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Better productivity in a pandemic

ISGEC and Citrix made it happen

India's ISGEC IT team saw the opportunity in adversity, turning a COVID-19 lockdown into better employee engagement and a new business model

Ask Vipin Kumar what his ISGEC team's biggest accomplishment has been during the coronavirus pandemic. A 26-year veteran in the IT field who has spent his career in heavy engineering and automotive environments, the Group CIO will be quick to reply: "In the shortest possible timeframe, we transformed a large part of our engineering-driven company into a highly-productive remote workforce."

Keeping employees engaged and productive during one of the most complex business disruptions in the last century was no small feat. In India, as with many of the initially hard-hit global locations, the pandemic came out of the blue. Organizations were not prepared for the drastic changes that would ensue – one day, everyone was seated at a desk in an office, and the next, business leaders were struggling to equip employees for a new home-based norm. While the major physical relocation was a big challenge, perhaps the most difficult hurdle was the striking cultural change that many companies in India and around the world would face.

Bracing for impact

The ISGEC leadership team prepared for the possibility that in the initial stages of transitioning engineers, productivity would suffer. However, the opposite scenario played out. Even when teams began to remote work, the speed of operations remained good.

"Our workforce really came through. It delivered high quality work in a timely fashion. And that was just the beginning of the journey," says Kumar. "As things progressed, we began to see that the pandemic actually would present us with business opportunities."

ISGEC

Industry
Engineering

Location
India

Citrix products
- Citrix Virtual Apps and Desktops
- Citrix ADC

Key Benefits
- Citrix Virtual Apps and Desktops securely delivers access to users' apps and data regardless of time, network, device or work location

- Citrix ADC provides end-to-end management visibility: real-time network bandwidths measures, reports and metrics

The upside of working from home

ISGEC engineers work with heavy design software that typically does not perform well in virtual environments. With Citrix, the team found that compute-intensive 3D graphics programs worked very well.

Another important consideration was that in the office environment, ISGEC designers work with large drawings – two-screen design models. Most often, one screen shows something completely different than the other.

"After a bit of tweaking, the team was able to simulate two-screen design modeling in our Citrix virtual environment," Kumar states. "This was a great achievement as enabling 3D rendering in a virtualized environment on two screens at home, without compromising on quality and speed, was one of the key requirements of design users," he adds.

That wasn't the only benefit the team identified. Another big plus was that employees would have a better work-life balance if they worked from home. Avoiding the long commute to the office was a welcome change for many. Some workers had to travel from Delhi every day, which involved navigating massive traffic jams that could consume as much as an hour and a half each way.

For company leaders, the pandemic also brought a positive realization. Many job functions at ISGEC are well-suited to remote work. Making those roles home-based could significantly impact the company's bottom line by reducing operational costs associated with office real estate.

A potential downside of working from home

Business as usual during a pandemic is not just about working from home. It's also about psychology. Kumar describes a different dynamic that may occur when an employee begins to work from home; in the office, management is more connected to the employee – better able to see and assess productivity. Work output is more tangible. The employee and his manager may have better communication due to physical proximity.

If an employee works from home, depending on the quality and frequency of the communication that occurs between the worker and the manager, a manager may not have the same kind of insight into the employee's behavior and work ethic. Because of the physical separation, the employee may wonder what the boss is thinking, and the manager may wonder what the employee is doing. This highlights the need for attitudinal restructuring in addition to the need for physical restructuring.

"We have learned that Citrix is simple to use, simple to deploy and reasonably priced. We got a great information security layer from Citrix and our Intellectual Property is now easy to manage. And the best part is that we had a choice: start small and grow – or go all in from the beginning."

Vipin Kumar
Group CIO
ISGEC

Attitudinal restructuring leads to assumptions

A discussion of changing attitudes often leads to questions about changing expectations. As ISGEC began to assess the fact that employees would alleviate commuting time by working from home, some leaders questioned whether it was logical to request that productivity increase accordingly.

"Some reasoned that we should begin to see better productivity than what we saw in the office," recounts Kumar. "Based on that discussion, we decided to set new productivity targets. We extrapolated that based on eliminating commuting time, remote workers conceivably could be 120% more productive when working from home compared to working from the office," he explains.

"Then we started analyzing the things which might be roadblocks in preventing that kind of aspiration," he continues. "We also realized there has to be give and take for everyone. That's when the idea of incentives came into play." Enhancing employee experience by using Citrix virtualization solutions came into being.

Realizing increased productivity is a partnership

ISGEC leadership decided to take a unique approach to delivering a great employee experience and realizing productivity gains. The company now engages remote workers in various wellness programs such as yoga, meditation and more, so that workers never feel that they are missing the benefits and sense of community that come with working in an office.

"To boost the employee confidence and engagement, it was decided to come out with innovative schemes and encourage the employees to take ownership of their work tools – to own their laptops," Kumar states. "Our company financed workers' IT assets. Workers pay small installments monthly and the payment term is stretched over a long period of time. We do this without any surcharge and also subsidize the cost of the computers, so it's a win-win situation for all," he continues. "This program alone caused productivity to jump significantly."

A final step that the company took was to implement regular touch points with remote employees. It does a rigorous review of employee performance so that everyone is clear on progress and desired outcomes.

Pandemic as a change agent

The coronavirus pandemic was the initial business driver that pushed ISGEC to select Citrix virtual technology and embrace remote work. The company made the transition in a matter of a few days.

It was the nature of ISGEC's business that steered the selection of Citrix. ISGEC is an 85-year-old company that jointly collaborates with many global players to deliver world class engineering solutions. The company is engaged in many businesses like EPC projects, process equipment, sugar plants and distilleries, boilers, steel and iron castings, air pollution control equipment, presses and liquefied gas cylinders. It markets its various products in the above domains and exports them to more than 90 countries globally. The organization is engaged in numerous turnkey projects, so it is necessary that there is extensive interaction between a number of functional areas within the company – design, materials, quality control, construction and vendor management. Strong collaboration is necessary for final delivery to take place.

"In order for this new remote work environment to be successful, we needed a well-integrated solution," says Kumar. "That is what Citrix offered."

Evaluating VMware against Citrix for remote work

In its efforts to find the right remote solution, the ISGEC team did consider VMware. "VMware already was in place as the virtualization solution in ISGEC's backend server stacks, so it would have been an easy choice," notes Kumar. "However, the way Citrix presented its solution in terms of feature sets and ease of deployment ultimately helped us understand that it actually was the right choice for our remote work platform. Add cost management and strong security features such as watermarking to the mix, and the answer was clear," explains Kumar.

"We worked hard on this," he shares. "With the help of valuable partners like Citrix, we were able to deploy a proof of concept (POC) in a very short period of time. Then we quickly implemented our solution. Citrix even provided valuable post-implementation support."

Security was top-of-mind

Security was a topic of paramount importance. When ISGEC leaders became aware of the impending mandate to work from home, there were numerous concerns about theft of intellectual property.

"Security is not necessarily all about technology; it is also about human behavior," Kumar says. "We had to make sure that we assessed the risks – known or unknown – that could create security leaks."

Accordingly, the company worked to ensure that employees understood their roles in keeping IP secure. Leaders implemented coaching to inform employees. They also updated security policies regularly and circulated them for awareness.

Citrix technology also helped the company protect its classified projects. "Citrix enabled us to institute watermarks and other safeguards so that employees could not engage in the unauthorized sharing of images without the threat of detection. To date, we have not had any security breaches," says Kumar.

Growing with Citrix

"The cost of our new Citrix solution is quite manageable," Kumar contends. "Once we have a bit more history with the work from home model, we'll be in a position to expand the Citrix footprint in our company." Today, the team is using Citrix Virtual Apps and Desktops and Citrix ADC VPX models on-premises. ISGEC also has Citrix Gateway in its technology arsenal.

Next steps include increasing the pool of people working from home, implementing a bring your own device (BYOD) program and ultimately creating a digital workspace platform for the entire organization.

"We believe that in every challenge there lies an opportunity," Kumar shares. "While the pandemic was a big challenge for our organization, it also uncovered opportunities to improve the business and the engagement and productivity of employees. We have learned that Citrix is simple to use, simple to deploy and reasonably priced. We got a great information security layer from Citrix and our intellectual property is now easy to manage," he continues. "And the best part is that we had a choice: start small and grow – or go all in from the beginning."

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