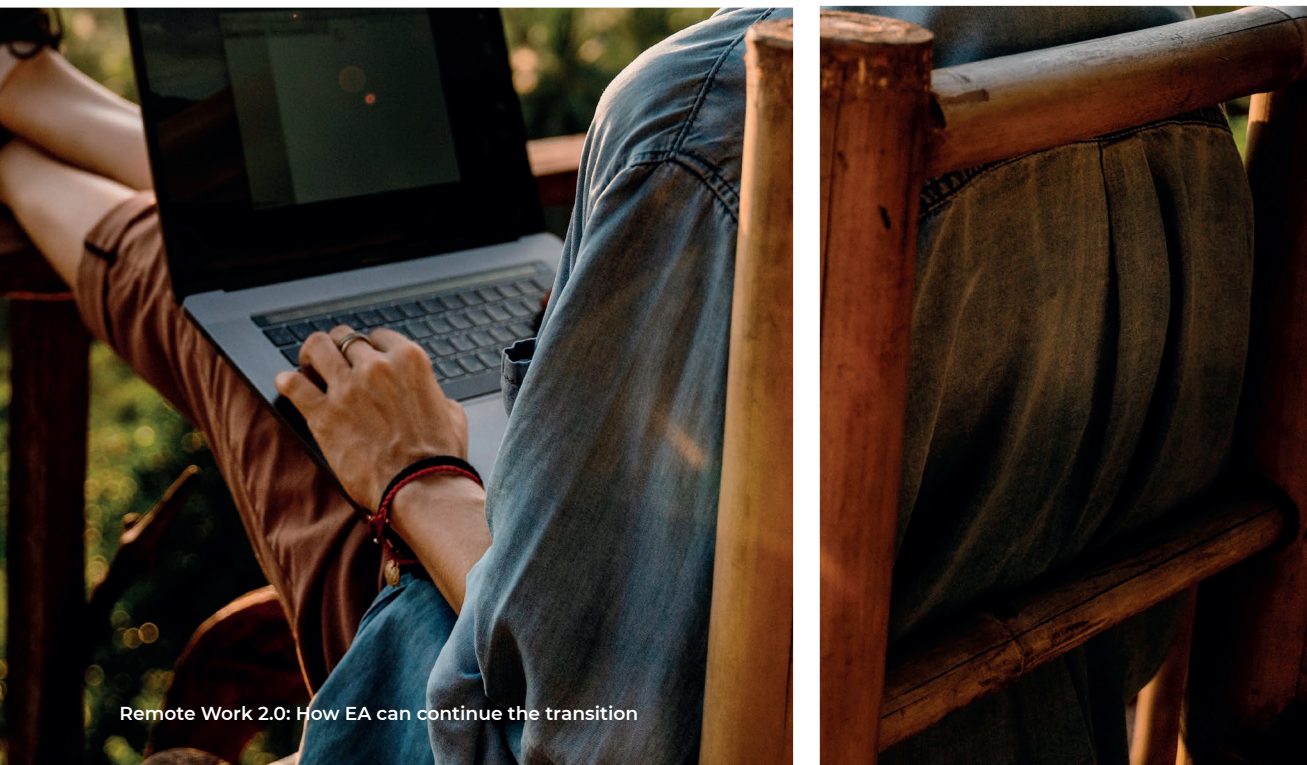




Remote Work 2.0:

How EA can Continue the Transition



The explosion in the prevalence of remote working has not been a choice for the vast majority of organizations around the world, with lockdown policies and general safety issues forcing its adoption. But like many forced changes, organizations that have quickly discovered the benefits of increased remote work have outweighed the costs, and it is likely that business will never fully return to the pre-pandemic ways.

However, the change to fully remote working was also abrupt and uncontrolled. Most organizations were not fully in position to make the change, and just because business has not collapsed does not mean that the implementation of remote work cannot be improved. As the business world transitions to a post-pandemic situation, enterprise architects will need to help guide the next period of change, in which remote work and cloud hosting become a key capability and not merely an option for emergencies.

The Situation So Far

First, let us clarify that there are two facets to remote working: working from home (WFH) and working from anywhere (WFA). The current change has been dominated by WFH, with a study finding that 60% of paid employees in the US were WFH at the height of the pandemic in May. WFA is likely the trend that will take precedence once the pandemic restrictions have fully passed and organizations have more choice in how their employees work.

Remote work has been a growing trend for many years before the pandemic, with ideas such as flexible working and co-working spaces being pushed in certain sectors. Gitlab, for example, has been entirely remote for years, while the likes of Yahoo and IBM have both embarked on major experiments with remote working in recent times.

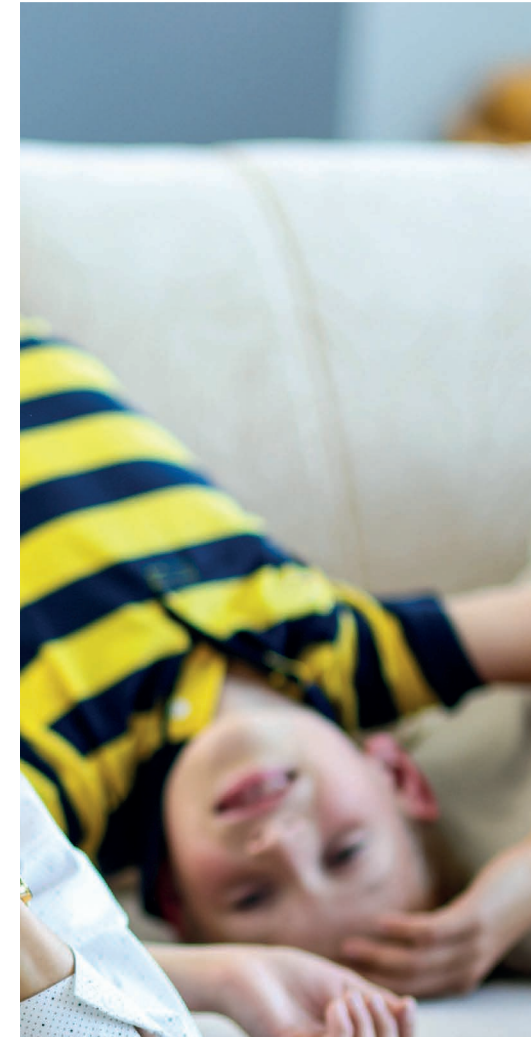
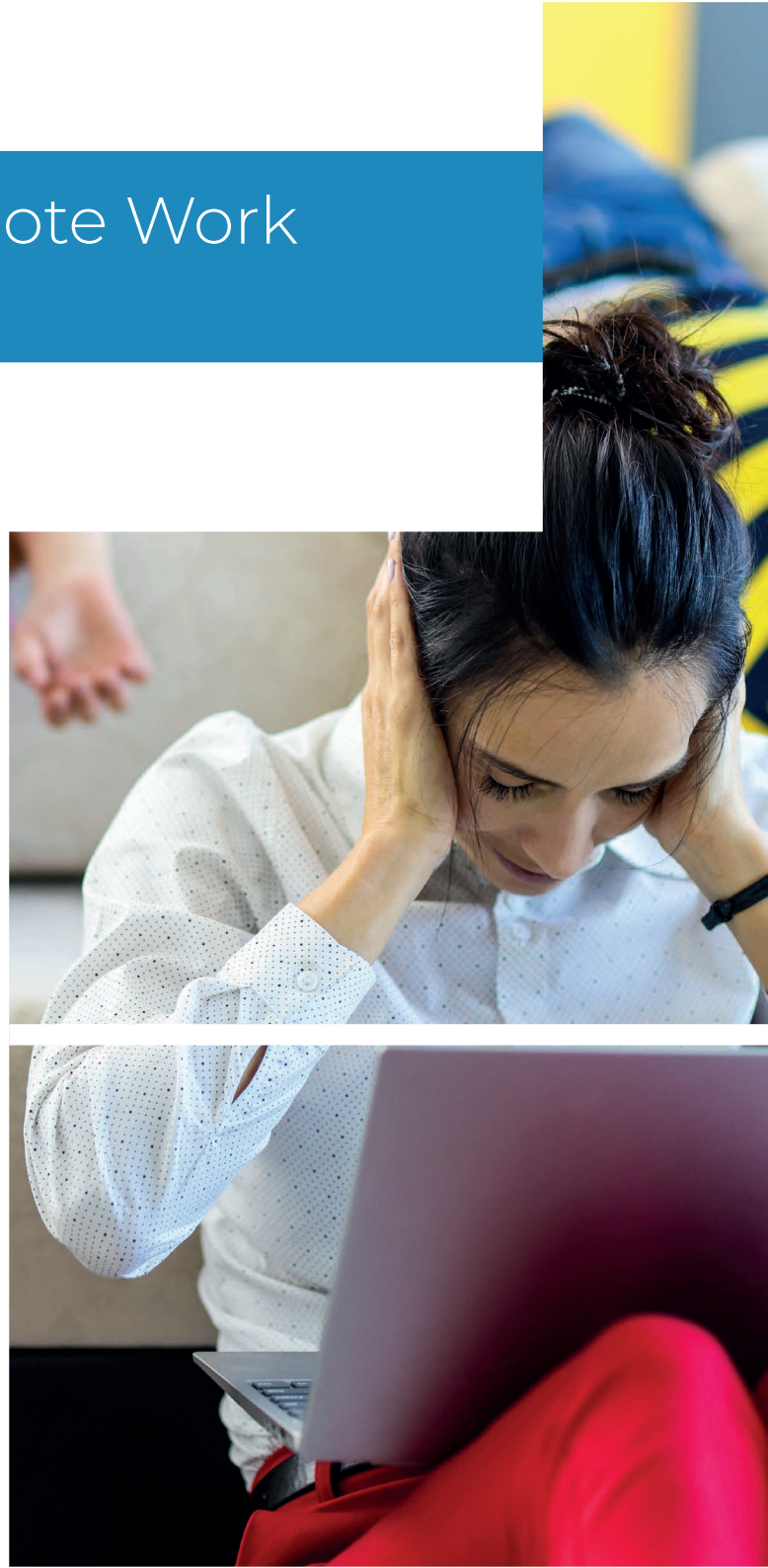
A number of major technology firms have already committed to offering 100% remote working opportunities for all employees, with the likes of Twitter, Shopify and Slack committing to full employee choice even after restrictions are lifted, while the evidence from employee surveys points to a massive preference for the option of remote work; 29% stated they would quit if the option were removed.

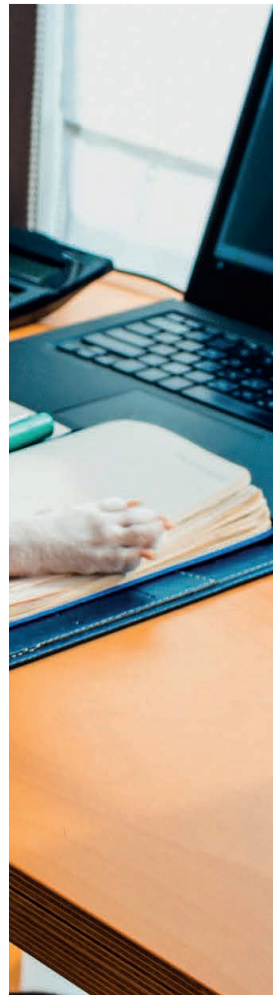


The Weaknesses of Remote Work Implementations

Though the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated just how much can be done remotely, we can identify several flaws in the current model.

The question many organizations will need to ask as government restrictions are eased is what balance they wish to strike between continuing remote work and returning to offices. The advantages and disadvantages of each approach are fairly well known: remote work can reduce all the costs associated with offices, removes issues associated with commuting, and likely improves employee happiness. However, the loss of office culture and socialization, the inconvenience of digital communication, and the lack of employee oversight must be considered. Thus far, studies have demonstrated that productivity does not fall and in fact increases in some cases with a switch to large scale working from home, but this may not be a homogenous effect and may be driven by a fraction of high performers.





In addition, there will still be many roles that cannot be done remotely, and organizations with a mixture of remote and on-site roles will need to be careful to manage employee satisfaction and prevent ill will towards those who do not have the freedom to choose. A recent paper argued only 37% of jobs in the US could be done entirely from home, albeit with large variations based on industry and location.

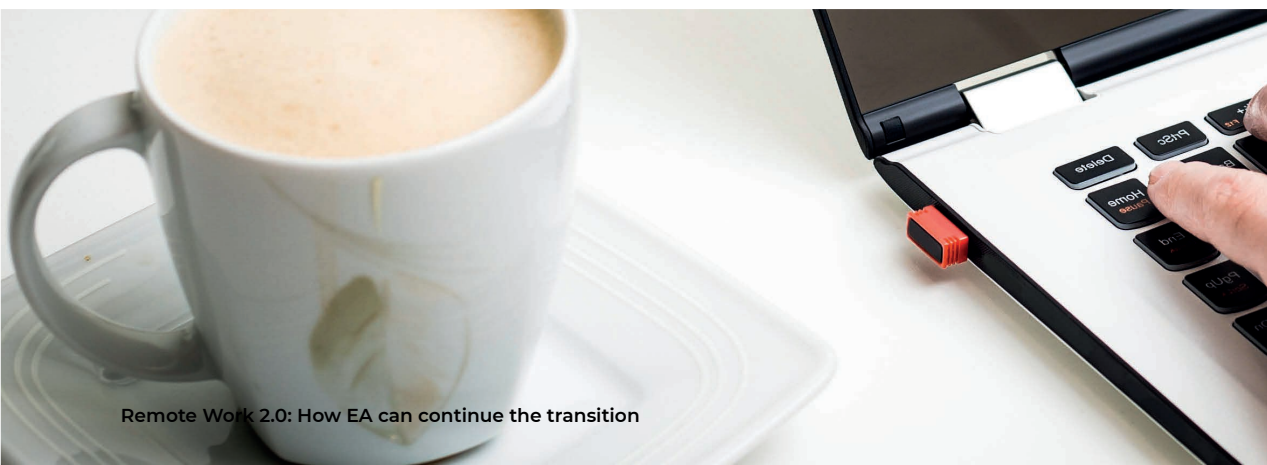
As mentioned above, many firms are likely to shift to WFA once feasible. WFA could introduce far more complexity. Instead of just working from homes that are likely within commuting distance of a main office, people can work from anywhere in the world, in completely different time zones. Organizations may encourage “colocation” in which remote staff gather together, perhaps in a small, suburban office that acts as a ‘spoke’ to a central ‘hub’.

Still, for enterprise architects the main concern will be the IT infrastructure that enables and underpins remote work. How does this perform? Productivity software, such as the likes of Microsoft 365 or Adobe Creative Cloud, are already well-suited to remote work, having offered cloud native applications for many years already. However, outside of the major application suites and web apps, it is less clear that the business world is ready. There are many key applications that remain on-premise only, or tied to specialist hardware, which continue to restrict remote working options. What is more, internally developed systems are much less likely to be cloud ready. Indeed, the technology portfolio is going to need careful attention, as it is likely to be more difficult to deliver the needs of remote work if hardware is a factor, compared to software. Of course, one aspect of this is simply ensuring that employees have sufficient access to laptops and other computer hardware necessary for work – not a small task, given that modern computer hardware likely has even shorter replacement times than software.

Enabling the Future

Before we proceed with details on how Enterprise Architecture (EA) can continue to deliver the changes necessary for effective remote work, it is worth identifying the two separate areas in which EA can help. First of all, for those organizations without EA or with an immature implementation, there are the general benefits that EA brings to IT and transformation initiatives. Second are the specifics for architects as they engage with the forthcoming recovery.

We will look first at the more general benefits of EA; for those who already have a mature architecture, feel free to skip to the next header.





EA Benefits

One of the biggest benefits to EA is one which won't be much use for the pandemic, but will come in handy for any future disruptions: that EA allows organizations to stay ahead of the curve and to execute change rapidly where necessary. Rather than being caught flat-footed by a major disruption like the COVID-19 pandemic, EA enabled companies to pivot swiftly to the new requirements, thanks to aspects such as impact analyses and technology roadmaps.

A Business Impact Analysis is not the exclusive domain of enterprise architecture, but is made far simpler thanks to the knowledge that architects possess and their overall view of the enterprise. A well conducted analysis would quickly identify supply chains, processes and technologies that are affected by disruptions, enabling change to take place where needed.



Application and Technology roadmaps provide a dual benefit, first enabling the lucky few to have already begun a transition to cloud-ready, remote suitable technologies, but for the majority that did not predict a complete disruption to normal life, their existing roadmaps are still crucial for observing the changes in processes and technology with remote working.

Of course, a big contribution that EA can make is simply in managing the application portfolio and ensuring that the tools needed to enable remote work are available, up to date and widely used. This does not simply mean acquiring new applications either – it is important to rationalize unused or unnecessary software, in order to save costs and ensure that employees correctly transition to up-to-date applications.

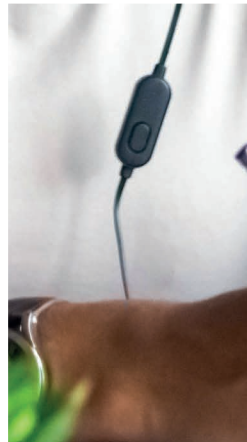


How EA can Improve the Future of Work

From Deloitte to Gartner, most research and consulting firms characterize the response to crises like the pandemic in 3 stages: first is the response, next comes the recovery, and finally the third stage focuses on thriving in the new situation. Given that the response to the pandemic has now largely occurred, what we're interested in is the next two stages.

Business Capabilities, and general operations, are two areas that concern EA and will be important to enabling a new normal for work. Architects will need to identify capabilities which are most critical to the organization and shift focus towards them, scaling up or down where necessary and ensuring that digital work can take place in mission critical areas.





The technology portfolio will need analysis to determine blockers to off-site work and methods to fix or ameliorate those technologies that are not remote capable. In addition, a fresh technology impact analysis can determine how these changes will affect other parts of the business.

Despite the advantages that EA brings in general to an organization, there are issues. Most notably is the 'typical' outlook of EA, which has always tended to focus on guiding organizations in the medium to long term, as opposed to dealing with short term demands. A shift in priorities is all very well, but EA teams may simply not possess the necessary culture and skills to handle a much more short term approach to transformation.

Nonetheless, a lot of work will still need doing for more ambitious and long term changes, which does present a difficult balancing act for architects. Strategic thinking will need to start pivoting towards a new normal which accounts for much more remote work, for continued pandemic disruptions, for possible international travel restrictions and for a much more rapid shift to e-commerce than previously. In particular, EA needs to work towards enabling the right technologies, and avoid an explosion of unnecessary applications and IT bloat. Focus more on evaluating emerging technologies - clearly with the new normal, older moderating models are sometimes just not possible.



Conclusion

There's no doubt that remote work is here to stay. Even for organizations that choose to return to office based work as much as possible, they may end up forced to accept remote working in order to retain and acquire high quality staff, who will no doubt demand the flexibility that they have become used to. Meanwhile, those firms which have not been able to smoothly transition to remote work will have to find ways to catch-up or change their operations, or else see themselves outcompeted by more nimble, lower cost remote work organizations. These kinds of drastic digital transformations will demand the guiding hand of enterprise architecture. While the specifics will differ for every firm, this eBook should provide some initial ideas for companies to get started on “the new normal”.



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