

# A workspace to fit the 'Century of the Mind'

As the nature of work changes, shouldn't the office environs keep pace? NIIT shares its vision

CHITRA NARAYANAN

A sculpture greets you at the entrance to NIIT's headquarters at Gurugram — a man in a thinking pose on a giant chess board, a play on Rodin's *The Thinker*. Even as you are admiring it, an abstract painting of a man gazing reflectively at a chess piece catches the eye.

NIIT chairman Rajendra Pawar is fond of saying that this is the century of the mind and these pieces of art all fit into that vision.

Pawar is now enthusiastically engaged in changing the Mohit Gujral-designed NIIT workplace that was created in 2005. He feels the way of working has changed so much in the intervening 15 years that the office needs a total overhaul — even though the existing workplace is fairly modern and quite an open set-up.

The NIIT chairman, who has a rather cerebral vision of everything, explains the changes in working style in two ways — practically and philosophically.

First, the philosophical view which, aptly enough, has scientific underpinnings to it.

Every era, Pawar says, is either dominated by bits (mind/knowledge related work) or atoms (physical science related). The Middle Ages were all about atoms, the Renaissance era, which was about art and culture, was centred around bits (creating things with mind), the Industrial era was all about

atoms, the post industrial era started moving into bits and for a while there was equal emphasis on both. "From the middle of the last century is when the engagement with bits really started picking up. Currently the engagement with bits is increasing further and further," says Pawar.

A very big pressure changing the workspace today is the exploding volumes of information (bits) everywhere. Every employee is coping with huge information. "We are anyway a company that is in the knowledge space but even those that are not are processing huge information," he says.

The other thing he points to is a systemic deflation of use of some traditional things, like owned cars (caused by Uber), hotel rooms (Airbnb). In the workspace, this translates into use of canteens (now people like to be at food courts or more Starbucks-like lounges), use of desks and chairs (more informal seating is prevalent now).

Moving into the practical side of it, Pawar says that the nature of change today is very different.

And the pace of change is accelerating. This has impact on the kind of work being done, and the work roles.

Having sold the technology part of the business, NIIT is now fully focused on skilling and training.

It was also growing out of space with the number of staff growing.

"But did we need to add more seating? No," says



Before and after NIIT as it was (left) and the re-imagined workspace; sculpture suggesting Rodin's *The Thinker* (left bottom)

Pawar, describing the work style of his CEO Sapnesh Lalla who travels most of the time and, when he is at the Gurugram HQ, uses the dining table on the top floor. "Sapnesh works more and more out of his computer."

The difference in work style is also in the way of communication and connectedness, all of which has happened thanks to technology, says Pawar, digressing to remind you of the Superphone intercom ad — "If you want to talk, you don't have to walk." The largest chunk of meetings are short review huddles — now more of that can happen on phone or video.

### The physical changes

The blueprint for the re-imagined office layout is ready — the new design focuses on aesthetics, comfort, flexibility and community.

Currently there are glass cabins on all four sides of a large hall filled with workstations. But the workstations all

have five-feet-high partitions that give privacy but also inhibit communication and collaboration.

In the new plan, the partitions are all coming down, and at the end of each long work table cluster there will be an AV unit, for a team member who might want to make a presentation. At the other end of the table is a small sofa in case two or three team members want a quick chat.

At the centre of the hall will be a Starbucks-style collaboration area with sofas in funky colours, and a lounge-style pantry. The space can also be used by employees to have meetings or simply as an alternative place to work, with bean bags and lounge chairs.

As for the glass cabins on the sides, most are being taken down — in their place will be fun meeting areas. The old command and control style of management has totally changed to a collaborative community style. "Less



command and control you are, the more meeting rooms you need — you are now co-creating things," says Pawar.

The ceilings will have interesting designs and the halls will have vertical gardens that could be used as screens or curtains or flexible walls. Nature contact is an important part of the new design with the outdoor brought in through plants and natural lighting.

All the latest in office technologies — automated systems for pantry, visitors, wireless interactive systems for audio visual, sit-stand desks — will come in. "One important change is that it looks emptier but can accommodate more people," says Pawar.

### The future office

It all looks beautiful. But how long before the next change in office layout will have to be ushered in? Will there be a radical change in work habits in the next ten years, warranting another re-design?

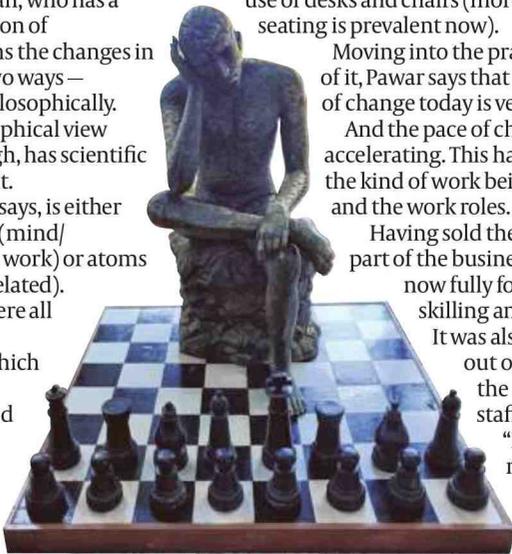
Pawar feels

this design may last because it is flexible — you can use many of the spaces in multiple ways and innovations like collapsible partitions allow for changes.

"In the next ten years, I certainly will not need to add more space. That's because the nature of millennials is that they are in and out people. In and out of jobs, in and out of home, in and out of relationships.. Besides, the 24/7 work culture may change and we may get back to downtime without communication from work. Also, things have a way of coming back full circle, a lot of the sustainable practices at offices today

— no plastic cups or bottles. First we had, 'bring your own device, then bring your own mug. And then to save the employee from bringing their own mug, we gave them mugs with the company branding.'

Final thoughts: Trust in the workplace will become a very important attribute in the workplace of the future. More the trust, more the openness possible, he says.



NIIT chairman Rajendra Pawar