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THE LAGGARD'S GUIDE
TO TRANSFORMING BUSINESS COLLABORATION

With all the ongoing attention surrounding the pandemic, it's easy to lose sight of the growing technology revolution that's quietly taking place — the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or Industry 4.0.

For those who are new to the concept, the Fourth Industrial Revolution centers around emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, the Internet of Things (IoT), the cloud, unified communications and 5G, to name a few examples. These technologies are driving widespread digital transformation and enabling businesses to act with far greater agility, automation, cost efficiency and speed.

It's the beginning of a new era, and there is massive growth potential for companies willing to take the plunge and overhaul their communications and collaboration systems. Yet not all companies are on board with the digital revolution. Many organizations are resisting change and clinging to outdated systems and processes, even as competitors double down on innovative technologies.

Closing the Technology Gap

A growing divide is forming between technology adopters and the laggards that are behind the curve. This divide grew significantly during COVID-19 and will continue to widen in the coming years.

Consider a recent study from the SMB Group that found about one-third of SMBs have accelerated their technology adoption and investments since the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020. This group is **42 percent more likely** to have increased their revenue than companies that decelerated their investments during that time. What's more, technology accelerators are 36 percent more likely to forecast revenue increases in the months ahead.

Of course, there is time for laggards to turn things around and get with the program. It's possible to transition from laggard to adopter. Oftentimes, companies just need a bit of guidance and consultation to make the leap and embrace transformative collaboration systems.

"We know that change is never easy, that's why the FirstComm team is dedicated to helping every single client work through evaluation, planning, and transformation from their legacy systems. It's our top priority to educate and support every step of the way, to ensure a hassle free communications experience, " said FirstComm VP of Business Development, Kevin Bartnicki.

"So, there is an incredible opportunity at hand for channel partners to act as trusted guides and resources, while helping clients navigate change and access new technologies," Bartnicki added.

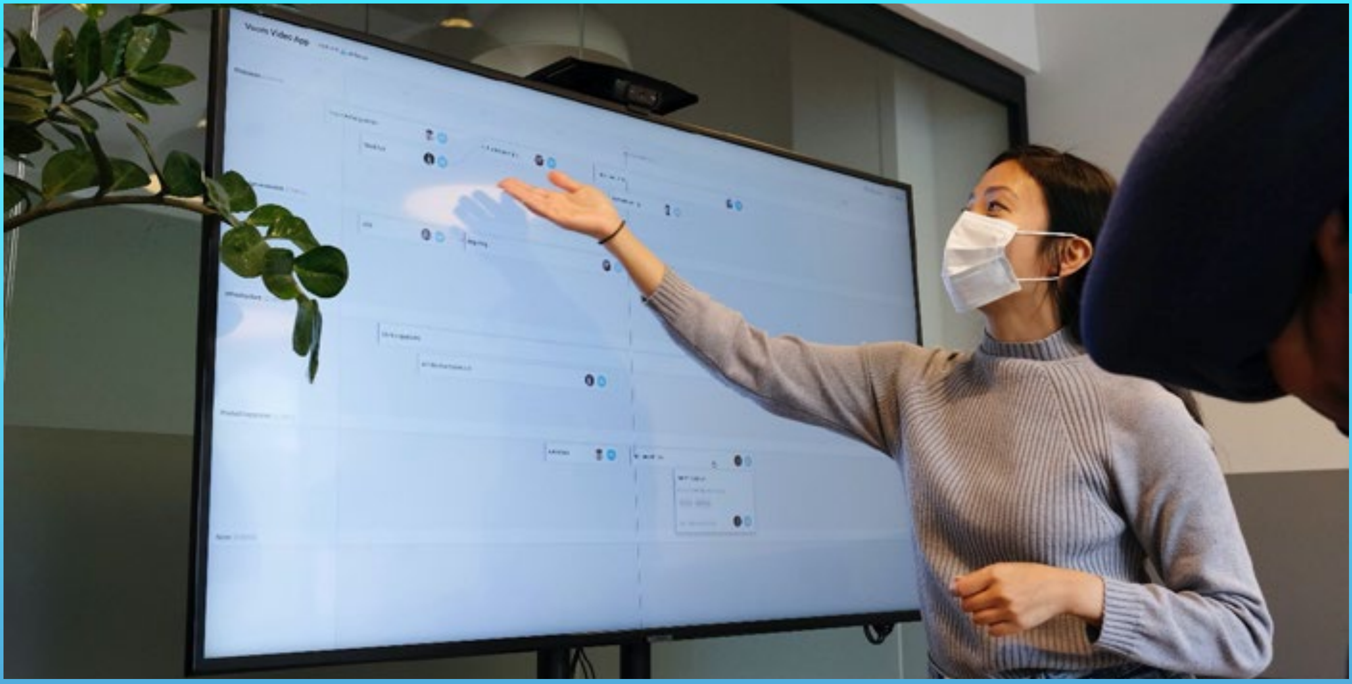
Let's take a closer look at the post-COVID collaboration landscape, the opportunities at hand and the risks that come with avoiding migration.

COVID-19's Impact on Collaboration

The pandemic was a catalyst for digital transformation, as companies across all verticals were forced to make quick adjustments to maintain operations. Heading into 2H21, businesses are now faster, more agile and more connected than ever.

"The outbreak of COVID-19 created a sink or swim moment for many companies," Bartnicki said. "Organizations that had cloud communications and remote networking solutions in place at the onset of COVID-19 were able to hit the ground running with remote work and had a much easier time transitioning to the 'new normal' of the pandemic. Companies that lacked robust strategies struggled to maintain operations — and many are still catching up."

Following are some noteworthy communications trends that emerged during COVID-19.



Rise of the cloud

Cloud usage took off following the outbreak of COVID-19, as businesses migrated systems and workloads to hosted platforms to accommodate remote users and reduce costs.

"A confluence of existing factors driving cloud transition has been further accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis: Cloud spending rose 37 percent to $29 billion during the first quarter of 2020," **reported PwC in a report**. "This trend is likely to persist, as the exodus to virtual work underscores the urgency for scalable, secure, reliable, cost-effective off-premises technology services."

Longer days, shorter meetings

The pandemic also had a big impact on how team members communicate and work.

For example, researchers from Harvard Business School found a **12.9 percent increase** in the number of meetings per person during COVID-19, as well as a 13.5 percent increase in the number of attendees per meeting. However, the group also found a 20.1 percent decrease in the average length of meetings and a noticeable increase in workdays due to remote work.

"Collectively, the net effect is that people spent less time in meetings per day (-11.5 percent) in the post-lockdown period. We also find significant and durable increases in length of the average workday (+8.2 percent, or +48.5 minutes), along with short-term increases in email activity," the report explained.

Video usage skyrockets

Video conferencing became a go-to technology during the early stages of the pandemic, as teams turned to platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams for internal and client-facing meetings. In one study, **60 percent of respondents** reported participating in video conferences more in 2020 than in 2019.

Video usage has since declined slightly from the onset of the pandemic, due to video conferencing burnout and with team members returning to offices. Yet, video conferencing remains a staple technology and something all businesses need to be using.

SMS becomes a business enabler

Text messaging also played a critical role during COVID-19, allowing employees and customers to stay in touch in a way that's secure, convenient, and affordable.

One of the most effective use cases for SMS during COVID-19 was curbside pickup, which enabled customers to place orders and arrange safe pickups during lockdowns. Curbside pickup helped many restaurants and retailers stay afloat during a time when they were unable to accommodate customers on-site due to safety concerns.

Top Transformative Technologies for the Post-COVID World

At this point, you're probably wondering about the specific technologies that separate adopters from laggards. **Here is a breakdown of the top tools that laggards should be looking into for 2H21.**

Unified communications as a service (UCaaS)

Many companies lacked firm communications policies early in 2020 and wound up with highly fragmented communications systems as workers took matters into their own hands trying to connect from remote locations — using personal phones, freemium conferencing software and third-party cloud apps to collaborate. This resulted in a sharp uptick in shadow IT, making it difficult for companies to protect data and prevent security vulnerabilities.

UCaaS solves this by **centralizing voice, video, fax, and SMS** services over a single, secure cloud-based platform. Companies can use UCaaS to consolidate their communications tools, lowering costs and improving performance.

Fixed wireless

Connectivity also became a major issue during the pandemic as local networks became overloaded with remote users. Across the board, companies struggled to maintain high bandwidth applications like voice and video resulting in poor user experiences.

A growing number of companies are now using **fixed wireless** to provide seamless connectivity to remote locations. Fixed wireless is quick and easy to deploy and a great way to provide failover for business continuity.

Work productivity apps

More companies are abandoning paper and spreadsheet management systems in favor of mobile apps, which are being used to streamline backend workflows.

In the past, companies had to outsource development and pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for apps. This is no longer the case, as recent advancements in no-code and low-code technology make it faster, easier and more affordable to create productivity apps from scratch.

Managed security and services

Companies today are facing a variety of threats and need to remain on the cutting edge of network security, connectivity and access.

One of the best ways to maintain strong security is to invest in managed security services, and outsource operations to a trusted provider offering **advanced threat protection** and unified threat management.

Advanced threat protection can provide access to properly configured virtual private networks (VPNs), so companies can avoid running sensitive data through unknown and insecure remote networks like homes, hotel rooms, and airports. It also can provide intrusion prevention, application control and visibility, data loss protection and anti-spam and malware filtering.

Hosted contact center services

There is relentless pressure to maintain strong customer experience (CX) metrics and enable positive customer journeys. Customer demands are rising year over year, and customers expect companies to be fully accessible and easy to communicate with.

Companies that can't provide amazing experiences risk losing customers to competitors. This issue came to light during COVID-19, as many companies were unable to provide basic support during lockdowns, leading to complaints and customer churn.

One way to streamline customer support is to invest in **hosted call center services**, providing detailed call analytics, intuitive dashboards, and flexible call routing at a fraction of the price.

Biggest Risks Facing Laggards

Up until the last year or so, many businesses have been able to avoid tedious technology migrations, and costly upgrades by using legacy solutions. But times are changing, and avoiding critical upgrades is becoming increasingly dangerous for business growth.

Looking forward, laggards simply won't be able to keep up in the coming age of automation. In addition, business leaders who consistently resist change, risk being seen as irrelevant and even a risk to operations. So, failing to adapt could lead to serious consequences for companies and professionals.

FirstComm VP of Product & Marketing Chris Ford stated that "based on last year's WFH adoption rates, laggards who don't prioritize a mobile strategy for their workforce, will encounter more struggles around business continuity, workforce efficiency and virtual shifts when the unexpected occurs."

Here are some of the biggest risks that laggards now face:

Employee turnover

Technologies like UCaaS and workplace apps are becoming dealbreakers for employees, who demand access to technologies that save time and position them for success.

Laggards that avoid integrating cutting-edge technologies risk losing talented employees to competitors offering better solutions and processes. It also can be difficult to attract top talent without having adequate systems in place.

Missed opportunities

The 5G era is officially here, as high-speed networks continue to get deployed across the world. Many businesses are now upgrading to 5G and augmenting their deployments with edge computing and real-time data management solutions, enabling them to reach customers with lightning speed and precision.

Businesses need to start looking for ways to ingest data faster and act on data in real-time. The days of getting by with near real-time communication are over.

Business disruptions

Far too many companies were blindsided by the pandemic and were unable to shift and make necessary changes quickly to stay in business. Many organizations went under because they lacked agility and flexibility.

"If last year taught us anything, it's that incorporating a reliable mobile strategy into your business communications is essential for an effective disaster recovery plan. And with costs of UC decreasing by the day, businesses can now easily utilize in-office and mobility resources at a fraction of the costs," Bartnicki said.

Laggards need to use the pandemic as a wakeup call and implement technologies that offer business continuity and anywhere access. This is critical for surviving potential future shutdowns and other unexpected disasters.

Tips for Transitioning from Laggard to Adopter

It can be challenging to work as a change agent for a company that falls into the laggard category.

Oftentimes, leaders want to transform their operations but fail to do so because of a lack of vision and poor execution. Countless digital transformation projects have fallen by the wayside, leading to wasted dollars and missed opportunities.

Here are some tips that change agents should consider when helping companies modify their processes.

1. Round up key stakeholders

It's important to avoid siloes when experimenting with new systems and processes. Start by rounding up key stakeholders and get multiple teams involved. This may include executives, IT managers, department heads and select end users who can provide unique perspective on workflows.

Change agents are encouraged to interview as many team members as possible and prioritize transformation. Trying to transform everything at once can be overly ambitious, leading to push back from team members and project delays.

2. Run pilot tests

When meeting with department heads, change agents should try and identify specific transformation use cases for pilot tests.

For example, instead of rolling out UCaaS across an entire enterprise, it may be better to test it out among a select group of workers and then compare results.

3. Host lunch and learn sessions

End users can be skeptical about change, especially involving communications or automation technologies. Technologies that seem like no-brainers to administrators can be perceived as threatening or invasive to end users, especially those with established workflows and preferred technologies.

A little bit of communication can go a long way in driving change. Technology leaders are highly encouraged to host lunch and learn sessions or educational seminars to cover why the business is considering making technology changes, and the benefits that they offer.

4. Scale

It's important to keep small technology deployments in perspective and use them to drive further growth. Migrations should build on previous deployments with the ultimate goal of driving change across the entire organization.

How First Comm can help

Transitioning from a laggard to adopter takes a considerable amount of time and dedication, and partners often lack the resources to see projects through end-to-end.

Enter FirstComm, a leading technology solutions enabler offering data networking, voice, and managed services. FirstComm helps partners by offering high quality solutions and resources along with white glove support — freeing them to spend more time on selling and driving growth instead of project management.

By working with First Comm, partners can receive critical guidance and expertise, and increase the chances of helping laggards improve agility and collaboration.

To learn more, contact FirstComm today.

About FirstComm

Founded in 1998, FirstComm is a leading technology solutions provider offering Hybrid Network Services, Cloud Communications and Managed Security nationwide with over 35,000 happy customers. Headquartered in Akron, Ohio and a 24x7x365 Network Management Center in Chicago, FirstComm is dedicated to pairing effective customer communications with next generation technology. Combined with a strong focus on the customer experience and operational expertise, FirstComm bridges technology with world class customer service. For more information about FirstComm, please visit www.firstcomm.com.

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