



Remote Working: 2021 and Beyond

The New Realities –
10 months on



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Remote Working: 2021 and Beyond

The New Realities – 10 months on

It's become part and parcel of life, not just in Britain but in economies around the world. Remote working is here to stay for countless organisations and employees. But how have things changed in the ten months since Britain was put into its first lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic? How are businesses and public sector organisations coping? How is technology helping to bridge the gap between office and home-working?

In June last year, we published our first White Paper on the topic. 'Remote Working – The New Normal' which considered the impact of coronavirus on companies and employees, contact centres and agents. As we move into a new year and a new lockdown, but with hope that a mass vaccination programme will see our lives return to some sort of normality, FourNet concluded that the time was right to revisit the subject and to consider what's been learned, how organisations have adapted, and how the latest technology might assist during 2021 and beyond.

In response to this new way of working many businesses are continuing to alter their ways of working, upgrading systems, improving processes, and turning to advancing technology to ensure that the new normal benefits both staff and employers. We hope this whitepaper provides you with fresh insight as to how technology can help deliver this new hybrid workplace.

How we adapted to working from home

Ever-changing government advice, coupled with varying policies across the four UK nations, had an impact on average weekly work-from-home rates during the pandemic. Despite peaks and troughs, what is clear is that more people are working from home than ever before, and many want, and expect, that to continue in 2021 and beyond.

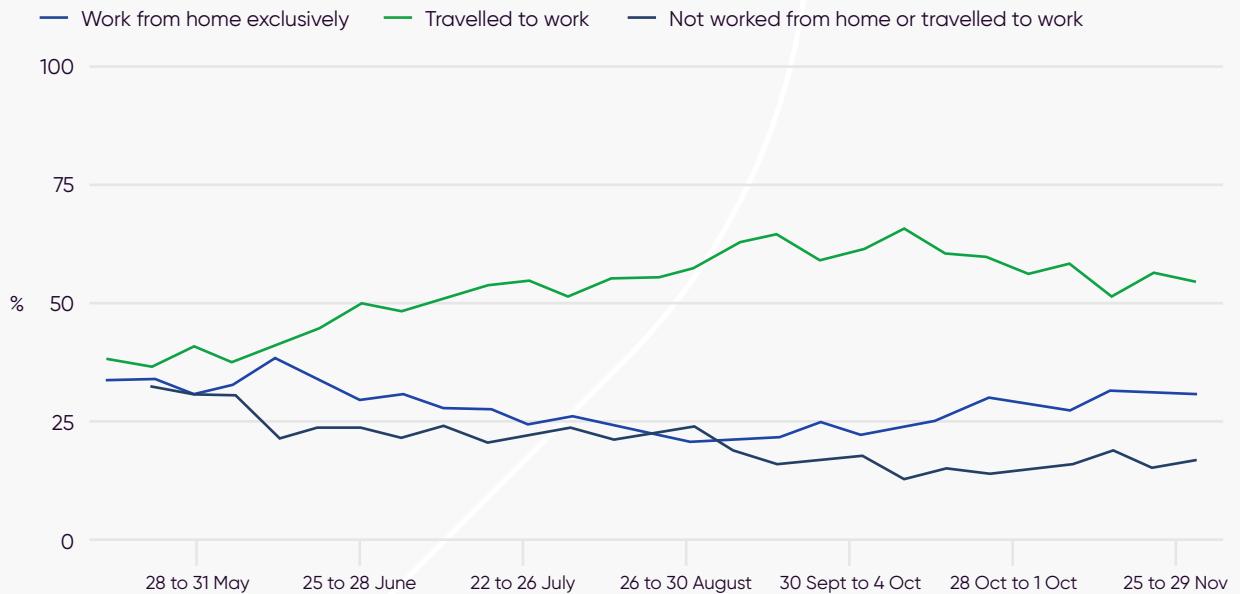
Pre-pandemic in 2019, just 5% of the UK's 32.6m adults in employment worked from home. In April 2020 when the first lockdown was introduced, that had risen to 47% according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Once the first lockdown was lifted, commuting began to increase once again, but by mid-June 38% of the UK workforce was still working exclusively from home. For a short period in September, when Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his ministers were encouraging employees to go back to the office, more than 60% of adults returned to their normal place of work. But following a rise in coronavirus cases and a government U-turn on the advice, the figure slumped.



By the end of November, according to the Office for National Statistics 30% of adults were working exclusively from home and just 50% said they were doing so at their normal place of work.

Proportion of adults, Great Britain, 14 May to 29 November 2020



(Figure 1. Source: ONS Dec 3rd, 2020 –)

Work life balance

Studies suggest that productivity output per worker is broadly similar to that before the pandemic, despite the rise in working from home, although there are substantial differences across sectors. That's despite the domestic demands and home-schooling requirements experienced by many families during periods of restricted movement during 2020. This is partly because employees are working longer hours – using what would have been commuting time to work, rather than relax.

Nine out of ten employees (88%) who worked at home during the lockdown said they would like to continue working at home in some capacity in future, according to a study for the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research (WISERD). Around one in two UK employees (47%) wanted to work at home often or all of the time.

Happiness levels are also thought to have risen as workers escape the gruelling twice daily trip on crowded buses, trains, trams and underground networks and feel they have more control over their lives. And, according to the same study for WISERD, the reported increase in mental health problems associated with the lockdown and working from home, subsided as workers became more accustomed to working from home.



Some employers, recognising the family and domestic commitments of their staff, offered additional flexibility during the working day so long as employees rack up their allotted hours. It's not unusual to see an email signature in which the sender states that they are working flexibly and at unusual hours, and do not expect an immediate response.

While workers may feel they miss the human contact and creative environment of working with colleagues in an office space, there's been significant business investment in technology such as Microsoft Teams, Avaya Spaces and Zoom, which allow virtual conferencing, meeting and breakout rooms and instant chat features to connect employees.

While none of these technology solutions replace the physical chats over the work coffee machine or water-cooler, morning coffee times and virtual cocktail evenings have been implemented by many organisations, while lunchtime yoga classes and 'pub' quiz nights have moved online.

In response to this new way of working many are now planning to re-configure their office premises to become collaboration spaces rather than a central hub for all employees to work from all of the time. Staff either visit the office fewer times a week, or only when required to do so.



"My prediction would be that over 50% of business travel and over 30% of days in the office will go away,"

Bill Gates

And it's not just employee's habits that have changed. Customer's habits have shifted too. With longer waiting times for enquiries to be resolved during lockdown, partly because of reduced capacity and partly because of greater demand, many consumers tried self-service options for the first time, and they liked the experience. That change in behaviour means businesses are likely to have to invest more in those online and omnichannel self-service tools, chatbots and artificial intelligence (AI) solutions.

The environmental impact

In March 2020, the ban on non-essential travel led to an immediate decrease in all types of transport usage.

Work-related travel including journeys to and from work usually accounts for significant levels of CO2 emissions. Air travel in particular – much of it for business – accounted for around 8% of the UK's total greenhouse gas emissions in 2018, according to the ONS. During the early stages of the pandemic, air traffic in the UK fell by 90% and by December had not yet recovered.

Since tackling climate-change remains high on the global agenda, one potential 'corona-bonus' is that video-conferencing, cloud-based collaboration and virtual summits have, during 2020, largely replaced work-related travel for many employers and employees.

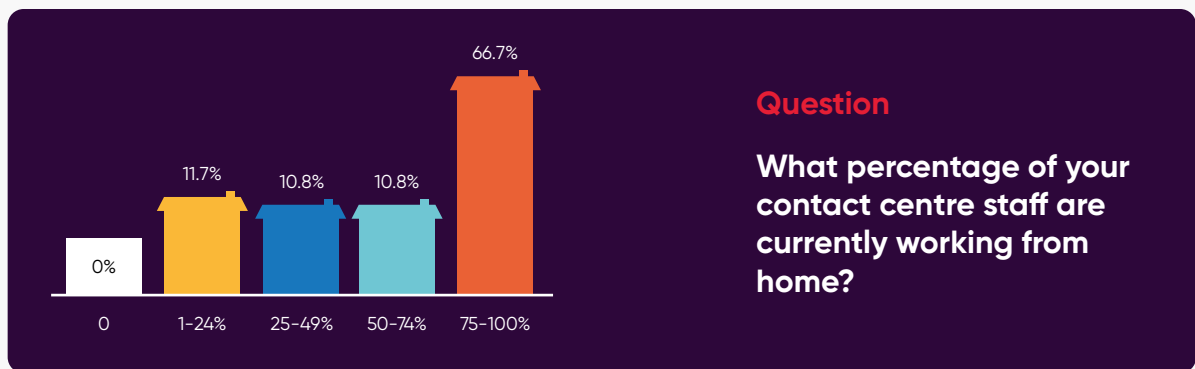
It remains to be seen whether this will be a long-term benefit, or short-lived once immunisation for COVID-19 becomes standard, but travel costs for businesses in the meantime have been significantly lowered.



Remote working for contact centres

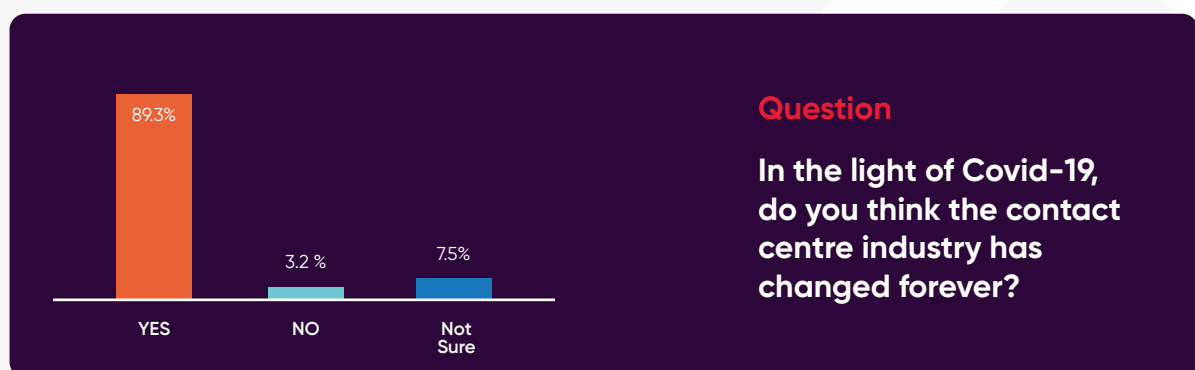
A survey conducted in conjunction with South West Contact Centre Forum and Call North West, of which FourNet is a member, suggests that contact centre leaders across the UK believe that COVID-19 has changed the industry forever.

Of the 102 contact centre leaders interviewed, 77% said their businesses saw 50% or more of their employees working from home during the early part of the pandemic.



Nearly 80% of contact centres invested in employee communications tools including Teams and Zoom. Around 40% of contact centres were investing in remote management, monitoring and artificial intelligence solutions to better cope with the changed working environment.

In 2021, 35% of contact centre operators believed agents would work mainly from home and 58% thought it would be partly optional and partly compulsory.



For contact centre operators there have been substantial challenges to overcome, according to the Call Centre Management Association. These include dealing with erratic levels of demand, altered channel usage, and the requirement to engage, motivate, monitor and support staff who are working remotely.



Significant compliance issues have also arisen, for instance, taking card payments and addressing fraud and cyber security risks associated with home-working, data protection issues, legal protections and insurance for staff, and even workplace health and safety assessments.

In addition, without the ability to enable agents to work from home, a significant proportion of contact centre operators did require workers to turn up on their premises through the pandemic.

Since the initial lockdown the demand for virtual contact centres has soared – helping businesses keep their customers happy and staff safe during the subsequent phases of the pandemic and beyond. In Wales, cloud based contact centres have also led to safer, improved healthcare and social care services for local authority and health board customers which have joined FourNet's shared [communications and contact centre platform Connecting Wales](#).



Rob Thomas
Managing Director,
Vale of Glamorgan
Council

While we always envisaged that Connecting Wales would have remote working as a priority, we didn't expect that we'd have to move most of our employees to home working in the space of a couple of days and for such a long period. The coronavirus pandemic has proved the concept of Connecting Wales and with FourNet's assistance and support, we had the smoothest transition to socially-distanced working as possible.

Because of the cloud-based virtual nature of the 'Community Cloud' platform for the Welsh public sector, remote working was instantly enabled and new dual language services to citizens could be swiftly established. Over the past 10 months, that's included a non-emergency hospital triage line at Cardiff Royal Infirmary; an advice line for the elderly and vulnerable in Vale of Glamorgan; home-working for call handlers in Rhondda Cynon Taff; a COVID-19 testing service for key workers; and a demand responsive bus service by Transport for Wales, called fflecsi.

The success of secure, cloud-based remote working has led many businesses to consider it as part of their long-term strategies, like [Flooid, which handles the sales operations for some of the world's best known food, beverage and fashion retailers](#). When the pandemic hit, the West Midlands based company required its 75 contact centre agents to be enabled to work from home. FourNet and partners Avaya ramped up the new service swiftly and smoothly. Flooid says it is seriously considering how the technology will be used once the threat from coronavirus has receded.



Dan O Mahoney
Head of Internal
Business Systems,
Flooid

FourNet's rapid action ensured the smooth running of our business and the protection of our staff at a time when everything was looking uncertain. The ability to access free licences enabled our agents to carry on looking after our customers while socially distancing at home, and has showed us the advantages of remote working. As a result, we are looking seriously at how this technology can help us in a post COVID-lockdown world.



Managing priorities through phases of a pandemic

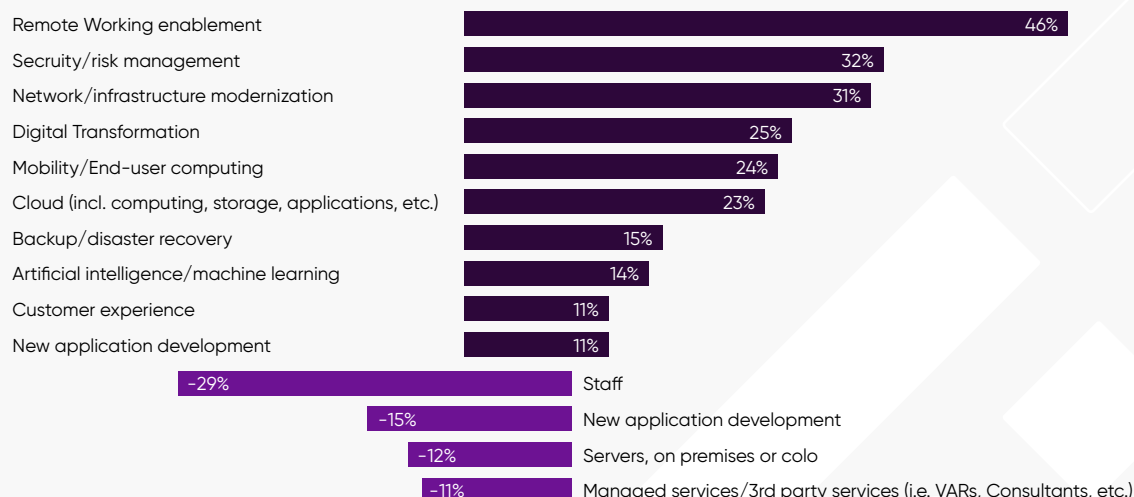
The unprecedented, and almost instant, shift towards home-working early in 2020 created some initial strategic headaches for senior leaders who had to consider how best to manage remote workforces and priorities in order to remain creative, collaborative and cohesive businesses.

Analysis by Tech Target highlights the shift in priorities for IT leaders through different phases of the 2020 pandemic. The study shows that in pre-pandemic January, the top IT priorities were modernising network infrastructure (39%), digital transformation (36%), cloud migration (35%) and cybersecurity or risk management (35%).

Priorities changed markedly immediately post lockdown when searches peaked for collaboration, cloud computing software and identity management – page searches were up by more than 400%. By September, remote working was still the highest priority (46%), followed by security and risk management (32%) as organisations sought protect themselves from cyber-attacks; network modernisation (31%) was also high priority to ensure businesses are resilient to future changes in ways of working.

The pandemic made technology investments harder AND easier

Which of the following investments have become harder to justify or have been accelerated due to the pandemic? (Choose all that apply)



Source: Tech Target, Sept 2020

What the future looks like? The hybrid workplace

The dramatic rise in remote working in response to the pandemic is likely to create a lasting impact – the creation of hybrid offices and a growth in hybrid models of work. Many organisations have been adopting meeting and collaboration technology solutions such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Avaya Spaces and Google to bridge the gap between office and home.



Microsoft's Teams has achieved staggering pick up since the beginning of the pandemic, and now has 115 million daily active users. Avaya Spaces has also seen significant growth. Its video traffic rose by up to 2500 percent during the pandemic.

According to Gartner, remote working and changing workforce demographics will mean that by 2024 only 25% of meetings will take place in person, down from 60%.

Microsoft itself has already moved to a "hybrid office" model where employees only turn up to the office for half their working week, and its founder Bill Gates has suggested in-person meetings simply aren't the gold standard anymore. Gates predicts that 30% of days previously spent in the office will be worked remotely and that 50% of business travel will be permanently wiped out.

There are, as we pointed out in our previous White Paper, considerable benefits for businesses and public sector organisations of encouraging greater numbers of employees to work from home. It means savings can be made on office space and the associated costs of business premises.

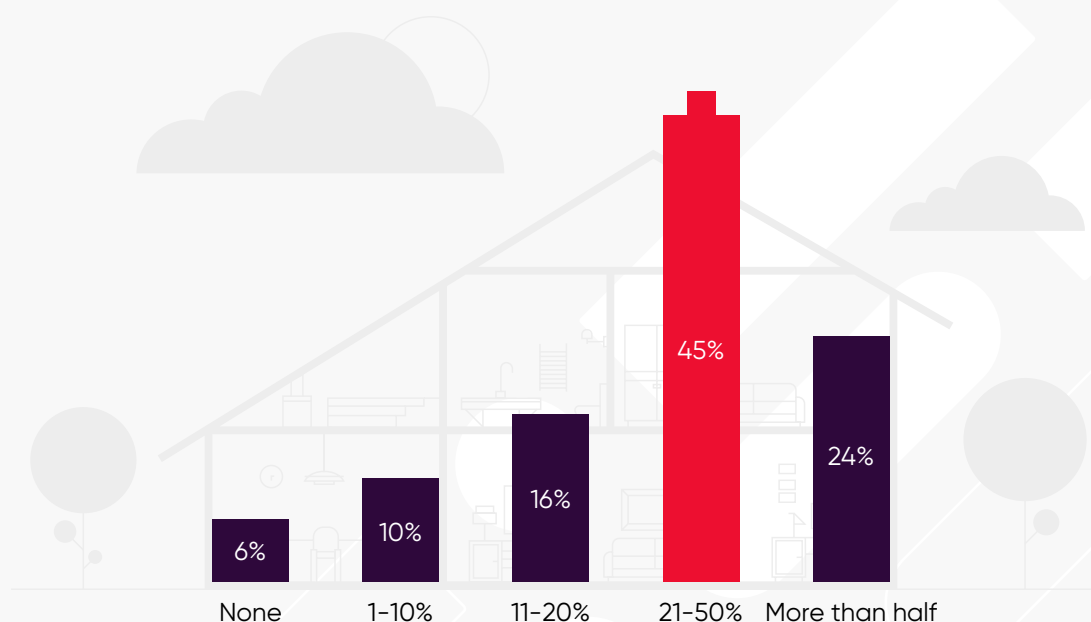
Remote working can help to build greater resilience into a business, because staff are spread across different locations and are not reliant on office space. Their working environment is secure, cloud-based – meaning operations are theoretically, 'always on.'

Because of the cloud-based environment, greater opportunities arise for sharing technology, office premises, contact centres and even personnel, with other organisations.

Where the pandemic has caused intense sadness, upset and hardship over the course of the past ten months, for businesses that have survived, technology has often provided swift and efficient solutions to emerging problems.

For organisations, business leaders, employees and contact centre agents, coronavirus has been a catalyst in the development of new technologies which will have a lasting impact on the way we all work in future – from the office and from home.

Proportion of enterprise expected to work predominantly from home post Covid-19



Source: Harvey Nash/ KPMG CIO Survey 2020



Business leaders are looking to a future, where the threat from COVID-19 has receded. It's a future where the business model is likely to be based on the 'hybrid workplace.' Part office based, and partly home based.

A study by consulting firm KPMG along with technology and recruitment company Harvey Nash suggests that 86% of IT leaders moved a significant part of their workforce to remote working during the pandemic and that nearly half of those, 43%, expect more than half of their employees to work from home once the pandemic is over.

The same report, based on a survey of over 4,200 Chief Information Officers and technology leaders, shows that with office location no longer a major issue, and remote working a must, that leaders need to rethink how they attract and engage employees in future.

Worries over the mental health of their teams concerned 8 out of 10 IT leaders, with 58% putting programmes in place to support their staff.

As a result of the wholesale shift towards more remote working, the success or otherwise of organisations across the UK, is likely to depend on how those businesses operate – how they deal with their culture and engage with their employees.



Bev White

CEO of Harvey Nash Group.

"In a world where location has dissolved, where the office now includes the kitchen table, and where over 80% of IT leaders are concerned about the mental health of their teams, organizations will need to reformulate their employee offer to attract and retain the talent they need to support them through the pandemic, and beyond."



How FourNet can help?

For successful remote working, FourNet offers a range of unified communications, technology and managed service solutions. These are integrated seamlessly with each other using a 'single pane of glass' solution, which eradicates the need for users to flick between screens, including:



Secure audio and video conferencing

Virtual meeting rooms for front and back office staff and contact centre agents, delivering robust high-quality engagement technology, for staff and customers. Also enables social and team-building activities for remote staff.



Secure collaboration tools

Ensuring team spirit is maintained, with easy and safe instant messaging, file-sharing and management tools integrated into one platform giving you a connected and collaborative workforce wherever they are.



Quality management

Automated omnichannel quality management processes which provide a range of tools for managers, from scoring evaluations to assigning training. Shifts resources from manual monitoring and management tasks to higher-value activities.



Intelligent Managed Services

Provides for reduced costs of technology support, longer and more flexible hours of service support.



Workforce engagement tools

Help promote a better work life balance, permitting flexible scheduling, holiday allowance and self-service and AI applications which reduce the quantity of mundane and repetitive customer engagements and allow resource to be shifted to higher value activities.



Gamification

Builds team cohesiveness and boosts motivation. These tools can help engage and incentivise employees to perform better based on key performance indicators. Also satisfies core psychological and motivational requirements both for individual workers and teams.



Community cloud

Shared technology via secure cloud, maximising workflows, keeping data secure, enabling staff to work resiliently from multiple geographic locations simultaneously.

As businesses have adapted to the new reality, so have FourNet's solutions. We now have additional integrated technologies to help you and your organisation cope with the new realities of 2021 and beyond.



New Technologies that FourNet can offer:



Cloud Telephony

The pandemic has dramatically accelerated the adoption of cloud telephony by all types of businesses across the UK. FourNet has a range of public and private cloud, single or multi-instance and single or multi-tenant telephony options based on global market leaders' technologies. Get in touch to request a copy of the Gartner magic quadrant research which identifies the leaders in cloud telephony and UCaaS worldwide.



Microsoft Teams Direct Routing

Our fully integrated solution routes all calls into Teams so that employees can answer via PC, laptop or Teams app on a mobile. It delivers seamless call switching, no loss of telephony system functionality and cost savings, with no need for Microsoft calling plans or on-premise hardware.



Microsoft Teams Contact Centre integration

Our multi-channel contact centre capabilities provide your customers access to your agents via their channel of choice – phone calls, voice messages, email, SMS, web chat, social media – in a single, fully integrated solution. The Microsoft Teams shared workspace then enables your agent to effortlessly engage back-office experts to provide the best resolution available for each customer contact.



Secure Network Infrastructure

With working habits dramatically changing throughout the pandemic (and beyond) it is imperative that organisations can enable home and remote workers with secured access into the corporate network from their home broadband or public WiFi connections. FourNet deliver market leading security solutions enabling reliable, fast and secure end point connectivity. Our cloud based threat mitigation capability ensures real time protection against the latest vulnerabilities and threats in a simple to deploy, cost effective solution giving you the comfort and confidence to enable remote and home working.



Teams Meeting Rooms

With Teams Meeting Rooms you can combine virtual and face to face meetings to create a rich, collaborative experience for everyone. Virtual meetings work well when everyone is remote but as more people return to the offices and meetings become a hybrid of face-to-face and remote attendees it can often end up feeling like two separate meetings. FourNet can help you configure the audio and video capabilities of your meeting rooms and integrate these capabilities into Teams; meetings are seamlessly scheduled, all participants can be seen and heard, documents and whiteboards can be shared by everyone.



Cloud contact centre capabilities

Internationally recognised as the leader for delivering Avaya in the cloud, award winning FourNet also offers CCaaS capabilities from the global leader in cloud contact centres: NICE inContact and fully Teams integrated Enghouse solutions. Our range of cloud platforms: Agile Cloud, ANTENNA and Community Cloud, have a solution whatever the needs of your contact centre.



PCI solutions for handling card payments

FourNet offers industry leading PCI solutions to deliver secure payment solutions for Cardholder Not Present payments whether the agent is working from home or in the contact centre. We integrate with the call flow and at the point of payment, intercept any tones as they are entered by the customer on their telephone keypad, meaning the agent doesn't hear or see the card data. With a cloud hosted, DTMF suppressing solution, the agent can focus on the customer and their needs, not the processing of information.



Teams contact recording

In addition to our industry leading contact recording solutions, FourNet can now provide call recording of all external calls into our Teams Direct Routing solutions. Calls are encrypted and the application is fully GDPR compliant. We can provide a range of call retention and archiving options. Resilience of call recording is provided by our dual data centres.



Employee Wellbeing

Over 80% of organisations across the UK are concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of their employees; FourNet have been working with our industry leading Workforce Management (WFM) partners to deliver a range of solutions to help. From empowering agents with the ability to manage their own time and swap shifts through to speech analytics to identify stressed or vulnerable employees, FourNet has a range of solutions allowing targeted interventions to safeguard agent and employee wellbeing whether they are home or office based.



Analytics

FourNet incorporates additional analytic tools to properly log and monitor calls, even via Microsoft Teams, providing you with a detailed understanding of your Unified Communications usage – whether softphone, video, instant messages or desktop sharing. Monitor activity and present data: intuitive analytics enables you to access data the way you need it; gain insights into adoption, costs, billing, performance, capacity and usage.



Secure remote working

FourNet enables secure remote working and communication for all our cloud platforms via any device, landline, mobile or softphone, with fully encrypted voice, video and chat and the same standards of secure communications as if your employees were on-site, using your organisation's network.



AI for call deflection

Keep customers happy during periods of peak demand with artificial intelligence assistants, powered by conversational AI, to shift incoming calls from human agents to digital channels. FourNet has rolled out a number of AI chatbots for our core sectors that enable customers to self-serve or to be escalated to an agent for complex queries.



Knowledge Management

To enable customers to self-serve and agents to find answers more quickly FourNet has been implementing knowledge management solutions for a number of our customers. These solutions enable consistent customer journeys by ensuring everyday questions are answered quickly and efficiently whether in self-service mode or via contact centre agents whether they are working remotely or on office premises.



10-day 'Sprint Methodology'

We can deliver rapid change to your business. Gone are the days when new technology takes months if not years to deploy. Our sprint methodology will deliver an initial solution in 10 days, with further phases to complete complex projects.



References

- 1 - April 3rd to 13th, 2020 – ONS survey showed 49% of adults in employment in Great Britain worked from home compared to an ONS survey showing that only 5% of the workforce worked mainly from home during 2019. Between January and December 2019, less than 30% of the workforce (32.6m) said they'd worked from home at any point.
- 2 - September 17th, 2020 – ONS survey showed that for the first time since the pandemic began more than 60% of adults had returned to their normal place of work.
- 3 - December 3rd, 2020 – ONS survey showed that 30% of adults in Great Britain were working exclusively from home with 50% reporting they were at their normal place of work.
- 4 - August 2020, Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research - 'Homeworking in the UK: before and during the 2020 lockdown', WISERD Report, Cardiff
- 5 - December 4th, 2020 – Guardian reports "Lloyds to move 700 staff into full-time homeworking roles"
- 6 - August 1st, 2020 – The HR Director reports 'COVID-19 crisis has changed the UK contact centre industry forever.'
- 7 - July 2nd, 2020 – Daily Mail reports 'Britain's call centre boom: Lockdown has been good for business...'
- 8 - October 2020, University of Essex study on Worker Productivity during lockdown and Working from Home.



**Delivering
innovative,
integrated,
instant solutions
to the new
realities of 2021
and beyond.**

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fournet.co.uk