

Rethinking Technology Refresh Programs in the 'New Age' of Work

The dramatic shift to a hybrid workplace (in-office and remote) is changing the game - pushing employees to be responsible for their own workplace technology.



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So, does this spell the end of organisational technology refresh programs as we know it?

That's one of the main questions a select group of industry thought leaders debated at an executive roundtable lunch, 'Rethinking the 'tech refresh cycle' - is it dead or alive?'

With traditional technology refresh programs incurring countless operational and financial costs - even hidden costs - and wreaking havoc due to undisputed business disruption, all attendees agreed flexible, simpler and more personalised strategies are needed in order to enhance the employee experience in today's modern workplace, and address the new ways of working both today and into the future.

What's more, many at the table agreed IT leaders and decision-makers need to rethink the cyclical tech refresh program - perhaps even adopt a 'Continuous Tech Renewal Model' - in order to win the 'war for talent' and address modern workplace trends.

Indeed, it's a timely discussion given that many employees across Australia and New Zealand are now adapting to a more permanent remote workplace model that depends on reliable, up-to-date technology.

This also has implications for how obsolete technology is upgraded, with a shift toward employees being responsible for managing their own technology refresh, leading to the end of organisational technology refresh programs, said roundtable attendee, CHG-MERIDIAN head of IT, Asia Pacific, Kirk Downey, and author of the whitepaper, 'Is the technology refresh dead?'

Certainly, the way people expect to work has changed, which is putting pressure on enterprises to update their personalisation strategies, Downey explained. Enterprises that give people the agency to steer their own digital experiences will be the first to understand what their new wants and needs are, and the best way to enhance employee experience in the modern workplace, he said.



Better still, people now expect their workplace technology to perform at an optimum level and seamlessly enable them to work from home. Indeed, the shift to remote work has also shifted the way employees view and interact with their personal and workplace technologies.

Decommissioning on the 'Trendy List'

Like Downey, Telstra's director of digital and IT solutions, Karen Hughes, said there's an increased sense of urgency to meet the needs of a technologically savvy and geographically dispersed workforce, and she also explained how the telco giant had already embarked on addressing the new ways of working - and rapidly preparing for the massive shift towards a hybrid workplace (in-office and remote) and 'workforce of the future' for quite some time.

"All our roles are flexible, and have been for a few years, and will continue to be," Hughes said. But equally noteworthy - and particularly exciting for an IT leader - is the fact that "decommissioning is now on the trendy list," she explained.

"Telstra is in a major transformation - coming towards the end of it - and we're looking to change how we run IT. We've already started to change that, so the refresh piece is interesting.

"For the first time in our corporate history, decommissioning is on the trendy list. It's exciting and high-profile. So, we're actually now talking overtly about decommissioning - and it's a CIO-level topic."





Empowerment of individuals just clashes with the over management of distributing logistics and distributing desktops

- CHG-MERIDIAN head of IT, Asia Pacific, Kirk Downey

In fact, many at the table agreed that tech leaders should no longer think of organisational technology refresh programs as a tech refresh scenario, but rather one of 'continual renewal.'

"Rather than just refresh, it's renewal, because it's constant - and it's individual," Downey suggested. "So, you take that supply chain complexity of distributing anywhere from 1,000 to 33,000 end points, for example, and break it down to an individual - almost at a consumer level - which then simplifies things."

Indeed, this process of empowerment is flying in the face of tradition, attendees agreed. "Empowerment of individuals just clashes with the over management of distributing logistics and distributing desktops," Downey explained.

Dissecting the issue even further, HP Managing Director, Australia and New Zealand, Mike Boyle, said the tech refresh cycle also needs to be considered in much greater detail - particularly in terms of forecast and hindsight.

Like Hughes, Boyle agreed it's been an interesting - and retrospective - 12 to 18 months - not only in addressing and meeting the needs of the workforce of the future, but in dealing with the various impacts of PC lifecycle refresh programs.

In fact, an 'employees ecosystem' has emerged over the last 12 to 18 months - and organisations are now grappling with whether the office is the home, the office, or something in between - which has major implications for the traditional technology refresh programs.

"From a supply chain management perspective, we're all looking to see how organisations adapt to this hybrid model, how this impacts what the new employee IT experience should be, and therefore, how employers and vendors must come together and meet that need."

Boyle suggested organisations need to look past 2021 given the supply shortages - and to make better projections whilst think of how technology can create a better employee experience in a hybrid world.

"It's no secret that demand for tech has never been higher, and while that's positive, it's also been a challenge for industries worldwide. As a result, we're encouraging customers to be thinking beyond 2021 in terms of the procurement," Boyle told attendees.

"We need to think about 'refresh' with a longer time horizon or even a continuous rolling environment. We're seeing a larger uptake on customers procuring more 'as a service' to help drive better experience and continuity for organisations."



New Day, New Pressures

Indeed, supply chain issues are just some of the challenges affecting organisational tech refresh projects on the boil today.

But there's many more, attendees revealed, and everyone is affected as technology refresh projects exist in every organisation across all industries.

For many IT teams, for example, refresh programs can be hard to justify, difficult to plan and manage, and never seem to end, said CHG-MERIDIAN's Downey.

What's more, attendees agreed the pace of technological innovation has made it difficult for many organisations to keep up - and the constant stream of investment that's needed can hinder a company's bottom line or ability to stay competitive.

In fact, the financial and operational burden can be great, attendees explained, and this is compounded by the fact that many companies are geographically dispersed workplaces, meaning IT teams can't physically replace technology at an employee's desk - leaving the company at the mercy of the employee's ability to self-serve. This, in turn, means IT teams can't focus on higher value, strategic business activities.

Throw in countless logistical, risk and governance challenges; high overhead costs from ongoing project management fees (time spent on evaluation, planning, and implementing the programs); hidden costs across the business; and the pressure to find and retain the right talent in order to win the

'war for talent' and stay competitive, and it's clear companies have many pain points to consider.

But there's more. Business disruption is yet another challenge as the lion's share of companies have large volumes of assets that need to be replaced simultaneously, attendees agreed, explaining how managers and employees spend countless hours on transition planning. Not to mention, the management and governance overhead of tech refresh projects is a substantial and repetitive cost when the tech is upgraded every three to four years.

Additionally, the strategic thinking behind many of these large refresh projects is yet another challenge, and many companies are also left wondering whether to sweat the assets, according to Joe Perricone, COO of Swanson Health Asia Pacific, who said this is yet another hurdle in the tech refresh lifecycle equation.

"For the not-for-profit, in particular, sweating the assets until they're drained of all lifeform is no longer the way to go."

Like Perricone, Helen Ashton, head of technology, Lifestyle Solutions, said 'sweating the assets' is impractical and unproductive - but often rampant in the not-for-profit world.

In fact, Ashton said the 'tech refresh' term can often be considered an alien term for a typical not-for-profit - and these operations, on the whole, often struggle to invest in technology every three years.

"The idea is you have a laptop and you will keep it forever and forever. There is this concept of actually sweating your asset to that degree, but it's not productive. It holds your people back. It holds your business back. It's a difficult concept for a number of executives, but we're getting there."

At the same time, public and private sector organisations are also grappling with the perpetual issues of legacy systems, and for operations at one particular Federal Government entity, there's also the added consideration of how to function in a world that has gone remote.

“We’re a very heavy campus-based organisation. Very traditional and old school,” said its CIO and digital officer, explaining the global health pandemic has forced a radical rethink of working patterns.

“Can we actually work off campus? My team is going through a very big headspace shift. Do we need to actually have everything physically on campus? We’ve never had to think outside of the campus. Everything stays on our shore, stays within our fence line.”

Right across the board, attendees said challenges are surfacing on the finance front as more and more firms are dealing with legacy systems and how to move forward with their tech refresh programs in a modernised world where new technologies are bridging the physical and digital worlds.

“As we shift to the cloud, that whole financial dynamic changes. We’re a Capex heavy funded organisation, so shifting those payloads means I have to find a way to shift that financial model to an Opex model,” the spokesperson said.

Rethinking how IT manages the financials is crucial, agreed Tod O’Dell, head of corporate technology at News Corp, who said all companies are having to re-evaluate strategies around the tech refresh lifecycle, and managing the financials is a big part of it.

“We all fall into the mistake of saying, ‘Can I have it for another two years, and then try to get that back into our budget. But to get it back onto the budget is challenging. So, how do we structure the finance models going forward?’”

Catering to a ‘User-Centric’ World

So, what’s the answer? Health Care Complaints Commission’s director, technology and systems transformation, Royce Michael Lee, said moving towards a ‘user-centric’ approach - a more personalised tech purchasing strategy that moves away from the one-size fits-all mantra is a possible solution - and better reflects today’s new ways of working.

“We have different workforces with different needs. The idea that the IT organisation would provide a one-size-fits all for everybody was a bit of a misnomer and a mistake,” said Lee, who has vast experience as a digital strategist and transformation leader and worked on a number of large-scale tech refresh projects at businesses like Qantas and other organisations.

“Where I see this going is we’ve done great work on human-centred design in terms of our customers, but it needs to be turned inward into our staff and really understand the unique needs and different elements of our workforce. How do they work best, and what’s the right technology response for them?”

“When you think of different people in different cohorts, you suddenly realise that the one-size fits-all approach doesn’t go very far. If I had my way, I’d always start with that journey of the employee. What’s the employee experience? What do they need to do in their day-to-day job? What is their lifecycle through the organisation, and then match that to their needs?”



Lee said it all comes down to a mindset shift. “It’s not about how I fit into work, it’s more about how my various work environments fit into me. I think it’s a mindset change into how you become more user-centric, which is supporting the different things they need to do in work and in life.”

Like Lee, News Corp’s O’Dell said fostering employee empowerment and providing greater choice - particularly on the technology tools front - are needed more broadly across industry. Organisations, and IT departments on the whole, also need to consider moving away from a simple ‘command and control’ mentality that permeates the world of IT.

“How can we change that dynamic to actually give them the tools they want - whether it’s a MacBook, an iPhone or an Android? People want that experience,” O’Dell said, adding that organisations also need to provide their employees with the back-end systems to support the devices, along with the financial support structures.

Giving employees choice and the tools they need is crucial to amplify the employee experience, O’Dell explained, and equally important is proving the value and worth of IT, which is typically seen as a cost centre.

We need to be having this conversation with management. How users are using the tools, rather than the ‘saving money’ mentality

- *Tod O’Dell, head of corporate technology at News Corp*

“IT is very good at spending money, but we’re very poor at showing value. When we move from command and control, to BYOD, is the cost any different? It’s still the same cost. So, we need to get better at showing the value we drive back to the business,” he said, explaining IT teams need to fight for the money - prove its worth - and don’t get stuck on the ‘saving money’ discussion with management.

“We need to be having this conversation with management. How users are using the tools, rather than the ‘saving money’ mentality,” he said, explaining the CIO can work with the CFO to be seen as a value driver.

Indeed, there’s a notable trend away from BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) to CYOD (Choose Your



Own Device), agreed Stephen Parker, CIO of Worldline Australia.

“It’s not necessarily whatever you want, but Choose Your Own Device from a limited catalogue that we’re prepared to support. That’s something that we’re seeing, but we also need to be mindful of security issues,” Parker said, explaining the new model addresses the flexibility required in the new age of hybrid working and the need for multiple devices.

“It’s the workplace equivalent of the omni-channel. You can start on one platform, and pick up on another. It’s that seamlessness that employees expect, and it creates productivity. It’s not the device, but the device ecosystem that they choose to use.”

It all comes down to giving people what they need, Parker suggested. “Respect the year we live in - it’s 2021. Your work experience should be a 2021 work experience. Firstly, the device is probably the key part of the onboarding experience,” he said, explaining tools matter and industry needs to respect the fact that technology is integrated into every aspect of daily life, and provide a more seamless hybrid workplace experience.

At the same time, making the supply chain more efficient will not only help streamline the tech refresh/renewal process, but will also move the industry to a more ‘user-centric model,’ agreed Swanson Health’s Perricone.

“It’s all about making the supply chain more efficient, and how do we bring on partners to share the same platform? Making the information more accessible. From an efficiency perspective, how easy is it to optimise what people are currently doing? The integration piece also needs to be considered.



What is offered as a service, and how can we gain some efficiencies of a shared infrastructure from the hardware and the communications perspective?"

A Better Way

Getting down to specifics, attendees also discussed the move away from cyclical technology refresh programs and the need to move towards a continuous technology renewal model that drives greater process efficiencies and reduces cost, whereby the technology becomes part of the cost of employment and not a back-office cost centre overhead.

This new model, in particular, meets the needs of the millennial workforce by allowing employees to equip themselves with the technology they need and to manage their own technology renewal. It can also enable a self-service approach, thereby putting the power back into the hands of the employee and enhancing the employee experience in the modern workplace, CHG-MERIDIAN's Downey explained.

But many attendees agreed the industry can't easily escape the past - the traditional tech refresh model hasn't changed in the last 20 years. What's more, organisation-led refresh projects typically still consist of seven key steps: evaluation; planning; procurement; design; staging and deployment; disposal; and post implementation support.

But a newer, simpler way, however, can empower

employees to collaborate, accelerate and simplify the renewal of IT systems. In fact, online tools are emerging that support organisations in their move towards a continuous technology renewal.

"Today, people are adapting their working styles, their efficiency, to what they've learned in their personal lives," Downey said. "People want to be productive with their own tools - particularly the millennials. That's the expectation. What tech do you use, how often do you replace it, and do I get a choice?"

In fact, organisations that want to stay competitive - and relevant - are recognising that technology is more than just a tool, but a weapon in the 'war for talent.' As such, they are empowering employees with choice, enhancing their productivity, and meeting the many challenges (from finance, to logistical, to governance) head-on by transforming to a simpler, more personalised technology renewal mode.

By empowering employees to select and manage the technology procurement process, from end to end, it allows employees to align their technology with their individual needs to optimise productivity.

Clearly, all attendees agreed a shift is needed on the tech refresh front - not only to keep pace with technological change, remain agile and resilient today and into the future, but to address the deeply entrenched 'new ways' of working, and enhance and empower the employee experience.