The future workplace in Asia

FUJITSU

Let's reimagine the workforce: how Asia measures up

shaping tomorrow with you

Disruption to the workplace

The Traditional Office

» For Asia to remain globally competitive in this recovery period, the challenge is to enable organizations to work from home because typically we're behind EMEA and the US in establishing cultures that support working from home. «

KER YANG,
REGIONAL STRATEGIC
OFFERINGS LEAD
AT FUJITSU ASIA

The workplace in Asia centers around structure and respect, and even in a modern industry such as tech, these cultural nuances are still very entrenched. And while other regions may also thrive on these same qualities, they are applied differently in comparison to how a traditional Asian workplace operates. It's what makes working culture in Asia so distinct.

One of the main characteristics is our dedication to the office. It has long been a benefit to Asian business but has meant that while flexible working was growing in popularity in other parts of the world, the office remained central to many successful businesses in Asia.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged this traditional outlook. Social distancing restrictions prohibited many employees from going to the office and required them to adopt a new way of working – remotely, and at speed.

In turn, this has tested a host of other cultural nuances. For example, Asian workforces are used to wearing relatively formal attire to the office, but is this still necessary in a home environment? Within some organizations in Asia, employees can develop a group mindset, and rely on approval of decisions coming from group supervisors – outlining the importance of communicating, even when working from remote locations.

Similarly, in some Asian countries, after-work dinners remain important for building relationships and forming bonds with employees. Now, with this option unavailable, managers have had to assess how they can keep the team mentality aligned despite employees being separated.

Going against working culture

Now businesses around the world have adopted remote working out of necessity, the widespread change has convinced many leaders and employees of its long-term benefits. As a result, it's predicted that remote workers will represent 30% of all employees worldwide by 2024.

This will account for 600 million people. However, the Asia-Pacific region and Japan are predicted to have the lowest number of remote workers.

Remote workers will make up half or more of the workforce in North America (55%) and the United Kingdom (50%) by 2024. In APAC, however, which includes China and India, just under a third (30%) of employees will be working remotely in 2024.

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And traditional working cultures in Asia have heavily influenced this statistic, as the majority of employees look unfavorably on the prospect of working from home long-term.

In fact, that 30% statistic may actually be lower for Asian countries in the APAC region as it's likely been bolstered by countries such as Australia and New Zealand who – like other Western countries – are predicted to have close to 50% of their workforces working remotely by 2024. This is supported by research which shows the majority of Australians want to continue embracing remote working post-pandemic.

Fujitsu's homeland of Japan is also expected to have reasonably low levels of remote workers, which is expected to only account for 20% of the country's workforce by 2024. However, this is still an increase of 9% and has been spearheaded by businesses like Fujitsu, which transitioned 80,000 employees to remote working – aiding the organization's goal to reduce its office footprint by 50% by 2022.

However, for now, Japanese businesses have implemented flexible workplace strategies that have enabled them to work productively from home for the time-being. Although most likely not to be permanent, these strategies mean businesses will be able to adapt to any future workplace disruptions.

Fujitsu is currently working on solutions that can aid businesses who want to return to the office, while at the same time make the most of these newfound flexible working capabilities.

# Potential challenges to workplace transformation

A drop in worldwide GDP

Over the course of this pandemic, the worldwide Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has dropped from +2.5% in 2019 to -5.5% in 2020. So, from a global perspective, this is a trepidatious time for businesses. And historically, this usually causes them to tighten the purse strings.

This could present a problem for businesses that need to invest in new infrastructure in order to enable remote working, and at first glance this could present a unique problem for Asian countries which are resistant to embrace home working.

However, despite countries across APAC needing to invest in this infrastructure, the region is in a stronger position than the rest of the world. Countries like China and Taiwan have even been able to maintain positive GDP growth expectations throughout 2020. The success of the region can be attributed to both a robust public health response to the pandemic and substantial growth in markets such as software (5.3%), IT services (5.9%), and communication services (3.7%).

So, while globally organizations may be investment shy, businesses across APAC may still have better long-term prospects to invest in resources in order to maintain success.
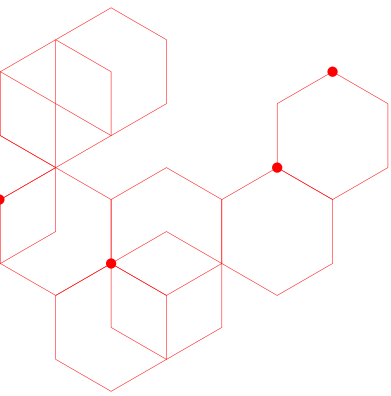
IT budgets for tech investment

Remote working is not the only thing propelling the need for digital transformation. Right now, 76% of those who say they prioritize digital operations transformation say they need process automation solutions, and 63% cite needing remote processing automation.

Unfortunately for the majority, IT budgets are stretched to afford the equipment necessary to continue operations, such as remote working infrastructure, and even then, 56% of employees are working from home on a minimal basis and 44% can't work from home at all.

And as 68% of respondents say their budget has either stayed exactly the same or has been reduced, with 29% saying their hardware acquisition budgets also decreased, automated solutions may appear off the cards for many.

However, the cost of new technology may fall outside the remit of the usual IT budget, as 31% of customer digital operations transformation budgets have seen increases. This dissociation may be down to the fact that digital transformation is no longer being seen as solely an IT prerogative, but one that both requires and benefits the entire company.

So, in organizations where departments such as HR and Ops are able to collaborate and share their budgets with IT, these businesses will be able to holistically transform their digital projects more closely in line with what the entire company needs.

» After the pandemic has subsided for Asian countries, the key challenge will be how our customers can ensure its employees can return to the office, and work-on premises safely. «

KER YANG,
REGIONAL STRATEGIC
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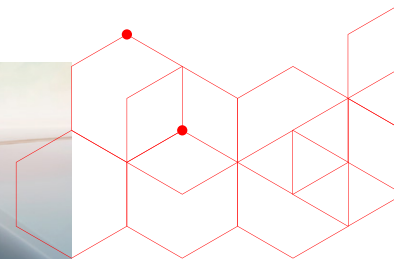
Employee welfare and efficiency

While the strict enforcement of social distancing rules by the government was the main catalyst behind the disruption to work culture in Asia, these rules were also embraced by businesses as they wanted to protect their employees' and communities' welfare. And this has not changed as a priority for the majority of businesses we surveyed in APAC (predominantly those based in the Philippines, Thailand, and Hong Kong).

As we recover, many businesses are planning to return to the physical office but will incorporate some of the strategies and infrastructure they've developed throughout 2020. Businesses are now looking ahead to this return and are considering implementing emerging technology to also overcome any health risks.

A majority of 88% say they need social distancing control solutions, while 69% require a health screening solution for employees and visitors.

Workplace technology adoption

Although the cultural transition to remote working may be harder for workplaces operating in APAC, the adoption, acceptance, and usage of new technologies is not.

Prior to the pandemic, CIOs around the world were planning to increase their adoption of emerging technologies. This still holds true for APAC. The region has the highest level of emerging technology adoption in the world. Businesses in Asia have shown a willingness to adopt technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotic process automation (RPA), conversional platforms, cloud, and edge computing.

Their adoption could have been accelerated due to their lack of existing infrastructure to facilitate remote working. It's certainly something Fujitsu experienced, when it had to give employees and its customers' employees the capabilities to work from home, almost overnight.

To pull it off, Fujitsu implemented its own Work Life Shift strategy to first get to grips with fast implementation of new technology, as well as encourage a culture that would embrace the change.

Smart Working

- Implementing AI and automation helps automate routine, manual tasks, freeing up employee time for more creative and strategic tasks

- Workplaces become more adaptable, productive, and engaging for employees

- Builds greater resilience into the business's infrastructure

Employees need to be able to carry out their usual work efficiently without any additional time constraints due to their location.

APAC businesses have been enabling this by implementing AI and automation. The technology automates routine admin tasks, which means employees are able to have more time to dedicate to more strategic responsibilities. As a result, businesses have been finding they're able to adapt to challenges – as well as create greater corporate value – by developing solutions faster.

In the short-term, adopting technologies such as these can increase productivity and engagement by preventing communications from ever becoming severed.

However, it also adds long-term sustainability to business operations because it gives businesses the infrastructure to work remotely whenever they need to. If another crisis happens, businesses will be able to quickly adapt to remote working and continue operations. Alternatively, it means businesses can access wider talent pools, as they're no longer restrained by physical location.

Aside from this, a smart working platform also decreases unnecessary property rentals which in turn lowers overall operational costs.

Borderless Office

- Allows workers to seamlessly collaborate with remote colleagues

- Safely and securely share information with collaborators

- A more holistic and effective way of ensuring cybersecurity

Remote working shouldn't disintegrate team working or a supervisor's approval processes. These characteristics of the workplace should still be able to happen at the same speed as if employees were in the office. This is vital to ensure the pace of operations in the workplace are not hindered. Essentially, businesses need to be operating like they are in an office, without actually being there.

They'll be able to achieve this by implementing technologies that allow devices to collaborate on workplace systems from remote locations. In addition, these technologies also need to maintain a businesses' cybersecurity.

Platforms such as the Customer Experience Centre, and Workplace Support are just some of the examples that offer all these capabilities, and let employees get on with the work they were employed to do.

Culture Change

- Help make employees more adaptable

- Create a more supportive culture that help employees accept new workplace changes

- Foster a 'remote-first' culture so employees working from home never feel excluded

There are two imperatives to make the transition to a remote workplace successful. The first is having the right infrastructure and technical expertise to facilitate a new way of working. And as we've outlined, the APAC region's overall willingness to adopt emerging technologies is a promising sign.

However, the second imperative is curating a remote working culture that feels just as supportive as the office does. This will help employees embrace workplace changes such as remote working, with more enthusiasm as their concerns will be more closely met.

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Regardless of location, encouraging employees to take part in a change program can be difficult to achieve at pace. Some 70% of change programs fail to achieve their goals, according to research by McKinsey and Co. This is most likely due to leaders not making the cultural investment needed to spur that change, and with Asia's traditional dedication to the office as the center point to successful operations, it will take focused and sustained efforts to pivot the existing culture.

Nurturing a culture that supports remote working – at least during this pandemic – is crucial to a businesses' success. But to achieve this, it's imperative leaders create supportive virtual workplaces employees not only feel happy operating in, but takes into consideration the mental health toll these shifts are taking on them. Otherwise, it will start to deplete productivity, despite efforts to retain efficiency.

There are programs that can guide leaders through changing behaviors in the workforce and outline where extra encouragement is needed. These solutions include Virtual Collaboration, and Workforce Analytics.

Ultimately, all organizations need to embrace the uncertain future that lies ahead.

This is now the time to take what you've learned, recognize your resilience, and stride on with the confidence that has brought you to this point.

Fujitsu will be with you every step of the way.

Contact us

Whether it's finding the right tech, managing change or training your people, we can help. Please contact us **here**, or contact to country sales representative directly