

A SILVER LINING IN THE COVID CLOUD

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In the future, 2020 will always be remembered as the year of the pandemic. The year the world came to a grinding halt. The year that people around the world were confined to their homes, due to the threat of an unknown virus, and subsequent lockdowns. . The year that followed, 2021, will be remembered as the year of both survival and hope; the year we saw a silver lining in the form of a COVID-19 vaccine and hope for ‘normalcy’, even as the virus continued to cause uncertainty.

If there is one word to sum up both 2020 and 2021, it is “unprecedented”. Looking back, these two years have profoundly impacted our lived realities and tested our resilience. While we may have lost much during this period, we have also gained substantially – the capacity to adapt to new ways, build resilience, and face the brave new world with hope and courage. Despite the challenges, we have discovered ingenious new ways to persist – to navigate the new normal and to restore the rhythm that defines our lives and our work. Technology, and the Internet have been invaluable assets, which have allowed us to continue our work interactions and engagements remotely. A plethora of collaborative tools emerged to shoulder all the demands that arose out of the need to physically distance. In no time, “remote work” models found universal acceptance. It was incredible how, overnight, we were able to transition to new work models which had previously been unimaginable. Some organisations have since then made sweeping changes to their policies to incorporate and permanently adopt some form of remote work or flexi-work model as a part of their workplace policy.

Today, remote work has become an attractive proposition for many organisations across the board. It saves overhead costs, gives employees freedom and flexibility, there are time and cost savings – dispensing away with long commutes, reduced utility bills, in some instances completely avoiding rental expenditure and capital expenditure associated with real estate, reduced facilities management costs, flexible work hours, and greater productivity.

As per the Microsoft Work Lab’s [2021 Work Trend Index](#), , based on 30,000 people interviewed in 30 countries, over 46% of the respondents had plans to move to more suitable locations because they could work remotely, and LinkedIn saw a 5x hike in ‘remote job’ postings. Nearly 73% of the surveyed respondents wanted flexibility in their work arrangements to continue beyond the short-term. Many employers were also receptive to this shift and over 66% of the decision-makers are considering or are in the process of re-designing existing physical spaces for hybrid work. This makes it clear that hybrid work is here to stay.

Unbundling the Paycheck from the Protection : Rise of the Gig economy

Traditionally, a job meant permanent lifetime employment, along with benefits such as medical and disability insurance. This structure created a job as a liability for an entrepreneur and resulted in businesses seeking ways to get the benefits of hiring new staff without taking lifetime liability for workers. This world was disrupted by the contracting/consulting paradigm, which already changed both blue and white collar jobs starting from the 80s. I see the gig economy as the next logical step in this evolution, aided by the rise of massive online platforms.

Today, young men and women are working for digital-first companies for small assignments, or ‘gigs’, powered by platforms accessible on their smartphones powered on cheap data, such as UrbanClap, Ola, Uber, Swiggy, Zomato, Dunzo in India. These platforms connect users to suppliers of services, smoothening the processes of discovery and availability, services pricing, and rating of service providers. Work of all kinds is getting unbundled, and hence democratized. It eventually leads to employment generation and overall skill development. Several companies pay their partners, be it drivers or delivery executives or other such personnel, according to the number of deliveries or customers they serve in a day or in a month. Companies also benefit as they save on administrative and compliance costs which they would otherwise incur for a full-time worker. Not limited to blue collar delivery boys, but also white-collar jobs like editing and content generation (**Freelancer.com**), software engineering (**github.com**) and even engineering consulting (**upwork.com**)! Given the technological transformation that Indian companies are undergoing, the gig economy is bound to grow. In order to successfully utilise the gig economy as a way of engaging the rising workforce, skill sets, technological access and regulations for protection of workers have to be at the right spot.

Hybrid Work – Where do we go from here?

As the pandemic has lessened in intensity, an increasing number of employers have opened up offices and some have resumed physical operations, while others have retained the hybrid model. There are some sectors or positions where the digital IT infrastructure is sufficient for supporting remote work completely, but for others, physical presence is required, especially for things such as technology/science laboratories, hospitals, manufacturing and other sectors which require specialised infrastructure available only in a limited physical setup. We can thus expect that from here on, there will be a whole range of hybrid work models which are going to evolve – with varying degrees of support for “work-from-home”.

As the kinks get ironed out, there are some lasting benefits to having permanent hybrid models. It does the unthinkable – for the first time in human history, people do not have to move to obtain access to better opportunities. In the Indian context, this would mean that people would be able to save rent as they continued to live in their home towns – consequently also ease some of the existing pressures on the population stressed larger tier cities. This can thus be a game-changing move in terms of democratising access to opportunities and making newer opportunities available

to a larger cross-section of people. There is another advantage in that hybrid setups have catalysed the digital transformation of various private and public sector organisations, which have had to streamline their digital adoption strategies and had to expedite related IT deployment or implementation. In the long run, this is going to help organisations progress in terms of modernisation goals and positively affecting systemic efficiencies. There is evidence that the pandemic also gave a fillip to the Government's Digital India initiatives – with initiatives like the UPI, Direct Benefit Transfers, GST, etc. This indicates that we are transitioning to a more “digital service delivery” oriented government setup. There is a lot of movement to ensure that government systems and processes get fully streamlined and digitised. This will lead to ease of living and ease of doing business. As paperless and contactless systems are deployed, physical processes will be substituted with software based virtual processes contributing to greater accountability and systemic efficiency. This significant transition is in process, and lays the foundation for hybrid work becoming a viable possibility for the government offices of the future.

Traditionally, physical offices have been a necessity as it was that one place that employees had to go to, to access all the physically maintained organisational information. Physical presence was also necessary as all other employees were only available in the confines of the same physical space – thus interactions necessary to drive the organisational agenda would only be possible in the confines of office spaces. As technology has evolved, these functions have been made redundant by collaborative virtual workspaces. Now the future is here. The eventuality has come to pass - we are living with the Hybrid Work, and Life model which will be the norm in the coming years.

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