

### **Contents**

Introduction	3
The Evolving Landscape	5
Challenges	11
Renovating Work Life Design	17
Summary and Considerations	22
Appendix	24

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## Introduction

Remote working models were discussed and debated last year, and are likely to gain wider adoption globally in 2022. Going forward, most managements including some Indian companies are set to make remote work arrangements a long-term feature. This pandemic-induced shift has signaled important ramifications for the future of work in a global context, most significantly an increased bargaining power for employees despite the loss of 114 million jobs worldwide.

The NielsenIQ headed leadership roundtable of India's 20 most sterling HR leaders, strategic consultants, CEOs, corporate advisers and talent developers explored the challenges in this changing work culture, and their implication for Indian organizations. With more than two decades of experience in a variety of sectors, our panel agreed that remote work models are the next workplace revolution but implementing them depends on the way we understand our working styles and how businesses transform over time.

Remote working model, also known as work from home (WFH), includes flexible work arrangements that bypass traditional office-spaces. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, such fulltime, partial or occasional WFH arrangements gave employees a never before experienced tractability in how they work. But it also presented a complex set of challenges including the issue of decreased productivity despite increased work hours.

## Introduction

Indeed, such paradoxes have been the hallmark of WFH, where every challenge is often accompanied by corresponding advantages like flexibility, productivity or time saved from daily commute. As such, leadership teams face an uphill task of striking the right balance when it comes to WFH for their respective workforce without compromising integrity, equity and efficiency.

Our roundtable presents a management perspective to these complex questions with a view to offering the best practices that are under implementation or consideration across a wider representation of industries. Our findings reflect how leaders are approaching innovative ways to address needs and demands of an emergent talent pool in India in an agile way.



There are conversations that are happening constantly in media and outside, but when you actually sit down with CEOs of large companies, whether they are multinationals or whether they are Indians, the critical question is "hybrid is fine but how? Nobody is able to get to the how of it right now. The intent may be there.

Shalini Kamath, Founder & CEO at SK & Associates

## The evolving landscape



## The evolving landscape

Globally, work cultures have undergone a seismic shift with the advancement of the virus. Aside from unleashing an unprecedented period of grief and anguish worldwide, COVID-19 broke the myth of a brick-and-mortar office. Further, employers were forced to reckon with the human and humane aspects of everyday work life. Failure to do so is arguably one of the factors behind the "Great Resignation." This is connected to caregiver duress, and the equally important phenomenon of the rise of the white-collared gig economy. In addition, individual priorities have been reset in matters of self-care, work-life balance, mental health and fiscal stability. Here's a closer look:

#### Hybrid models at work

Organizations are exploring an entire gamut of options when it comes to flexible workspace and hours. The accent is on creating a seamless flow of work between frontline and back-end workers. The divergent approaches to remote work are outlined below:

Minimal in-office presence: This model is prevalent in the consulting, education, information and technology, real-estate, and media industries due to the nature of the work, which can be conducted over the phone and with a computer. However, most have mandated a minimum of two days in-office work week, primarily to encourage social interaction, collaboration, and culture building.



At Mr. Cooper Group, we will be moving forward as a homecentric company and will come together in person for collaboration, celebration and learning.

Arati Mohanram, Vice President, People Org India Centre, Mr. Cooper Group.

- On-site and in-office: The essential services sector with customer-facing personnel or IT operators cannot but enforce regular office hours. Sectors such as banking and finance are waiting on future technological innovations for a more flexible approach as these have practical limitations and concerns over data security. Non-profit organizations too fall under this category since outreach, face-to-face interactions and field-work are core components of the job. However. to ensure more equitability, senior and mid-level staff are returning to the office, while employees who relocated to home stations are being brought back in a phased manner.
- 3. WFH entirely: A minority of organizations in India, mostly multinationals, are offering full work from home option to their employees. Offices are open but there is no mandate for employees to return. Thus far, people are self-regulating and choosing their own time and date to work out of office. Certain organizations have allowed employees who had relocated to home stations to work out of those cities and towns.

- 4. A rotational roster: New joiners and essential teams who cannot but work from office are being asked to come to work on a rotational basis. However, companies are restricting occupancy at 25-50% on any given day due to space constraints and social distancing regulations.
- imperatives and customer needs dictate operational modes for sectors such as manufacturing and sales. Large conglomerates have entrusted local/regional management with the discretion to open offices and factories and to adapt to changing situations as they deem fit. The cardinal rule guiding all such policies has been to ensure the health and safety of workers, a full vaccination drive, and no layoffs.

## Vulnerable cohorts, or the "she-cession"

The most socially relevant phenomenon to emerge out of the pandemic has been the "she-cession." Women, across the globe including India, especially those who are less-skilled and low-paid workers, have suffered the greatest income loss. Experts have claimed that the pandemic has entirely destabilized the last generation's strides toward economic gender parity. Beyond pandemic-induced lay-offs, the task of balancing professional commitments with caregiving responsibilities and household chores put immense duress on women's performance and mental health as these tasks are generally shouldered by women. In India, middle-class women faced drastic changes when established support systems of domestic workers and school disappeared overnight due to the

lockdowns. Further, even in white-collared jobs, women tend to undertake more unpaid or ignored labor even at work such as connecting with overwhelmed or/and sick juniors and team-members. A recent study found that women are 60% more likely to take on this "office housework" than men, simply on account of their gender. Hence,

while both men and women have strong apprehensions over performance evaluation and future career advancements in a WFH model, women are especially wary of negative appraisals. As such, they have a constant fear of missing in-person relationship building opportunities and the consequent loss of social capital.



I think when the woman is at home it is expected of her to put food on the table, unless and until she is somebody who argues against it and negotiates to be in better place. But this is an automatic assumption in our country. I have had somebody in my team quit because her caregiving responsibility expanded. Maybe it was the last straw on her back, but yes, I do think it is disproportionate on women and it has always been.

Kripa Krishnamoorthy, Director HR, Citibank

## Rise of the white-collared gig economy

People able to work from home took the plunge and experimented as freelancers during the pandemic. The "gig economy" gives individuals access to increased autonomy and control over their working hours, income, and nature of work. It has created a nimble workforce that is not afraid to jump ship should management fail to listen. This is aggravated by the fact that first world companies, especially in the technology and media domains, are outsourcing work to India. It is an unprecedented phenomenon, which has de-glorified the traditional day job. Employees wield the power now to juggle multiple contracts without sacrificing family or alone time. Whether this increased bargaining power is here to stay is yet to be seen, but for now our companies and organizations are having to reckon with a very agile talent landscape.



People who are 20 years younger than me are contemplating, 'Can I work in three-four different organizations at the same time and yet have my own time?' When you have the option of working with more than one organization, then you can get the flavor of the kind of work that is going around in the industry, so the learning is a lot more. Five years back, the gig economy was only available to the tech sector, today it has opened up. We can make something out of this situation and not just survive but thrive. I think that should be the outlook.

Anu Ghosh, Independent Insurance Consultant and President of Women's Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (WICCI)

## Informal working style

Several months of working remotely under successive waves of the pandemic has also led to cost-saving and inertia. Both management and employees are looking at reduced commuting hours and attendant overhead costs. Dress codes and relationships for some have been reimagined and despite the decline in face-to-face conversations, colleagues have dropped the formal mode of conduct.

## The "Family" restructured

The family unit underwent a major upheaval after the pandemic's onset, and companies have had to come to terms with the fact that employees across the spectrum have suffered psychological, health as well as fiscal crisis, sometimes all at the same time. Child and eldercare had significant mental health impacts on individuals, forcing managements to restructure expectations on an "as and when" policy. However, it has not been an unmitigated disaster. Our discussion affirmed that the pandemic introduced a one-of-a-kind opportunity for fathers to bond with their children and spend quality family time. Men in India are beginning to prefer this new work-life balance over a fiveday work week. Single employees too have realized that selfcare, health, and work-life balance are the new standards of well-being. Therefore, for the first time a new kind of talent base with radically different metrics of success confronts HR and management teams in India.



In this historic moment, company adaptability is key to the survival of both organization and talent. The challenges are overlapping and interconnected, and therefore, solutions may take a while to appear.

#### Creating a level playing field:

heads were unanimous that creating and retaining a level playing field is essential. Women are opting out of the workforce because of systemic chinks, such as underwhelming support facilities for parents and working couples. This is both a cultural and infrastructural problem that companies alone cannot solve. According to some views, there is fear that women-specific policies will create an inequitable environment in an already compressed situation. Second, in an unstable economy, businesses are looking to stabilize before any radical long-term measures can be implemented. On the other hand, treating women employees as a monolithic cohort might be concerning. Therefore, it is strongly advisable that HR avoids generalization.



For a lot of women, fulfilment as a professional, only comes from being at work, at a physical office.

Shilpa Ajwani, Founder & CEO at unomantra.

On-site and off-site work equity: The issue of a fair and balanced work environment is tied to the critical question of performance measurement metrics. How should a company measure performance of a WFH employee with that of their inoffice counterpart? While employers are skeptical of the WFH-productivity relationship, employees themselves fear lack of recognition of their labor when they work remotely. Further. working remotely is mostly an option for knowledge workers, services, or backend office teams. This has been a cause of concern for it can widen the social and digital gap.

#### **Culture versus Covid:**

1. Mental health: Scrapping the brickand-mortar office erases the space to develop human bonds. In 2020-21, the world faced a pervasive and exceptional sense of isolation. WFH also led to an unhealthy blurring of boundaries between work and personal space. The long-term impact on the social fabric of such selfisolation and unwholesome work habits or expectations is a matter of concern for HR heads.

#### 2. Presenteeism and visibility:

Organizations are having to rethink their understanding of success, results, reward and remuneration within a new framework, but it is taking time. Indian work culture is marked by a presenteeism attitude and there is a reluctance to give employees autonomy over their work. Global MNCs, who were already working over cloud, had experience in remote work, and had robust processes in place. They were comparatively faster in shifting the focus to mental health and forging stronger organization culture. For Indian companies including the larger groups, these concerns are not at the forefront. They are more intent on reinstating and reverting to office spaces and hours.

At least in India, a large group of companies have been used to the input-based way, say eight-to-five, or eight-to-eight, or eight-to-twelve, depending upon wherever they come from. So, for the switch to happen to just "output," where I am only going to look at what you have delivered at the end of it and nothing else, is a different mindset. So that requires a full change. Do I see it happening? In the newer economy, yes, they may pick that up and work on that. As to the older economy, the hard-core companies, my own sense is they will go back to the traditional way of working, with some minor modifications here and there, which would be more optical rather than whole lot of genuine intent.

Shalini Kamath, Founder & CEO at SK & Associates

- 3. Last mile implementation: Even though certain organizations want to adopt progressive solutions and policies regarding mental health, performance metrics, and flexibility, such efforts lose significance down the corporate ladder or don't get implemented by frontline managers. This is highly likely for large conglomerates and companies with units distributed across the country.
- 4. Dilution of organizational culture: While technology enables global participation and connections, it lacks the human touch that is needed to foster company values and culture. New recruits, especially the millennials, have skipped conventional immersion activities and have consequently built no connection to the leadership that is necessary for motivating, inspiring, and upskilling new talent. In the absence of in-person training and guidance, new joiners are struggling to get a handle on company expectations and norms. This disconnect with senior team members and a lack of cohesion and camaraderie have created a floating population of talent that is keen to quit if they feel unseen or unfulfilled.

The immersion into the system of those who are fresh out of an MBA school is extremely weak; they don't feel part of the community or culture. Their first job experience has severely limited their potential under lockdown because they do not really understand how jobs are to be performed. Second, theirs seem to be a revolving door policy because the talent deficit is so high. This is a worry for me because I do not see a long-term prospect. Third, we need leadership to motivate and inspire us to upskill.

Monica Jasuja, Head Of Product Management, Mobile Financial Solutions at Comviva

5. Innovation and efficiency: Employees want the traditional brainstorming sessions around the proverbial water cooler. Phone calls and zoom sessions are too regulated for spontaneous ideating over new products and processes or problem-solving. Further, they resent the time wasted on calling, coordinating, and cross-checking with a scattered team. At the same time, "work introverts" have been arguably more productive as they enjoyed the cocooned environments at home. However, there is general consensus that virtual coordination and communication can be an inefficient way to conduct business in terms of time and energy.

At office, typically around 6 pm, we gang up in one of our rooms and most of the strategy happens there, in more of a fun conversation over a coffee. That is where we connect, very casually. We call it low-quality conversation with high-quality people.

Soma Maitra, Vice President & Head-Innovation & Incubation, Grocery Retail Business, Reliance Retail

In the tech industry, people with deep technical goals, prefer to work alone and for extended periods of time. This is not to say that interaction is not required, but when you are trying to solve a deep technical problem, you experience repeated interruptions if you are at office. You don't have that when you are working from home. So, what we saw was a jump in productivity and much more job satisfaction.

Reena Dayal, CEO at Benzaiten Advisors LLP

#### Infrastructure:

- are a matter of concern across the board, but especially in the financial sector.

  Banks, consultancies, and other segments simply cannot take the risk of allowing a hybrid model until technology catches up. Further, fundamentals are lacking to support customer-care operations in some sectors with clients complaining about time lags, poor service, and security concerns.
- 2. Childcare: There is a growing conversation around the world that is asking governments to consider childcare and other caregiving amenities as infrastructure since it buttresses economic activity. There are only a few countries in the world that can boast of a robust childcare system. Most including India lack affordable, trained, and registered childminders and daycares. However, Southeast Asian countries such as South Korea, Singapore, and Pakistan belonging

to the South Asia region are beginning to take cognizance of these drawbacks and funding a variety of monetary and mental health initiatives. Policy measures for quality childcare will enable women from all sections of India to optimize and actualize their potential, and above all, will be a long-term investment in economic progress.

#### Money matters:

Affordability: The conversation around the financial health of businesses has been ignored. For both start-ups and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), generating profit is crucial for stakeholder engagement, growth, and equally importantly, welfare and increment packages for employees. Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) form a sizeable portion of the Indian economy, contributing to 37.54% of the GDP. However, according to one of our roundtable participant Shilpa Ajwani, they are comparatively less sensitive about issues like organizational culture and processes, and are

also not as employee friendly as larger companies. Mid-level and small companies in India also lack the technological knowhow, skills, tools, data bases, scales, customers, and monetary cushion that is required to restructure operations for remote work options. Consequently, the hybrid model would be unsustainable and unaffordable if clear HR policies are not executed.

The challenge I am facing in my own small start-up is that you cannot have a team which is distributed globally because the collaboration required is much higher. So, I don't think that very small companies or start-ups or lower medium-size company are really going to look at a hybrid and work from home only model. They might have everyone on-site. This may differ a bit depending on the nature of product and services of the startup"

Reena Dayal, CEO at Benzaiten Advisors LLP



Companies and organizations in India are working overtime to respond to the challenges of income generation, employee job satisfaction, and health safety measures. However, for those who adopt a hybrid model of work constant and clear communications led by leadership will be the founding blocks for all future technologies, infrastructure, and HR policies.

Segmented and individualized policies:

While some companies have instituted blanket WFH policies for their working mothers, others are trying to help middle-management women with daycare and travel accommodations. Yet others are opting for more customized solutions as they understand that no one woman reacts to opportunities in the same way. Indeed, the last is vital for creating equitable opportunities as well as benefits in a hybrid work model. And, to avoid a

presumptive approach by HR, some companies are asking individual women to openly voice concerns and have those important conversations with their management regarding caregiving duties, career opportunities, and impact on performance assessment and appraisals in a flexible work mode. Second, while a radically different approach to women and work requires a cultural and behavioral shift in both the sexes, it will do good to eschew the idea of women as primary caregivers when formulating policies. Hence. HR function in certain companies is trying to engage employees, especially men, in conversations around the gendered nature of household chores and encourage equal division of duties. In addition, companies are looking to technological innovations to help women upskill, irrespective of location, and integrate such training programs into company policy.

Performance management: Our panel drew on their lifelong insight into Indian organizational culture where performance and appraisal metrics are based on timesheets, data, and activity hours, to suggest that the time has come to shift towards a more qualitative result-oriented approach. Whether remote or otherwise, HR heads are instituting training programs for management and advising leaders and employees to jointly and continually re-tune key performance indicators (KPIs). The pandemic has revealed that soft skills such as risk management, role-modeling and compassion are necessary yardsticks for a more holistic measure of results. Further. companies are aware that policies often become diluted as they percolate down the chain of command. In the matter of covid regulations, directives were clearly articulated and enforced even in more federally structured organizations. The same attitude needs to be adopted when it comes to progressive metrics of success and achievements.

3. Enhancing managerial capabilities: The above problems are insolvable without a sensitized C-suite management. The broad consensus is that the pandemic induced a paradigmatic shift in the definition of management and leadership. Given the direct correlation between working from home and productivity of employees.

Further, for progressive policies to be successful, it is imperative to curtail gaps between praxis and policy as well as communications from line managers and senior leadership through frequent and constant feedbacks. As such robust feedback mechanisms from employees are also being sought to enable actionable problem-solving.

We should evaluate the emotional quotient (EQ) of top leaders and borrow from the behavioral sciences to reinvent leadership that is more empathetic, emulates positive role modelling, and has a more reasonable approach to crises.

Anu Ghosh, Independent Insurance Consultant and President of Women's Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (WICCI)

We are looking for more grit, tenacity and resilience in our employees and with that empathy. Emotional quotient is also becoming increasingly important in all contexts. We have introduced to a limited extent a detailed psychometric assessment when we hire people at leadership levels, as well as basic levels, to get a snapshot of the person. Internally, we are looking at training programs that will train our leaders to work in a hybrid set-up.

Nimisha Rana Pathak, Director HR at Alvarez & Marsal

- Fostering company culture: Some strategies to transmit company culture and values to new recruits include more frequent touch points between new joiners and headship, involving them in exciting projects, introducing a "buddy" at work, and of course platforms such as Yammer chat, Slack channels, Teams, and Notion. These measures have had considerable success in building credibility and connections both horizontally and vertically in organizations. Leaders also need to role model the ethics and principles they want to see. And for that an effective mechanism is needed to assess the values that are "sticking" and those which fall to the wayside.
- 4. Innovation and brainstorming: To circumvent an uninspiring virtual world, companies have begun to adopt an opendoor policy to sourcing ideas, gamifying brainstorming processes, and conducting regular events to prompt creative engagement such as improv activities.

While such activities are meeting with limited success, they are undoubtedly prompting the technological and innovation sector to develop better products for a world in and beyond the pandemic.

Most of the tech companies, which are working on collaboration products, are actually focusing their next generation products and even current generation products on hybrid working model. So their predictions are that this is here to stay in some form or the other. And as we move forward, technology will become an even better enabler.

Reena Dayal, CEO at Benzaitan Advisors LLP



## **Summary**

#### **Favorable Outcomes**

- More control over work hours and assignments.
- Increase in productivity and focus without interruption.
- Able to stay safe, stay connected to children and loved ones.
- Cost saving when it comes logistical overheads, reduced traffic hours, real estate.
- Able to stay employed or increase income through the gig economy.

#### **Undesired Outcomes**

- Unhealthy work ethos: blurred lines between workspace and personal life leading to increased work hours.
- Negative impact on productivity due to caregiving and added responsibilities at home.
- Lack of social and spontaneous brainstorming and innovation.
- Isolation and sleep deprivation and other deteriorations in mental health.
- "She-cession" and "The Great Resignation."

 Rise in social differences in society by creating a digital and technological divide.

#### **Impediments**

- There are contradictory trends regarding productivity, be it women, caregivers or work introverts.
- India lacks the support system for SMEs to go remote.
- Better technological advancements are required to enhance virtual collaboration.
- Presenteeism, trust issues, and inputbased metrics are contrary to the new ethos.

#### **Bridging Gaps**

- Recalibrate performance metrics and orient them towards output and results.
   Also, include soft skills as well as wellness to measure performance.
- Visibility should not be equated with dispensability of employees.

- Equity demands that no single cohort be treated exclusively. HR must create level playing fields by outlining individualized policies for vulnerable cohorts.
- Transform managers into leaders through better selection and research-based training programs, so that they understand and act on the psychological aspects of team management.
- 'Consult/discuss,' and not 'tell/inform' should be the approach for formulating caregiver centric WFH policies.
- Understand caregiving responsibilities as infrastructure that facilitate economic progress. Take this discussion to the larger public.
- Be intentionally inclusive when it comes to vulnerable cohorts and new joiners.
- Curtail gaps between praxis and policy and prevent dilution of briefings from line managers and senior leadership.
- Frequent and constant feedbacks on policies and performance between management and employees.

## For Employer's Consideration

While the virus has actualized what was only wishful thinking for some, namely "a work, out of anywhere" culture, the option will be enshrined in company policies sooner rather than later. Indeed, for large Indian companies and organizations, local culture will be an important factor in pushing the dial towards a flexible work-life balance. Policies will need constant shapeshifting, monitoring, and improvements to ensure fair play, equal opportunity and equal visibility. The HR function everywhere is working overtime to make the future pandemic proof as is the Indian government, which is contemplating a legal framework for new models of work. While this threatens to outstretch resources, companies should take solace in the fact that innovations in architecture, communication, transportation, as well as interior design are already underway to enable the transition into remote work modes of the future.

It might also be worthwhile for companies to note that these shifts are occurring at the precipice of what a report by The Future Laboratory has labelled, "The Transformative Twenties." We are entering a decade where the pursuit of mindfulness and "pleasure, inactivity, and the desire to live ordinarily are equally valid metrics of living." Employees and consumers are increasingly rejecting busyness and want transparency, empathy, and a more carbon-neutral lifestyle. Hence, it seems that COVID-19 merely fast-tracked an adjustment that is already mandated in the next lifestyle revolution.

## **Appendix**

## Roundtable Participants

Anjali Gulati Founder & CEO People Connect	Anu Ghosh President WICCI - Insurance Council   Founder - Insurtech Buddies Community	Arati Mohanram Vice President- People Org India Centre at Mr. Cooper Group	Ashish Anand Chief Human Resources Officer at SAR Group of Companies	
Elsa Marie D'Silva Founder - Red Dot Foundation	Kripa Krishnamoorthy Director HR, Citibank	•		
Rajesh Srivastava Chief Human Resources Officer at Capital Foods Private Limited	Reena Dayal CEO at Benzaiten Advisors LLP	Ruhie Pande Chief Human Resources Officer at Godrej Housing Finance & Godrej Fund Management	Satyajit Mohanty CHRO @Crompton Greaves Consumer Electricals Ltd.	
Shalini Kamath Founder & CEO at SK & Associates	Shazia Fazal Director DTH & Telecom Partnerships at Discovery Communications	Shilpa Ajwani Founder & CEO at unomantra	Soma Maitra Vice President & Head-Innovation & Incubation, Grocery Retail Business, Reliance Retail	
Sonali Gupta Psychotherapist, Author of Anxiety (HarperCollins)	Sunita Wazir Senior Manager, Global Wellbeing At Unilever	Swati Datye Executive Vice President & Head, Employee Experience, Talent Acquisition, Talent Mgmt, D&I, Campus at RBL Bank		

## **Appendix**

## NielsenIQ Team

Sandhya Vishal Vice President Legal	Funda Kalemci Global Leader Diversity & Inclusion	Supriya Shashidhar Executive Director Global lead, Qualitative
Mahima Chadha Product Leader Retail Intelligence	Deepshikha Shahi Director Analytics Sales	Sujata Chatterjee Director
Anupriya Deepak Associate Director Communications	Sweta Agrawal Associate Director Retail Intelligence	Kavita Joshi HR, Learning and Development Lead MEA
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#### **About NielsenIQ**

Arthur C. Nielsen, who founded Nielsen in 1923, is the original name in consumer intelligence. After decades of helping companies look to the future, we are setting the foundation for our future by becoming NielsenIQ. We continue to be the undisputed industry leaders as evidenced by our experience and unmatched integrity. As we move forward, we are focused on providing the best retail and consumer data platform, enabling better innovation, faster delivery, and bolder decision-making. We are unwavering in our commitment to these ideals and passionate about helping clients achieve success. For more information, visit: niq.com