Supporting a Hybrid Workforce: Tech Challenges and Solutions

Hybrid work is clearly here to stay,
but a recent IDG survey shows IT is struggling
to provide a consistent, seamless experience for
employees while keeping enterprise assets secure.

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Hybrid work is no passing fad. In fact, the percentage of employees working at least part of the time outside the office—either totally remote or on a hybrid model—has grown from 43% two years ago to 70% today, according to a recent IDG survey of senior IT managers.

Not surprisingly, leadership expects IT to enable and support a hybrid workforce; 78% of C-suite survey respondents said it's a high priority. To enable a successful, productive hybrid workforce, IT must be able to provide a rich, consistent, and high-performing experience to employees, regardless of whether they're working from the office, their home, or on the go. Additionally, IT must partner closely with the business to align desired employee experiences with the IT infrastructure.

The top three focus areas for supporting hybrid workers include:

- Enabling employee engagement collaboration across sites (52%)
- Improving overall productivity (46%)
- Closing gaps in security strategy (40%)

Providing a consistent, high-performing experience for workers in-office, at home, and on the road includes deploying collaboration tools that enable teams to be productive and maintain a strong culture regardless of location. IT must also provide robust security, which is difficult when people are working outside the confines of the corporate firewall.

With so many complex tasks to accomplish, it shouldn't come as a surprise that the majority of IT leaders (57%) say it is highly challenging to provide consistent, seamless support for employees across the board.

The good news: the rapid adoption of cloud-first network platforms provides a more flexible foundation for connecting teams, collecting the intelligence required to continually improve the employee experience, and making hybrid work seamless and secure for everyone.

IT challenges run the gamut

According to the IDG survey, the top three IT priorities to support hybrid workers are application modernization (54%), security improvement (49%), and providing upgrades to collaboration tools (46%). These are all short-term, urgent tasks.

Investments in network infrastructure, management, and planning are critical for enabling hybrid work long-term. Reducing network downtime and improving resiliency was seventh (38%) on the list, which may explain why so many organizations are experiencing significant challenges in enabling remote work. (see chart).
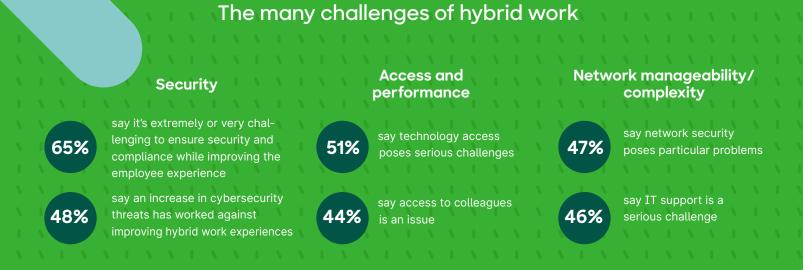
The challenges of enabling parity

Experiences for which it is most challenging to enable parity between remote and on-site employees

Access to networks, data, and systems	51%
Network security	47%
IT support / help desk	46%

"While IT teams are rightly focused on the collaboration and productivity tools that support hybrid work in the short-term," said Grant Shirk, Head of Product Marketing at Cisco Meraki, "the network is the most strategic long-term investment to enable an effective hybrid [model]. Building a flexible, agile network today will allow IT leaders to more rapidly adapt to the opportunities hybrid work will present in the future."

Digging deeper into the survey data reveals the true challenges IT teams anticipate as they prepare for a permanent hybrid reality.

The many challenges of hybrid work

Security

65% say it's extremely or very challenging to ensure security and compliance while improving the employee experience

48% say an increase in cybersecurity threats has worked against improving hybrid work experiences

Access and performance

51% say technology access poses serious challenges

44% say access to colleagues is an issue

Network manageability/ complexity

47% say network security poses particular problems

46% say IT support is a serious challenge

Hybrid work: a tale of three workplaces

There are three primary working environments IT teams must enable: the office, the home, and on-the-go (e.g., hotel, cafe, customer site). While there are significant differences in the challenges each poses to IT, commonalities abound.

Bandwidth:

- According to a study from Cisco, bandwidth poses enormous challenges because 98% of meetings have at least one person joining remotely. This means, for example, that even team meetings that used to be a quick conversation in someone's cubicle will now become a video call. An internal study at Meraki found that traffic on their networks increased 30% over the past 18 months, and continues to grow rapidly.

- These near-constant live-video feeds chew through much more bandwidth than the organization previously consumed. IT must ensure there's enough network bandwidth both in-office and from the office to the internet to handle these communications. Beyond having enough bandwidth, IT must be able to dynamically segment networks, add additional capacity, and plug coverage holes to ensure high-quality connections.

Inclusive collaboration:

- With geographically dispersed colleagues, collaboration requires more than video conferencing capabilities. Employees must be able to collaborate and communicate on a wide array of tasks in mixed live and remote teams. Rich, high-performing collaboration tools are essential, and no one should be penalized for working in a different location on a different network and setup.

Connectivity and bandwidth:

- While in-office workers have a consistent experience with connectivity, IT has little control over what's available to employees at home or elsewhere. Speeds and throughput will differ substantially. To cope, IT must have a cloud-first platform to manage the network to account for these differences.

- This also requires IT to have detailed information on each employee's connection as well as the ability to switch between wired and cellular to provide performance. These capabilities require the deployment of an appliance or software at employees' homes. Whatever the solution, it must be plug-and-play and automatically configured. Manual configuration and deployment simply will not scale given the current and expected future scope of hybrid work.

Management and support:

- With employees working at so many different locations, it's difficult, if not impossible, to create a single point of control with traditional networking solutions. IT needs a cloud-first solution to manage a hybrid work environment effectively.

- Policy enforcement, device provisioning, and support were generally cumbersome and complex well before the migration to hybrid work. With a significant proportion of employees working outside the office, these tasks become exponentially more challenging. Overcoming them requires simplification and automation of the process.

Security:

- Hybrid work also complicates security with employees working outside of the firewall. They need a secure connection from their device to corporate digital assets, but strong security cannot get in the way of good performance. Additionally, employees cannot be expected to deploy and configure complex applications and gear. IT must secure employees' connections to enterprise applications and data with an easy-to-deploy VPN (virtual private network) platform that can rapidly scale and automate configuration.

Intelligent, cloud-first solutions for hybrid work

Virtually all IT decision-makers (95%) place a high value on having real-time network intelligence as part of their strategy to improve workforce experiences. But a significant percentage (40%) said it's difficult to gather useful information on network endpoints and cloud environments. In addition, 94% highly value having a single technology partner to compile intelligence on the entire tech stack.

In order to deliver on all of the above, organizations should consider a cloud-first networking platform. It's an efficient and effective way to provide centralized management for a hybrid work environment with multiple locations. A cloud-first networking platform also enables IT to scale easily and rapidly.

3.4 million

The Meraki cloud networking platform powers more than 3.4 million networks globally.

630,000+

Over 630,000 organizations, from small businesses to the Fortune 500, manage their networks in the Meraki dashboard.

23 billion

The Meraki platform captures over 23 billion network interactions every week and uses that data to power AI operations and troubleshooting.

Cisco Meraki provides an intuitive, intelligent platform that enables cloud-first operations with open APIs, connecting enterprises around the world to a broad ecosystem of applications and technology providers.

The Meraki Z3 teleworker gateway is an all-in-one converged device. Employees plug it into their ISP and are connected to their corporate network over Auto VPN. Employees get wireless connectivity for their home with cellular backup—wireless LAN and WAN on one simple device that IT can manage via the cloud.

All Meraki infrastructure is cloud-configured and managed. IT no longer has to send a specialized consultant. Anyone can plug in the device and IT can configure it remotely from anywhere.

The bottom line

Hybrid work is the new normal. This means IT needs a new kind of network. With a cloud-first network, IT can centrally manage connections, dynamically allocate bandwidth, ensure security, and apply intelligence to automate previously manual functions. And with intelligence, automation, and the cloud, IT can ensure employees have an excellent experience no matter where they are physically working.

For more information on Cisco Meraki's intelligent, cloud-first solutions for hybrid work, visit meraki.cisco.com/experiences/hybrid-workforce

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Creating intuitive technologies to optimize experiences, secure locations and seamlessly connect people, places, and things. Cisco Meraki is making IT easier, faster, and smarter for end customers and partners. Cisco Meraki connects passionate people to their mission by simplifying the digital workplace.