

## New normal in the workplace post Covid-19

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**ABSTRACT:** There are very few events in a span of life that calls for an entire transfiguration, the ones that serves as an impetus behind the momentous change, a change that will lead a world to a “new normal”. The Corona has triggered an anxious trial run for remote work at a grand scale but the big question is whether current experience that has forced us towards newer ways of working has actually accelerated mindset shifts to the Future of Work especially the future of Workplace?

**KEYWORDS:** Work from Home, Covid-19, Future Workplace.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Even before the pandemic struck the remote working was accelerating in U.S.A. A study by Global Workplace Analytics has shown that the number of employees working from home has grown by 173% from 2005-2018 excluding self-employed. Even in India, many companies had provision for work from home (WFH) policy for its employees, but for them it was more of an option rather than the choice. The growth of remote culture has been moderated because of two schools of thought that guard this culture where one opinion says that remote work impedes the creative spark when we are interacting with the actual people in close proximity rather than with their virtual bodies. This particular idea resonates with the standpoint of Yahoo’s CEO Merrisa Meyer who in 2013 banned her employees from working from home. She holds the opinion that the absolute best place to work, to facilitate efficient communication and collaboration is physical conventional office space and that is why she felt it is critical that everybody in Yahoo is present in their offices. Contrary to this school of thought, there is nearly two years long study by Stanford professor Nicholas Bloom who paints a very different picture and indicates it is the time to embrace and enable the benefits of working from home. He found an astounding productivity boost at the end of the study among the employees opting for work from home. His study found that telecommuters took shorter breaks, had fewer sick days and took less time off.

### 2 NEED OF THE STUDY

The remote culture was bound to happen in 5-6 years down the line and it ought to have benefits that can be reflected in its uprising in last few years but its growth remained stagnated because of these two schools of thought but now is the time, the best time to analyze the work from home culture keeping its merits and demerits in mind since pandemic has run a global experiment and now everybody is working from home and is in a best position to be able to respond to questions on the factors that will determine the future of work from home culture. The determination of the future of workplace will help us to understand the culture and thereby this study will become important to guide HR professionals and the entire organization in general to be ready well in advance to formulate policies, directives, productivity, motivational and technological tools that would enable them to run organizations efficiently.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted is a primary research conducted on 130 working professionals coming from different sectors like Corporate, Government, Pharmacy, Legal and Academia engaged in different profiles like Marketing, Finance, Human Resources, Operations, Professors, Research and Teachers who are currently working from home. The respondents were asked to share their experiences on working from home based on the factors like productivity, motivation, communication, stress, time, energy, cost etc. that will be determinants in deciding the 'new normal' in the workplace post COVID-19.

### 4 SURVEY RESULTS

- **Commutation Time while (WFH):** On an average, it takes 1 hour 45 minutes for respondents to commute from home to workplace one way, which calls for 3 hours 30 minutes commutation time daily by the working professionals. Work from home will surely save individual's daily commutation time.
- **Adoption of hobbies or activities while WFH:** Since Work from home will save individual's daily commutation time, it will provide scope for other activities to be performed during the time that has been saved. It opens up a chance to include productive pursuit in their daily routine. With this perusal in mind a question was asked if their current experience of working from home has permitted them to indulge in activities or hobbies that they were unable to perform earlier due to crunch of time, to which sweeping 73% of respondents replied in affirmation.
- **Working more than actual working hours when WFH:** There is often a notion attached that you can work a little more when you are at home, at your desired place, at your convenience. The managers might take you for granted that you are working from home. This notion has too been considered when asked if they felt that they ended up working more than the actual working hours. To which, 64% people agreed that they ended up working more. The female respondents though, felt this way more than males. It is 71% of females in contrast to 53% of males. The reason why more females felt that they worked more in homes than in the conventional office space can be attributed to the corona crisis where domestic help were unavailable and females were occupied with triple marginalization/ responsibility of work, family, kids and household chores.
- **Stress by being in front of the screen the entire day while WFH:** There was another stress that was added by the virtue of working from home, and that was the stress by being in front of the screen the entire day. It was 62% of respondents who agreed that they feel stress in being front of the screen the entire day. Even in this response there were more females, 76% of females felt stressed by being in front of the screen while working from home whereas it was only 42% males who agreed to the question. The reasoning attached with the findings can be accredited to the fact that a large number of females surveyed were engaged in the profile of professors, teachers where they had very little experience in conducting online classes.
- **Face to Face Interaction V/S Virtual Interaction:** Work from Home means little or no face to face conversation with your employees, your team or your subordinate. 65% felt that face to face interactions are productive than virtual meetings. As for the analysis, face-to-face interaction is a medium to build trust, understanding and sense of a shared mission or values that brings a life to any deal or project. It is easy to be on the wrong side of the web miscommunication so it is better to be on the right side of the physical meetings when dealing with critical issues. 91% on-field professionals believe that face-to-face interactions are more productive than virtual interactions. To add to it, one of the respondents in sales profile mentioned in the experience section on how difficult it is for him to convince customers via virtual platforms. It reflects the inability of the web-based platforms to facilitate effective interaction in the profiles like Academia, Sales, R&D and New Product Development.
- **HINDRANCE WHILE WFH:** The majority of the respondents (55%) complained technical glitch or internet connectivity as the major source of hindrance
- **WFH Saves Cost, Time and Energy:** To understand the ideology of employees and employers better across a question was put across if they think Working from Home saves cost, time and energy to which whooping 78% agreed that it does saves a lot of said things. The energy we are talking about is the energy of being present there, energy in literal terms of conservation of electricity in offices. The cost related to computers, phones, heating and air-conditioners will be reduced. The money that is incurred on rent or on real estates for office spaces will be saved for the corporate houses when their employees will be working from home. Additional perks like buffet, recreational activities that are provided as an incentive will be set aside and the saved money can be utilized for expansion of business.

- **Monotony while WFH:** The question was there if at any time professionals had enough of webinars and a feeling of monotony sunk in? To address the claim a question was asked if they think home based or virtual meetings tend to become monotonous and repetitive to which 59% agreed.
- **Productivity Level While WFH:** We can associate Employees' productivity directly with the organization's bottom line. There is a positive relationship between productivity of employees and growth of the company. More the employees' productivity, the more will be the growth of the company keeping other factors constant. When we work from office (WFO), this particular factor is taken utmost care of. So, while evaluating the future of work from home culture this is the salient criteria that cannot be compromised. 75% of the professionals stated that their productivity level either remain alike or similar as pre COVID days.
- **Motivation Level While WFH:** What is the propelling force behind employees' productivity? The answer to the question is 'Motivation'. Motivation is the impetus that drives this force, urges one to do better- to explore one's own limits and sail through anything that comes his/her way. Hence, employees' productivity depends on motivation and their engagement to the organization and their work and that is why Human Resource departments lay particular emphasis on motivational theories and the ways to keep employees motivated. On being asked if it was difficult to remain motivated, 55% of respondents replied in affirmation that it indeed was.
- **Is WFH Culture Here to Stay:** 77% of professionals believe that Work from home is here to stay. But will it stay the way it is now, the entire business houses operating from homes or will it have a blend of both, work from home and work from offices co-existing together? That's the question that has been discussed later.
- **Number of Days Working Professionals Wish To WFH:** To understand the future of the workplace our hypothesis were if the answer to the question "How many days they wish to work from home post COVID-19?" came out to be more than 4 days, there are very high chances that work from home could easily replace work from office culture entirely in upcoming 2-3 years and also the older people would be more likely to opt for WFH than the younger ones. But the result to this was quite astonishing. The average days for which the professionals wanted to work from home post COVID-19 is 2.5 days. Male and Females both opted for the mean of same number of days i.e, 2.5 days. Amidst the different age group, the relative days were similar ranging from 2.5 days to 2.6 days.

## 5 ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS

- **BLENDED WORKPLACE:** The assessment of the entire analysis led us to encapsulate, given the factors in mind that it will be a far-fetched idea to believe the future of workplace to be entirely work from home.
- **BENEFITS OF WFH:** Unequivocally, there are benefits to business organizations operating from homes that include the commutation time that gets saved (Approx. 3.5 hours a day), conservation of energy, commutation cost and miscellaneous costs that are incurred on daily operations.
- **'ME TIME' WHILE WFH:** Picking up of hobbies during telecommuting is meritorious in itself since it gives people time for themselves. People might opt for work from home on days they need to finish their urgent work if blend culture happens to exist.
- **SITUATION WILL BE BACK TO NEW NORMAL:** As far as working up more than actual working hours is concerned, this was a time when plentitude of webinars were conducted and that kept working professionals really busy but when things will turn to 'new normal', number of webinars will decrease gradually and will leave people more time even if they are working from home
- **PRODUCTIVITY LEVEL IN THE LONG RUN:** Productivity level is really heartening to see in the responses administered by respondents. There were hearty results with the motivation level of workforce during their tenure of Working from Home but because this was an unprecedented time where company required their employees more than ever, workforce was enthusiastic and remained motivated to help their organization deal with the pandemic but once situation will improve a little, with lack of workplace engagement there are chances that workforce would easily lose out on their internal motivation and would be in dire need of external motivation that cannot be best applied in virtual platforms ultimately leading to stress and anxiety.
- **WFO vis-à-vis WFH:** The advantages of work from home cannot completely outweigh pros of working from office. The dilemma of interaction is real because our creativity gets multifold when discussed in a group, ideas starts to come in when brainstormed with the peers. Work from home, in this particular aspect gives away the feeling of isolation and

loneliness. The installation of equipments at homes is not feasible. The situation is all the more grim in profiles like sales, academia, R&D, NPD and Lawyers where work from home daily is unimaginable. The core nature of their job is to go out and work.

- **OPINION OF THE PEOPLE:** On being asked on the number of days they wish to work from home, many respondents mentioned 0 days and added in the experience section that neither it is feasible for them to work from home nor their company would allow it. Sectors like manufacturing can never dream of going all home. Also, working professionals themselves have opted for only 2-3 days of working from home. The review considering all the factors in loop is that undoubtedly the COVID-19 pandemic has led the acceleration of the future of Workplace but this future of Workplace will not be either Work from office or Work from home but instead a blend of both the arrangement. Hence, a blended workplace will be the 'new normal' post COVID-19.

## 6 COMPANIES SUPPORTING WFH

As per the latest reports, there are few blue chip companies that have mandated their employees to work from home for few months before they take a final call on the workplace while there are others who have bifurcated the percentage of employees who will come to office while rest will continue to work from home.

According to Economic Times report, Facebook will allow employees to work remotely until July 2021 whereas Indian IT giant Infosys thinks permanent work from home model for 33-50% of its employees' just like Twitter to meet the post pandemic world. Rival TCS (Tata Consultancy Group) is not far behind where it has said that it is looking at 75% of its employee base to permanently work from home by 2025. These IT companies might shift their employee's base permanently to remote (while some still prefer blend of both) manufacturing, retail sectors will vouch for a blended model.

## 7 FUTURE SCOPE

Since, the future of the workplace is a **blended one**, what are the changes that will be witnessed from there on.

In the survey, a question was asked if the company allowed work from home before the onset of the pandemic to which 45% respondents said that their company did not allow work from home pre COVID-19. In the future, we will see these 45% of companies allowing their employees work from home provision for limited number of days in a week. They would chart out provision for telecommuting in their policies from now on.

### ARE ORGANIZATIONS READY TO EMBRACE THE CHANGE?

But the future trend will remain abridged if the corporate organizations are unable to accommodate this trend. To address this aspect, a question was asked if the respondents feel that their organization is ready to embrace the change.

- An astonishing finding was observed it was only 43% of respondents who are confident that their organization is ready to embrace the 'new normal'. The organizations have to tighten up their belt, look for the ideas that worked for them in the past, revisit those ideas that were not fruitful and formulate new policies that cater to all the factors that are essential to operate telecommute. Here, only the resilient organizations will come out with flying colors and the rest will mere survive but the resilient ones will thrive. This situation should be seen as an opportunity because the organization who will be able to tap the future of work needs comprising work needs, workplace needs, and workforce needs first will be able to surpass other organizations and here comes the role of Human Resource Department to align the corporate culture with the current and the future requirements of the market.
- **STRONG LEADERSHIP:** The first and foremost way to make organizations ready for a blended workplace is to have a strong leadership. Only a resilient and agile leader will have the ability to reconstruct a culture that invigorates this type of flexibility, flexibility that encompasses a blended arrangement. It is the HR strong leadership that should come out and enable the efforts of not simply returning but reimagining and building back better.
- **DATA/CYBER THREAT MANGEMENT:** The next challenge that lies in front of the organization is with the blended workforce more will be the use of data and more the use of data through online channels more is the risk of data threat. The company needs to strengthen the security for device-agnostic access. The communication lines should be encrypted reducing the risk of data breach privacy. The company should form formal guidelines on their current security software tools and should be clearly communicated to the employees.

- **ENSURING BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE:** If WFH is here to stay with work from office setup, companies have to provide its employees essential tools and equipment (could be in the form of laptop, portable Wifi etc.) that would enable them to work from home. Companies need to spend additional expense on providing basic home office needs for their employees on days they wish to work from home.
- **COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM:** An Effective communication is what makes a team strongest, unbeatable and unattainable. Without effective communication any organization is doomed to fall and especially in a culture that is to come-a blended culture, communication takes a driving seat. Hence the biggest challenge is to attain a communication system that is comprehensive and reaches out to every employee. It is of utmost importance for any organization to be equipped with efficient tools to communicate to enable blend-culture effectively. According to report of Deloitte in April 2020 titled "Future of Work Accelerated: Learnings from the COVID-19 Pandemic", Human Capital Consulting | India Perspective<sup>5</sup>, 75% of organizations used Zoom platforms for collaborations followed by MS Teams with 70% usage. Mentioning a platform to be used as a medium of communication and communicating about it to employees will lead to clarity. It is important that every employee remains connected and effectively contributes to the business goals. The organizations need to start thinking on how to accommodate and espouse newer ideas that aims to thrive. There needs to better communication, transparency and accountability especially when employees will be working remotely.

## 8 CONCLUSION

The review considering all the factors in loop is that undoubtedly the COVID-19 pandemic has led the acceleration of the future of Workplace but this future of Workplace will not be either Work from office or Work from home but instead a blend of both the arrangement. The advantages of work from homes cannot completely outweigh pros of working from office. Hence, a blended workplace will be the "new normal" post COVID-19.

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