

The work-life post-COVID-19: From collision to integration

As we move toward a new year, there is an impending need to find a healthier way to work, making necessary adjustments not just at home to accommodate work, but also at work, factoring in the varying circumstances employees live in and how they are impacted as they work from home

By **Bhavna Sarin**

*'If your time to you is worth savin'
And you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'*

These lines come from a very popular song called 'For the times they are a-changin', by Bob Dylan.

If you are incessantly busy convincing colleagues, leaders, and employees that 'this phase is temporary and we will get back to normalcy', dear stranger, consider this a wake-up call, because the times, *they are a-changing!*

In a recent global survey by Blind, a verified anonymous professional network, on being asked if individuals were able to separate work from home life effectively, the responses revealed that 62 percent of professionals are not able to separate work from home life effectively, and the statistics were higher for



well-established organizations - 71 percent of professionals at Apple are not able to separate work from home life effectively, the corresponding percentage for both Google and Microsoft stands at 72 percent. It's time to zoom out and look at the bigger picture and acknowledge that you need to not just bring in technology to enable workflows but you need to change and manage expectations, mindsets, and culture to move forward.

It's been over seven months and the year is coming to an end, employers can no longer emphasize that work and life have collided and we have to get used to it no matter how one impacts the other, instead, they need to address the issue and find a more healthy and productive manner to proceed into the coming year, being cognizant of how we want work and home life to look like and make the necessary adjustments not just

at home to accommodate work, but also at work, factoring in the varying circumstances employees live in and how they are impacted as they work from home.

There is an urgent need to make work-life post-COVID-19 such that we can succeed and grow professionally as well as personally, without compromising either.

What's changing and what stays the same

"I believe that the key pillars or core components of healthy work-life balance will not neces-

In a post-pandemic world, people will look for organizations and leaders to take more responsibility for their holistic well-being and build a culture of trust and equality

sarily change post-COVID-19. The pillars continue to be awareness, discipline, and conscious prioritization. As an organization, we prioritize the overall well-being of our employees over anything else. Therefore, in such a situation, most of our critical decisions are driven by employees themselves!" shared Sushant Patnaik, Head-HR at Aeris Communications. He added that the organization has given one-day compulsory off every month (in addition to leaves and holidays) to continuously remind employees to keep their work-life and health in balance.

Dr. Gaurav Hirey, Founder & CEO, GoEvals brings forth another aspect in his article on "Intelligent Tools: The secret sauce to a successful hybrid workplace". He believes that the term 'work-life' balance is going to take a whole new meaning. "The future is essentially going to be about 'work-life merge' and 'hybrid' workplaces." In essence, a shift in how and where work is done. One such organization that has been quick to adapt to a shift in working styles in the face of the pandemic is Tata Steel. Last month, the India-based steel manufacturer announced a new work model that allows employees to work from home for up to 365 days a year. The new Agile Working Models' policy is a move toward a "trust and outcome-based working culture" and to give more flexibility to its employees, stated the company.

The outlook to enable and empower a geographically distributed workforce is gaining momentum. STL's CHRO, Anjali Byce shared her thoughts on this approach, "Confucius said, "the key to success is often the ability to adapt". These wise words are relevant in our current context; with many roles moving to a 'Work from anywhere' – WFA (not just home)! 'Adaptability' truly is the key ingredient for a healthy and productive work-life integration- Consciously build boundaries between work and life, prioritize to get disproportionate results, practicing mindfulness, and retaining hobbies are the secret sauce! It's also important to reflect on how WFA

has ironically resulted in work-life balance. Today, one can meet multiple customers/ stakeholders across the globe – all in a day's work- each hour different geography!"

Beyond working models, what's also critical to shaping work-life post-COVID is employee expectations. Highlighting prevalent employee expectations, Accenture India's Managing Director and Lead for Human Resources, Lakshmi C. said, "In a post-pandemic world, people will look for organizations and leaders to take more responsibility for their holistic well-being and build a culture of trust and equality. A recent Accenture research suggests that by meeting six fundamental human needs - emotional and mental, relational, physical, financial, purposeful, and employable - through work, both our people and our business will be "Net Better Off". As organizations boost these dimensions and create meaningful, trust-based relationships with their people, they will unlock their people's full potential and see an increase in overall business performance."

Shifting from work-life collision to work-life integration

While the early months post the coronavirus outbreak called for immediate attention to go above and beyond to save businesses and economies, it is high time employers began to align workplace expectations, policies, and practices according to the present circumstances of not just

the business, but also employees.

"Emotional and physical well-being would continue to be the key pillars around which a productive work-life balance would be pivoted. The additional dimension brought in by COVID-19 is the element of remote and distributed work-teams, and the adjustments that one needs to make in managing the social needs of people and looking to work in teams. We have proactively worked with our employees and strengthened several well-being programs, which allows



them the flexibility to choose and adopt to their convenience," shared Arun Dinakar Rao, Chief People Officer, Birlasoft.

Employee benefits are already experiencing restructuring to align with the needs and demands of a post-COVID workplace, and it is equally important to revamp the entire organizational design acknowledging the fundamental changes in the way we live and work post the pandemic. Here is how some organizations are working towards improving the quality of work-life post-COVID-19:

Provide clarity to plan: Global organizations like Twitter, Google, and Uber have led the charge on this aspect by announcing the likely duration of functioning in a remote working setup much sooner. Nutanix is yet another organization, among many others emerging, to take a stand and provide clarity to employees. Nutanix's India SVP and MD-Operations, Sankalp Saxena, shared, "To ensure the safety and security of our people during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have extended work-from-home for our employees until

Flexible working not only portrays an organization's intent to create a workplace for the upcoming generations but also solidifies its intent to cater to the needs of its diversified workforce across geographies

September 2021. Post that, we will likely return to the hybrid model of both remote and in-person work options, depending on what works best for our people."

Implementing and executing relevant initiatives: Focused on self-care and resilience, Accenture has offered a variety of programs and tools to enable people to take care of their well-being. "We have a digital hangout destination known as myDigital Workplace for our people to stay connected, and access learning resources and guidance on subjects ranging from setting up a virtual workspace to manag-

ing one's time and well-being. Our AI-enabled chatbot provides mental health self-help techniques and access to mental wellness experts," shared Lakshmi C. She added that the organization has also introduced a Virtual Summer Camp under their existing Parents at Work program which provides parents with online and offline resources to keep children between the ages of 5-12 constructively engaged.

Boosting productivity with a hybrid working environment: "A value-oriented and culture-rich ecosystem spurs the motivation levels of employees, wherein stress levels are neutralized and greater mental well-being is achieved," emphasized Satyanarayanan Visvanathan, SVP, Head - HR (Global) and Corporate Quality, CSS Corp. He added that post-COVID-19, when employees return to office, "the transition is bound to take time and it has to be a facilitated process with policy amendments. Especially in the IT industry, flexible remote working should no longer be an exclusive privilege, and more employees could likely deliver expected levels of productivity (or even more!) with hybrid work environments. Quite a lot of work-life collision could be minimized with this approach."

Encouraging social interactions: Speaking of the burning need to maintain social interaction amid social distancing, Clumio's GM & Vice President of Engineering, India Operations, Sandeep Soni noted that for a remote working setup, the key pillars of a healthy and produc-

tive work-life would be staying connected, focused, healthy and fit. "We conduct Zoom happy hours frequently to stay connected and enjoy with our colleagues offline. Come today, we have encouraged and adopted a hybrid model of work by first, ensuring a safe work environment. Our employees come together a day or two in the week to collectively brainstorm and make key decisions and then go back to execute the decisions taken with clarity. This allows us to have a good balance of safe social interactions and execution towards our strategic initiatives."

Training leaders and managers to enable workflows: Shedding light on how leaders and managers can contribute to an improved quality of work-life post-COVID, Giridhar GV, EVP - Global Human Resources, HGS, said, "Employers must ensure the physical and mental well-being of the workforce more than ever before to counter the challenges caused by sedentary work for long hours, limited social interactions and health anxiety. Businesses will also need to equip leaders and mid-level management to better collaborate through the right mix of technology and skill to handle a dispersed and virtual workforce. More interactions and collaboration within the team to retain the social aspects of the workplace while also driving productivity is critical, and HR teams must play a big role in this."

Normalize not being ok and being open about it, without fearing a consequent impact on



review. It could often be momentary where some stressors just need to be spoken about to feel lighter. Don't you remember the last time you shared something that stressed you out with someone and felt lighter immediately after? Why limit that sensitivity to family and friends? It is all about being compassionate and encouraging empathy. Your employees, leaders, and colleagues are as human as your family members and friends who you deeply care about and would want to know about. It's time to create that safe space at an organizational level and foster meaningful workplace relationships.

The new year presents an opportunity to pause and look back. Reflect on what you need to start/stop/continue in the next year, as an individual, as a team, and as an organization, in a manner that benefits, not just the business but also employees. Redesign the not so successful practices, tear down year old ways of thinking, and finally, adapt not just your policies but also your mindset to the way of life that's relevant today. 🍷