

# 'New Normal' Puts SD-WAN Digital Transformation in the Fast Lane

WITH NETWORKS IN THE SPOTLIGHT, SECURITY AND EFFICIENCY FOR REMOTE WORK ARE TOP PRIORITIES IN 2020

Enterprise connectivity and network priorities have undergone a rapid shift since the start of 2020. Companies' changing business needs and a homebound workforce have contributed to an "all hands on deck" reconfiguring of the IT infrastructure and applications they depend on to do business.

In other words, COVID-19 has accomplished in a matter of months what digital transformation has been trying to do for years. New research from Masergy and IDG shows how postpandemic networking investment patterns reflect the shift.

In particular, with more workers at home (a trend nearly certain to continue even after pandemic lockdowns ease), companies are revisiting their network modernization plans. They're turning to software-defined wide-area networking (SD-WAN) to help ensure that employees stay connected and cloud applications work as expected—all while keeping data safe.

"COVID has meant a workforce that is close to 100% remote," confirmed one respondent to the Masergy/IDG survey, which polled IT leaders at U.S.-based multinationals. "That has certainly changed our IT priorities."

IDG conducted the survey on Masergy's behalf in May and June of 2020, and it reflects a significant shift from surveys conducted in prior years.

"We have been doing this survey since 2017," explains Ray Watson, VP of Innovation at Masergy. "We've never seen business continuity and global workforce enablement rise to the top the way they do in our 2020 study."

Watson says that after the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, IT organizations reacted quickly. They turned to

remote access technologies and cloud communications technologies to enable business continuity despite closed offices. But those that used legacy networks to make that transition hit snags, he admits.

"Now that working from home is the 'new normal,' every corporate network is in the spotlight," Watson says. "It's clear that IT departments remain challenged when it comes to turning their temporary remote work setups into sustainable solutions that are globally reliable—and, most of all, secure."

Those concerns came through loud and clear in the new survey.

## The Infrastructure Imperative

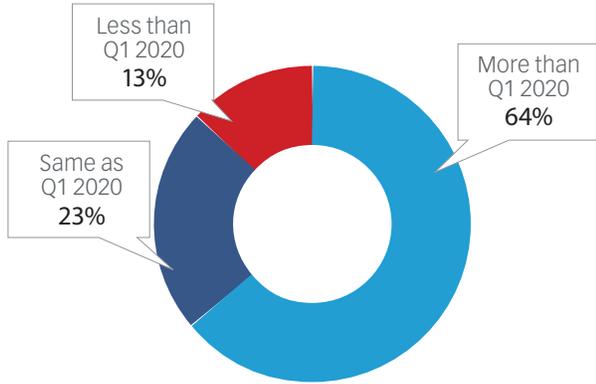
Nearly two-thirds of the respondents reported investing more in network infrastructure in Q2 than they did in Q1. That's because in the first part of the year, lockdowns hadn't yet sent employees home en masse. (See Fig. 1)

Survey respondents also reported giving top priority to building out technology that enables remote work and collaboration tools, by a wide margin (44% of the respondents) compared to other initiatives. Enabling AI-based analytics and automation was the second-most-cited top infrastructure priority, named most important by 21% of the respondents, followed closely by service reliability for business continuity (20%).

"The most important current connectivity goal of our organization is adaptation for remote work," said one survey respondent, speaking for many others.



**Fig 1 Almost Two-Thirds Report Investing More in Network Infrastructure in Q2 2020 Than in Q1**



SOURCE: IDG

**SD-WAN, Now More Than Ever**

Enabling many IT priorities in the new reality is SD-WAN, because of its adaptability and versatility.

Accordingly, more than half (56%) of the survey respondents are piloting, installing, or upgrading SD-WAN installations. That result reflects an upswing that continues from last year (54%). It's also significantly more than reported in

the 2017 survey, when only 35% of the respondents reported investing in SD-WAN.

Once considered optional by many enterprises, SD-WAN has emerged in just a couple of years as a necessity embraced by IT departments everywhere.

"SD-WAN is now vital in today's business climate, due to the need for consistent communications services," says Watson, who also cites the imperative to efficiently manage multicloud environments and address a critical need for internet-facing security at the WAN edge as drivers of SD-WAN adoption.

IT leaders now look to SD-WAN as their go-to tool for addressing many of the challenges of communications continuity, multicloud operations, and—their top priorities—cloud and network security.

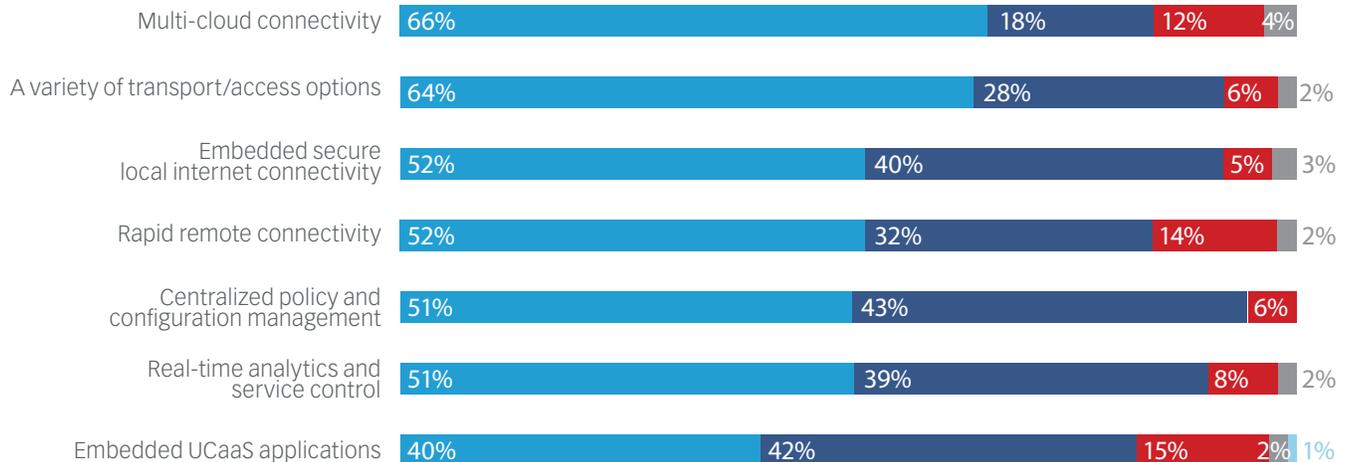
Respondents place the greatest importance on SD-WAN capabilities such as multicloud connectivity (cited as very important by 66% of the respondents) and support for a variety of data transport and access options for the network (very important to 64% of the respondents).(See Fig. 2)

IT leaders also turn to SD-WAN for its ability to relieve their teams of manual network monitoring and other day-to-day management tasks. That's because advanced solutions



**Fig. 2 Importance of SD-WAN Solution Capabilities**

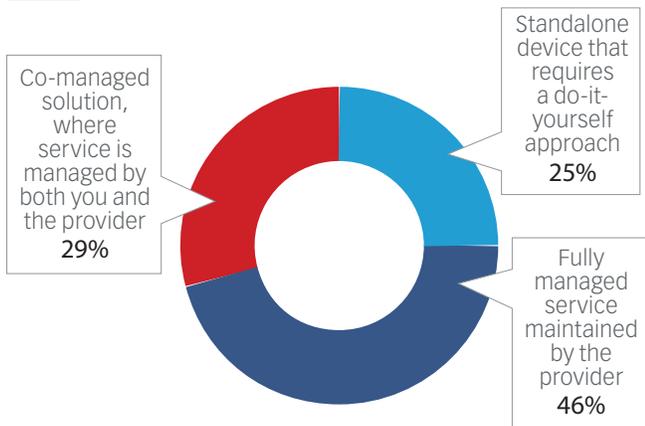
Very important Somewhat important Neutral Somewhat unimportant Very unimportant



SOURCE: IDG



Fig. 3 Type of SD-WAN Solution Installed



SOURCE: IDG

offer fully managed solutions as well as comanaged options in which responsibilities can be shared between customers and providers. Comanaged options can give IT departments access to the best of both worlds, providing total control over network services along with the backstop of an outside resource for keeping up with changing workloads.

It's no wonder, then, that the latest survey shows that a combined 74% of enterprises prefer support from their providers, with nearly half (45%) opting for a fully managed approach and another 29% opting for a comanaged service. Meanwhile, just 25% prefer to fly completely solo. (See Fig. 3)

It seems clear that IT leaders value solution flexibility and managed services more during times of uncertainty, when they may need to rapidly (or even unexpectedly) pivot network services or management strategies to face new challenges. Managed services provide the flexibility and ability to lean on a provider for scalable staffing when they need to navigate an ever-shifting terrain.

Respondents to the 2020 survey reported that SD-WAN delivers a trio of top benefits:

- Increased efficiency (reported by 69% of the respondents)
- Greater agility (66%)
- Enhanced security (65%).

Cost savings were cited by barely more than half (51%) of

the respondents. Cost savings ranked below efficiency and security benefits in past surveys as well, reflecting the increasing importance of other benefits over cost savings.

Efficiency and agility gains result from SD-WAN's centralized management and software-controlled functions. These functions enable IT teams to prioritize application traffic and adjust bandwidth dynamically in response to shifting priorities while maintaining end-to-end visibility.

And the technology continues to evolve.

Now, AI-infused SD-WAN can automatically evaluate network service quality, thanks to digital assistants that offer advice on how to optimize performance in real time. Even so, "digital assistants are just the beginning," explains Watson. "AI is also driving fully autonomous networks that are self-monitoring and self-healing and will revolutionize IT operations as we know it."

### Counting on Security

With corporate networks expanding, so too are security risks. Work-from-home employees—who use untrusted personal devices and networks to do their work—increase the attack surface exponentially for corporate networks.

Reflecting their concerns about large numbers of employees having suddenly been forced to work at home, respondents cited security as the top consideration when purchasing SD-WAN solutions, by a wide margin (70% of the respondents). Concern about security is not new: It was also the leading concern for the IT leaders polled in 2019.

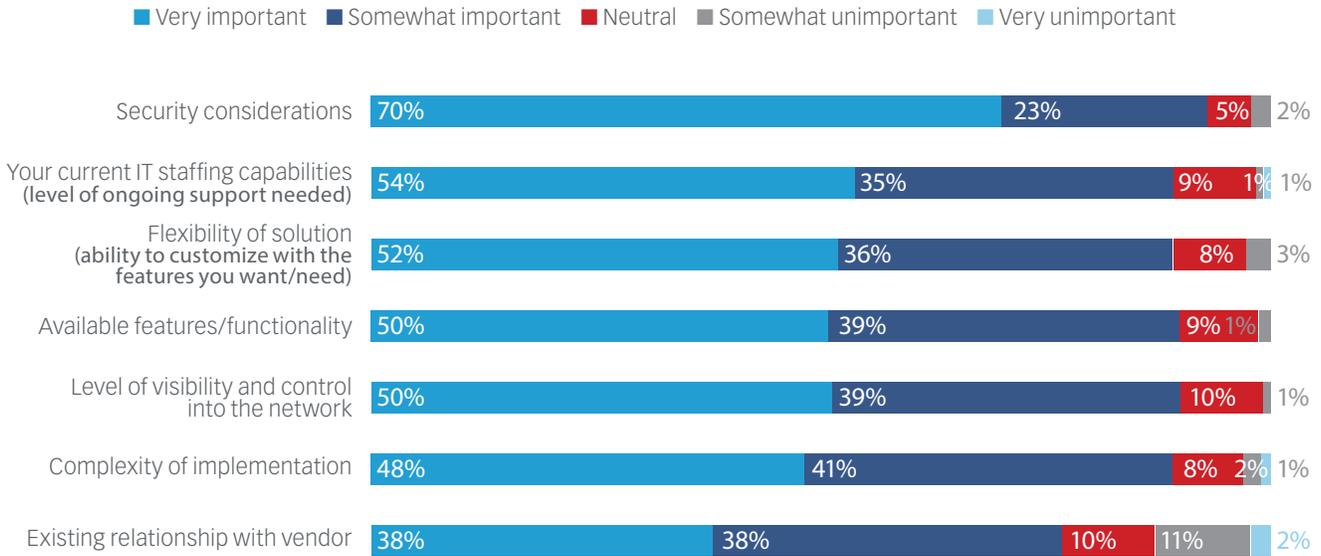
Staffing considerations began rising in the ranks in the 2019 survey and came in second in 2020 (its highest position yet), cited by 54% of the respondents. (See Fig. 4, page 4)

Staffing and security go hand in hand. Much like the manual work of network performance management, firewalls also require threat monitoring and response performed by security analysts. Handling firewall alerts is a 24 x 7 necessity that remains vulnerable to security skills shortages known to stress IT departments even in the best of times.

All of this makes it understandable that another question in the survey shows most respondents relying on SD-WAN service providers to manage security and firewall policy (59%) and, secondly, to manage application performance monitoring (58%). Offloading these vital functions frees up in-house IT staff, giving their organizations more time to handle the unexpected.



Fig. 4 Importance of Factors in Making SD-WAN Purchase Decisions



SOURCE: IDG

Security is so vital that an overwhelming 91% of the respondents expressed interest in services that converge WAN and security—also known as secure access service edge (SASE) solutions.

One respondent summed it up well: “It’s a challenge to keep our network secure while still allowing our remote employees to efficiently work.”

**Conclusion**

The survey revealed that the changes wrought by a global crisis of unprecedented scale have pushed enterprises to accelerate digital transformation projects rather than slow them down. To support today’s top business goals, respondents indicated, a WAN that can improve network agility, simplify change management, and enable a distributed workforce is important. Secure SD-WAN architectures have risen to the challenge, providing critical functionality while freeing up IT staff to address other urgent priorities.

The work-from-home IT environment has made the network an investment imperative, with SD-WAN solutions providing answers across vast areas, including remote connectivity; multicloud performance management; efficiency; automation; and, most importantly, security.

“In 2020, companies in every industry are putting their SD-WAN digital transformation efforts in the fast lane,” Watson says. “As they do, they’re increasingly turning to best-of-suite solutions that unite a constellation of network, security, and cloud communications capabilities into one flexible tool that can collectively tackle more of today’s business challenges.”

Making the complex easier to manage is the name of the game in a world full of unexpected challenges. As Watson sums up the benefits of SD-WAN: “It’s a single investment delivering multiple levels of transformative impact.”

For more information about how SD-WAN solutions can meet the IT challenges of rapid transformation and a distributed workforce, visit [www.masergy.com/sd-wan](http://www.masergy.com/sd-wan).