

The Anatomy of Rebuilding & Recovery

A CEO LOUNGE INITIATIVE

Who Moved My Workspace?

In conversation with



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Who Moved My Workspace?



Working from home, flexible hours and co-working were on the upswing thanks to freelancing and an increase in knowledge workers. The pandemic and lockdown have forcefully extended this to sectors beyond the software industry, making them key policy decisions. A globally distributed team, agile tech and micro services have been taking the forefront, changing the way we perceive work. It has challenged design ideas, open workspaces, and the relevance of large, centralised office spaces. Are office spaces just buildings with furniture (both, inanimate and animate kinds)? Can remote working be a permanent change in the Indian context? Some of the sharpest minds from across industries discuss the future of work and workspaces.

Words by Divya Sista

The world is moving at an unprecedented pace. Organisations can no longer afford to wait and watch. Slow and steady is now replaced by fast and consistent. To succeed, companies cannot remain myopic. They need to be nimble and responsive to change. The Covid-19 crisis saw organisations large and small, including governments, embrace work from home. The work-from-home starter pack came with flexible working hours, promises of reducing individual carbon footprint by cutting commutes out, and a general sense of ownership amongst employees for their professional responsibilities. It provided an opportunity for indecisive and even reluctant organisations to jump onto the remote working bandwagon and speeded up mobility goals for companies

already with the work from home option. But there could be more than what is on offer on the kitchen-cum-cubicle table — both, sweet and the not-so-sweet.

NEVER LET A CRISIS GO TO WASTE

Like every other thing, remote working too can be viewed from the demand-supply standpoint. The demand for flexibility in work in terms of when, where and how a person works has been rising. Before the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, the average employee wanted to work from home at least for some time in the workweek.

“What was fun until last year is looked at as something forced now,” outlines Sharmila Khan, Director — Country HRBP, Micron Technology. The crisis has opened up a Pandora’s box, giving people a glimpse of what working from home as a matter of routine could possibly mean. While it is a bed of roses for some, the thorns are beginning to prick others, with

entire families under the same roof. Many have still made it work.

The lockdown has served as a reminder that digital working could be a lucrative economic opportunity for society and businesses alike. Living in a metro is no longer a requisite to a juicy job.

“The pandemic has challenged everything from what we knew as workplaces to work-life balance. Many organisations have begun examining a post-pandemic workspace strategy beyond centralised offices, and existing space design,” says Aksh Rohatgi, CEO and Country Manager, ISS Facility Services India.

Remote working has arrived, though not in style, given the circumstances. Prima facie, this new normal translates into reduced costs for the organisation, tossing away fancy office spaces and premium real estate and ringing in flexibility for the employee. This has been a business continuity planning test of sorts for most sectors beyond IT, in



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which remote working was relatively easier to adopt and often par for course. But there is no one-size-fits-all process of capitalising these benefits. That, business continuity has to be a natural progression and need not be triggered by a natural calamity or a disaster is the biggest takeaway for companies from the pandemic.

THE REAL REAL-ESTATE PERIL

The digital revolution has been not just a catalyst in this revolution, but also the single largest cog to which the economic wheel owes its movement. The pandemic hitting even a decade earlier would have been unimaginable, considering infrastructural support for digital work was still nascent. Today, every organisation, irrespective of the industry, is a technology company. Tech is the central nervous system of every organisation — it can contribute to fantastic reflexive, agile responses, or paralyse it irreparably. Organisations are therefore investing in tech capital over real estate. Industries, like banking,

which are on the high-speed digital lane even without the pandemic, have been rationalising floor space.

“There is a whole new set of requirements that real estate has never seen before, like sanitisation, IoT, social distancing. There is an overall contraction in the total square feet space, but the revenue per square foot is definitely going up,” explains Aditya Mina, Partner, Consulting Deloitte India.

“Organisations are looking at hard cash savings with reduced requirements for office space. The real estate industry too is catching up, setting up processes and standardised services like flexi-working spaces to service the demand,” Mina adds.

Does this translate into a miscalculation for companies heavily invested in real estate space and sprawling campuses is the bigger question on hand. Commercial real estate has experienced massive shockwaves, not just from remote working policies, but also the lockdown effects on consumer-facing businesses.

"The focus of the employer is now centred around the employee and has moved from amassing square feet to employee experiences. Office space won't be wiped out and is here to stay. We might witness it in a different form," Mina analyses.

TIME-SLICING: HOME VS WORK

Digital work tools are malleable, and work practices surrounding these often develop over a period of time. But with an extreme jump ship situation the lockdown hurled everyone into, there was zero transition time to 'make remote work work'.

"There is a lot of emotion attached to our workspace because that creates a sense of identity; a lot of time is spent there. Limiting this territorial working also creates a sense of insecurity, which explains the initial resistance surrounding work from home," says Sangeeta Ray, Country Head, Siemens Real Estate.

The whole lockdown-driven adoption has well begun, and it is pertinent that this is viewed as an open-ended, continuous process.

"Now that the employee is comfortable with the idea of working remotely, we are looking at optimising workspaces. Individual work desks are history, and once the pandemic is over, we envision employees coming to offices for exclusive collaborative work. Our forecast is a 70 per cent desk-sharing policy since all individual work items would probably be taken care of from home," foresees Ray.

It gets complicated in the Indian context, given that personal and professional lines blur into a fuzzy space. Add domestic intricacies of the elderly living at home, no concrete child-care, and that India typically has families housed in two- or three-bedroom apartments, with no isolated home-offices or even work desks — the office for many could be a more lucrative option.

"In India, the office is an active social stimulus hub and it fundamentally ends up becoming their (employees') life. Productivity has gone up, but there are also ungodly working hours and weekends are disappearing. Somewhere down the line, fatigue is going to set



"Somewhere down the line a fatigue is going to set in, then the line dividing the personal and the professional would get harder — that could change what we are witnessing now"

Aditya Mina

Partner, Consulting Deloitte India





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CEO and Country Manager,
ISS Facility Services India

in, then the line dividing the personal and the professional would get harder, and that could change what we are witnessing right now,” Mina predicts.

PLANNING OBSOLETION: HOME AND WORK

The benefits of remote working far outweigh the costs, at least for the foreseeable future. Questions of the economic ripple effect office commute has on climate change and carbon footprint are foggy. Should the carbon footprint include factors like online shopping which is a consequence of staying at home? Should the economics factor in the consequences of declined revenues for food joints surrounding office spaces? These details could crystallise over time. The larger picture emerging now is a positive-sum game, with employees and employers approaching a sweet spot. However, as more and more organisations are learning, digital fluency does not equate with a happy, productive work from home environment.

“At the core, business always follows the law of conservation. It has just changed form from business centres to co-working to satellite offices and hub models,” says Abhay Tiwari, Head, Corporate Real Estate, BNP Paribas.

OUT OF OFFICE BUT IN THE ZONE

“Some industries like multinational banks were ahead of the curve, and have implemented workplace policies as early as 2013,” points out Tiwari.

There has been innovation in the work from home policy space as well. We must not forget the fact that working from home is not conducive for some job roles.

“Our Purple solution in Japan was a result of optimising proximity density,” Tiwari says. “The central office housed 50 per cent of the staff, while the rest connected from locations within a 5-km radius.” This benefits both the organisation and the employee on multiple levels, including risk resiliency, a wholesome cost-benefit ratio especially where a combination of products and services are involved.

Chandresh Natu, Practice Head, Wipro HR Services India says the outlook concerning work from home is different for different companies. “Twitter has announced its employees can work from home forever, but Netflix’s CEO says work from home is hurting the company’s productivity and innovation. It’s different for different organisations and every company is managing the situation in its way. In

our kind of business, client approvals to work from home are crucial. There is a minor percentage of employees who have returned to work in our campuses,” says Natu, adding that how Wipro has implemented technology tools to ensure employee safety when they are in campus. “Our colleague’s health is paramount. We’ve come up with an IoT health response solution called ‘Health COV-ER’ which takes into account everything from employee health assessment and declaration, his transport, occupancy monitoring/seat booking in the campus, social distancing, face mask alert, crowd avoidance, contact tracing, facility sanitisation and so on,” he says.

THE WANT-NEED CONUNDRUM

There are discoveries for everyone along this remote work journey. Despite sharing their lives with technology and devices, it is startling that most millennials and generation Z report difficulty in adapting to

working from home as a result of Covid-19.¹ This could also be attributed to the fact that work from home combined with the lack of a social life during the lockdown and subsequent precautionary advisory of social distancing is not a pleasant cocktail. Further, as things get clearer, a switch between concrete personal spaces and professional time is necessary if working from home has to be sustainable.

“Initially working from home was fun. Just six months into it, this has hit a plateau, and productivity is on a decline. Seventy per cent of our workforce do not have access to an exclusive work area at home, with everyone at home using a common space to study, work or just spend time. The employee today wants a flexible work atmosphere which he dictates,” points Rohatgi.

HR policies today are centred around the organisational needs of its employees, rather than the employee wanting the job, giving rise to employee-centric policies beyond just connecting teams through tools like Zoom.



A certain percentage of employees will indeed come back. Building confidence in employees that the workspace is safe for them to come and work is crucial"

Chandresh Natu
Practice Head,
Wipro HR Services India





“Our homes aren’t designed for 100 per cent work from home. I see a hybrid model for Micron for a certain period. But what we miss out being 100 per cent remote is how do you drive culture from a remote environment. How do you bring in creativity? How do ideas get explored without a set of brains sitting together and discussing? And for a tech company like ours, innovation is the anchor, and so how does that happen without creativity and discussions,” elucidates Khan.

The pandemic has not been the same in terms of work experience for everyone either. “Women have been hit harder since they have to don multiple hats, and the domestic responsibility still largely lies with her. The pressure is

tremendous,” Khan observes.

Some people might want to return to work post-pandemic, while some must, given client requirements. “Identifying which employee to bring back to work is going to be a challenge. But building confidence in employees that the workspace is safe for them to come and work is more crucial,” states Natu.

The future of workspaces is not a business world with zero offices. As teams adapt to new work routines, the focus will shift from where to work to objective results-based tracking and asynchronous communication. “We might not see swings and slides in all offices, but telecommute and remote working are here to stay,” Rohatgi concludes.



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Sharmila Khan
Director – Country HRBP,
Micron Technology

TAKEAWAYS

Work is something you do, not somewhere you go:

The conversation should move from ‘where to work’ to ‘how to work’.

Access to mobility in work goes beyond a good wi-fi connection:

Employee-centric HR policies and a robust remote-working policy are the need of the hour.

Work is where the heart is:

The future of work is hybrid with the employee choosing when, where and how she works from.

Digital working does not equate social isolation:

Physical distancing has been imposed by Covid-19 and not remote working.



¹ <https://www.smartsheet.com/content-center/news/over-90-young-workers-having-difficulty-working-home-survey-finds>

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