

Editorial

Work From Home - lessons for future

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Prologue

The new corona virus, COVID-19, caught the human civilisation unprepared. The patient zero is still unidentified and the antidote to the infection is yet to be found. The first report came in Nov 17, 2019 from a hospital in Wuhan, China. Initially, the Chinese Government suppressed the highly infectious nature of the lethal virus until Dr Zhang Jixian decided to blow the whistle on 27th December 2019. China officially reported to the World Health Organisation on 31st Dec 2019 about the Virus. WHO could not initially assess the severity of the infection potential and took two months and 11 days watching the virus spread globally, before declaring it as a Pandemic on 11th of March 2020. By then, the horrific stories about the Virus has been flooding the internet especially in the social media creating a panic that gripped the minds of people all over the World, a phenomenon unprecedented in history of mankind.

The daily bulletins of the WHO have been a subject matter for political

comments and insinuations, causing the top global leadership forum like the United Nations, practically go on a holiday. The collective leadership of the world community has not been able to discuss the ramifications and find a uniform response. The UN security council has all but abandoned its role, unable to look beyond the conventional security concerns. The G-8 leaders have withdrawn from global stage to fight the virus in respective their home turfs, as the biggest threat to their leadership and power. All other issues that were considered important in the agenda of world leaders, before March 2020, have been relegated to 'Not Urgent' category.

The Lockdown

The corona virus has spread rapidly to 200 countries across all continents except the Antarctica. WHO advised 'social distancing' as the only way to contain the virus until the scientific cure or antidote is found. The war against Corona was formally declared by every National Government deciding to impose restriction on free movement or assembly of people.

A new phenomenon was born - "Lockdown". Governments of the World imposed various forms of lock down. The schools, colleges and offices were closed. Rail and Road transport except for movement of essential commodities and security personnel, have been suspended. Airports were shutdown and commercial flights were suspended. The laptop carrying, white collar employees across all sectors of employment switched over to " Work From Home" (WFH) officially, and the employers demonstrated generosity with their public affirmations not to lay off employees during the shutdown. The employers went a step forward by assuring continuity of salary payment to blue collar workers who had to stay at home due to the lockdown decree.

Work From Home - the emotions

These out-of-the-blue restrictions with the first announcement of lockdown amused the public. The Government of India's announcement, asking people to stay at home, and asking employees to work from home (WFH), and direction to employers for facilitating WFH and continuing salary payments, brought solace and positive vibes, all around, especially in India. There was hope that soon, all will be well, and normal life shall resume. Staying put at home for a period of three weeks was received very well by the people as it helped the family rediscover their emotional bond. Working from Home was new for most of the people who were used to work from office. WFH was a challenge for employees, as mastery of

the technology was key to maintain the aura of efficiency and merit, without the opportunity to walk in and explain. There were many ethical concerns at both ends. The employer was worried if the employees should be assessed based on time logged to computer or out put of work for a day, and wondered how to find a good measure of efficiency. The employee struggling with technology worried how to complete the work in time, and found himself over-stretched in time. The work-life balance has a different perspective in this context.

The continuity of WFH-the dilemmas

Emotional stress for WFH employees kept rising as lockdown extended, and there was no firm indication of getting back to work in office. After three months of lockdown, the global economy is hit by the worst recession ever, and the WFH employees' mind is gripped with fear of possible lay off and financial insecurity as news about job-losses around the world, have started trickling down all over the internet. The WFH employees working from home initially spent long hours, stretching up to 12 hours, to grapple with technology, and during the extended lockdown period they continue to overstretch with a mindset of fear and insecurity. Long working hours is not necessarily a reflection of higher productivity, and when it is induced by emotional insecurity, the quality of output could be questionable. There are no universally accepted, established norms to guide or regulate working hours in

WFH mode. Corporate America and Corporate Europe had been partially experimenting WFH with varied observations. The vast majority of people still have a blue collar shirt! The Society needed the services of mostly the blue collared workers, badly during the pandemic induced lockdown, and that is why the rest of the humanity kept glorifying them as Corona Warriors and cheered for them.

The rationale for WFH

The rationale of WFH is important. Human civilization has evolved as a community lifestyle. Work is only a small part of the whole Living experience. The context is all important - why do we work from home? The schools could not discontinue education a few months before the annual examination. All factories could not abruptly close down as there is an elaborate operating procedure before shutting down or restarting. The mobilisation and demobilisation of men at work in the unorganised sector is a mammoth activity. While the Managers could sit at home the day after lockdown, the workers could not. They have to be maintained at temporary shelters with essential provisions and safely deported back to their native homes. The Government offices could close down the shutters but governance had to continue. Only few could work as they have had the wherewithal to continue in WFH mode. Therefore, in the context of a lockdown induced by a pandemic, the assessment of WFH can at best be limited to a small minority of

employees around the world who could work from home. Some people, in the Government, Industry, Commerce, Education had to work from home, to ensure uninterrupted flow of essential services for people confined to their residences during lockdown, and maintain law and order, healthcare and sanitation services for the community during lockdown. The education sector has a huge role to play in WFH mode to extend the classroom to every home and maintain a positive psychology.

The utilitarian perspective of WFH

The utility of WFH can be assessed on two fronts. The WFH proved emphatically that in a situation of near-complete shutdown of all public activities in the World, the orderly governance of the society and minimum activities for healthy living, could be successfully carried out. WFH was tested globally as a solution to pandemic and found effective for survival. However, if WFH was efficient enough to maintain the health of economy, the answer would be different. The main reason of inadequacy was not that only a small fraction of people could work from home, commandeering a tiny force that was out in the field to cover the ground, but because the world was not better prepared for WFH. For example there is no country on Earth which has a regulation in place for WFH though many a companies have been articulating their WFH policies for over a decade. Companies have been asking people to work from home long enough

for regulators to notice and intervene. There was a loud alarm ringing for such a long time but no Government seemed to take notice of it. When the global lockdown happened as country after country started declaring emergency locking down practically everything except hospitals and policing, there was no guideline how to handle continuity of work.

WFH - a reaction or response?

Did we respond or react while switching over to WFH? Everyone took their own time & path. Not all organizations or self employed people have taken the same path. Some have reacted instantly and others have responded, taking a little longer. The availability of technology platform and confidence in handling of available technology, determined the speed of switch over from physical to virtual mode of working. Lets examine in the limited context the impact of WFH. The first comments that came from people was about a quixotic restoration of Work-Life balance. It turned out to be a privately held construct of emotion vs reality. Time with family increased but so did the working hours. Good relations sprouted in family as there was a veiled illusion of more time to meet and talk, though in reality, the television, internet and cellphones had long filled in that space called family-time. WFH women, have had more work as compared to the WFH men.

The positives from WFH

On the positive side, the Technology phobia seems to be gone. PC has become the real personal computer, not just a machine for office. People have realised that It is not all that difficult to learn the keyboard at any age. During lockdown induced WFH, people have got used to work without assistance of domestic help, driver, attendant, receptionist or secretary. People have found out how good and efficient are Alexa and Google, as personal secretaries. There is a new found respect for the blue-collar workers. Everyday people who WFH are learning something new. We see that 24/7 working schedule is possible and it can go with 24/7 commitment to family as well. Commuting time need not be wasted in traffic, and the telecommuting is just fine. COVID-19 enforced WFH has made working people smarter than ever before. Employees of all age groups have realised that Technology adaptation is not a choice but a compulsion, and a matter of survival. Jobs are getting reengineered around new technologies and rate of obsolescence is getting faster. The older people who ignored the technology earlier, are now adapting to ICT faster as midlife crisis is most acute in the job-sphere at the middle, under budgetary pressure to optimize costs. Lifelong learning is not a sermon for the next generation but reality for the existing employees, young or old, alike. Creativity, cyber-skills and agility are the three sought after core competencies in the new job-sphere.

The limitations

However as of now, the positive impact of WFH are limited. Starting from the emotional point, the charm of week-end holidays have completely faded. People are losing count of Saturdays and Sundays and its hard to tell the exact weekday without looking at the calendar. The limits of WFH have been tested. Every work necessary for human existence cannot be done in WFH mode. Robots are yet not ready for all physical work. E-commerce needs a physical supply chain. Amazon cannot deliver a thing without the carriers physically moving the merchandise from factory to doorstep of customer. Laboratories, Hospitals, Farms, Factories can be robot assisted but can't operate in WFH mode. Soldiering, policing, construction, sanitation, etc can't be done without a substantial presence in the field. The handling of logistics, production and distribution, still require physical work. Everything can't be done with a laptop, camera and internet. WFH cannot be efficient without some back up fieldwork. WFH is dependent upon efficiency of computer hardware, software, Internet connectivity and is extremely vulnerable to major power failures, cyber bugs and hacking. There has been concerns raised about security of data privacy.

The alienation

There is a new form of alienation taking shape. Karl Marx was right. New forms of work arrangements under industrial capitalism alienated people from Society, Work and Self. The root of alienation is Work time. The working

class movements in the world during 18th and 19th centuries have been grounded upon large scale alienation of people due to long working hours. From 18 hours of indentured slavery to 8 hours a day, has been a long journey for working class of the World. For over a century working hour regulations have aimed to provide more free-time to labour. Free-time was essentially the Me-time for working people to indulge in pursuits for happiness out of freewill. WFH has shown early signs of annulling the work-time regulations, disguising compulsion as volunteering, and force as freewill. Sans regulation, WFH treads into dangerous consequence of a new form of alienation. Prolonged period of 'social distancing' might crystallise into a habit causing fundamental changes in long establish behavioral patterns in society, adding to alienation.

Education - the silver line

The impact of WFH in the Education Sector brings the most positive outcomes into light. Education usually leads the social change, and steers the society during crisis. One of the biggest challenges before the education system has been the population. This is the only sector which has 100% customer base. The limitation to reach every child and every adult living on earth at any corner of the World, has been a challenge of access or communication. The cause of failure was that either the teacher could not reach the student or the student could not reach the teacher. The resources to build as many schools and provide as many teachers,

as necessary were never there. Distance learning systems and practices was there but as exception, as a supplement and as the least preferred option to get a child educated. WFH has placed distance learning centerstage. The goals of achieving 100% literacy is no longer a dream. Going way beyond, providing skill education to 100% people, looks a real possibility now, from the limited testing of Teaching from Home(TFH) and Learning from Home (LFH). The Virtual class room is as real as Real, in a perfected technological environment powered by Internet and softwares like Zoom and Google Meet. The test run during the Lockdown has been a great learning for the Governments of the World. Education can reach the people, who were unreachable earlier.

Epilogue

Work from Home (WFH) has a contextual relevance. It will always have. Not many research studies have gone into this emerging pattern of deployment. The conventional wisdom for advocating WFH, has been to save on administrative costs per employee attending office, but studies on productivity gains from WFH, has been limited. Stanford Economics Professor Nicholas Bloom mentioned in an interview published in HBR Jan-Feb 2014, about a study conducted at the Chinese Travel Company, Ctrip, over a 9-month period, on productivity of employees who voluntarily opted

to work from home. Among other findings, the study established a positive effect on employee productivity while working from home, apart from the savings on office costs and travel costs. The study was conducted by Prof Bloom along with the co-founder of Ctrip, James Liang. But it emphasised that the productivity is associated with the nature of work. The exceptional pandemic situation under which the WFH flourished should be seen like the response of a rapid action force, nothing more. WFH during the pandemic proved a point or two quite clear. First, its going to comeback, prepared for a long stay. Second, the on-field operations which had to be carried out by some people during lockdown, risking their lives, will have to be replaced by robots as early as possible. Third, all blue collar jobs must be converted to white collar jobs, before the next pandemic breaks out, as the world cannot afford another meltdown of the global economy. Life expectancy of human beings have been rising continuously since the end of the second world war. During the last fifty years, the world has seen more peace and prosperity than ever before in history of mankind but new threats to human existence with potential to wipe out the entire race has been also lurking around in the form of rouge terrorists and rouge viruses with their amazing ability to mutate and grow even after complete annihilation.