



The Future of UnWork:

Creating value for SMBs through connected productivity.

The journey towards Unwork.

The workforce – let’s face it – is exhausted. Burnout, quiet-quitting, and a looming productivity crisis are signs of an overworked culture on the brink, with urgent ramifications for the success (or failure) of technological investment.

It’s tempting to pin these symptoms to some sort of post-pandemic hangover, but it is likely that organisations would have found themselves at this point regardless.

As Microsoft’s Work Trend Index puts it, the pace of work is outpacing our ability to keep up. AI is expected to lift the burden, but in the here and now, the workforce is struggling with digital debt; an innovation-killing, information-overload that is well beyond human ability to process and sustain. No wonder 2 in 3 people say they struggle with having the time and energy to do their job and are 3.5x more likely to struggle with innovation and strategic thinking.¹

Which brings us to the concept of “Unwork”

Unwork refers to the new wave of technologies including AI promising quantum gains in productivity; gains so enormous that they will result in “unworking” the amount of time, effort and resource that is needed.

We’re not there yet. Companies have implemented new platforms to make employees more productive, but unless these tools are integrated seamlessly and employees are trained in how to use the new tech, we will remain in a state of productivity inertia.²

The result? Projects fail to land, output plummets and workers blindly continue to do what they’ve always done.

“People are just too busy doing work they always have. Workers don’t naturally disrupt themselves or are trained to do so – they do today’s job the way they did it yesterday, or the way they were trained. And neither is likely to be the best or most efficient way.”

– Ross MacMahon, Business Success Manager, Crayon



Right now, SMBs should be well along their optimisation journey towards Unwork and are wanting to see a return on their technological investment. Yet the current state of productivity inertia puts this ROI at risk.

- ● *MSPs need to step up and become both strategic and operational partners to guide SMBs through this crucial period, smash through productivity roadblocks and build a truly connected digital environment.*

SMB priorities and challenges.

Today, SMBs are in optimisation mode. After significant investment in technology during the pandemic to help employees remain productive, they now want to see real return on their tech spend in a hybrid world.

Not unexpectedly, spend on productivity tools has stagnated since the COVID peak. Data drawn from a recent Forrester study of SMBs across the region found that 60% of SMBs say expenditure will remain the same for the next 12 to 24 months, with only 23% investing more.³

This poses a risk for MSPs. If you fail to prove your value during this period of optimisation, you risk losing business and your status as partner of choice when spend does increase again.

So, what are the business priorities that will drive investment from SMBs in the productivity domain?

The same Forrester study reveals SMBs are investing in employee upskilling, with 81% of SMBs saying that improving employee capabilities is a top priority over the next 12 to 24 months.

Improving customer experience is a key priority for 86% of SMBs. But delivering a great CX should not be restricted to external customers. In fact, it could be argued that creating a best-in-class CX is dependent on first creating a top employee experience. This requires integrating digital tools around the user experience to enable employees to be as productive as possible.

“For MSPs/Distributors and other channel operators, it will be important to understand the customers’ business needs, timelines and budgets to build transition timelines that are achievable, make sense and that will add value into the future, not just for today.”

– Ollie Heales, BDM Productivity, Crayon

In the following pages, we explore how MSPs can prove your value to customers by:

- Becoming a strategic and operational cloud partner
- Creating a connected digital environment
- Helping SMBs drive growth through innovation, collaboration and productivity.



- ● *Reposition your offering to meet the current priorities of SMBs: tech optimisation, upskilling, and CX.*

Become a strategic and operational partner.

To accelerate growth in an increasingly tech-driven world that is also grappling with an IT skills shortage, SMBs are quickly realising they need to outsource cloud strategy development and operations to a third party.

88% of SMBs are preparing to increase investment in MSPs over the next 24 months.⁴ This is a key opportunity for service providers to play a pivotal role in enhancing the next phase of cloud adoption.

But you need to offer the right services at the right time. MSPs need to be attuned to their customers specific needs and be agile in what they provide. It has to be in line with what their customers are looking for right now.

Are SMEs looking for tech support at this stage of the journey? Not so much. Instead, they're on the hunt for strategic partners.

What we're seeing is a trend where SMBs are lagging behind enterprise customers in cloud adoption, because of a lack of internal skills. They recognise that it is critical to improving business agility and CX as a platform for growth. But they are hampered by budget restrictions and can't compete with enterprise for top IT talent.

"MSPs will need to become more business consultants and less technical."

– Ross MacMahon, Business Success Manager, Crayon

The top three capabilities customers seek from partners when it comes to the productivity stack are:

- Integration at 65% (making things work better together)
- Cloud strategy development at 58% (having a clear plan on what to add to the mix), and
- Managed cloud operations at 47% (taking care of cost, spend, consumption and the performance of platforms and applications).⁵

This focus on strategy and operations makes sense, as the stack is mature and most companies are comfortable with general "keep the lights on/break fix" day-to-day management. SMBs are now focused on a more strategic view of their planned investments and seeking services that help control costs and optimise use and performance.





MSPs can unlock additional benefits for SMBs by digging into the features and functionalities that are often not fully implemented or leveraged. For example, Microsoft 365 license holders may not realise they have Power Platform tools as standard, or may not have looked into how to use Viva. The IT team may be aware of the full toolkit but don't have the bandwidth to enable end-users. Or a HR professional may waste time building a business case for a point solution in creating training programs because they are unaware existing solutions like Viva could meet their needs.

- ● *Be seen as a partner with integration know-how and strategic capability. The priority given to integration is a clear indicator that SMBs are looking to get their platforms, systems, software and applications working more tightly together.*

The need for cloud strategy development reveals customers are seeking partners who can ensure they continue to implement new cloud technologies in an orchestrated way.

Creating a connected digital environment.

The solution lies in a connected digital environment that is built around the needs of employees. But don't let your customers fall into the trap of believing any investment in new tech will inevitably boost productivity.

Ricoh conducted a market study that found nearly two-thirds of business leaders reported productivity losses when new systems and processes were introduced.⁶ More recently, the CSIRO noted technology "isn't an off-the-shelf panacea to our productivity woes" when it is used to merely automate bureaucratic inefficiencies, which demonstrates very little has changed since.⁷ Part of this challenge is due to the influence of the pandemic on cloud adoptions across the region.

Cloud-powered organisations drive sustained value from investment when the three pistons of people, process and technology are well calibrated and working together at the right speed. However, the move to cloud was so fast for many companies over the pandemic years, they simply haven't had time to develop the operational maturities required. Ricoh found that only half (56%) of organisations actively pursue a strategy that connects the digital environment, people and process, while 48% of executives believe their teams are not using collaboration tools in the most productive way.

The importance of change management

The rapid take up of cloud collaboration solutions driven by the pandemic was a windfall for many vendors and partners in the region.

However, the furious pace of adoption meant SMBs often had little time to properly plan and integrate new solutions into their existing environment and business processes. Ricoh's findings show that when new technology is implemented without robust change management, the result is often an increasingly fragmented working environment for the end user. This remains true today. Small frustrations for many can create a significant productivity drain for a company.

For example, most workers toggle between apps 10 times an hour, costing organisations 32 days per worker, per year of workplace productivity.⁸

"User experience continues to drive how software and applications evolve. User experience is crucial to understanding the customer journey. Beyond technology, how, why, and where employees access applications will also drive evolution and innovation"

– Ollie Heales, BDM Productivity, Crayon

● ● *Cost reduction and value optimisation is front of mind for many SMBs. If you're not having that conversation, it leaves the door open to proactive competitors. To get on the front foot, consider how a comprehensive set of business and IT metrics could be used to start and steer the conversation.*

The high demand for integration services and cloud strategy development in the productivity domain suggests SMBs recognise there is a backlog to be addressed on this front. They are looking for partners that can tackle this and work with them to ensure future adoptions are better coordinated.

Importantly, SMBs need partners that know how to determine whether their cloud investments are contributing to the right business metrics and outcomes. These will vary from customer to customer, but the Forrester Future of Operations data provides a useful guide to the top priorities for SMBs in the region: Revenue, Customer, End User, and Operational Effectiveness.

How are you assessing the success of your customers' cloud investments?

Partners who can demonstrate their understanding of the metrics and sub metrics used to assess the impact of existing cloud investments will have an advantage over those that speak only to the common IT metrics such as latency, availability and security.

Let's consider a few examples:

END USER	CUSTOMER	FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the company have an established end-user training program for new hires? Is the use of the technology documented in line with standard operating procedures and/or business processes required for each function and/or job role in the business? What is the utilisation of the solution across the employee base, and how many of the functionalities within the solution are used? How many support calls are generated by end users in relation to each solution? Even anecdotal evidence can provide clues as to the amount of frontline pushback a business may experience after introducing a new cloud productivity solution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do the cloud productivity solutions used by an SMB provide business process efficiencies? To which parts of the SMBs' operations? Can any efficiency gains be shown to benefit reliability, quality and timeliness of services to customers? Do the solutions improve speed-to-market, responsiveness to customer requirements or inquiries? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the business successfully reduced CapEx as a result of adoption? Has there been a measurable or notable reduction in the time taken to execute internal processes across teams/functions/departments? Are the solutions discrete to only one or few parts of the business, or are they utilised broadly? Has the move to cloud reduced operational overheads, backlog and/or technical debt for internal IT? Is there functional duplication in any existing solutions that could be consolidated to optimise IT cost?

These are just a few considerations that a partner can work through with their SMB customers. A conversation that focuses on business metrics and outcomes can help partners to position as strategic advisors, and create a deeper, longer-term relationship with SMB customers.

The AI genie is out of the bottle.

The rapid advent of consumer-level AI tools creates new opportunities and risks for SMBs. Every company needs to find ways to do more with less, innovate on their processes and control their costs.

Use-cases for SMBs include process automation, 24/7 customer support, chatbots and personalisation, lead generation, customer segmentation, inventory management and predictive analytics. Data can be better protected through enhanced security and fraud detection, while time-consuming tasks including market research, content creation and social media management can be automated. But simply dropping an AI solution into an organisation with inefficient processes or poor governance will not bring the promise of Unwork any closer to fruition.

Tools like ChatGPT can provide quantum productivity gains without users needing any of the training downtime, certifications, or self-service academy courses that are commonly needed to make effective use of many cloud and SaaS applications. Best of all, SMBs don't need to have deep pockets to take advantage. It's little wonder the use of such tools has exploded, but like any new technology, the gains will be greater and the risks lower if use is properly planned, integrated and governed.

As organisational psychology professor Adam Grant noted, "It's fascinating that people are more excited about AI rescuing them from burnout than they are worried about it eliminating their jobs."⁹

Reflecting the level of burnout on the front line of many businesses, employees are hungry for any technology that supports their ability to do more, faster. Employers may be aware and have concerns about the potential risks involved, but at the same time, the fear of missing out on AI-driven productivity gains will often outweigh the possibility of problems emerging down the track.¹⁰ As such, the AI genie is out of the bottle.

AI proliferation is likely to become the next big challenge for IT teams. With so many free tools, shadow IT is set to increase. As with cloud adoption, the use of multiple AI tools without visibility or planning can result in many small subscription costs that add up over time, impacts on resourcing (bandwidth consumption and data storage), security concerns and the ever-present issue of IP leakage.





The opportunity for partners is to help SMBs to make the best use of such tools while reducing some of the inherent risks that they present. Areas of opportunity include:

- Needs assessments
- Identifying metrics for success
- Data structuring and optimisation
- Choosing the right solutions
- Facilitating pilot projects
- Skills training
- Change management
- Technology integration
- Performance measurement
- Scalability
- Continuous improvement

Help customers prepare their culture for AI by nurturing curiosity, embracing a willingness to fail, and a “learn-it-all” approach to building AI muscle over time.”

- ● *Leverage some of the publicly available guidance already in the market to prepare AI-Adoption Readiness checklists for your customers. Help SMBs understand the potential pitfalls or knock-on effects to other parts of the IT/ cloud estate.*

If AI is used correctly to reduce information overload, it will not take away your job, it will put you back in it.”

– **Ross MacMahon, Business Success Manager, Crayon**

Re-position with Crayon.

Stay agile. Although productivity spend has stagnated, there is a huge opportunity for MSPs to show their value to customers today.

This relies on positioning yourself as a true strategic partner who can leverage technology to improve productivity, enhance the employee experience and unleash the full potential of Unwork.



Want to understand how to maximise the value of your existing technology? Download our Productivity Guide to understand quick wins, and possibly hidden and unknown features within your existing productivity stack that you can unlock to increase productivity.

[Download Productivity Guide](#)

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