Small business will never be the same. What does that mean for your tech?
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The wheel. The steam engine. The assembly line.

Each of these solutions was considered a logical next step in productivity. In their respective times, they were innovative and paradigm-shifting examples of the future of work.

“The future of work.” It used to be that we spoke about the future of work as some far away destination we were traveling towards. When COVID-19 hit, suddenly every business on the planet found themselves in the future, forcing them to adapt their working models out of pure necessity.

The new future of work will build off the accelerated position we all find ourselves in today. Many envision a future so technically sophisticated that companies can automate or outsource most menial workplace responsibilities.

It isn’t just about working faster or smarter – it’s about working differently. Technology will play a key role in cultivating these workplace cultures—ones that look a lot different than they did yesterday.

While the innovations mentioned above bred efficiency, modern workers crave solutions that create work-life balance and foster flexibility, especially as they transition from the fully remote working environment they found themselves in. Employees going forward will want to think and work differently than their predecessors. They’ll want to continue to work beyond the confines of their office spaces and stay connected — whether they’re working in a coffee shop or from the comfort of their living rooms.

But they also want purpose, connection, and the freedom to create at their own pace and on their own terms. The future of work isn’t just trying to find the next wheel, steam engine, or assembly line. It’s investing in the best resource any small business has: its people.
Evolving needs

Like the wheel, steam engine, and assembly line, a startup or small business isn’t born as a fully formed idea – it starts as the germ of one. The idea warrants a plan, which then justifies the people, places, and things needed to carry out that plan to help the idea reach its full potential.

That’s been the blueprint to startup business growth for longer than any of us can remember. While it’s still relevant, the changing landscape of the future of work will alter the way three pillars of startup and small business development are approached: the people, the workspaces, and the technology.
The people

A hefty paycheck does not sway the new wave of young workers. Millennials — expected to make up 75% of the workforce by 2025, according to a Cone Communications study — see work as a way to pay bills and maintain certain qualities of life. Still, they crave balance and some purpose behind how they spend their workdays.

The same Cone Communications report found that 76% of employees consider a company’s social and sustainability values before accepting a job. In contrast, 64% will decline a job offer if a company’s corporate social responsibility initiatives aren’t secure.

For this generation, it’s not enough that a job pays well; they want to work somewhere that affords them a feeling of pride and a sustainable work-life balance. When trying to appeal to the employee of the future, these are must-haves rather than luxuries.
The workspaces

While they will not become completely obsolete, the traditional office space will no longer be a necessity, as recent history has shown us. Remote work will continue to be a popular choice for start-ups and small businesses, not only for the cost-savings, but also for employee safety. Small offices and co-working spaces may continue to be an option but will likely look a bit different—and certainly be less populated—than they were pre-COVID. For example, things like hot-desking will be replaced by spaces that are more private or spread out to help maintain a sense of social distancing.

Employees want to work in places where they’re comfortable, and today, that means feeling safe and promoting well-being. As a result, modern companies who want to maintain a physical office must factor multiple variables into the identification, customization, and maintenance of their workspaces. After all, investing in a workspace is an investment in current and future employees.
The technology

Work no longer is confined to face-to-face interactions inside the walls of company property. The past few decades of technological innovation gave rise to a workforce that can operate on any number of devices from any corner of the globe.

First came the conference call, which allowed colleagues to patch into a dedicated line from anywhere in the world to conduct daily meetings, big-ticket strategy sessions, and other communications. Next came mobile, which meant conference calls could be taken on the go — and co-workers could connect directly to discuss pressing issues without the need for a conference call. Eventually, video conferencing emerged to combine audio and visual capabilities, allowing separated parties to read their co-workers better and enhance meetings with imagery.

Now, a solution like Cisco Webex merges all of those advancements into one collaborative platform with a powerful AI assistance, audio recording, transcription, and prioritization features that let attendees actively listen and get the most out of each interaction.

The demand for change has been the catalyst for the evolving status quo in each of these areas. Employees are essential to production, which means small businesses — in particular — must ensure they have all hands on deck in terms of workforce, workspace, and technology to handle the demands that are sure to come.

As future-of-work solutions gain ubiquity in small business circles, leaders must embrace the mindset they bring as well as the technology itself. They must hire with that culture in mind, ensuring that new talent aligns with the company’s M.O.

Leaders also need resources to foster such an environment. They must be educated on the technological and professional tools required to stay up to date. This demand will only grow with time, and these three pillars will only evolve further. Small businesses that want to present a sustainable and attractive image to current and potential employees must provide comprehensive solutions that address all three of those critical small business pillars.
The all-in-one revolution

Technology’s greatest strength is its ability to aid efficiency. The wheel, steam engine, and assembly line all surfaced due to one prevailing theory: There’s always a faster and more concise way to get from point A to point B.

For small businesses and startups that might lack the resources of their larger counterparts, it’s more critical than ever to prioritize speed. Future-of-work solutions enable greater efficiency and allow non-enterprises to operate, communicate, and collaborate in a timely fashion.

As these solutions become more readily available, they’ll start to be presented as suites and boutiques that companies can use to centralize workflows. Artificial intelligence, for example, can help consolidate and predict menial and mundane tasks like creating follow-ups and building agendas. Beyond automation, these unified platforms can feature messaging tools, collaboration resources such as screen-sharing and video conferencing add-ons, and word processors.

For a long time, those tools were standalone offerings that companies could purchase separately and provide to their employees. These companies would either build their own tech stacks or empower workers to construct their own arrays of resources to complete tasks. That could easily result in teams that needed a dozen different systems to complete a day’s work.

While each piece of tech is optimized to complete a task as quickly as possible, a tech stack of out-of-sync tools leaves precious bits of time on the table – time that could be devoted to creative thought and problem-solving. With an all-in-one platform that hosts messenger, project management, email, and other features, communication for all projects is housed in one place.
And with the incorporation of AI, these platforms can predict or suggest next steps for optimal efficiency. For example, Cisco Webex amplifies collaboration and video conferencing with an AI assistant that can identify multiple ends of a conversation, transcribe a call’s contents, and craft action items for all participants.

Platforms like Webex represent a shift for small businesses toward streamlined operations. Repetitive, time-consuming tasks that clog up your team’s daily bandwidth can be completed by AI — without employees having to lift a finger.

How will this affect collaboration — specifically the balance between virtual and in-person work?

To start, the distinction between the two will become passé. Ideally, in-person communication will still be a go-to option for employees who want to convey insights. But as workforces become more remote and embrace other nontraditional approaches, companies will welcome anything that keeps employees engaged and work flowing.

Virtual and augmented reality can add a new dimension to video and virtual conferencing sessions while helping remote workers feel connected, even if they’re oceans apart. Working in a silo deprives employees of the kinds of interpersonal interactions that spark genuine creativity and high-level thinking. These connections, though, can help workers feel more confident both in themselves and their collaborators.

By building that sense of camaraderie, technology can eliminate potential barriers and bottlenecks. Workers can feel confident in the work they’re doing and comfortable acting quickly. As decisions and actions are made more expeditiously, small businesses can operate at the pace necessary to build a sustainable foundation for the future.
Future-of-work solutions are only as healthy as their ability to compensate for, scale, and anticipate the needs of employees. A small business’s needs will change over time as its point of view and position changes. To get ahead of those looming issues and ensure your tech stack remains relevant, start by taking a couple of steps. First, leadership and decision makers need to poll those who will be working with the solutions. This bottom-up approach is far more effective — and likely inexpensive — than trying to guess what tools will boost productivity.

Understanding what resources will make your employees’ jobs easier empowers your employees to voice their concerns and provide insight on how these new solutions integrate into the workflow more seamlessly, which should ensure a more immediate ROI. Plus, it’s a cultural advantage that will empower employees to voice their concerns and provide insight on how these solutions can be most effective. Once those two items are off your to-do list, your employees’ voices will be crucial.

To ensure you’re circling the tech stack needed to make your company soar:

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The next generation of collaboration
1. Ready the culture.

Technology can’t be a plug-and-play solution. The culture it’s being integrated into needs to be open to its presence and willing to ensure the new addition is a success.

Build a culture that’s willing to collaborate in monitoring your tech stack’s effectiveness. To make your employees feel like part of the process, ask questions regularly about the impact technology is having.

If your staff members feel their input is essential, they’ll take pride in how your stack is being applied and be stewards of it. In short, make sure your culture is — and remains — ready to make your tech stack stick.
2. Forget retrofitting.

Tech stacks can mean different things to different companies. To figure out what it will mean for yours, determine what your team needs first before committing to a solution.

Before a product overhaul, ask employees what they like and dislike about the current setup. Then, make sure any new solution improves upon or maintains the features they mention. An outside-the-box approach could be asking employees what apps they use the most in their personal time. This question can help shed light on what kind of functionality will best engage your workers and blend in with their routines.
3. Set it and remember it.

In a perfect world, a small business would find a tech stack that scales with the company. In the real world, growth dictates that needs might change from time to time. That’s why it’s imperative to always be on the lookout for whatever tools your team will need.

Make a point to audit your stack yearly or every other year to measure its effectiveness. Ensure it’s secure while determining whether you’re getting the most value from it. If there’s a feature that your team isn’t using, find a way to drop it and avoid wasting money.
The future of work is exactly what it sounds like:

It’s a look at how your workforce will evolve from month to month, year to year, and decade to decade. While modern solutions might not be as transformative as the wheel, the steam engine, or the assembly line, they will transform your small business for the better.

Is your company looking to up its collaboration game?

Visit Webex to learn more and sign up for a free account.