally, everyone would be routed to the data centre through a VPN. Now with cloud and SAAS, backhauling has lessened, and there are new vectors that you need to pay attention to,” says Sridhar.

It is time to step up and up the ante — establishing communication channels other than e-mail and chat, bringing in structured collaborative interactions, and laying bare guidelines for engagement — are all steps in the right direction. “Organisations can establish workflow communications managed by tools in a systematic approach. It is a combination of tools for real-time conversations like chats

and video conferences, email or group notifications, and static tools like shared documents or legacy SOPs (standard operating procedures)," says Sridhar.

THE CONVERGENCE OF ADAPTABILITY AND SECURITY

In uncertain times, the focus is always on keeping up, adapting to the next change, and innovating to address challenges on hand. But now more than ever, there is a pressing need to look for solutions and adapt strategies that offer flexibility as well as security.

"Cybersecurity is an important part of the equation. In some cases, we had to let people plug in personal laptops. We stepped up the security by raising the level of the operating systems, putting a set of controls around them, using certificate-based authentication for devices connecting from outside, getting everyone enabled for cloud without coming into a VPN tunnel and many more workarounds all happening at the same time," says Srinivasan.

"During the last one year in the pandemic, phishing attacks have increased exponentially. Our cybersecurity team has never been busier. In terms of the top IT priorities for 2021-22, network security is probably number two or three. It has to be a core part of our strategy given the vast distributed infrastructure we

currently have. How do you manage all that information, which is so crucial for business continuity, is keeping chief information security officers (CISOs) awake at night," says Anand of Reliance Industries.

What is necessary is convergence across the network — between data-centres, the cloud and the core system while staying secure. Can we be ready enough, is the larger question.

"Threat perception has also gone up several notches. Even though not by choice, and pushed by the pandemic, this is a good time to bring in tech for security. Security plans are incremental. We have to continuously rethink security, stay on our toes because this is a constant battle against unknowns," quips Kumar.

Systems today are not only dynamic but quite open with a concentrated focus on data analytics, which means a customer could log in using a personal device and submit data, or access it. Ideally, this congruity demand preserves and maintains a consistent user experience while not compromising on security. However, real situations are never ideal.

"We grossly underestimate internal threats. Network security plays a large role — identity access management, intrusion detection system, data governance and data loss prevention — these are all systems that help to identify and to manage threats. In

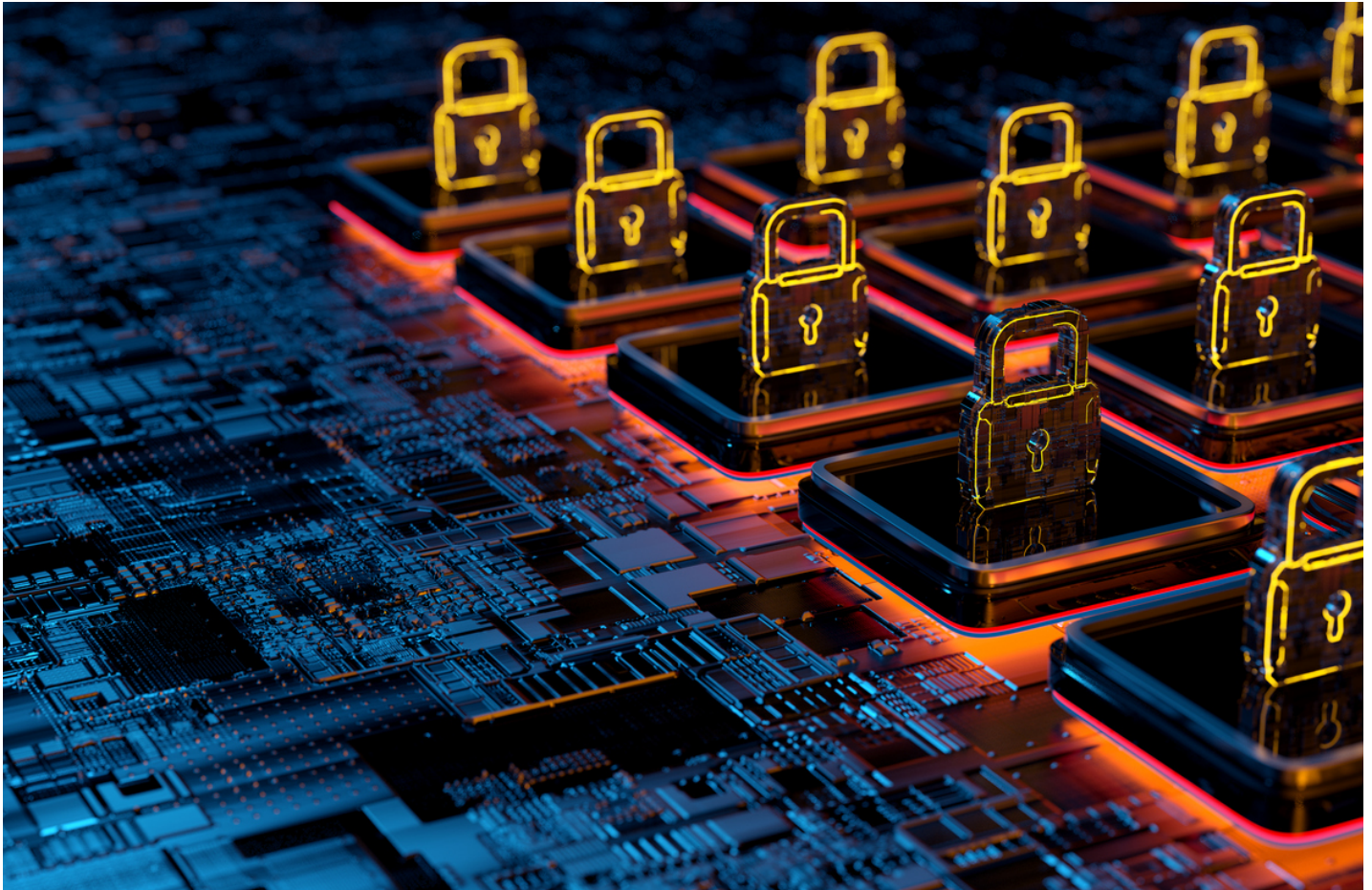


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tech parlance, we refer to and think in terms of DMZ and MZ [demilitarised zones and militarised zones] consisting of firewalls, perimeters and border security, which sums up how important the idea of security is. We are moving from a more reactive approach towards a more responsive, predictive network through AI and IoT," adds Khan.

Supporting zero-trust networks for devices accessing through remote logins, using network automation for constant endpoint behaviour monitoring, and supporting secure networks are fundamental as organisations head towards a highly distributed presence.

"There is a synergy developing within the network — a delicate balance between security, cyber insolvency, zero-trust networks and moral policing," observes Daga.

DISTRIBUTED WORK FOR THE CUSTOMER

Businesses are all about delivering great outcomes and delightful user experiences. With the world going digital, and shifting consumer preferences, success is proportional to the effectiveness of a customer engagement strategy.

"One of the positives has been that everybody is glued to the screen now. Customer acquisition now boils down to how engaging is the experience for the customer on the screen. The whole experience that consumers were getting at a physical store, say, a Reliance Fresh or Reliance Digital, we now have to replicate that entire experience on a six-inch screen. It's now the virtual world that will define our customer acquisition and retention strategy. One must also understand that user experience has become a very level playing field now where anyone could compete," says Anand.

"Generally, customer experience and engagement can be a challenge in a remote setup. How a business runs the show on a no-compromise network while employees, consumers and vendors constantly and seamlessly engage is vital," explains Madhan.

Networks and digital experiences dominate consumer engagement strategies today. 'Digital' and 'online' promise to be an equaliser of sorts, and it is the network that facilitates this process.

"Every industry is undergoing a digital churn to create better experiences

for its customers. Industry leaders are distributing their enterprise strategically so that it adds value to the whole consumer experience in some way," says Sridhar.

A good connected experience is no different for the customer than an employee. Consistent, seamless interactions are possible through secure guest Wi-Fi networks, SD-WAN, automatic security patch updates and easy UI/UX interfaces.

"Innovation is a responsibility we have towards ourselves and more importantly towards our customers. The idea is to provide secure, connected and seamless digital experiences on multiple levels — the ability to work remotely and still have control, the ability to have a contactless interaction with customers, and the ability to have frictionless interaction with all partner ecosystems," says Srinivasan.

"In a time when the infinite scroll is the norm, and the market is flush with options, customer attention is fleeting. Both, in B2B and B2C spaces, the focus is on delivery and not just managing things. Social media for business has helped us stay connected

and has great untapped potential for business capitalisation," opines Daga.

Remote working is much more than the implementation of a well thought of strategy. It is reliable execution supported by the right infrastructure, network capabilities, security and coordination.

"Business has the confidence of technology now. We now believe that we can handle something uncertain, learn and keep going because we have tech as our associate," says Kumar.

As the lines between work and personal life get blurred, employees demand flexibility in work. Distributed work could also be a game-changer in employee engagement and increased productivity. The future of work is distributed, even if it is a legacy left behind by Covid-19. Organisations have adopted distributed structures and coupled them with compatible business strategies to maximise value.

"Gig development, variable manpower and flexible application engineering will happen in the future. So again tech is changing our outlook — the way we look at solutions, and in a way the whole world," says Madhan.



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TAKEAWAYS

Management must facilitate a communication network to make up for important interactions lost in translation.

Security for distributed working spaces is about being accessible, open, adaptable and agile while still keeping check, with zero compromise on data and network security.

Distributed network implementation strategy must include the usage of tools that facilitate consumer experiences as well as employee ease of working.

The learning curve has been steep. Communications of a transactional nature are effective over a virtual channel. But for channels like sales and relationship-building which relies on nonverbal cues, it is a work in progress.

Building upon outdated management systems, employing technology for niche solutions, and gig-economy giving rise to a benefit-realisation-based fee structure could be the future of distributed work.



¹ http://www.telework.gov/Reports_and_Studies/Annual_Reports/2013teleworkreport.pdf

² The idea was originally put forth by Geoffrey Blainey in *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*

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Founder & Publisher : **Deepak Yadav**



Editor : **Hari Govind Nair**



hari@ceolounge.net

Deputy Editor : **Amit Ranjan Rai**

Feature Writer : **Shivanshu Nirupam**

Senior Designer : **Santosh Nirala**

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