



## Executive Insight Report



in association with



# Safe and Effective Remote Working

Addressing immediate  
pandemic-related needs while  
laying foundations for the future

## *Freeform Dynamics, April 2020*

*The current global pandemic has created an imperative to move more employees to a remote working model. Once the crisis is over, however, it's extremely unlikely that things will go back to exactly as they were. In all probability, a 'new normal' will emerge that combines the best of modern and traditional work styles to enable much more flexibility. Against this background, how do you adjust or extend your end user environment to accommodate short term needs while laying foundations for the future?*

### **KEY FINDINGS**

#### **Familiarity with remote working varies, but there's a lot of experience out there**

During a recent global study in which 1507 senior business and IT professionals were interviewed on the telephone, a third of participants declared comprehensive and robust remote working facilities. These 'Front runner' organisations had progressed on a track that many others are starting to follow today in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Those with experience highlight some of the key technologies required**

Front runners put significantly more focus on flexible, device-independent access mechanisms for core business systems. Where appropriate they have also invested in Virtual Contact Center solutions to maintain the customer experience. Beyond this, they are much more likely to be using real-time collaboration and advanced video conference functionality. This puts them in a better position for teams to interact in a virtual and more agile manner.

#### **The need for awareness of human and risk related considerations is clear**

Those in the Front runner group have taken more specific steps to make sure employees are treated as people rather than simply resources. This is critical in the context of emergency relocation in response to the global pandemic, as health, wellbeing and morale related issues can creep up over time. Higher awareness of the risk imperative among senior managers in the Front runner group is also key as it helps significantly with the safety side of remote working.

#### **Thinking beyond the current crisis to a post-pandemic world**

While it's hard to do at the moment, as you make decisions around process and systems implementation, upgrade or extension to deal with immediate needs, it's important to think about requirements over the longer term. If it's a choice between relying on low-grade solutions and workarounds versus spending a little more to do it well, look at the superior outcomes achieved by Front runners laid out in this report and use this to shape your forward-looking business case.

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The research upon which this report is based was designed and executed by Freeform Dynamics, with sponsorship from Cisco. Input was gathered from 1507 senior business and IT professionals via the telephone across 13 countries, 8 industries and range of organisation sizes. The study began towards the end 2019 and was completed in Q1 2020.



# Introduction

The world was a different place when the research reported in this document was originally conceived. During that pre-pandemic time towards the end of 2019, we set out to investigate the topic of 'Workplace Transformation'. Our objective was to explore how modern technology and working practices were creating business advantage by allowing people to work in radically new and different ways. One of our main aims when designing the study was to generate insights that would help management teams prioritise their efforts and build a business case for investment.

In the intervening period, however, the global crisis has emerged. Pretty much every business on the planet has been impacted by the threat of COVID-19, which is still very much with us at the time of writing.

Most businesses have seen their revenues decline, or even disappear completely in sectors such as hospitality, air travel and other industries deemed to be 'non-essential'. At the other extreme, FMCG companies, food retailers, logistics firms, pharmacies, healthcare providers and others engaged in essential activities have never been more stretched. In between, many businesses are simply concerned with how to remain operational against the backdrop of travel constraints and social distancing directives.

## Spotlight on remote working; more to consider than you might think

Business challenges in these unprecedented times are many and varied, but there's one topic that's front of mind for everyone looking to keep their workforce active and productive – remote working.

In the first instance, the focus is frequently on getting employees who are normally office-based up and running in a home environment. Short-term measures to achieve this, however, may not be sustainable, e.g. there's a limit to how long an employee can work eight hours a day hunched over a laptop on their kitchen table without suffering health problems. Furthermore, the emergency choices you make on tools and services, e.g. the use of consumer-grade video conferencing, or rudimentary access mechanisms to allow the use of personal equipment, may not be right (or safe) for the business in the longer term.

The same is true of rapidly implemented systems and workarounds put into place to deal with new challenges faced by frontline workers, e.g. mobile solutions based on generic devices and office tools that were never designed to cope with the rigours of operating in the field.

And when things are done on an emergency or temporary basis, it's all too easy for security, compliance and data protection exposures to arise. This can occur as a result of expedited decision-making based on minimal due diligence when selecting solutions or services. Other exposures can stem from a need to connect employees via inherently insecure devices and networks. Either way, at some point those initial compromises around risk management need to be identified, acknowledged and ultimately addressed.

## Let's not forget the human dimension either

Overarching the operational and risk considerations is the impact on employees themselves. Face-to-face interaction is an important part of the way many people naturally work, and when this is wrenched away it can be hard to adjust to alternative ways of interacting. Problems range from unfamiliarity and discomfort with various forms of electronic communication hampering the operation of teams and business processes, through to lack of direct social interaction negatively impacting relationships and morale.

# Opportunity to learn from those with experience

Against the background discussed, lessons can be learned from organisations who already had extensive remote working experience before the pandemic hit, and a third of the 1507 participants in our research fell into this category. More of these shortly, but in the meantime let's define precisely what we mean by 'safe and effective remote working.'

## Key remote working requirements

During the research we looked specifically at three forms of remote working, all of which are relevant to the current discussion.

Nomadic working is traditionally associated with enabling roaming

professionals to work in an ad hoc manner in temporary locations such as remote offices, hotels, airports, coffee shops and so on. It's relevant now because it defines the approach you might initially take to get employees up and running from home on a temporary or emergency basis. In both situations, the focus is typically on connecting users securely via laptops, personal/home equipment or as guests on shared computers.

The home office model is concerned with setting up users to work in a permanent home-based environment with dedicated business facilities. It defines what's needed to enable home working on a more sustainable long-term basis and takes account of the health, safety, comfort and wellbeing challenges previously highlighted. A permanent home office, for example, is likely to include a suitable desk, chair, monitor, keyboard and other facilities. Given the uncertainty around the duration of the current crisis, moving to this model might make sense for many employees.

Mobile working in the context of the current climate is most likely to be associated with essential workers operating on the front line. Requirements here will clearly vary by industry and profession, as will risk management considerations.

### Location Flexibility

**Nomadic working**  
in a temporary location, e.g. home, hotel room, etc

**Home office**  
to enable more regular, permanent home working

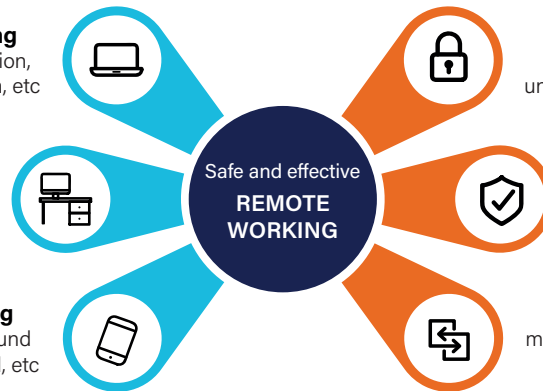
**Mobile working**  
while roaming around facilities, in the field, etc

### Management of Risk

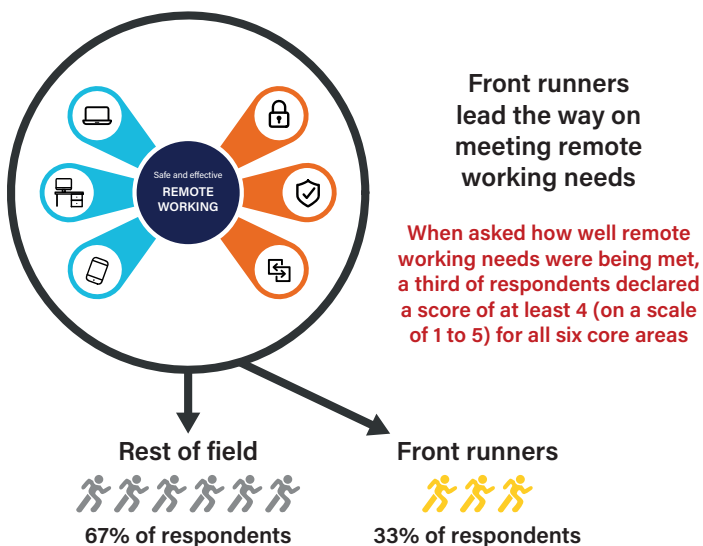
**Security**  
measures to prevent unauthorised data access

**Compliance**  
measures to assure adherence to regulations

**Data protection**  
measures to prevent loss of business data



## Tapping into insights from 'Front runners'



Clearly, those who have already implemented remote working safely and effectively will have a lot of insights and experience relevant to the current situation, not to mention useful knowledge of systems and best practices.

In the remainder of this report, we will therefore be looking at what we can learn from one particular group of research respondents that we have termed 'Front runners.' This label reflects the fact that even before the pandemic, they were already out in front when it came to meeting remote working needs across all of the areas we have highlighted, including risk management. Comparing their behaviour to the rest of the field is very revealing.

# First things first: keeping core processes running

In today's digital world, one of the most fundamental prerequisites for effective remote working is putting the right systems and services in place from a technology perspective. In general terms, this begins with device and access flexibility. The requirement here is to enable access to the applications employees need to work from home or any other relevant location, using any device. This is a capability Front runners particularly emphasise.

Such flexibility can be important when rapidly shifting employees to a home working model as the ideal equipment may not always be available right away. At

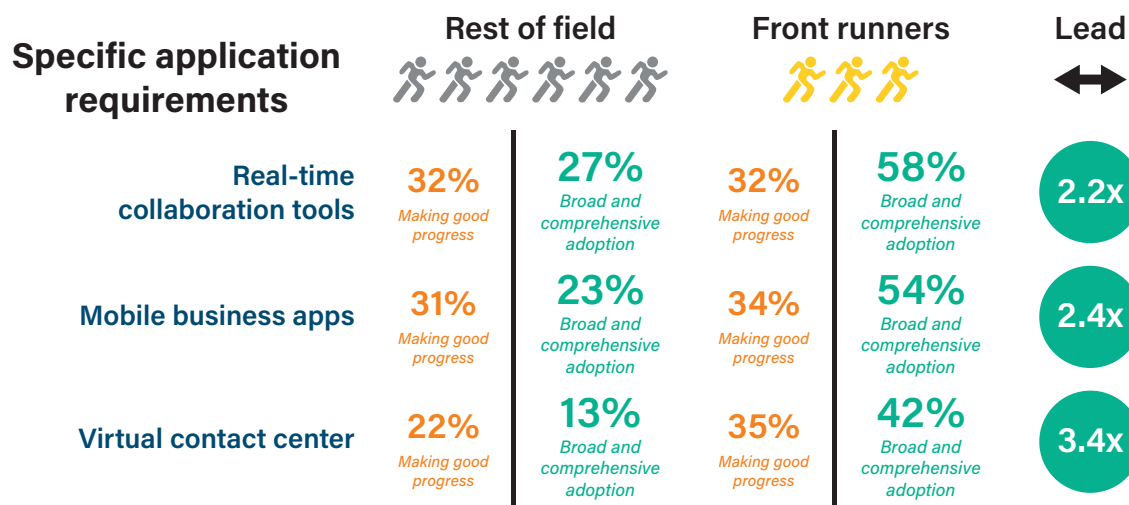
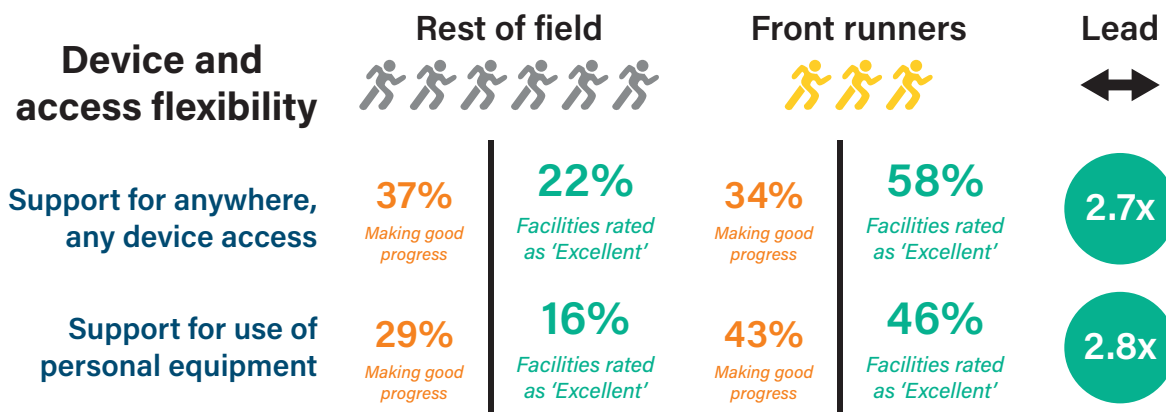
the time of writing, for example, some are finding it hard to source new laptops, speakerphones, webcams and other peripherals as the rush to home working has led to shortages of supply. You may not want to (or be able to) invest in lots of new equipment anyway, so you might have no choice but to exploit the kit already available to users – personal or otherwise.

Given that most core business applications such as ERP, CRM, activity management and so on are browser-based in terms of UI, these are relatively straightforward to deal with from a remote user experience perspective, though you clearly need a secure connection to the enterprise network or relevant cloud service (more about security later).

That said, there are some specific application requirements that Front runners are again much more likely to have dealt with effectively. Real-time collaboration tools such as instant messaging and web conferencing stand out here, as does the need for mobile business applications (more likely to be critical for frontline workers).

Where relevant, specific support for the virtual contact centre approach is also key. Continuing to deliver a good customer experience is still important, even in these difficult times. Indeed, servicing customers or citizens effectively is significantly more critical for public sector organisations, healthcare providers and others delivering

essential services. If social distancing directives have led to reduced or zero physical call centre capacity, virtual contact centre capabilities allow calls and messages to be routed to home-based agents and customer service to continue.

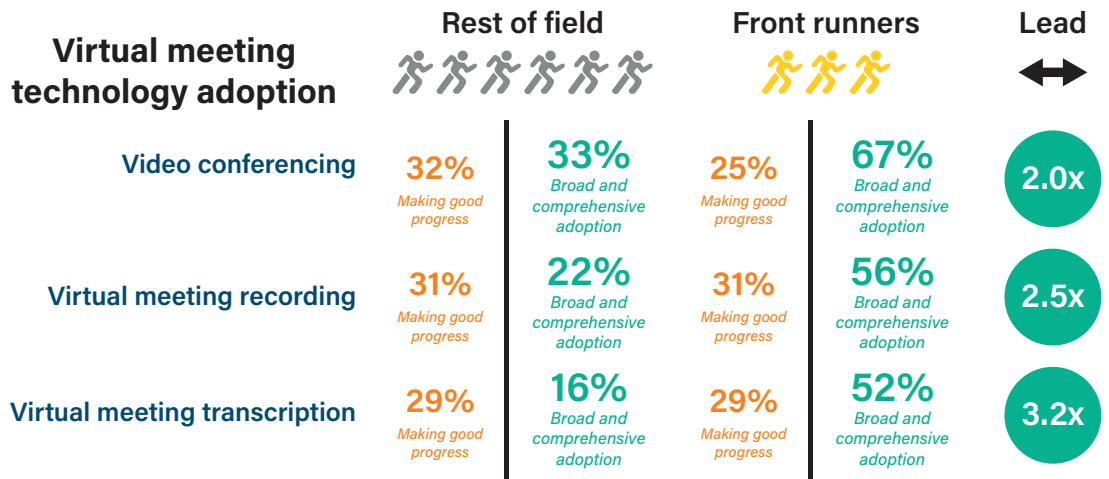


# Enabling professional teams to operate virtually

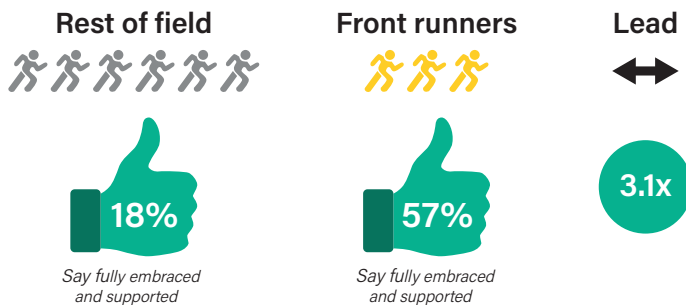
Beyond structured process activity, most organisations rely on employees being able to 'meet' in order to discuss business matters and make decisions. This could be in relation to a sales opportunity, project, planning and review exercise, or 'huddling' to deal with process exceptions. With physical face-to-face gatherings being difficult or impossible at the moment, all such activity needs to take place in a virtual manner. This brings us to video conferencing, a capability that hitherto might have been considered optional, but one that under the current circumstances is increasingly becoming business critical.

The truth is that many organisations had already appreciated the value of video conferencing and as our Front runners illustrate, such entities are much more likely to be properly geared up for virtual meetings. What's interesting when

you look at the data, however, is that they are not just further ahead on core video conferencing functionality, they are also more likely to be taking advantage of advanced functions such as virtual meeting recording and transcription.



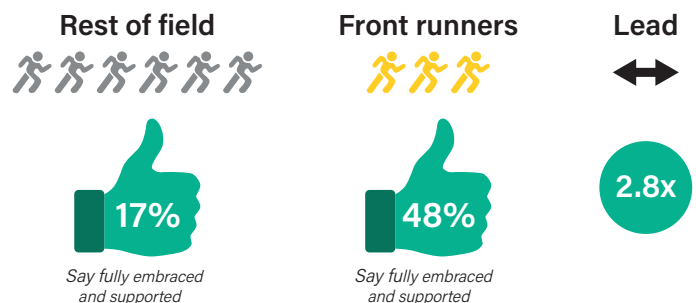
## Use of Virtual Teams that operate across locations and departments



Observations such as these prompt consideration of why Front runners have put more emphasis than most on certain types of solution. In this case the way in which they have adopted modern team structures provides us with a strong indicator. Front runners, for example, are much more likely to have their people working in virtual teams that operate across locations and departments. This clearly has advantages when it comes to driving management, review and other ongoing activities that need input from multiple disciplines, often across multiple locations.

While virtual teams are appropriate for ongoing requirements, sometimes you need a cross-disciplinary, cross-location team to quickly form then disband around specific activities. This kind of approach, for which solutions such as real-time collaboration and video conferencing are key enablers, enables a high degree of organisational flexibility and responsiveness. Making such connections between technology and value introduces the notion of thinking beyond immediate needs and considering future business advantage. More of that shortly. In the meantime, let's look more closely at the human dimension.

## Use of Agile Teams that form/disband around specific activities





# The importance of acknowledging employees as people

From a business perspective, it's sometimes legitimate to think of the workforce simply as a collection of resources. On other occasions it's critical to recognise that employees are living, breathing human beings. Trust and empower them and make them feel good and secure about themselves, their jobs and the organisation they work for, and they will contribute well both individually and collectively, and remain loyal. Few would argue with this basic principle, but problems can arise when people's work and lives are significantly disrupted, especially with little or no notice. Unfortunately, the current crisis epitomises the notion of rapid and significant disruption for many employees.



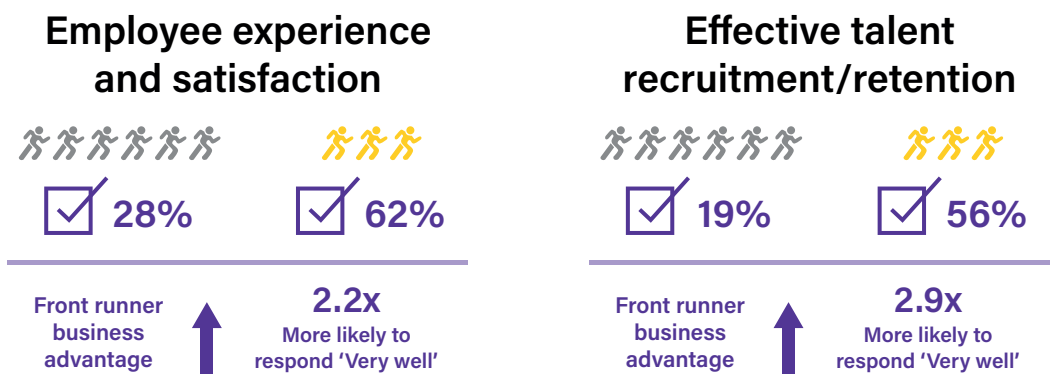
With this in mind, it's no coincidence that Front runners exhibit a range of traits and behaviours that reflect the principle of treating employees as people rather than numbers on a spreadsheet or collections of competencies on a compliance document.

Some of what we see here is particularly important in the context of moving people to a remote working environment for the first time. Yes, they will need the right equipment, facilities and the necessary training so they can work comfortably and efficiently, but they also need you to trust them. One of the quickest ways to undermine

morale, for example, is to constantly harass them to make sure they are working or put draconian measures in place to monitor when they are working.

It is necessary, however, to put employee engagement mechanisms in place to gather regular feedback from employees on how well they are doing in order to identify opportunities early to improve things or deal with issues and challenges.

The enhanced employee experience and satisfaction achieved by Front runners corroborates the value of the people-centric approach. This in turn can pay back down the line in the form of more effective talent recruitment and retention.



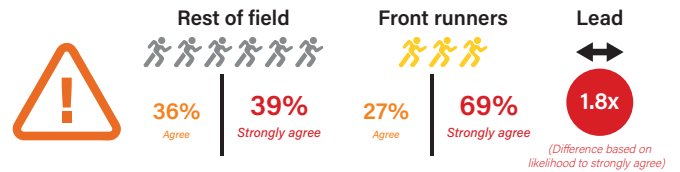
# Dealing with the 'safe' part of remote working

When it comes to risk management, Front runners are effective at dealing with matters of security, compliance and data protection. Indeed, good performance in relation to these is part of how we define the Front runner group.

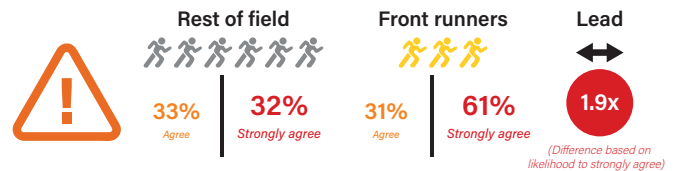
It's beyond the scope of this report to go into detail of the many and varied systems and infrastructure related capabilities that need to be in place to implement effective risk management. Suffice it to say that things like network security, identity management, data classification, access control mechanisms, backup, recovery, archiving and so on are as important to remote working as they are in the context of on-premise environments, more so in many cases. As you move more users to a remote working model, working through such systems, application and data-level requirements is important.

Coming back to our Front runners, this more experienced group highlights some higher-level considerations. From an executive air cover perspective, for example, it's not just about security and compliance being firmly on the senior management agenda, but executives fully appreciating the consequences of problems occurring in these areas.

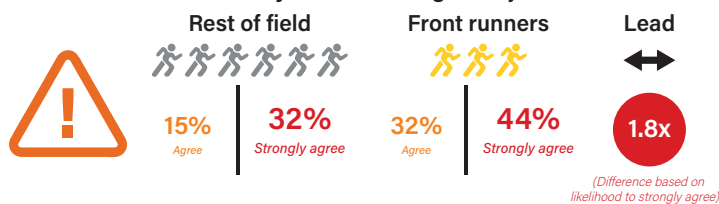
## Security and compliance are firmly on the senior management agenda



## Our executives appreciate the cost and disruption that security and compliance breaches cause



## Users will bypass security and compliance measures if they get in the way of them doing their jobs

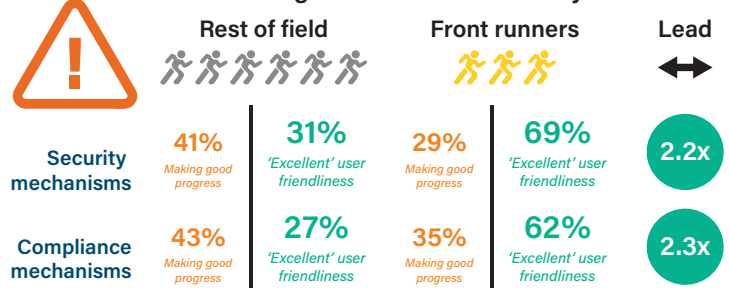


At the other end of the spectrum, awareness is also important at the workforce level. The people-centric thought process we discussed previously is important here too. Front runners recognise that it's just human nature for employees to try to work around security and compliance measures that get in the way of them doing their jobs. In response to this, they put a greater emphasis on user-friendliness of risk management measures.

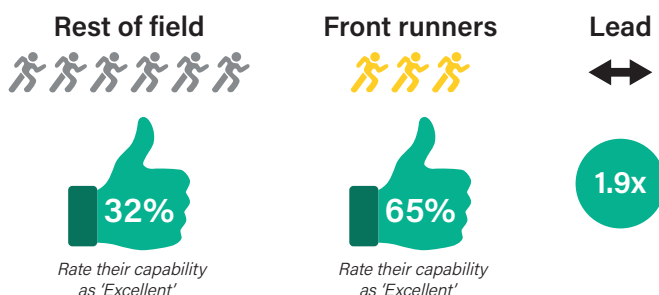
This kind of pragmatic human-aware approach is important when users are working remotely. Again, human nature says that we are more likely to be tempted to break the rules when no one's watching!

As we are reviewing risk management in the context of remote working, it's worth highlighting a major positive that stems from reducing the organisation's dependency on specific physical locations – better

## User friendliness of end user related risk management measures and systems



## Assessment of Business Continuity

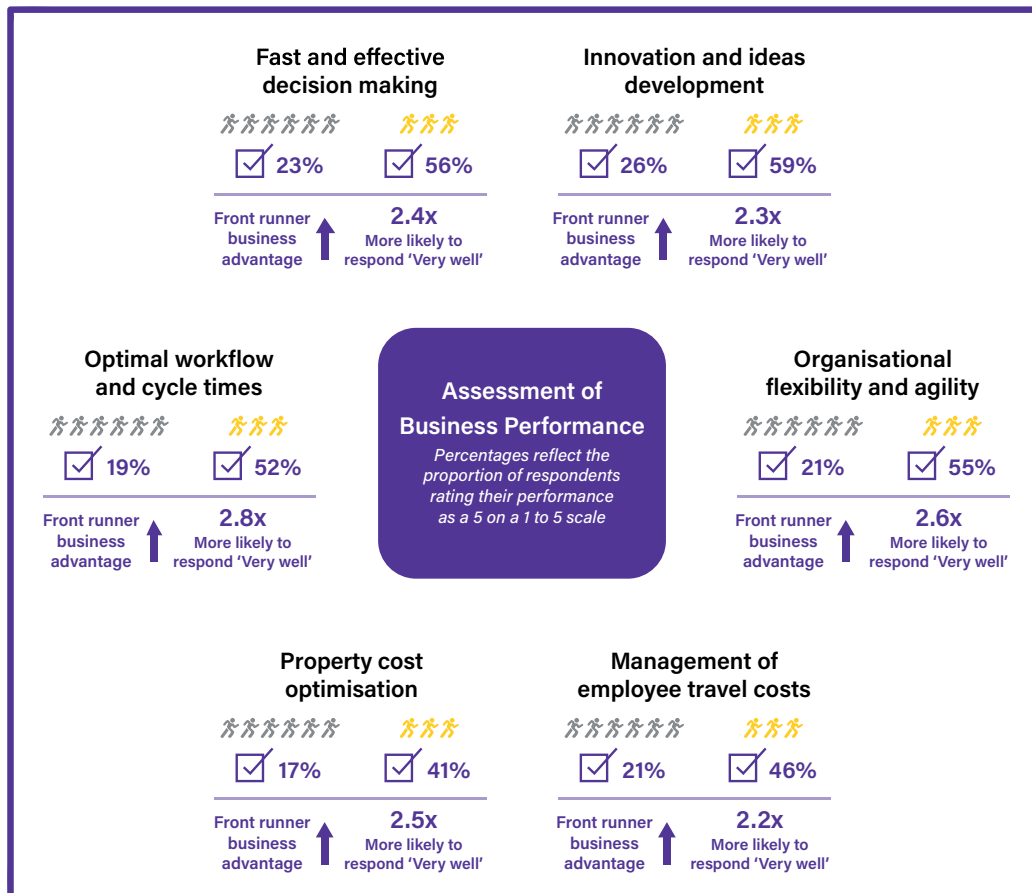


business continuity. Put simply, if a disaster or crisis occurs that renders a location unavailable, users can be moved to work elsewhere with minimum disruption. In line with this, those with superior remote working capabilities are more likely to give themselves a top rating on the business continuity front. In many respects, the current COVID 19 crisis, unwelcome though it is, provides us with a clear illustration of this principle in action.



# A good time to consider longer term value

OK, so let's not pretend that the immediate priority isn't to get or keep employees active and productive. We must also bear in mind that with an uncertain income stream, now's probably not the time to spend money that doesn't need to be spent. That said, if you need to implement, upgrade or extend solutions to enable remote working in the short term anyway, you might as well approach it with an eye to the future.



To put this into perspective, consider that post-pandemic, things are extremely unlikely to go back to exactly as they were before COVID-19 hit. Whether you were forced into remote working or were already moving in this direction and simply got nudged to accelerate progress makes no difference. However you got there, employees will inevitably discover the benefits, so some of the transformed behaviour for at least some employees will be institutionalised for the longer term.

Some of the superior outcomes achieved by Front runners signal where these benefits are likely to arise –

improved decision-making, better innovation, greater agility and responsiveness, and so on.

While we can't attribute such benefits directly or solely to advanced remote working capabilities, it doesn't take much working out that virtual teams, agile teams and virtual contact centres enabled via the kind of solutions we have been discussing would have helped significantly to drive better results. Casting your mind forward to the post-pandemic era, it also doesn't take much imagination to work out how safe and effective remote working capabilities can help to reduce property and travel costs in the future.

## From remote working to workplace transformation

Zooming out, the reality is that safe and effective remote working is just part of a bigger conversation around workplace transformation more broadly. This is about rethinking the way you enable work and your workforce for maximum efficiency, effectiveness and flexibility. While it might seem like a long way off from wherever you happen to be locked down at the moment, the vision is one of optimising and integrating the user and team experience across all of the environments they work in – head office, branch, coffee shop and the virtual world.

If this is something you agree it would be good to plan for sooner rather than later, despite the short term imperatives, you may find our self-assessment tool useful to help figure out where you are now and what to prioritise (see <https://futureofwork.webex.com/maturity-calculator>). In the meantime, we hope you and your employees stay as safe as possible in these difficult times.

## About Freeform Dynamics

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