



A radical change to work



THE COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of life around the world. As the virus spreads, starting in China at the end of 2019, businesses worldwide have been keeping an eye on the impact that this virus has on their operations. Of paramount importance are the health and safety of people. Accordingly, companies have sought ways to keep essential services and business operational while minimising risk.

NGC is no different, operationalising a COVID-19 Business Continuity Team in January, and monitoring the situation frequently. The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) team has been a part of this effort from its inception, keeping abreast of the Company's plans and contributing and shaping the ongoing responses. When the decision was taken to move to a Work From Home (WFH) scenario to protect the well-being of NGC staff, the ICT team was already mobilised to support.

A Solution that Scales for Mobile Users

Rapid and reliable deployment in a situation such as this is key. Throughout the years, ICT has provided various ways to work remotely to external parties such as consultants, and certain members of staff that required access while away from their office. The traditional solution is robust but required manual deployment and assistance from a member of the ICT team.

In 2019, leveraging a close relationship with Microsoft, and always with an eye to facilitating the business in modern ways of working, the ICT team started work on deploying a Windows 10 Feature called Always On VPN. This required significant infrastructural changes in how the environment handled security – an exercise that took several months. However, in December 2019, Always On VPN was in limited testing outside of ICT.

With the looming threat of the pandemic in January, additional time was dedicated to wrapping up the project while balancing routine requests. With a push on the weekend of March 14th, Always On VPN was completed. This was deployed to all users on March 16th with excellent success. Of the over 250 laptops to which it was auto-deployed, only two experienced unrecoverable issues.

A Quick Solution for Deskbound Users

While the Always On VPN deployment worked well for already mobile users, almost half of NGC's client fleet are desktops. The ability to support desktop users from home was needed. The ICT team discussed a number of solutions, including the option of carrying desktops home. This option was not ideal due to the fact that desktops are not intended to be mobile, often cannot connect to home networks and are not insured for mobility.



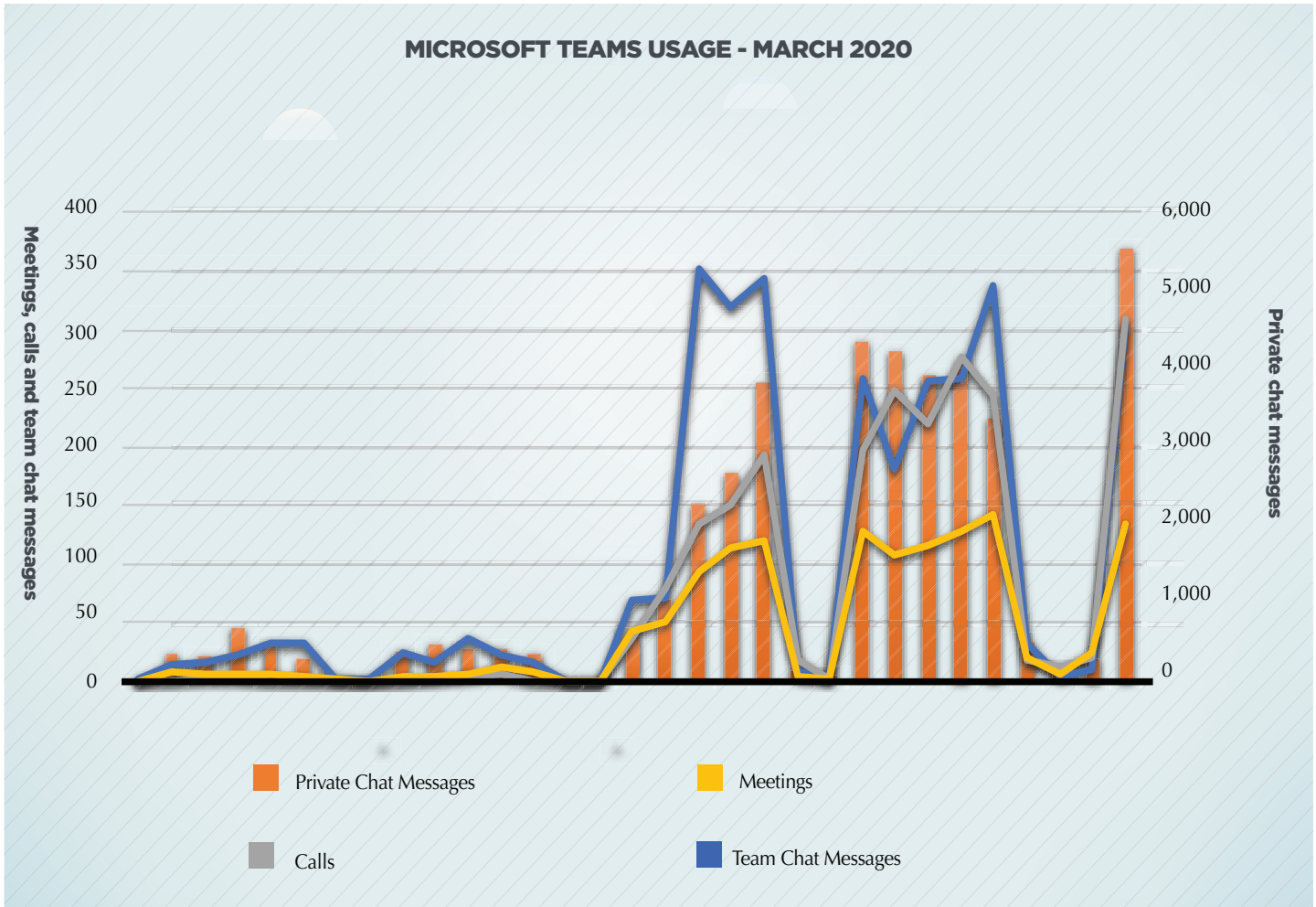
What was tested in quick stead was a solution called Chrome Remote Desktop. This solution had two requirements:

1. The user needed a PC at home to use
2. The user needed a Gmail account

The issue with this solution is that it was very manual to deploy. Unlike the Always On VPN, this did not scale. The approach, therefore, was to develop clear, detailed, yet easy to follow instructions and circulate to users. This approach worked with great success.

Keeping in Contact

Even though users now had access to computer resources from their homes – either through Always On VPN for laptop users, or Chrome Remote Desktop for desktop users – this new remote work scenario has put the Company in uncharted waters in terms of office culture. The ICT team turned again to the Company's investment in Microsoft technologies and began giving tips and guidance on using Microsoft Teams to facilitate remote meetings and to keep in touch one-on-one with colleagues. Many online collaboration platforms such as Zoom, WebEx and even Microsoft offered free licenses for a limited period at the start of this pandemic. Fortunately, NGC already had Microsoft Teams licenses for all users and has been making use of the platform for a few years in limited ways.



Online collaboration increased following WFH implementation

With the advent of WFH, the adoption of various Teams features has increased immensely, with meetings, calls and chats more than quadrupling over the last month.

Supporting It All

Through it all, the ICT Helpdesk has also been adapting. As the first point of contact with the ICT Division, the Helpdesk receives a constant flow of requests daily. During the period of transition to WFH, these requests continued, as people adjusted to their new work environment.

With the loss of the office phone extension, the Helpdesk mobilised to serve employees through Microsoft Teams. The initial push to get Chrome Remote Desktop from a manual to a scalable process was directed and driven from the Helpdesk. The effort to ‘emergency reload’ as many workable laptops as possible was also owned

and completed by the Helpdesk, as well as a number of additional user requests.

Through it all, the Helpdesk has been adapting and delivering, with support from other teams within ICT, and support from NGC’s Security Department.

What the Future Holds

At this point in Trinidad and Tobago, with the stay-at-home order firmly in place, even more departments have opted to reduce their on-site rostered staff and move their users to WFH. While there have been hiccups along the way, the dedication of the entire NGC team to continue to deliver its essential service to the nation, the proactive leadership of executives and the delivery of enabling solutions will continue to keep NGC operating through this pandemic and into this radical new way of working. ■