A FRAMEWORK TO DEVELOP A HYBRID MODEL OF WORKING

Abstract

COVID-19 has been one of the biggest disrupters to the earlier methods of working. It has accelerated the pace of change and is redefining the organizations approach towards work. The companies may structurally shift to the hybrid model according to their needs. This shift could be laced with unforeseen challenges and impromptu improvisations. This paper attempts to provide a guiding framework to make the shift as smooth as possible and make the companies aware of some of the hidden costs of this model.

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The recently announced reforms by the Indian government are expected to empower Indian IT and BPO companies by relaxing the compliance and reporting obligations[1], and provide impetus to the movement to hybrid model of working – a combination of working from home (WFH) and working from office (WFO). As the vaccines are rolled out in the coming months of 2021, businesses would revert to the traditional methods. Many may return to their workplace, but proven advantages of working from home cannot be denied anymore.

Case for hybrid model

By now, the benefits of hybrid model must have become apparent to most companies. Here is a quick summary of the broad benefits.

		Companies	Employees
Immediate Benefits		• Increased employee productivity from time savings accrued through fewer distractions, less sick leaves, reduced commute, etc.[2]	• Comfort yet business friendly clothing and personalized workplace • Time and money saved in commuting and rental accommodation
Long-term Benefits		• Rationalization of real estate; movement from urban to semi-urban office spaces • Access to diverse talent pool based on their location, personal condition (people who couldn't be part of workforce due to child-care or elderly-care responsibilities, etc.)	• Empathetic remote working policies leading to increased employee motivation • Better work-life balance leading to reduced absenteeism

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[1] https://www.livemint.com/companies/news/govt-eases-guidelines-to-make-work-from-home-permanent-11604594622132.html

[2] https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200710-the-remote-work-experiment-that-made-staff-more-productive

The roadblocks to hybrid model

Notwithstanding the benefits, the movement to hybrid model is fraught with challenges. Apart from the obvious challenges about deploying the necessary technology infrastructure, there are 3 critical intangible challenges that needs to be dealt with.

Fostering Organization Culture

- Driving adoption of a company's culture and values, especially important for the new hires
- Physical barriers leading to loss in transparency between the customers, suppliers, and the employees

Driving Productivity

- Difficulty in monitoring productivity potentially leading to micromanagement and building mistrust among the team members
- Lesser visibility into an individual's physical and mental state, potentially leading to burnout and exhaustion

Enabling Collaboration

- Loss of informal interactions potentially hampering rapport building
- Defining ground rules for collaboration through virtual means for effective collaboration

Fig 1: Challenges towards hybrid model movement

Hybrid model – the framework

The implementation of the hybrid model framework has two parts to it – first is about enabling an individual's readiness to work remotely, and second is about enabling an organization's readiness to deploy the model.

Individual readiness

Most companies believe that employee well-being should be at the center of an organization's blueprint to deploy sustainable hybrid model. Though there are several determinants of employee well-being, there are 4 main dimensions in the context of hybrid model.
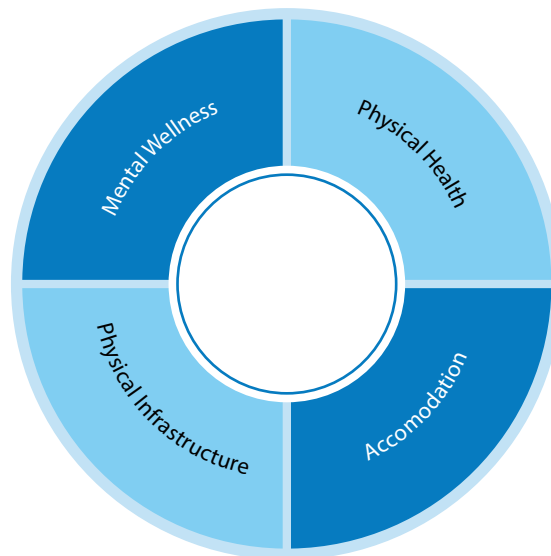

Fig 2: Individual Readiness Assessment

Mental wellness

Loss in transparency, loss of trust, or loss of social connectivity can alienate a person and lead to loneliness and mental exhaustion. This can be overcame by organizing regular direct consultation with the concerned employees without the presence of supervisors. This could involve asking questions about the work deliverables, employee connect, etc., that can act as a proactive dipstick to identify areas in which employees needs assistance. Employee engagement programs should also be conducted along with the other HR initiatives for team-building and individual wellbeing.

Physical health

Employees working from home should practice good ergonomics such as correct posture, avoidance of continuous exposure to screens, and proper eye contact with the screen at a correct height. It is also recommended to conduct workshops on muscle stretches and exercises at home.

Physical infrastructure

The employees need to be equipped with the following infrastructure to replicate a work-like atmosphere at home:

- Right spot to set up 'home office' - should be well ventilated, without direct exposure to sunlight and dampness, and equipped with good internet connectivity

- Ergonomically designed chairs and desks

- Uninterrupted power supply to avoid loss of work and even damage to the system. If the power outages are predictable, then the work and shifts should be planned accordingly, and spike busters should be provided for remote areas

- Constant security patches and upgrades, to help mitigate the risk of high levels of security threats

- Employees need to exhibit appropriate meeting etiquettes. A workshop on how to conduct the meetings online, the soft skills required, knowing the best camera angle, lighting and background, etc. should be conducted

Accommodation

If the employees living in places that are distant from the company offices (for e.g., greater than 100 kms) are expected to temporarily work from office as part of work from home/office rotation, then arranging temporary accommodation close to the company premise would be a challenge. Companies can collaborate with local businesses that can provide economical pay-per-use accommodation services.
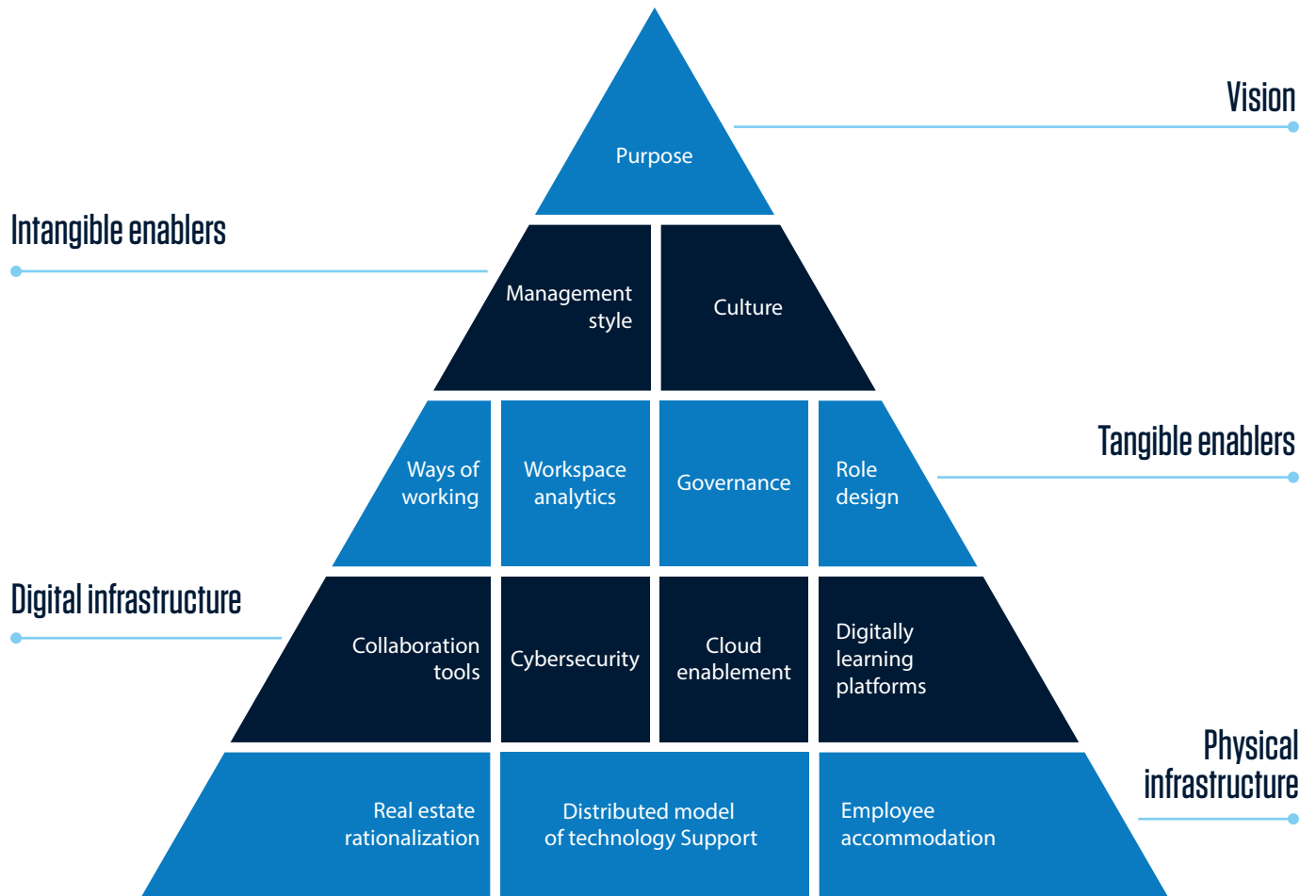
Vision

Intangible enablers

Tangible enablers

Digital infrastructure

Physical infrastructure

Purpose

Management style

Culture

Ways of working

Workspace analytics

Governance

Role design

Collaboration tools

Cybersecurity

Cloud enablement

Digitally learning platforms

Real estate rationalization

Distributed model of technology Support

Employee accommodation

Fig 3: Organizational framework for Hybrid Model

Vision

Companies will have to be flexible and open to new behaviors and practices. The volatile and interdependent nature of the world has made companies introspect about their purpose and strategy in a broader sense, touching all the stakeholders, including investors, employees, customers, suppliers, governments, and communities. The vision statement should articulate this redefined sense of purpose holistically and sharply.

Intangible enablers

This includes the management style, role design, leadership, and culture. The new management style should be trust based. Companies must transition from assessing a worker's productivity not just in terms of hours spent on screen but also in terms of outputs achieved based on clearly defining goals and continuous feedback. This drives employee accountability and self-worth. The hybrid model would require comprehensive review of the job roles in terms of role split between WFH and WFO and changes in the job definition of different roles. Roles requiring delivery from within a controlled environment

(client development center) due to client requirements or regulatory requirements or need for regular client interaction should be considered for work from office. Some of the changes in the job definition could be appraisal metrics (outcome based) and periodically taking up responsibilities for additional tasks that arise because of hybrid model. An example of such task is scheduling and facilitating governance meetings to track productivity metrics published on a digital dashboard.

Tangible enablers

This includes the remote working practices, solutions to manage office workspaces, and assessing the readiness of an individual as explained earlier. Agile working practices such as daily stand-up to review backlog, prioritize the tasks to be done, and discuss checkpoints or getting feedback from stakeholders should be followed. Employee and PC monitoring software such as Sapience Vue, TSheets and Paylocity etc. can be used to generate real-time insights on productivity. To optimize office real estate utilization, companies can deploy workspace analytics solutions to track floor occupancy, density, and automate sanitation procedures. Such solutions are

important for service industries such as IT and BPM with headcount-based billing.

Digital infrastructure

Cloud has become the bedrock of digital transformation as it is cost effective, scalable, location agnostic and helps enhance collaborative tasks. Cyber security and data privacy should focus more on creating a safer workplace at home. Online platforms should be available to employees to self-upskilling.

Physical infrastructure

Companies need to reimagine their real estate footprint. Instead of a single, large centralized workspace, companies can have a distributed model in which workspace can be a congregation of smaller geographically distributed, but virtually connected modules. This will bring the employees located in the same region closer to their clients and give the employees an alternate workplace in case of emergencies or loss of infrastructure. Companies should consider moving away from centrally located technology infrastructure (for hardware and software) management groups to Hub-Spoke-Edge model with lean

Conclusion

The abrupt change brought by a black swan coercive event such as COVID-19 has thrown some unusual surprises and benefits. The Hybrid model is one of them. If the learnings from working in the times of COVID-19 are captured and extrapolated systematically, then it can bring about workplace transformation through hybrid model.

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