

# Future of work fast-forwarded with VR meetings, job sharing

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A global pandemic has already brought about seminal changes in the way we work. It is now also altering the future of work. Some Indian companies are trying out augmented reality to improve virtual office meetings. This would mean participants can wear headsets and see a remote conference room, move around that room and do many of the things that were earlier possible during a face-to-face meeting. Except a handshake.

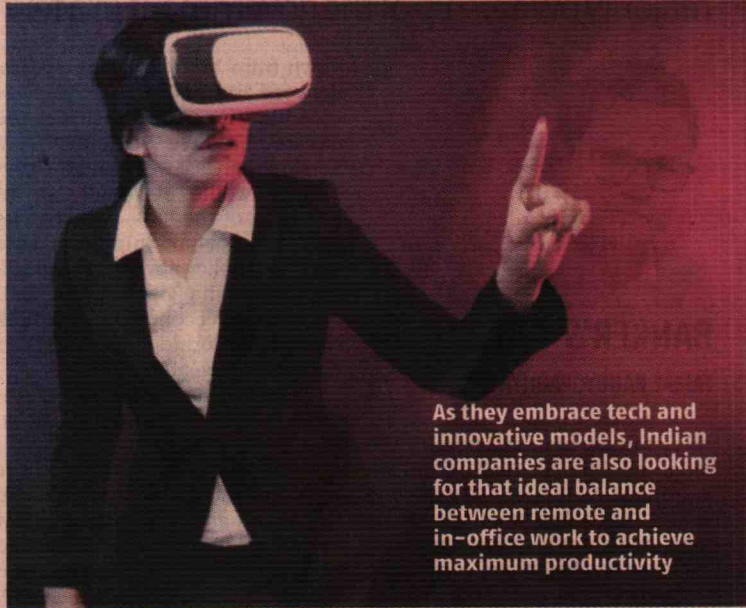
Other, far-reaching changes are also underway. From the start of 2021, a well-known services firm has been experimenting with “job share”, where two equally qualified people are hired for the same job. This allows each person reduced and flexible work hours.

Many large companies have also begun vacating prime office space in major Indian cities in the belief that future work needs will most likely not necessitate the presence of all employees in the office at the same time.

Some others are employing artificial intelligence (AI) and other tech tools to make warehousing, for example, free of human intervention. One manufacturing company has ensured remote visibility of its blast furnaces so that human intervention is essential only in the case of a breakdown.

From corporate offices to shopfloors, from vendor meetings to client servicing, Indian companies are — just like some big Wall Street firms — debating the pros and cons of remote working and looking for that ideal balance between remote and in-office work to achieve maximum productivity.

Some like Krish Ashok, global head, Digital Workplace at TCS, are of the view that work from home (WFH) may not be a permanent solution for everyone. “WFH is one of the tools in an arsenal that includes physical workspace. We can debate how much is ideal: 50:50, 25:75. It will depend on the organisation and the kind of job role,” he says. “Innovation requires empathy and face-to-face communication. Collaborative creativity requires you



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to jam with people. A video screen is not the way to do it at all.”

Physical meetings certainly help in fostering team spirit, developing better collaboration, enabling greater exchange of ideas wherein understanding of the body language is critical, agrees Atrayee Sarkar, vice-president HR Management, Tata Steel. Doing so in a digital environment has its challenges.

Ashok of TCS points to one: middle managers began micro-managing employees at work since they were not physically present to monitor their teams. “But the assumption was that if the managers heard nothing from employees on the personal front, everything was okay. We had to change both assumptions in opposite directions. Managers needed to be less micro-managerial about work but more (cued in) about employees’ personal issues.”

The hybrid work model has also brought about other changes. Take Maruti Suzuki India, which has, for long, been guided by the Japanese parent’s strict code of traditional working with a fixed office seating pattern: the boss would sit at the head of the table and everyone else in a team had fixed seats. This is changing, with the com-

pany now allowing flexi-seating, even for the boss, “like IT companies”. Also, seating capacity at its offices may not be expanded in the near future even if hiring picks up.

“Only 20-25 per cent people come to the office on any given day now. We are also considering flexibility in office timing,” says Rajesh Uppal, member, Executive Board (HR, IT, Safety and Digital Enterprises) at Maruti.

Tata Steel has deployed a workforce modularisation concept called “POD” to manage the shopfloor. POD divides the workforce into self-sufficient groups comprising operation and maintenance personnel, including contractors, to limit chances of exposure while restricting inter-POD interactions. It also provides a digital interface for several other functions, including B2C retail customers and a supply chain visibility platform for automobile customers.

Going forward, WFH may become a small portion of the “future of work”. Shanthi Naresh, career business leader at asset management firm Mercer, points out that “the question we need to answer is what are technology, economics, politics and demography doing to the nature of work, the worker and

the workplace.” Take the case of gig workers. A large tyre manufacturing company, which employed gig workers even before the pandemic, has expanded this workforce. “The automobile industry is witnessing significant shifts in technology (electric vehicles) and consumer preference towards design and styling of vehicles. In these instances, a workforce with highly specialised skills is required and some of that can be gig workforce. This trend has got accelerated,” says an HR consultant.

With the workplace flexibility model, companies are now also beginning to take a hard look at employee compensation. Google, for instance, has launched a platform called “Work Location Tool” for some geographies, for employees to calculate how much their pay or earnings will be if they decide to relocate and work remotely. The calculation is based on the cost of living of the place. Employers may offer workplace flexibility in a tradeoff with reduced compensation and employees may find the equation advantageous, too.

Sarkar of Tata Steel says the concept of physical presence lost relevance for 40-50 per cent of the company’s workforce last year. “We have shifted our Delhi office from its prime location to the Tata Steel BSL office, where we implemented a shared workspace model. Similarly, in Mumbai, we are giving up one office space and consolidating our workspace requirement.”

In a recent Aon Pulse survey of 250 companies, about 30 per cent said they were exploring return to office, says Roopank Chaudhary, partner and chief commercial officer (India & South Asia) at Aon. “Around 18 per cent don’t expect more than 50 per cent of employees to return to an office setting even after the pandemic is over, while 30 per cent don’t expect more than 75 per cent of employees to come to office,” says Chaudhary. “At the same time, one-third of the companies are expecting employees to come to office and be onsite for two or three days a week.”

Considered decisions or trial-and-error methods — in a time as uncertain as now, there’s only one thing that holds out, and that’s: to each his own.