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The year 'work' changed

The changes brought about by the pandemic are not likely to go away any time soon



Aruna Sankaranarayanan, DEC 29 2020, 07:13 IST | UPDATED: DEC 29 2020, 15:21 IST



Representative image. Credit: iStockPhoto

2020 will undoubtedly be remembered as the year of the pandemic. Covid-19 caused careers to careen and the abrupt changes that were thrust on an unsuspecting world had a huge socio-cultural impact.

People were confined indoors, businesses shut shop and job losses mounted across a gamut of professions.

Whether it was construction, retail, manufacturing or

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whether it was construction, retail, manufacturing or hospitality and other services, jobs were nixed.

While some of these jobs were reinstated as economies sputtered back, others have been permanently erased.

The second major phenomenon in the workplace is the unprecedented shift to working from home (WFH). An array of professions, including some that couldn't envision moving away from the in-person mode of delivery, went online.

These shifts have had spill-over effects in diverse areas — from the gig economy to gender equality.

A motley of experts were asked by bbc.com about work-life in a post-pandemic world. Their responses paint a mixed and nuanced picture, where some people have flourished, while others have floundered.

WFH is here to stay

Stewart Butterfield, the CEO of Slack, argues that WFH is here to stay, with over 70% of workers opting for a hybrid model — one where they go to work a few days a week but work remotely in the remaining time. The founder and CEO of Zoom, Eric Yuan, reminds us that not only corporates but many other professions discovered new clientele and customers by going online.

Therapists, piano and yoga instructors offer services transcending geographic boundaries, while companies are able to tap into a more diffuse workforce, thereby enhancing their talent pool.

The flexibility of the gig economy benefits both workers and employers, though it comes with other costs, like reduced financial security for employees and greater staff turnover for companies.



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Naohiro Yashiro, a Professor of Global Business in Japan, points out that WFH also removes impediments for the elderly and handicapped people to be a part of the workforce.

Traditional office spaces

Traditional office spaces may be reimagined as we transition more towards hybrid working. Co-working facilities may mushroom, as companies decide to forgo exorbitant rents.

Rashmi Dhanwani, Founder, Art X Company, a consultancy in the arts sector, adds that home and work spaces have merged, so we may have to redefine work-life balance for ourselves.

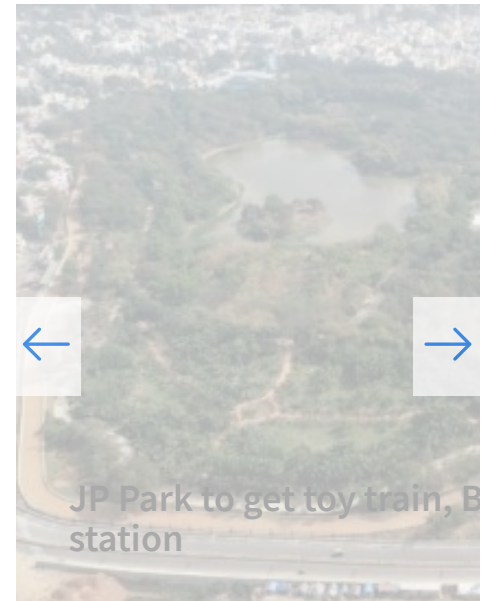
Further, as WFH home affords more leeway in terms of where people live, there could be an exodus of office goers to smaller towns and scenic locales, opines Jay Van Bavel, Associate Professor of Psychology and Neural Science. This may cause rents in city centres to plummet, attracting a younger demographic and altering the cityscape itself.

Travel and work

Business travel will shrink both within and across countries for a while, asserts Psychology Professor, Cary Cooper. Both a fear of contagion and a desire to reduce expenses will compel businesses to rely on video conferencing and calls to conduct long-distance transactions.

As companies realise the redundancies of travel in certain contexts, many business interactions will remain online for the foreseeable future. Cooper also predicts that managers have to cultivate new skill sets to manage

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people both online and onsite. Besides fostering team spirit during remote work, managers have to identify at-risk markers of employees struggling with mental health issues.

Covid-19 and gender

Women are another group whose lives have been upended by Covid-19.

Business leaders also point out that more women lost their jobs when compared to men. Additionally, as childcare and domestic work usurp more time with entire families at home, the onus of household work falls disproportionately on women.

On the flipside, Jean-Nicolas Reyt, Assistant Professor of Organizational Behaviour, argues that WFH may provide a fillip to women as it offers greater flexibility and convenience. Interestingly, WFH may also induce fathers to contribute more to household work and childcare, as some surveys in the US and Canada suggest.

Even as news of the vaccine has buoyed spirits, it is unlikely that we will go back to business-as-usual. While Covid-19 will hopefully abate, it will leave its indelible mark on the workplace through the changes it has ushered in.

Though positives like increased worker autonomy and greater diversity are welcomed, organisations and governments need to address the woes of the marginalised and oppressed and bridge the yawning gap on either side of the digital divide.

Those left vulnerable

Elisabeth Reynolds, a research scientist with a focus on

work culture, sounds a note of caution when she reminds us that remote working remains the purview of the educated elite.

Workers who depend on regular office-goers, including those who toil in restaurants, transport, housekeeping and retail, are likely to be stranded as hybrid models become the norm. Reskilling and upskilling of these vulnerable workers are a pressing need.

Inequality scholar Anna Stansbury argues that the need for voiceless workers to organise and advocate will only intensify. Imparting digital literacy and improving their access to the online world are essential, believes Chinmay Tumble, a professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

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