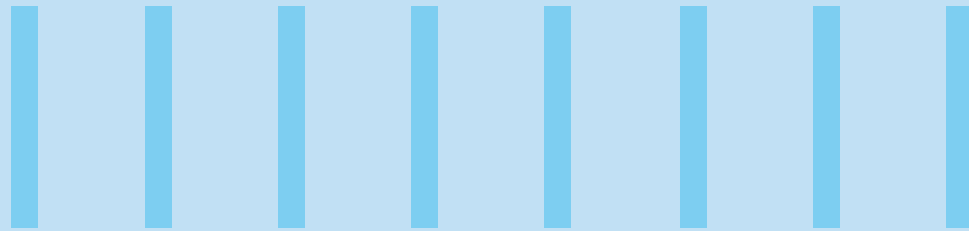




BUSINESS AS USUAL, AT HOME

Mapping the route towards permanent remote work



Abstract

While COVID-19 and its lockdowns left several sectors stranded without a workforce, it also unceremoniously pushed digitized businesses to rapidly adopt remote-working models. With several businesses now seriously considering telecommuting as a permanent possibility, this paper examines the challenges to remote work as it exists today, and how they are being overcome.



The remote way

Three months since the novel Coronavirus made its presence felt, businesses have begun trying to regain some semblance of operational normalcy. Some are in a phased process of getting their

workforce back to office – a welcome relief to some based on the poor quality of their first-time experience with remote work over the past several weeks. For others though, especially those with

jobs in a computerized environment, a variety of digital tools had already made telecommuting a preferred option of their work landscape for quite some time.

Industries that can enable remote working:

- IT Services
- BPO
- Finance
- Telecommunication
- ecommerce

Industries that cannot support remote working:

- Manufacturing
- Retail
- Healthcare
- Construction & real estate
- Transportation
- public utility operators

Granted, sectors like manufacturing, construction, real estate, and healthcare certainly did not have the luxury to even consider remote working. In fact, manufacturing units across the world –

and especially in India with its migrant workforce – relaunched physical operations just a week into the lockdown, protecting plant workers with whatever constituted ‘adequate measures’ against the virus.

Yet, in digitized occupations, remote working though not openly alluded to by interviewers and managers certainly did exist, couched in terms like ‘flexible hours,’ to be readily availed when needed.



Being always on

Until the pandemic made it a dire necessity, enterprises did not view the remote-working model with much positivity. A professor at a reputed American university labels how remote work has been perceived and what most remote workers are having to grapple with as an ‘attribution error’. Quite simply, this error translates to attributing noble reasons to an in-office worker who is unavailable, while at the same time, questioning the competency of a remote worker typically perceived as always inaccessible. A reactionary overdrive of

remote workers to being thus perceived perhaps gives rise to today’s common complaint. In an attempt at reversing the attribution error, they find themselves hooked to their phones or computers, ending up working longer hours than they would have in office.

Thus, ironically, telecommuting instead of restoring the balance between home and work, seems to have blurred their boundary lines. This realization is no mean discovery. People have always looked appreciatively at telecommuting’s benefits

of getting to the “workplace” in just a few seconds. What they perhaps did not anticipate, was being overwhelmed with other responsibilities at home, including kids. Along with managing the cognitive dissonance of having home and work lives merged, the challenges of inadequate connectivity and telecommuting technology figured alongside as well. For many, the lack of a designated office space at home in already cramped living conditions, and constant environmental distractions added to the list of woes.

Challenges faced by workers:

- Lack of proper workspaces, crowded living conditions
- Poor connectivity, broadband quality
- Blurred boundaries between work and home
- Distraction from family, Other responsibilities

Challenges faced by businesses:

- Securing permissions from client, government to enable remote work
- Security compliance
- Remote management of employees
- Shipping computers to employee homes, lack Of adequate hardware

These conditions can be seen as temporary — hoping the pandemic makes the much-

needed exit quickly — yet in case it does not, a long-term remote working policy, as

already instituted by some tech giants, is the need of the hour.

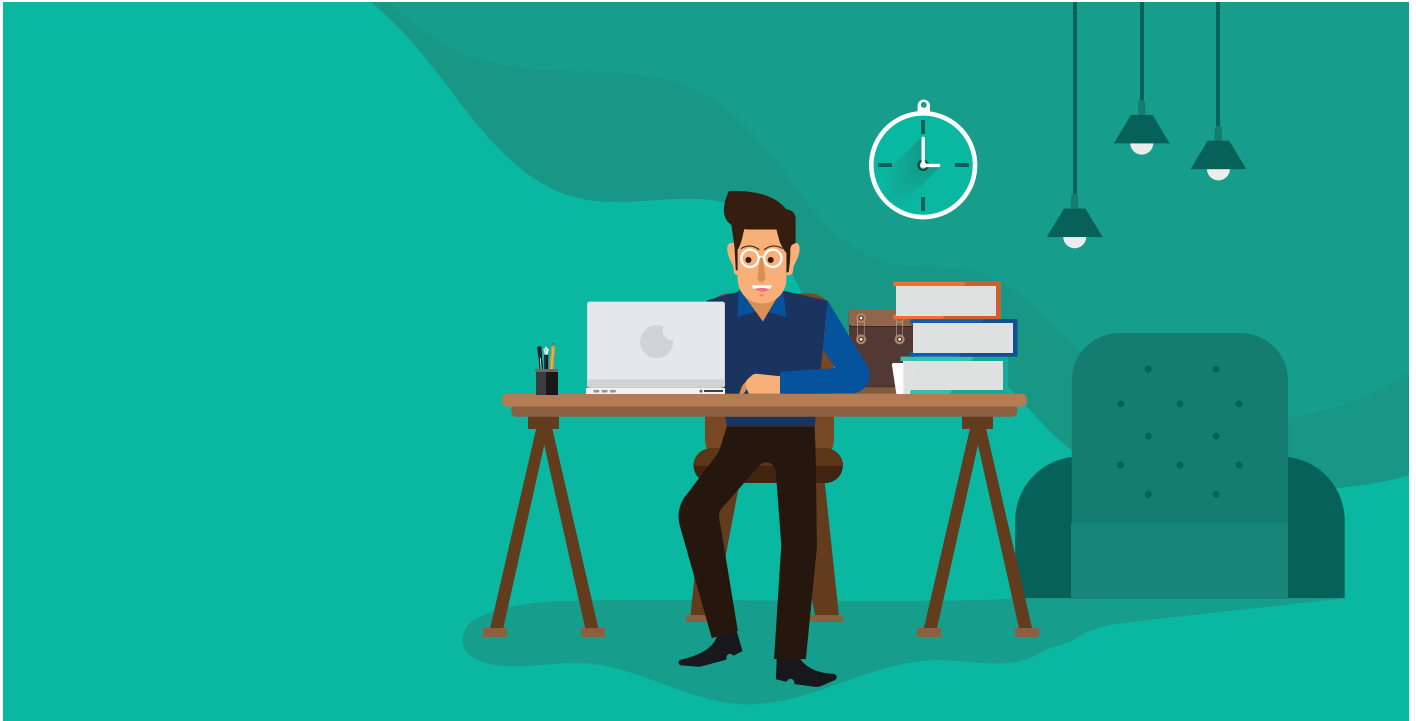
The unprecedented call to remote work in India

In late April, when the impact of COVID-19 on businesses worldwide began to emerge, it touched an exposed nerve in Indian industry. Some of the big global firms that had been offshoring their operations, began repatriating their processes and increasingly turned towards artificial intelligence (AI) to drive back-office work. This, of course, posed a threat to outsourcing hubs like India that have thrived through supporting the backend processes of multinationals – from banks in America to telecom giants in Australia. Today, India's outsourcing market is approximately worth \$52 billion, and its six major IT services companies employ almost 1.2 million people.

Thus, in an unprecedented situation, Indian IT firms struggled to setup remote access for their employees. They were addressing critical issues that could have long-term impact on their businesses. The challenges of facilitating telecommuting for employees and obtaining necessary permission from clients and the government were exacerbated by poor quality broadband, a lack of hardware, and crowded living conditions at employees' homes.

Simply put, the outsourcing industry wasn't used to functioning extensively on the remote setup. And even as industry body NASSCOM convinced the government to waive some regulations to better enable remote work, and resident IT teams worked doubly hard to ensure business continuity and information security, many employees were left without computers to work with.





Ensuring business continuity in outsourcing

As lockdowns were initiated to restrict movement and enable social distancing, IT companies swung into action by shipping desktops to the homes of employees as procuring the large number of laptops needed at short notice was a herculean task.

Infosys alone shipped around 35,000 computers in addition to enabling high speed broadband connectivity for its staff, while expanding its virtual private network bandwidth ten times over.

Another prominent IT services firm headquartered in Bengaluru built an

infrastructure model that would allow 4.5 lakh employees to work from home. It drafted a 'Secure Borderless Workspaces Framework' especially suited to the times. Other companies were setting up crisis management taskforces that briefed clients on measures being taken to ensure security and obtain approvals for remote working.

Making remote working sustainable for outsourcing firms

- Drafting a long-term remote working framework
- VPN solution for access control & data security
- Rethinking pricing models
- Decentralizing delivery centers
- Setting up crowd-testing platforms
- Powering up network infrastructure, maximizing VPN bandwidth

A key suggestion that has been bandied about, as a more permanent solution to ensuring business continuity while working from home is setting up crowd testing platforms than simply having an offshore office to handle back operations.

A crowd testing infrastructure involves curating testers from around the globe who operate remotely within embedded platforms. These personnel form a globally distributed workforce, using their own hardware, and essentially operating on a

remote-only model, ensuring speed and flexibility in delivering services. Other strategies involve rethinking pricing models to accommodate operational shifts and establishing a powerful VPN system for access control and data security.

The potential for long-term telecommuting

Until the pandemic, most businesses teetered at the edge of end-to-end digital transformation, especially when it concerned drafting and implementing serious remote-working policies. Work culture, save at a few tech companies, largely leaned towards presenteeism, which in turn, was a yardstick to measure productivity.

Now, these companies are realizing that they can function with less real estate under the remote working model, and also significantly reduce related operational costs. According to research by Global Workplace Analytics, companies can save up to \$11,000 a year per employee

if they work from home half the time. Silicon Valley giants like Microsoft, Twitter, and Facebook were among the first to encourage their workforce to connect from home. And now, they might be the last to get their employees back at the workplace, having woken up to the fact that some of their employees may not want to return to their cubicles after all.

In light of this, Twitter recently announced that while its offices will reopen when it is safe to return, it will also enable its employees to work indefinitely from home if they so choose. Others like Microsoft and Google have encouraged employees to work remotely till 2021. Facebook,

after an in-house survey found 40% of its employees interested in telecommuting permanently, announced that in ten years close to half its employees would do so.

Others have been even more ambitious. Shopify, a Canadian e-commerce platform calling itself a 'digital by default' company going forward, will have their offices closed until 2021 post which most of its workforce will work remote forever. Similarly, Upwork, a global freelancing platform, and Coinbase, an SFO-based digital currency exchange, followed suit announcing their own 'remote-first' work models.

Resources for successful remote work

New work-from-home policies involve supplying employees with resources to help them setup office spaces. Google

and Shopify have given their workforces a \$1000 stipend for essentials while Twitter has signed off on reimbursement cheques

for home office furniture, including ergonomic cushions.

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Also, to power a telecommuting model with maximum benefits, companies are adopting device-agnostic access and cloud-based remote work tools from tried-and-tested suites that offer hassle-free installation. More importantly, they are ensuring high-speed internet access for remote employees. While some have begun reimbursing internet costs, others have proactively petitioned state-level

policymakers to direct internet service providers to relax their Fair Usage Policy (FUP).

As mentioned earlier, another critical factor for businesses and their workforces to address together is the consequence of merging work and home lives. To do so, companies will need to foster an environment that respects the need for personal space, encouraging employees

to disconnect when they want to through continuous positive reinforcement.

As for organizations for whom alternate workspaces cannot be a permanent reality beyond the pandemic, the solution lies in arriving at a work culture that strikes the middle path. Perhaps the maxim to live by as we learn to co-exist with a particularly virulent virus would be to "meet only when there is a need."



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