Connectivity and collaboration

The future of work

ITPro.

Business

Welcome

The world has changed significantly since 2020 and so has the way we work, with a hugely accelerated transition to agile and flexible practices. Now that we're starting to consider what a post-COVID world looks like, many organisations are figuring out how to best accommodate the needs of their workforce and the needs of the business – for the most part with some kind of hybrid working model.

But in this new world of hybrid working, there are key considerations that need to be taken into account, and it's fair to say that connectivity is at the heart of many of them. In this report, created in collaboration between IT Pro and Virgin Media O$_2$ Business, we'll explore what this new world of working means to both businesses and workers, and the paramount importance of connectivity to its success.

Maggie Holland, Group Editorial and Content Marketing Director, B2B
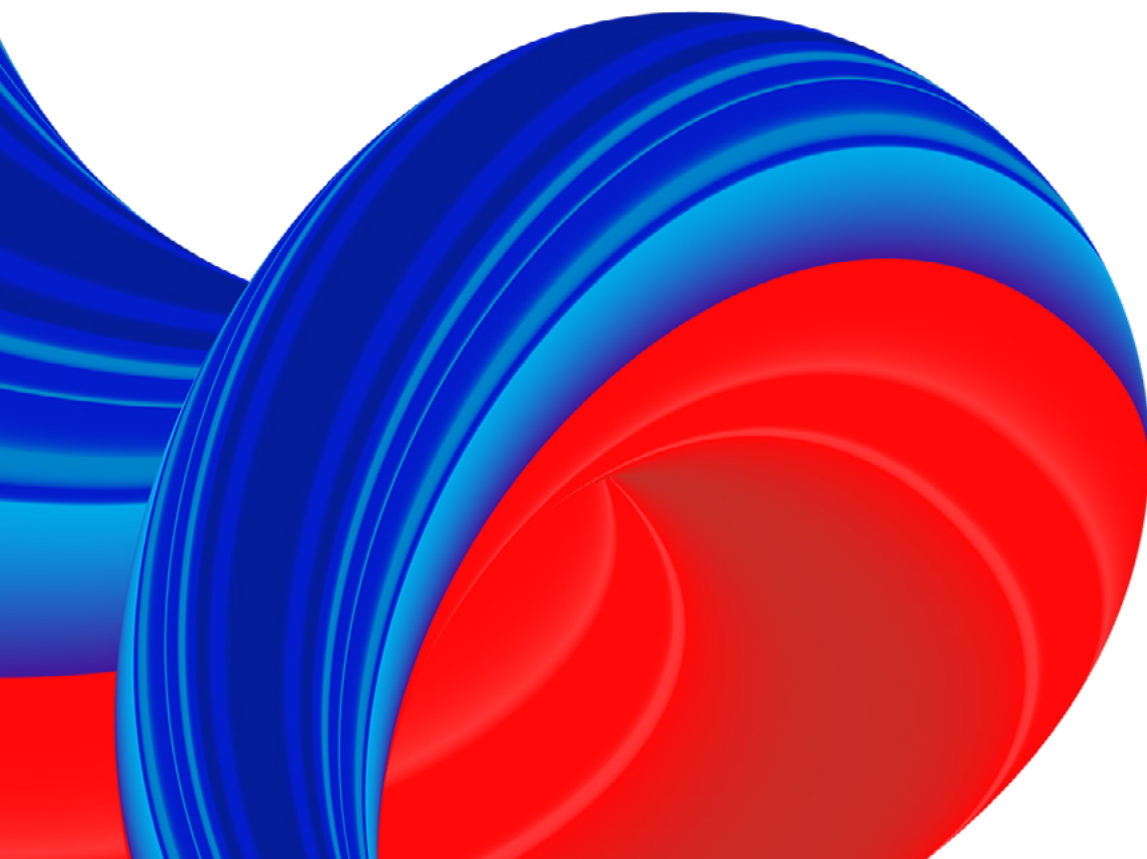
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About Virgin Media O$_2$ Business

Virgin Media Business and O$_2$ Business have joined forces to reimagine connectivity – as a digital partner that helps UK organisations rise to the challenge of the new working dynamic between companies, consumers and their communities.

Virgin Media O$_2$ Business plays a leading role in supporting the public sector and businesses of all sizes to achieve more, from small and medium organisations right up to large enterprise and wholesale partners. This includes offering a variety of managed connectivity services and flexible working capabilities, security, data insight, 5G private networks and cloud solutions, as well as wholesale services to other operators and partners.

Virgin Media O$_2$ Business is committed to using the power of connectivity to share more with communities across the UK, taking action to close the digital divide and helping to build an inclusive, resilient and low carbon economy.

Chapter 1
The evolution of work

Why communication and collaboration matter more than ever

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the way we work, accelerating trends towards home and remote working so that practices that once seemed experimental became mainstream within a few short weeks. In 2019 only 5% of employed people in the UK worked from home. By the end of April 2020, this had risen to 47%.

IT moved at speed to support this sudden pivot. Worldwide sales of laptop and desktop PCs increased by 11.2% between April and June 2020, while sales of office furniture increased by up to 438%. Crucially, COVID-19 delivered a huge boost for cloud computing. **Global cloud spending rose by 37% during the first quarter of 2020 and continued to grow**. A report by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr) and Virgin Media O$_2$ Business found that the COVID-19 pandemic had accelerated digital transformation projects for UK businesses by three years on average, and by four years for organisations with more than 250 employees.

At a time when the pandemic made doing business as usual untenable, trends in mobile devices, high-speed connectivity, collaborative platforms and cloud-based infrastructure combined to provide an alternative. Even now, as businesses navigate uncertain times, it's clear that working practices have changed for good. Research from the UK Office of National Statistics shows that 31% of businesses still had a workforce working remotely by May 2021, and that 25% of businesses still intended to use increased homeworking going forward, with that figure rising to up to 49% in the information and communication sector. **85% of UK working adults want to use a hybrid approach in the future**, incorporating aspects of home and office working.

Hybrid working is here to stay

Businesses are experiencing the benefits of the new approach, not just in terms of business continuity, but in improved staff wellbeing, reduced office overheads and even increased productivity. The Cebr/Virgin Media O$_2$ Business report found that employees were also discovering many positives, including being more productive, more in control of their work, more trusted and empowered. **85% suggested that remote working offered them opportunities for a better work-life balance**, with more time for leisure, family, friends and hobbies. 69% of business leaders believe that the changes to working policies driven by COVID-19 will be permanent.

What's more, the same report suggests that the increase of hybrid working, along with digital delivery of services and big data, could lead to a range of benefits affecting both employees and the business. There's evidence that remote working boosts employee productivity by the equivalent of two hours a day, along with customer service and satisfaction scores. **It also opens up opportunities to the just under four million people who would otherwise be 'locked out' of employment**, while enabling nearly half (46%) of the UK's 8.6 million part-time workers to increase their hours.

Not every enterprise wants to embrace these new flexible working practices, but those that don't could be in for a shock. The UK-based job board, Totaljobs, has seen a 40% increase in searches for roles that offer remote working options. **A global study by Gartner suggested that 82% of workers who can work remotely now prefer to do so more than half the time, while 51% said their choice to stay with an employer would be determined by whether or not they could work flexibly**. Keen as some managers are to get teams back working in the office, 2021's resurgence of the pandemic with the Omicron variant only pressed home the advantages of a more flexible approach. True, even remote working evangelists are aware of the potential downsides – the challenges of collaboration and communication, the missing opportunities to generate ideas. Yet hybrid working models offer the best of both worlds; the office environment for when proximity is advantageous, but with remote working still an option for continuity and focused task work – and as a contingency in the face of any future disruption.
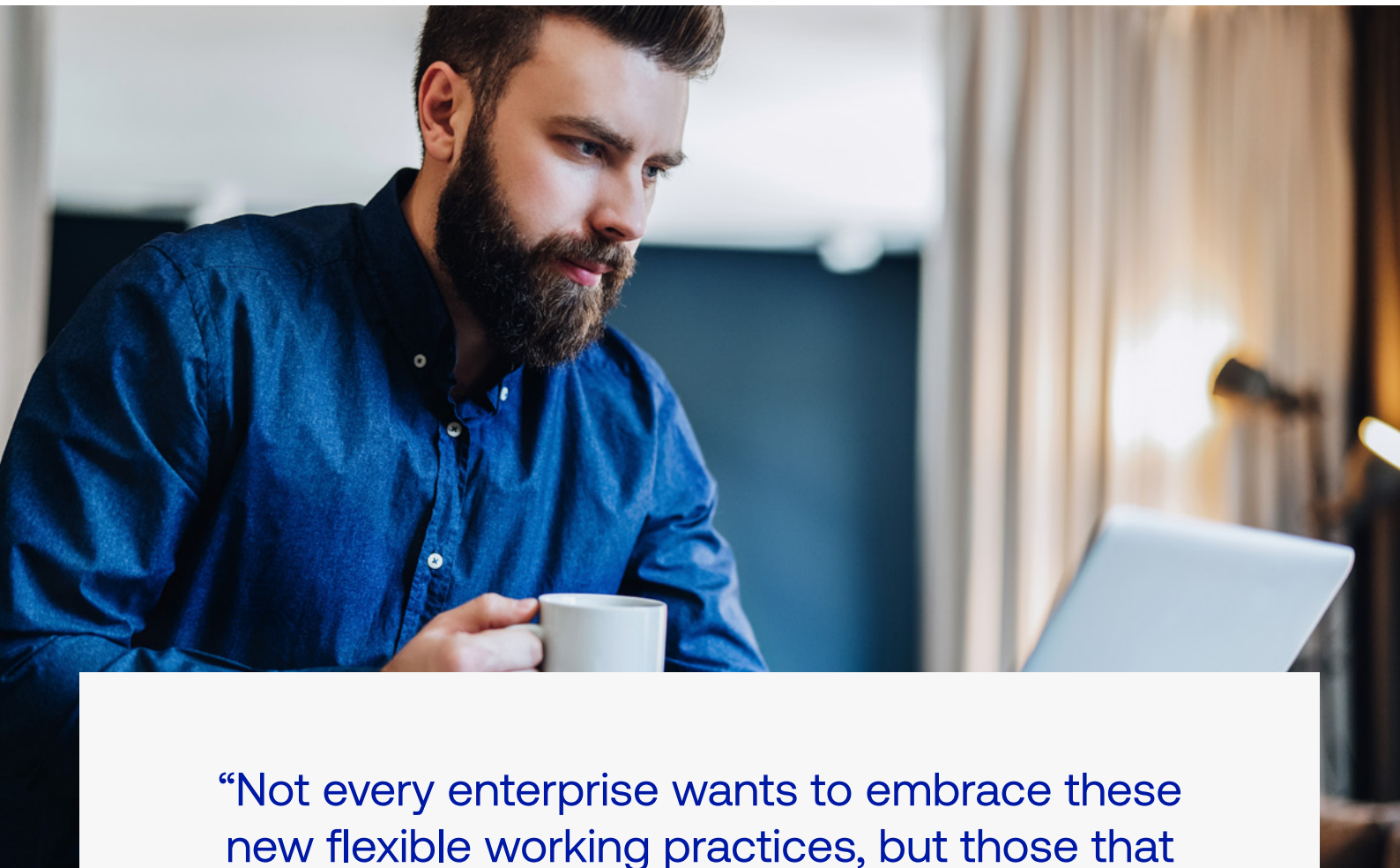
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New fundamentals

Supporting a remote or hybrid workforce has involved some major changes and challenges for IT. For some businesses, it's required an investment in new laptop or desktop PCs to ensure that workers remain productive whether in the office or at home, along with the broadband connectivity and network capabilities to support that. For others, it's encouraged new investments in mobile devices and high-speed mobile connectivity. For nearly all, it has meant bringing in new platforms to drive remote communication and collaboration, giving teams the tools they need to work effectively as teams even when they work apart.

Cloud-based tools and services have been critical here, providing secure access to information to whoever needs it, both inside and outside the office, while allowing businesses to take advantage of streamlined digital workflows, analytics, business intelligence, automation and AI. Tools such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, Zoom, Wrike and Google Workspace have given a remote workforce the means to maintain communications and manage project workloads even when they don't work from one physical location. In 2019, Microsoft Teams had approximately 20 million active users. By August 2021, it had over 250 million.

The shift has even transformed how IT operates, requiring IT teams to manage, update and secure systems remotely, and provide help desk services to their users in their homes. That's increased their reliance on cloud-based device management and security tools, and on the use of analytics and automation to anticipate and deal with issues, or manage a large, distributed fleet effectively.

All of this has required the right connectivity to be in place, delivering safe, reliable access to cloud-based services, tools and corporate data, and providing IT with appropriate levels of security and control. For many businesses, this has required a shift to a new, more flexible infrastructure, bringing mobile, WAN and Wi-Fi services together, and rethinking how the different parts of the enterprise connect. The foundations for a hybrid future are now in place, but the work of building it has only just begun.

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Chapter 2
Planning a hybrid future

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How do you support new working models?

Moving towards a hybrid working future makes sense for both employees and the business. It can boost productivity, improve employees' work-life balance and wellbeing, while helping companies reduce their office overheads. 90% of employees surveyed in the O$_2$ Virgin Media Business/Cebr survey felt that remote working helped them build their working day around other commitments and improve their work/life balance. What's more, there's no cost to productivity but, if anything, the opposite. The report shows that increased remote working can lead to a **3.4% increase, plus a 4.9% improvement in customer satisfaction**. Crucially, going hybrid doesn't mean adopting one specific working model. In fact, McKinsey has isolated six, ranging from models where employees work almost entirely from one or two centralised locations to

models where the whole business operates remotely. In between, there are models that prioritise office-based working but leave space for partial remote working, and models that see workers distributed across homes and multiple hubs. Other models may focus less on where people work, and more on when, splitting the week so that workers work from home on some days, but are available to meet and plan in the office on others, or even work inside or outside the office depending on their current projects and their specific work requirements.

Among high-profile companies that have adopted hybrid working, you'll still find different teams and employees taking a range of different approaches. Through Virgin Media O$_2$'s Work Smarter, Live Better programme, for example, its 17,000 plus employees can embrace their own hybrid working mix, moving between on-site, virtual and remote spaces, supported by connected digital technology and an adaptive framework designed to empower high-performing teams.

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Other organisations have taken a similar approach. At Citigroup, **roughly 50% of employees now split their time between remote and office working**, with others working entirely from the location or the other. Roles are even labelled hybrid, remote or resident to make this clear. At Google and Microsoft, employees generally work from home two or three days a week but may be asked or allowed to spend more time working remotely. One size doesn't have to fit all.

Even small and mid-sized organisations can thrive with a hybrid model. Manchester-based charity, LGBT foundation, transformed to a flexible working model in response to Covid-19 lockdowns, but realised that working remotely – and embracing mobile tech and connectivity – empowered them to scale up to a national level. With Microsoft Teams and a mobile hardware fund, it was able to take a more fluid, flexible approach to work and support volunteers across the UK.

> "Managers have to shift to an approach that focuses more on contributions and outcomes"

Similarly, the small team at Liverpool Arts Bar responded to the pandemic by shifting their business from physical events to virtual events, supporting their customers and community through smart devices and mobile connectivity. Not only have they adopted hybrid working models, but a hybrid business model, focused on creating events that mix the best of the physical and the digital.

This is what the most effective hybrid models can do: **balance the activities and key objectives of the business with the preferences of employees, and help businesses expand their capabilities**.

The hybrid workspace

Whichever working model your business selects, the key thing is to develop the right workspace and infrastructure to support it. This means a strategy, designed to meet specific employee and business needs and deliver measurable outcomes.

As Craig Hughes, Global Real Estate & Hybrid Transformation Leader for PwC UK put it in a recent report, businesses can't just adapt to hybrid working **"by making superficial changes to your offices or focusing only on how many days per week people will be in, or what technology you need. If you fix this in individual silos, you only end up multiplying the complexity you face.**

Instead, businesses need to focus on creating the best possible spaces for teams at home, in the office and across other shared spaces, while managing occupancy levels effectively. The more flexible the layout, the better, providing teams with spaces where they can focus on individual work, but also spaces where they can meet informally or have external meetings with partners or clients. These collaborative spaces may take different forms, including casual working spaces or stand-up meeting locations, with access to video screens and interactive whiteboards.

What's more, the office needs to foster ad-hoc interactions, where shared ideas can spark future innovations. Beyond the office, technology enables employees to contribute and collaborate in the way that suits them best. Fast, reliable laptops and mobile devices provide teams with the tools to mesh in with their home and office-based colleagues, with mobile connectivity enabling real-time communications.

Business-grade security features protect all employees from malware and intrusion and ensure corporate data is safeguarded. Cloudbased productivity applications ensure that workers can work through their tasks from home or from the office, or from other locations when required. Video conferencing and calls will continue to play a large part in team communications, and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has recommended that video meetings become the default in hybrid working environments; they suit a wider range of employee personas and bring benefits for accessibility. Yet **'Zoom fatigue'** has become a recognised phenomenon, caused by the intensity of virtual face-to-face interactions and the resulting high cognitive load.

For this reason, real-time video communications need to be combined with asynchronous communication tools, such as messaging or text-based chat, which give employees more flexibility in how and when they share ideas and information. Virgin Media O₂ Business's Danny Hicks recently noted in a Virgin Media O₂ Business blog, that he'd found that **"the number of people who used to be silent during inperson meetings now have an outlet by using chat within collaboration tools, and feel more enabled to followup by email, giving them more of a voice"**.

New models, new skills

The shift to remote working has already redefined how managers and employees operate and interact, but a lasting hybrid working strategy goes further. Businesses and managers will need to develop new skills to build relationships and team cultures at a distance, and support workers as they adjust to new working practices. With less scope to monitor workloads and performance in the office, managers will have to shift to an approach that focuses more on contributions and outcomes, and less on working hours and visible attitude. Existing systems and processes may not be fit for purpose and need to be replaced.

Workers, too, will need to adjust, and may need training on how to manage their work-life balance, look after their wellbeing and disconnect. Regular social events and personal interactions could be crucial in keeping employees engaged and connected to their teams. Daily catch-ups aren't always the right answer, but regular one-to-one and team meetings can give structure to the working week and ensure that remote workers don't end up feeling isolated.

No business gets this all right the first time, and hybrid working models will continue to evolve. Having clear objectives – even measurable KPIs – can help you monitor whether your hybrid model is working for you, or whether it needs tweaking or reworking. The workplace and the technology are important, but they're not the be-all and end-all. In the end, it's all about the people.

Business

Chapter 3
Powering a hybrid workforce

Reliable connectivity that can grow with you is crucial for hybrid collaboration

It takes a range of technologies to make hybrid working possible, but connectivity is the glue that holds it all together. Without a reliable, secure, high-bandwidth connection, teams based inside and outside the office can't collaborate to any meaningful extent. Remote workers can't access the on-premises systems and resources they need to do their jobs. Without robust connectivity, IT teams can't manage and secure devices from a distance or provide remote support. Unless you have a solid network and robust connectivity to it, cloud-based productivity, business intelligence and communications tools don't work.

Unfortunately, that kind of connectivity can't always be taken for granted. Businesses may not have the network capabilities in the office to handle a largely remote workforce, while the consumer grade broadband services employees may be using won't always have the performance or reliability to meet their needs. Contention and latency during busy periods can make it hard to use video or work effectively with cloud-based tools, while many remote workers will be sharing Internet connections with housemates, partners or a family. This isn't a problem when employees enjoy up to 1GB connectivity, as offered by Virgin Media across its UK network. However, not every employee will be so lucky.

Connecting employees

There's no easy one size fits all solution to fix employee connectivity. Some businesses may offer schemes to upgrade existing consumer-grade fibre broadband connections to businessgrade connections with dedicated service and support. Others may provide employees with a secondary fixed-line connection to be used specifically for company use. However, that might not be possible or desirable, and in some areas lack of high-speed services will make that approach untenable.

In some cases, mobile connectivity could be the answer; while 4G services won't match the speeds of a superfast fibre connection, they could work within a blended solution, where the business provides a form of load-balanced connection, combining fixed-line broadband and a mobile link. **Employees can switch to a mobile connection when the fixed-line connection doesn't provide ample bandwidth or use some devices over 4G and some over ADSL or fibre broadband**. 4G can also work as a failover solution. If the fixed line goes down at a critical point, there's no drama – the device or Wi-Fi network just flips over to the mobile connection.

Business

The 5G Advantage

As 5G services roll out across the UK, mobile connectivity becomes an even more serious alternative to fixed broadband. 5G is fully capable of supporting seamless HD video conferencing and video calling and real-time document collaboration. Downloads and uploads that used to take minutes can happen in seconds. As new virtual-reality and augmentedreality applications reach the mainstream, 5G has the performance to cope, and even applications that require low latency become usable, with near zero delay.

In the future, 5G communications could keep even more remote fieldworkers connected to the company network, using cameras and sensors to monitor their safety and their health. And, if anything, 5G gives organisations even more flexibility as to where and how they extend their networks, making it easier to create a highly adaptable, high-speed infrastructure that supports the full range of workers, locations, applications and devices. Workers can feel like they're on the office network, almost wherever they are.

This changes the game when it comes to where companies and workers can operate, as – provided the 5G infrastructure is in place – you no longer need to have any hardwired network infrastructure in a location to get to work and get things done. It's even possible to set up private 5G networks for projects or businesses where highspeed connectivity and security are paramount.

At the moment, there are challenges around the ongoing costs of 5G communications, particularly when it comes to applications that consume large quantities of data. For those used to unmetered connectivity, the data or speed restrictions on some services can be a shock. However, as the 5G rollout continues and more services launch, 5G is becoming a more viable alternative to fixed-line connectivity, while also forming the likely future platform for many cloud, edge and Internet of Things (IoT) applications.
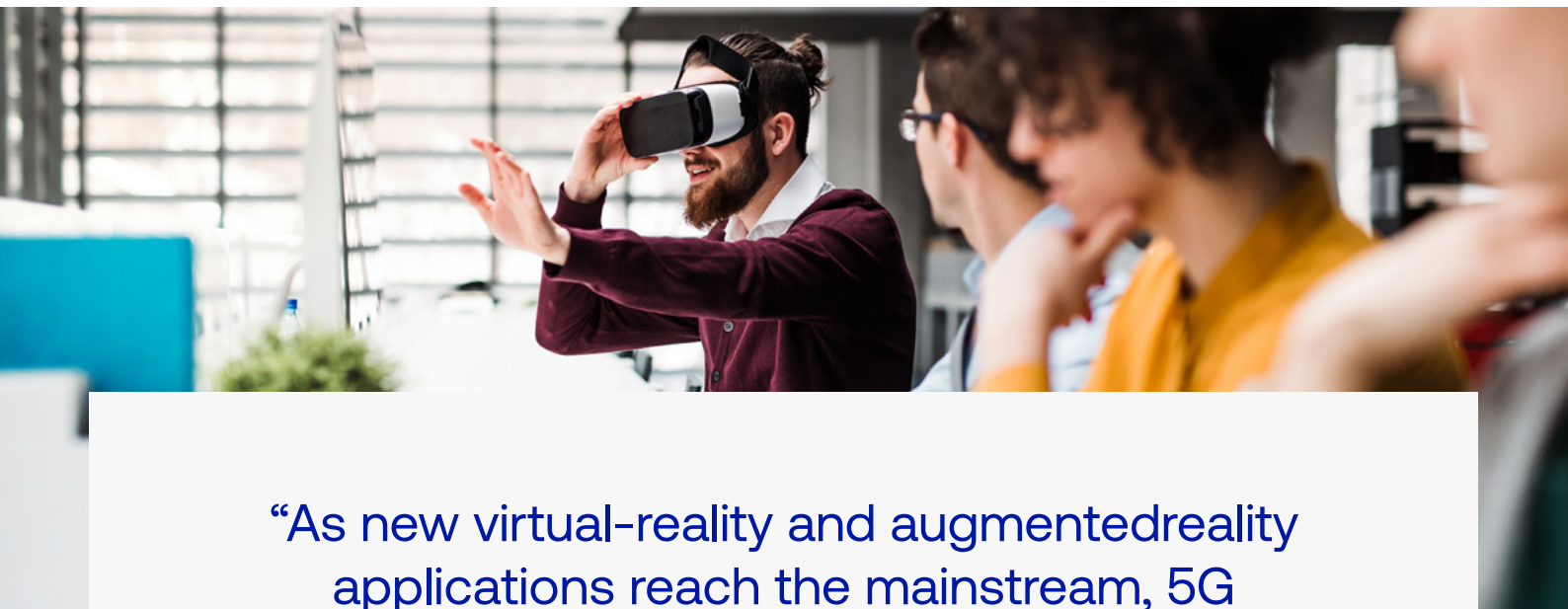
"As new virtual-reality and augmentedreality applications reach the mainstream, 5G has the performance to cope, and even applications that require low latency become usable, with near zero delay"

Business

Dedicated Access

On the office connectivity side, other options come into play. Dedicated Internet Access (DIA) from Virgin Media O_2 Business offers businesses a dedicated or leased line Ethernet connection with, with no contention with residential users and predictable, reliable bandwidth. Symmetrical upload and download speeds ensure that you've got the upstream and downstream bandwidth required for demanding, data-driven applications, cloud-based services and more. DIA gives businesses the connectivity they need to service a distributed workforce, and to handle virtual meetings and consultations with customers or partners.

The strengths of DIA go beyond speed and bandwidth. Virgin Media O_2 guarantees 99.85% service availability (or 100% with dual-Ethernet solutions), backed up by an SLA. Without secure, robust and effective connectivity, it's impossible to maintain a productive hybrid workforce, but by using services that offer them that connectivity with real control, businesses are well placed to make the most of their hybrid strategy. Ad-hoc strategies may have worked so far, but it could be time to put the business on more solid footing for the future.

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Chapter 4
Staying productive and secure

Hybrid working creates new challenges. How can businesses meet them?

Speed and cost are vital aspects of business connectivity, but they should never be the only factors. This goes double when maintaining a hybrid workforce, where reliability, security, service and support are every bit as crucial. When a connection is good one day and poor the next, or when high download speeds aren't matched by solid upload speeds, it's hard for remote workers to remain productive. When office connectivity doesn't fully support those remote workers – or provide access to key cloud services to those in-house – productivity also suffers.

That's why it's so important that businesses find a connectivity partner that can offer them the services they need in a business-grade package backed up by business-grade support. With Virgin Media O$_2$ Business, for example, businesses can expect responsive service from a dedicated UK business service team, including expert advice to help them improve existing connectivity or plan for future requirements.

New challenges

Of course, moving to hybrid working models also creates new challenges for security. Remote workers work outside the protection of the corporate network, either on less secure, often shared home networks, or on high-risk public networks where they're vulnerable to network snoopers or malicious hotspots. Compromised devices on the home network may spread malware and ransomware to corporate devices, while cyber-criminals may target vulnerabilities in popular websites, communication tools and web-based applications. This might not only result in a data breach but give a hacker a foothold from which to infiltrate the company network.

Business

"A smart choice is to work with a connectivity provider with a one-stop-shop approach to both security and connectivity."

To make things harder, the human risks of security only become magnified with distance. On their own and unprotected by the IT team, remote workers are more likely to click on suspicious links in phishing emails or fall victim to SMS-based phishing or SMSishing attacks. If they use personal devices for business, there's a higher chance that they'll install malicious apps. For all these reasons, a smart choice is to work with a connectivity provider with a one-stop-shop approach to both security and connectivity, so that they can **go beyond delivering fibre and mobile broadband services to advise, support and protect**. Safeguarding a hybrid workforce demands a more complex, multi-layered approach to security, designed to secure endpoints and control data access wherever users work.

Here, traditional firewall and antimalware tools still have their place but need to be backed up with tools that give you more control over endpoint devices, and more scope to monitor and enforce security policies. With a more distributed workforce, IT teams need tools that make it easier to manage more devices more efficiently at distance, and that enable them to take a more proactive approach, recognising and addressing signs of attack at speed.

Not every business or every size of business will have the same resources or requirements. **Smaller businesses can rely on products like McAfee Multi Access**, which protect smartphones, tablets and PCs against malware, ransomware and identity theft. **Medium and larger enterprises might need something more heavy-duty**, featuring next-generation security tools and the endpoint management features needed to work – remotely where needed – across a larger, more distributed device fleet. For example, Virgin Media O_2 Business worked with wealth management specialist, Bravura Solutions, to build a bespoke security solution based on technology from Sophos and Asavie. **Not only did this enable them to protect 300 devices used across the business**, but initiate a BYOD policy with secure, remote wiping of corporate data and apps.

Supporting your employees

Of course, even with the best technology, employee error or misbehaviour will be a weakness that cybercriminals can exploit. Fixing this comes down to education, and developing a culture that recognises mistakes are made, and lets workers report something that worries them without fear of shame or blame.

Like many larger businesses, Virgin Media O_2 Business runs its own internal phishing simulation programmes, where it can see where human error leaves vulnerabilities open, and where education and process improvements could help prevent a real attack. There's no reason why smaller and mid-sized companies can't perform similar exercises or make them part of routine security education and training.

As hybrid working models become permanent and mainstream, it's more important than ever that employee education and awareness programs continue, so that **new cyber-attacks are recognised and blocked**. With the right technology, policies and programmes in place, businesses can meet the new security challenges of the hybrid workplace head on and enable communication and collaboration without compromise. And if this is something your business struggles with, trusted partners like Virgin Media O_2 Business are happy to provide guidance, expertise and support.

Chapter 5
Q&A with Simon Pollard

The shift to hybrid working is creating new ways to connect and collaborate in business. We talked to Simon Pollard, Senior Product Category Lead – value added services at Virgin Media O₂ Business, about the work the company is doing to support organisations in their transformation.

The pandemic has transformed both the way we use IT in work and the way we work itself. Do you think these changes are permanent?

I think the changes we have seen over the past two years, specifically in relation to home/hybrid and flexible working, were predicted prior to the pandemic, and a shift had already started that the pandemic has accelerated. In regard to their permanency, I see the way we work continuing down this hybrid path and feel that providing businesses with the tools to work flexibly and securely in this manner is of significant importance.

We've seen in-office collaboration replaced by virtual tools. How do you think businesses can make the most effective use of these, and what kind of connectivity do they need to have in place?

Firstly, in terms of making the most effective use, I think operators and service providers can play a role in educating and demonstrating how businesses can work more collaboratively and more efficiently with virtual tools. Virgin Media O₂ Business can provide this through consultation with our customers and cater for training packages that ensure businesses can make the most of these virtual tools.

In terms of connectivity, this depends on location and on the size of the business. However, future-proofing businesses' connectivity with both fibre or dedicated internet access solutions and 5G technology would provide a solid foundation for success.

We talk a lot about the connectivity within the business, but how crucial is the connectivity in employees' homes? Is there anything practical that businesses can do about it?

As I've mentioned already, I believe hybrid working will be a new normal for lots of businesses, with this in mind it does raise a question that looks to address connectivity not just in the home but also on the move. Ensuring that your home connectivity bandwidth is capable of taking on the seamless transition to cater for work alongside the needs of the home life is an important element. However, it's also really important to recognise that traditional fixed-analogue technology will be coming to a close in 2025. This industry change will result in landline and traditional internet connectivity coming to an end as we know it. It is therefore key for businesses to recognise how they can look to future-proof their connectivity solutions both at home and in the office.

"5G will be an essential evolution in mobile technology that will ensure that businesses will have real resilient connectivity"

Do you think the rise of hybrid working has seen a rebalancing of priorities in favour of flexibility, scalability and resilience over raw performance?

I think that there is a growing recognition that businesses can work in a hybrid manner and still meet their customer and commercial goals. But, beyond this, I also feel that hybrid working can also accelerate and enhance their business outcomes, whether in regard to reducing costs and overheads, increasing productivity, or changing the way businesses can interact with their customer base.

How important is 5G to creating a world where people can communicate and collaborate from anywhere?

In a world of hybrid working, 5G will be an essential evolution in mobile technology that will ensure that businesses will have real resilient connectivity in their premises or at home to fallback to, while also ensuring that working on the move becomes as seamless as being in the office.

Business

Where does Dedicated Internet Access sit within this? Do you see it mainly as a solution for offices and branch offices, or do you see it as a good fit for other locations?

I think that our DIA portfolio is a great fit for many scenarios and doesn't need to be limited to office and branch offices, though the benefit should relate to business needs on capacity and bandwidth that is required, alongside the additional benefits of resilience, uncontended data speeds both upstream and downstream, and enhanced service levels.

The shift to remote working has created new security challenges, particularly when it comes to securing endpoints outside of the estate and managing employee behaviour. How do you help businesses meet them?

The security landscape is always changing and the need for securing businesses endpoints has never been more apparent. I would recommend any business device being protected with a security solution. In Virgin Media O_2 Business we have curated a portfolio and have partnered with bestin-class security providers to deliver compelling propositions based upon our customers' needs. Whether it relates to security, connectivity, productivity or futureproofed communications solutions, we offer free consultations to understand business needs, challenges and outcomes. We want to provide a simple to understand recommendation on how we can help businesses succeed in this new world of hybrid and flexible working.