

Operators should help businesses to enable remote working during the coronavirus outbreak

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The new coronavirus disease COVID-19 was officially declared an international pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020. The initial outbreak prompted the cancellation or postponement of major technology shows (such as Mobile World Congress and Enterprise Connect), and many businesses have put business travel on hold and are advising employees to work from home where possible.

Businesses and their employees worldwide are assessing how best to approach the situation. Many employees will rethink how they work and businesses may have to rapidly adapt their systems to manage the surge in the number of employees working remotely. Some of these businesses will not be adequately equipped to connect a remote workforce, let alone securely. Only 40% of businesses worldwide reported having conferencing or even instant messaging applications in our [2019 ICT business survey](#), indicating that a large number of businesses are ill-equipped to connect a remote workforce.

Operators will need to assist their customers and help them to develop their networks and communication solutions during this crisis.

Operators have launched several initiatives to help businesses to stay connected

Ensuring that businesses and consumers remain connected during a pandemic is of paramount importance. Operators in affected areas have adjusted their tariffs and usage plans to provide more flexibility to businesses' and employees' connectivity options.

The most common initiative has been the significant increase in mobile data allowances.

- [Telecom Italia has sent SMS messages to inform all its customers in affected areas that they have unlimited mobile data and fixed-mobile calls during March 2020.](#)
- [Telefónica has added an additional 30GB for its mobile customers for 2 months.](#)
- [Vodafone Spain has released unlimited mobile data to all business customers during March.](#)

Operators are offering free home fibre and mobile broadband solutions.

- [Italy's Go Internet launched its new Smart Working home broadband solution](#), which is either an FTTP or 30Mbit/s mobile broadband solution. The operator is waiving the first monthly subscription fee for the service, which is a flexible solution for employees who need to quickly acquire home connectivity for work or personal purposes.

Operators are also offering help in other ways.

- [Chinese operators have emphasised that they remain committed to meeting their 5G roll-out targets](#), and they have provided free 5G equipment and services to selected hospitals that are tackling coronavirus disease.
- [Starhub in Singapore has announced that it will provide free access to its SmartUC Mobile solution](#) (a fixed–mobile integrated voice solution) to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) until 1 September 2020. This will enable SME employees to use an app on a mobile phone or desktop computer to make and receive calls from their business landlines.

Operators are actively involved in ensuring that businesses and employees have flexible connectivity for remote working. However, operators should also ensure that businesses have the right tools.

UC and VPN providers have been quick to enhance access to their remote working tools; operators should follow their example

- [Unified communications providers including ByteDance \(Feishu\), Cisco, Google, Microsoft and Zoom are giving businesses free access to most of their chat, calling, video and conferencing solutions](#). These free trials are initially set for between 3–6 months depending on the provider and will help businesses to keep employees engaged and connected while working remotely.
- [VPN providers such as Check Point have released free licences for their tools for 60 days](#).
- [LogMeIn has released emergency remote work kits](#) for healthcare providers, educational institutions, municipalities and non-profit organisations. The kits include VPN services and free access to GoToMeeting UC and webinar tools.
- [Box \(a SaaS storage solution provider\) is allowing all existing business customers to add additional users beyond their licence limits to ensure that employees can access and store files securely from remote locations. It has also released a 90-day free trial for SMEs](#).
- [Alibaba is offering free credit for cloud services to affected businesses](#).

Operators' initiatives for helping businesses to manage the impact of the coronavirus have rarely extended beyond connectivity. Many operators are reselling solutions such as Box and Teams and have their own (generally white-labelled) UC solution. Operators should match the trend set by other providers and remove licence restrictions for business customers.

Operators should work with their channel partners to provide training to enable businesses to use UC solutions. Businesses will need webinars and online training videos for their employees so they can use UC features while working remotely.

Security will be a significant concern for businesses as more employees adopt remote working. Operators can release emergency VPN solutions and other cloud security protocols (such as those built into Office365) to help businesses to quickly secure their networks. Operators should increase bandwidth allocations on VPNs and provide IT support to ensure that these corporate networks can withstand an increase in remote traffic. SMEs may need additional support. Mobile VPN applications such as MaaS360 and MobileIron can also be rolled out to business customers.

Operators should take the lead in enabling remote working

Remote working was already an increasing trend and it will only be accelerated by the coronavirus outbreak. Operators in affected areas are improving the flexibility and availability of their connectivity solutions, but this should also extend to UC solutions.

Operators supply communication and ICT solutions to businesses (particularly SMEs) and these businesses may not have the tools or the IT expertise to enable a remote workforce. Operators will need to proactively advise businesses about the free tools that are available and ensure that they have access to training materials. Many businesses will be unsure about how to manage the need to ensure that their employees can work remotely and operators should take the lead in helping businesses to address this.