

A Definitive Guide to the Digital Workplace

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A Definitive Guide to the Digital Workplace

You may not have heard the term digital workplace before but you've definitely experienced one. If you use a computer in the course of your work, chances are you're interacting with a variety of digital tools or applications to get things done. So at the most basic level, **the definition of a digital workplace is the technology people use to access and share data, information and knowledge at work.**

Topics covered:

This whitepaper explains why the digital workplace should be a focus of every organization's digital transformation efforts. Once you have a full understanding of what the digital workplace is and why it's important, we'll explore how to make it great.

Who is it for:

The information presented is intended for CIOs, COOs, Communications, HR and IT leaders, knowledge management practitioners and others focused on ensuring that critical data, information and knowledge is easily accessible in their organization.

The Growing Importance of the Digital Workplace



The last decade has given rise to an explosion of digital workplace tools designed to make our work life easier. In fact, we now have so many features available to us that it can be a chore just to decide which flashy new app to use. And here's where the challenges begin.

In today's workplace, it's often the abundance of technology and new features—not the scarcity of tools—that's the challenge to be overcome.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF NETWORKS

The age of hierarchies is fading fast.

Networks are the lifeblood of the modern organization.

The latest digital tools unlock the potential of networks in new and exciting ways. Having a culture where all voices count makes for happy workers and provides a competitive advantage.

But while networks are the new organizing principle, there is still a place for specialized groupings of people and information. The dominant belief among knowledge management and organizational learning practitioners is that silos are bad. New thinking is challenging these assumptions in some important ways.

Maybe it's not silos that are the real problem but the lack of connections between them.

In fact, there's strong evidence that having groups of individuals working closely in clusters promotes effective collaboration.

The trick is to connect those silos so that knowledge and information flow freely between them. This requires us to think carefully about how workplace technologies, especially collaboration tools, are designed and configured.

Simply put: clustered collaboration, plus a shared space for cross-pollination, equals accelerated progress and innovation.

EMPOWERING REMOTE WORKERS



Workers are on the move.

The expectation that work can happen anywhere, anytime is the new norm.

A growing number of companies now offer telecommuting and other flexible work arrangements. This shift can save companies money while catering to workers who value greater flexibility.

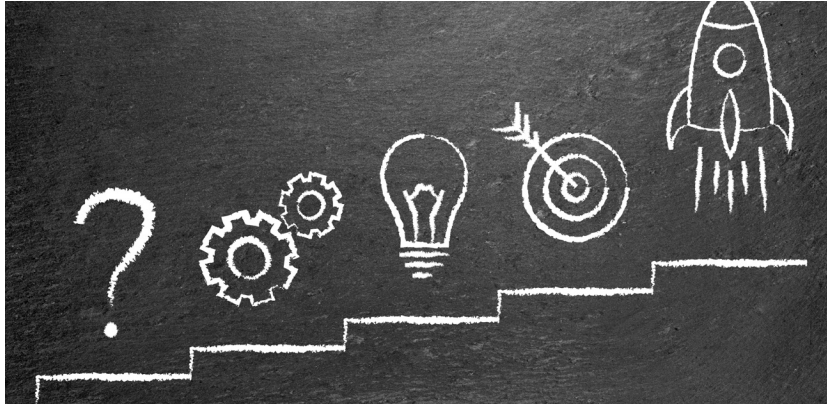
But how do you ensure that the digital workplace is designed in a way that doesn't slow remote workers down?

Routine tasks should be easy to accomplish. Spontaneous communication and collaboration should be effortless, regardless of a person's location. Too many hoops can lead to major productivity loss (and disengaged remote workers).

The old way to provide remote access to enterprise technology was through slow and clunky VPN (virtual private network) connections. The latest cloud platforms have vastly improved this experience. So it's not unreasonable to expect that a well-designed digital workplace will provide effortless and secure connections from anywhere, on any device.

Mobile devices now rival PCs as the primary way people consume work-related content. Workplace technology should, therefore, deliver a top-notch mobile experience that doesn't compromise on core features or functionality. That said, it's not a given that an application's default mobile experience will be great out of the box. It will likely take some extra effort (and resources) to get it in line with user expectations.

IGNITING PASSION, FULFILLING PURPOSE



We all want to feel like our work matters.

We probably chose to work for a particular organization because something about their mission clicked. We want to be contributors to that mission and feel passionate about our role.

Organizations rated as the best places to work are skilled at inspiring their staff. They have found ways to instill a sense of purpose and agency to solve any challenge. Some of this can be achieved through inspirational leadership and promoting a “can do” culture. But there is no substitute for equipping staff with the best tools to fulfill their purpose and ignite their passion.

When it's easier to get things done and stay connected to the larger organization, passion and productivity tend to follow.

There are countless examples of organizations that fail to invest in the type of technology that will support employees to do their best work. At the same time, leaders scratch their heads, wondering what's causing widespread inefficiencies and worker disengagement. It's common to see people once inspired by an organization's mission become discouraged and disengaged simply because they don't have the right set of tools.

Does your organization seek greater engagement and productivity? Do you have an awesome mission that you want everyone to feel connected to?

Then match the design of the digital workplace to your culture and mission in order to deliver on your promises to employees.

TRANSFORMING THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE



It's all about the customer, right? Maybe not.

Digital transformation efforts tend to focus on the customer experience (CX).

One of the hallmarks of customer experience design is meeting the customer where they are—delivering personalized tools and content across the entire arc of the customer journey.

For example, someone shopping for a car may start out casually researching models and the pros and cons of each. An automaker will deliver personalized content through different channels to start steering them in the direction of their company. They'll also provide tools matched to the shopper's decision stage ("Want to see that car in red with the optional sunroof? No problem!").

Once that person purchases a car, they'll get a cool app to check on the health of their vehicle and can join an online forum with other owners. These are just a few tools in the CX toolbox.

The concept of employee experience (EX) has emerged more recently and is fast

becoming a critical part of the digital transformation roadmap. In fact, 2018 was proclaimed to be the year of the employee experience.

The C-suite is now realizing that they can't overlook the employee experience when investing in the customer experience. Looking back, it seems logical that staff equipped with the best tools internally can better serve their customers (or in nonprofit speak, partners, grantees, or beneficiaries) externally. Even the best customer experience platforms will fail to deliver when chaos and disorganization reign within.

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Like the customer experience, the employee experience includes all of the touch points and interactions that an employee has with a company. From job applicant to former employee, the goal is to deliver the best possible experience at all stages of the employee lifecycle.

Getting this experience right attracts the best people, keeps them happy and productive, and can even sustain the value of their knowledge and expertise once they leave.

DESIGNING THE IDEAL DIGITAL WORKPLACE



Given what's at stake, it is well worth an organization's time, effort and resources to get the digital workplace right.

How?

Think like a great designer.

The workplace is a complex, interconnected system of people, processes and technology. Workplace tools must be designed and configured to strengthen, not disrupt, this system while delivering a great user experience. And it's not just one type of user you're designing for. Typically there are tens if not hundreds of user types (aka profiles), depending on the size and diversity of your organization.

The starting point for designing a great digital workplace is gaining a deep understanding of how staff interact with their current set of tools. Observing behaviors and human-machine interactions allows you, the designer, to pinpoint challenges and craft a vision for the ideal digital workplace.

You'll uncover bottlenecks that slow productivity and cause aggravation. You'll also discover people who aspire to do far more than their current set of tools allow. So it's important to also look beyond the current situation and imagine how the digital workplace could better support staff to fulfill their professional purpose.

This is where design thinking can be especially useful.

Design thinking, a human-centered approach made popular by Ideo and Stanford's d.school, helps designers listen and empathize with those they are designing for. In

this model, designers should not come to the table with preconceived notions of what the solution will look like. Instead, the solution should spring from the collaborative problem-solving and ideation that occurs between designer and end-user. This ensures that the solution is perfectly matched to user needs.

Using design thinking to design the digital workplace can revolutionize the role of workplace technology. Shifting it from a basic set of tools to an agent of organizational transformation.

With this approach, employees are no longer expected to just make the best of the tools that they're given (and suffer in silence). A human-centered approach puts people and their needs at the center of the digital transformation process.

For most organizations, applying design thinking in this way represents a massive step forward. It will result in putting the right tools in the hands of staff to motivate and inspire them. It will also give rise to systems that constantly evolve and improve over time in response to user needs.

ELEMENTS OF THE DIGITAL WORKPLACE

So what are the tools that make up an effective digital workplace? At Ideal State, we use a four-tiered framework to assess and transform the elements of the digital workplace. They are:

1. **Community and Collaboration**—how people connect, learn and work better together
2. **Content Management**—how meaningful content is produced, discovered and used
3. **Data & Information Management**—how data are transformed into useful, accessible information
4. **Strategy**—where you're trying to go and a roadmap for how to get there

No single tool is used in isolation.

Each of the elements that make up the digital workplace should be designed to work together to deliver a great user experience (see infographic on the following page).

INTRODUCING THE DIGITAL WORKPLACE

Optimize and connect these four elements to deliver the ultimate digital employee experience

COMMUNITY & COLLABORATION



Engage in one-on-one
and group discussions



Share solutions and
generate new ideas



Read company news
and staff blogs

CONTENT MANAGEMENT



Create and share anything
with anyone



Access and edit from
anywhere



Find what's relevant
and up-to-date

DATA & INFO MANAGEMENT



View and discuss
meaningful analytics



Maintain a single
source of truth



Share and compare data
across the org

STRATEGY



Design a comprehensive
digital roadmap



Implement cross-
cutting governance



Clarify system ownership
and management

Community & Collaboration

This is where the organization comes together to work, share and learn. The community and collaboration layer is increasingly the most important part of the digital workplace. Unfortunately, many still consider it an add-on or enhancement rather than a core feature set.

At Ideal State, we're emphatic about the importance of this layer.

If people can't easily tap into the expertise of their colleagues or feel connected to the greater organization, the value of the digital workplace is dramatically diminished.

Likewise, people should be able to easily switch between collaborating with team members and collaborating across teams. Ideally using the same or similar set of tools.

Specific features and functionality you might find in this layer include:

- Discussion forums
- People directory
- Staff blogs
- Company news
- Instant messaging
- Collaboration groups
- Employee self-service sites
- Innovation and ideation tools

Content Management

Content management should go way beyond an approach to storing documents. At a minimum, every employee should be able to easily share and work together on content with colleagues. Sharing and collaborating with people outside the organization is also critical for most.

But where it all comes together is search. If you're storing content in multiple systems and repositories (and who isn't?), search should scan multiple locations with ease.

Specific features and functionality you might find in this layer include:

- Federated search across multiple systems
- Cloud and on-premise document repositories
- Collaborative document creation
- Secure external content sharing
- Personalized content notifications and recommendations

Data & Information Management

Most organizations are drowning in a sea of data.

The problem is, only a small fraction of it is ever used for the benefit of the organization.

The best approach to data and information management is to make it as transparent and accessible as possible. This open-by-default approach makes it possible for anyone in the organization to produce the next big insight or raise a critical question.

The ideal digital workplace is a complete system that delivers a value beyond the sum of its parts.

Data is of no use if it just sits there. Analytics are what bring data to life and generate value from large data stores. But compiling data in a data store and layering on some analytics tools is only the first step!

Business intelligence tools should be deployed to all potential data consumers, not

just senior management. Dashboards should be easy to interpret and manipulate to suit different needs and levels of data proficiency. Just because someone isn't a data nerd, doesn't mean that they can't glean important insights from organizational data presented in a clear, understandable way!

Specific features and functionality you might find in this layer include:

- Cloud and on-premise databases and data repositories
- Business intelligence dashboards
- Role-specific content recommendations
- In-context data-related discussion threads and forums
- In-context analytics tutorials and walkthroughs for non-expert users
- Export-ready analytics for meetings and presentations

Strategy

The tools that make up the digital workplace must be actively planned, rolled out and managed as a complete system. Ideally, this will be carried out by a single group of people accountable for delivering an exemplary digital employee experience.

Leadership of this group should cut across all key functions of the organization to support shared ownership and accountability. Without cross-cutting leadership, it can often be the departments holding the purse strings (such as IT or communications) that end up making decisions affecting all end users.

A digital workplace strategy is more a set of guidelines than a rigid rulebook. Especially in larger organizations where technology is changing rapidly. The goal is to derive the greatest value out of the current set of tools while continuously planning for future improvements.

Getting the greatest value from tools depends on how well they're working together. A digital workplace strategy should aim to deliver a seamless, user-friendly experience to every employee, regardless of role or location. This requires constantly listening to users and being responsive to their needs.

Some of the activities covered under digital workplace strategy include:

- Designing and maintaining current- and future-state digital roadmaps
- Conducting stakeholder discovery and design thinking activities
- Implementing cross-functional digital governance

- Establishing clear roles around system ownership and management
- Routinely measuring tool performance and user satisfaction
- Employing user-centered design and continuous improvement

CREATING A HEALTHY DIGITAL WORKPLACE ECOSYSTEM

It's useful to think about the digital workplace as a living system, or ecosystem, of interconnected technologies, people and processes.

Making changes to one element of the ecosystem triggers a cascade of often unforeseen impacts on other elements, just like in a natural ecosystem. So the digital workplace designer must be careful to anticipate and design for these effects. In a healthy digital workplace, each element (community and collaboration, etc.) is enhancing or supporting, rather than diminishing, the value of the other elements.

To maintain a balanced digital workplace ecosystem, there must be a master plan or roadmap that guides technology selection, configuration and deployment (see our related case study). When new technologies are thrown into the mix without regard for this balance, chaos—or at the very least inefficiency—is inevitable.

As mentioned earlier, this is where design thinking can be a huge asset.

All too often those of us looking at the world through the lens of technology suffer from tunnel vision.

As you embark on your digital transformation journey, it's easy to forget that technology is only one component of the digital workplace. People and processes are just as important, if not more so.

Talk to the people interacting with the digital workplace and understand how they experience it. At what points in a routine process do they interact with different tools? When do they step away from the computer to consult with a colleague? Where do digital tools reach the limit of their usefulness and human interaction is what's needed?

All too often those of us looking at the world through the lens of technology suffer from tunnel vision. We see the world as a series of challenges that a specific piece of technology can solve. But design thinking reminds us that people must be at the center of any solution—technology driven or not. So start there and design the digital workplace around the people and processes it serves, not the other way around.

Moving Beyond the Traditional Confines of IT



IT still matters, just in a different way.

Traditionally, IT professionals are the ones responsible for selecting, configuring and deploying enterprise technology. This model has worked well up until now. Especially when navigating available systems requires deep knowledge of the underlying technology. In the past, it often took years to configure and deploy a major system throughout a large organization (and at many organizations, it still does!).

But that is beginning to change. Systems and storage have moved to the cloud. Enterprise technology, following the model of consumer technology, keeps getting easier to deploy and use.

IT is no longer an isolated function—technology permeates every aspect of our work both inside and outside the organization. There's a growing realization that all

companies are technology companies. CIOs are becoming more embedded in every aspect of an organization's work.

So it follows that an organization's digital strategy is a key driver of growth and productivity and, ultimately, how much impact it is able to achieve.

TECHNOLOGY AS A DISRUPTIVE FORCE WITHIN THE ENTERPRISE

We have entered the age of disruptive enterprise technology. A simple app introduced by one employee can spread virally throughout the organization in a matter of weeks.

This means that organizations must adopt a flexible, adaptive mindset when it comes to IT. With greater agility comes the ability to continually improve the state of digital tools. Improvement means that technology is not only optimally selected and configured, but that it delivers the best possible employee (and by extension, customer or beneficiary) experience. Since needs constantly evolve, technology should do the same.

Getting this dynamic interplay of people, process and technology right requires strategy and coordination beyond the traditional confines of IT. Decisions around an organization's digital roadmap should involve all key departments and the significant participation or support of senior leaders. This is the best way to make sure workplace technology is highly functional and in alignment with an organization's culture, mission and strategic goals.

WHY GOVERNANCE MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

The technology-driven workplace introduces a new set of governance challenges.

It's not a given that staff will obediently use only officially-sanctioned applications.

If the current "official" technology doesn't meet their needs, employees will quickly shop around for a tool that does. Workplaces have seen an explosion of consumer-grade, user-friendly tools in recent years. These tools are often adopted by a team or department to solve a specific set of business challenges and then spread virally elsewhere.

Gone are the days where teams would wait a year or more for a new technology to be launched by the organization. If there's a burning need, it may be possible to launch an application that meets that need in a matter of minutes.

Because of this, IT governance requires a fresh approach. It is no longer acceptable to simply tell people they can't use a certain tool or to try to block its use. Top-down policing will not suffice. Community-based IT governance is the future.

Community-based IT governance means instituting policies that respond to the needs and behaviors of the widest swath of the organization while still conforming to internal standards around security, compatibility and the like.

The new IT governance takes a human-centered approach. The highest goal is to deliver an exceptional user experience. Once this condition is satisfied, efforts to ensure that tools are in compliance with all institutional policies and regulations can follow.

About the Author

Sara Teitelman | sara@idealstate.co | [@sjteitelman](https://twitter.com/sjteitelman)

Sara is principal strategist and co-founder of Ideal State, where she focuses on leading large-scale engagements for clients seeking to transform the way their organizations use knowledge, information and data to achieve greater impact. Before starting Ideal State, she spent most of her career establishing thriving knowledge management and learning practices in the international health and development sectors. Sara has been a featured speaker at several industry conferences including KMWorld, InsideNGO and APQC and holds a master of public health degree from the University of Washington.

About Ideal State

Ideal State designs and builds digital workplaces that inspire people to do their best work. We do this by combining people, processes, and state-of-the-art technology to redefine how people collaborate and learn together.

Visit us at www.idealstate.co.