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The Future of Work: Developing an Inclusive Hybrid Work Policy for India

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Executive Summary



The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in some permanent changes in the way we work. With the outbreak of the pandemic, public health measures such as lockdowns became mandatory across the world, with over 90 countries imposing such measures by April 2020.¹ Overnight, diverse sectors such as healthcare, education, business, government, and more had to find new ways to function while adhering to changing guidelines. It was information and communication technologies (ICTs)— such as video communications — that became the bulwark of our defense at this time, allowing economic activity to continue and helping employees work from the safety of their homes.

While it was the pandemic that led to the large-scale adoption of ‘teleworking’ models across sectors, the experience of working online through 2020 and 2021 gave employees the appetite and interest in continuing such models in the long-term. Today, many employers continue to offer teleworking options to employees.

This includes policies specifying job roles or teams that can work remotely, or others that require employees to work on-site only on certain days. **Hybrid work – a mix of on-site and off-site workstyles** – offers employees much flexibility in deciding their workstyle, with initial surveys showing that many employees value this flexibility. Data from job portals also shows that the number of searches for flexible work options has dramatically increased in recent times².

Over the past two years, there has been a decisive shift in expectations in the workforce. As a result, hybrid work arrangements, in some form or the other, are likely to persist well after the pandemic. Besides offering flexibility to employees, hybrid work allows employers to tap better talent, and enhance productivity. It could, with the right policies, help address socio-economic issues such as women’s labor force participation³, access for disabled employees⁴, as well as regional inequalities in economic development⁵. However, there are certain safeguards needed for effective hybrid working too. These include reducing friction in the regulatory framework –

particularly diverse labor laws that are yet to be updated to regulate the changing nature of work, issues such as ‘moonlighting’⁶ and lack of access to suitable work environments in India’s multi-generational households, negative effects on work-life balance, data security and employee privacy concerns, and the extra burden of care work on women employees.

To minimize the risks posed to employers and employees, public policies and programs that support the uptake of hybrid work models will be crucial. To enable a fair and inclusive transition, governments and workplaces must balance workers’ needs with organizational and financial concerns. The government, in particular, could also proactively develop policies to support hybrid work, considering the potential benefits that such a shift might entail⁷. As the definition of a workplace evolves, such interventions can help facilitate wider workforce participation and minimize implementation challenges, while making sure that employees working remotely get similar legal protections as their counterparts working on-site.

Internationally, many countries have already instituted policies and put their weight behind programs that encourage the transition. These include measures such as creation of well-equipped co-working hubs, tax exemptions, and a change in labor laws, including the rights of employees to disconnect after their agreed working hours. Besides these, India will also need to bolster its internet infrastructure so that ICT tools can work seamlessly across geographical boundaries.

It is in the above context that this brief aims to provide an overview of the emerging evidence on hybrid work in India, while identifying challenges affecting employees and employers. It also looks at promising international practices aimed at facilitating hybrid work and provides recommendations that can help unlock its true potential for a productive and inclusive work environment in the country.

The Landscape of Hybrid Work in India

Defining hybrid work and telework

Before we begin, it is important to define what we mean by hybrid work and telework. All home-based work is not telework; home-based workers can also include workers in self-help groups (SHGs), artisans, industrial workers, etc.⁸ The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines telework as referring to employees who use ICTs to perform their work remotely on a regular or permanent basis, either from home or at another location of their choosing.⁹ The US' Telework Enhancement Act 2010¹⁰ and the EU's Framework Agreement on Telework 2002¹¹ use similar definitions. Popular terms like work from anywhere (WFA) and work from home (WFH) fall under this definition. However, some jurisdictions like Colombia and Spain use the term remote work, although "remote work" usually refers to situations where the employee works full time from a place other than the usual place of work. Hybrid work or flexible work are other terms used to refer to arrangements where employees choose to go into the office a certain number of days a week or month, and have the flexibility to determine their own workstyles.

In this brief, we will use the term "hybrid work" to broadly refer to all the above models, unless otherwise specified. This is because employers are increasingly dealing with a workforce that is partly remote and partly on-site, rather than fully being either. The term "hybrid work" covers these nuances.

Hybrid work's rising prevalence in India

Hybrid work has risen in popularity in India, as elsewhere, during the COVID-19 pandemic. As public health measures ramped up in 2020, organizations had to shift to teleworking on short notice. In India, where the government imposed a complete lockdown, the shift was almost instantaneous, especially for its large IT & ITES industry. Major companies and startups such as TCS, Flipkart, Infosys, Swiggy, Razorpay etc. went fully remote in the first wave itself.¹²

74% of Indian employees wanted flexible remote work options to stay after the pandemic

→ Changing Recruitment Patterns

Between October 2021 to March 2022, there were over 32 lakh searches for jobs by Indians on *Naukri.com*. About 57% of these searches were for permanent remote jobs. In July 2021, *Naukri.com* launched a new feature which allowed recruiters to post jobs with options to work remotely, or permanently outside office, or from home on a temporary basis¹⁴.

The portal saw over 93,000 listings for permanent and temporary jobs. *Indeed*, another job search platform reported that searches for 'remote work' skyrocketed to 966% in April 2021 as compared to the same period the prior year¹⁵.

Over 2021 and 2022, many Indian companies embraced hybrid models of work; several also experimented with hybrid models – partly on-site and partly remote – to help build organizational culture and interaction between employees while offering their workers the flexibility to work as per their convenience.¹³

Employees also seem to be showing affinity towards hybrid work. Published in 2021, Microsoft's Worker Trends Index showed that 74% of Indian employees wanted flexible remote work options to stay after the pandemic¹⁶. In fact, a recent survey by an HR firm found that at least 6 out of 10 employees said they were prepared to quit their jobs instead of returning to the office.¹⁷

While we need more evidence to draw a definitive conclusion, a broader picture seems to be emerging. The pandemic has normalized hybrid work models, and a significant portion of employees and employers want to incorporate it into their workstyle, if it can be accommodated.

Why is hybrid work here to stay?

There are many factors that make hybrid work an attractive option for employers and employees. This section will elaborate on some potential benefits, while identifying ways in which hybrid work can contribute to a more productive and inclusive workplace. The evidence for these has been emerging over the last few years, especially over the pandemic, which this section aims to summarize.

For employers

Employers gain a bevy of benefits from hybrid work models, ranging from reduced costs and ease in scaling to improved talent acquisition. Hybrid work can especially help lower costs for firms by reducing the need for office spaces and other operational equipment.¹⁸ Firms can also save on a variety of utility and maintenance costs, such as electricity, air conditioning etc. A survey by Regus showed that many companies are now looking for smaller and flexible office spaces, when compared with earlier.¹⁹

With hybrid work reducing the need for physical workspaces, firms can expand and hire from newer locations before setting up office spaces there. Moreover, a reduction in in-person meetings can also reduce expenses related to travel, whether by road or through air. The normalization of hybrid work has substantially improved the acceptability of video collaboration, where it was not an option pre-pandemic. In fact, many Indian companies are likely to continue benefiting from reduced travel expenses following the acceptance of hybrid work and video collaboration. Some companies were also limiting travel in order to reduce emissions and to improve upon their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices.²⁰

WORKING FROM HOME LED TO A

13% performance increase in 9 months

While evidence on this is still emerging, early research suggests that hybrid work can also benefit firms by improving their workers' productivity, in addition to granting them access to a much wider pool of talent. In a study conducted through a work from home experiment via Ctrip, a travel agency, professors at Stanford University showed that working from home led to a 13% performance increase in 9 months. The employees attributed improved productivity to a quieter and convenient work environment with fewer distractions leading to more focused work, lower commuting hours, and lesser leave times.²¹

With surveys showing that an increasing number of employees prefer remote and hybrid work models, hiring employees that are willing to take up hybrid work has become significantly easier. Several market surveys are

→ TCS' 25x25 Model

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) is the biggest Indian multinational IT services company. It employs 480,000 people in 149 locations across 46 countries. At the beginning of the pandemic, TCS had to ask 90% of its employees to work from home. As the pandemic eased out and offices started opening, employees might have expected to resume working from office buildings. However, TCS adopted a new model, with a long-term goal to move towards hybrid format by 2025

In early 2020, TCS announced a shift to a new 25x25 work model i.e. only 25% of TCS employees would be expected to work anytime from the office and not spend more than 25% of their time there. This aims to move 75% of the company's 480,000 employees to permanently work from home by 2025. It is currently in a revamp stage, where the back to office component is being accelerated to reach 80:20 ratio (80% in office, and 20% from home), before it may move back to the 25x25 model. The primary goal of going through these varying models is to address high attrition rate in the IT-ITeS industry.

In a Point of View article on their blog, TCS said: "We believe that the future shift is going to be a hybrid model with flexibility of work from anywhere. This evolution of the workplace and working style is not just a short-term change but a revolution to the new world."

pointing to the increasing uptake of hybrid work models among Indian employees.²² In fact, it appears that employees are also likely to look for alternative jobs, even with reduced pay, if it means that the company has options accommodating hybrid work. Thus, providing employees with increased choice could have positive effects on retention, while reducing hiring and training costs. Some preliminary findings also suggest that employees would forgo an offer for a higher-paid job which requires them to compulsorily come to office.²³

Adopting hybrid work can also reduce labor costs by enlarging the pool of workers that firms can choose from, especially since location-agnostic hiring can help companies save on the House Rent Allowance (HRA) component for employees in smaller towns with lower costs of living.²⁴

For employees

ELIMINATION OF WORK COMMUTES AND REDUCED PRESSURE ON URBAN ACCOMMODATION

One of the biggest benefits that employees report is the elimination of work commutes. This benefit can have several far-reaching effects. Commute times have been one of the most contentious issues facing the labor force in recent years. Indians spend more time in daily office commute than most countries in the world, with over two hours on the road every day, as per a report by office commute platform *MoveInSync*. A study carried out by the IDFC institute in Mumbai²⁵ has also identified that longer commute times dissuade workers from taking up jobs they are qualified for, and heavy traffic congestion in the city fragments the city's labor markets.

In addition to improving access to jobs for workers, reduced commuting times can also aid in reducing transport-related carbon emissions and air pollution across the world. Global carbon dioxide emissions fell by 6.4%, or 2.3 billion tonnes, in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic stopped economic and social activities worldwide.²⁷ Emissions bounced back as economies re-opened, but this also points to how travel, be it through aviation, cars etc., is an enormous source of carbon emissions. Road and aviation are the predominant causes of vehicular pollution in India, depleting the quality

→ Commuting

MoveInSync's report titled 'Travel Time Report Q1 2019 vs Q1 2018' states that an average Indian spends 7% of their day commuting to office averaging less than 3 minutes per kilometer.²⁶ The report suggests that by altering or introducing flexi-work timing, a company's employee has the potential to reduce travel time by 20% to 40% or 25-50 minutes a day.

Relying on hybrid work can help dent air pollution by reducing vehicular commutes, and thus help improve air quality.

of air in many Indian cities.²⁸ For instance, in Mumbai, the transport sector accounts for 19.4% of the total emissions generated, amounting to 4.5 million tonnes CO₂e. Road transport contributes 83% of these emissions, prompting the city government to take measures to improve sustainable mobility.²⁹ Relying on hybrid work can help dent air pollution by reducing vehicular commutes, and thus help improve air quality.

Hybrid work could also help reduce the pressure on real estate markets in the big city centers, and give relief from soaring real estate and living costs, thus allowing for more savings at the individual level. In addition, a burgeoning population has already put severe stress on resources such as water, electricity, and housing in Tier- I cities. Tier-II and tier-III cities³⁰ in India could also see a decreased outflow of workers, thereby benefiting the local economy further.

Having said that, it is possible that moving towards hybrid work could adversely affect some businesses, particularly the retail and hospitality sectors in the big cities. Employees will travel much less and may not consume as much as when they commuted to the office. The real estate sector is also likely to be affected because of reduced requirements for office space, and the outflow of people from metropolitan areas. However, there may be some positive effects too – many Indian developers noted an increase in demand for residential real estate by the end of 2020, especially in city outskirts, and tier-II and tier-III cities.³¹ Similarly, demand for office space might pick up further as offices prefer hybrid work instead of fully remote. In addition, local economic ecosystems in tier-II and tier-III cities could be spruced up as more people move in.

INCREASING LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE (LFPR) OF WOMEN

Female employees returning to the workplace after childbirth or with other caregiving responsibilities could immensely benefit from hybrid or remote work opportunities. Several studies, internationally and in

48%

of women surveyed had dropped out of employment within four months of returning from maternity leave

India, have shown that fathers and mothers were affected differently during the pandemic. An analysis conducted by LeanIn.org and McKinsey in 2020 among working parents found that women with children aged 10 and under were more likely than men to either downshift their career, or even leave the workforce altogether because of the COVID-19 crisis.³² A study conducted among Indian women in the corporate sector **before the pandemic** showed that almost 48% of women surveyed had dropped out of employment within four months of returning from maternity leave.³³ In the absence of flexible work options, many respondents dropped out citing *lack of household support* and *lack of time* as reasons, and even those who had returned continued to face challenges, especially where jobs required extra travel.

Given that the pandemic has induced a higher rate of unemployment among women, retention of women in the workforce has to become a priority. Customized policies such as flexi-time, remote, and hybrid work could provide women with a lot more flexibility in managing their responsibilities while also enabling them to remain in the workforce. In fact, The Economic Times reported that work from home options were one of the major reasons women were moving jobs in recent times.³⁴ This is not to say that men should not partake in care responsibilities. But even as individuals, activists, and policymakers strive to shift mindsets and split the burden of care work between men and women, flexible work options can help women stay in the labor force.

A hybrid work arrangement can also address concerns regarding women losing opportunities to network and form relationships in their workplaces. In fact, by proactively creating policies that enable equitable participation in the workplace, including training leadership on managing a hybrid workforce, firms can mitigate the risks that come with remote roles. If work-from-home policies in companies are drafted in a gender-sensitive manner, it can also reduce the risk of relegating women to off-site roles.

→ Women are preferring more flexibility in work³⁵

A recent survey conducted by LinkedIn of 2,266 Indian women employees highlights the need to pay diligent attention to women's demands for a more flexible work environment.

83% of working women want more flexibility

70% have quit or are considering quitting their jobs because they are not offered the right flexible policies

70% of working women are rejecting roles that don't allow them to work flexibly

MAKING WORK MORE ACCESSIBLE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Accessibility has gained a renewed focus as governments have legally mandated workplaces to provide suitable accommodations for employees with disabilities. In this context, hybrid work could help facilitate greater access to job opportunities for disabled or immunocompromised employees. People with a disability that restricts mobility could build their careers with relative ease in industries with such models. Internationally, some steps have been taken to provide remote work options for disabled people. For instance, working from home is included as a reasonable accommodation in the US via the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and in the UK Equality Act 2010.³⁶ The UK's Access to Work scheme also gives grants to disabled employees for some adjustment expenses, even if they are working from home.³⁷

The World Health Organization specifically endorsed telework for people with disabilities during the pandemic.³⁹ In India, the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) issued several circulars on WFH for government employees. It exempted persons with disabilities and pregnant women

→ Making work more accessible

Increased hybrid work adoption has made employment opportunities more accessible and conducive for persons with disabilities. Here's one such testimony from a disabled employee, who saw positive effects of the hybrid workplace.³⁸

"I work in tech and I am lucky that I have never had to work from an office. It's very hard for me, due to severe anxiety and I'm privileged to be in an industry where remote jobs were already possible to come by. But it was frustrating for me to see others in my position unable to work remotely for what seemed to me to be no reason, since most tech work can be done remotely perfectly well. (I even speak about and advocate for this at tech industry events.) I think what's happening now, with more tech companies suddenly pushing for working-from-home, is going to be great long-term for people like me. It's going to be hard to turn this back once people know there's nothing really stopping them from being able to work from home and I think we'll see a huge rise in remote positions going forward, even after this situation passes..."

—Jameson, 29

from attending office as soon as restrictions began, and these accommodations continued for them much longer than for other employees.⁴⁰

Hybrid models could provide an impetus for workplaces to recruit and retain disabled employees. This is particularly relevant in India, where according to a market report, we have around 1.3 crore employable disabled persons, of which only 34 lakh have been employed across the organized sector, unorganized sector, government-led schemes or are self-employed.⁴¹ Hybrid work presents a chance to address long-standing barriers to employment for such disabled people, providing them access to more kinds of dignified work. However, we do risk relegating disabled employees to home-based roles and invisibilising their work. Thus, workplaces must look at statutory obligations and ensure that disabled workers' have an opportunity to participate as equals with their able-bodied colleagues and have their concerns heard.

Challenges presented by hybrid work

While it presents attractive opportunities and benefits for employers and employees alike, there are several challenges that come with hybrid work. Firstly, it is a recent phenomenon that has come into prominence in some sectors because of the pandemic; this is especially true for the services domain. As a result, many employers and employees are still struggling with the transition to a hybrid setup.⁴²

The uptake is also being affected by the ambiguity in India's labor laws, in particular the lack of clear regulation of various teleworking arrangements, including hybrid and remote work. Employers also face concerns with respect to the difficulty of monitoring workers and ensuring productivity, even as employees face the risk of longer working hours, and the blurring of boundaries between homes and offices. As workplaces are transitioning, women employees also find themselves burdened with care work while working at home, and even risk being permanently relegated to remote positions.

Both employers and governments will therefore have to work with these concerns in mind and come up with policies that reduce this friction. In addition, they will have to ensure that commitments to healthy and inclusive work environments are met regardless of the models adopted by businesses and other organizations. This section will look at some challenges involved with the recognition and uptake of hybrid work models. It will also look at the various kinds of gaps involved – regulatory gaps, productivity, gendered impacts, etc.

A. Regulatory Gaps

One of the biggest challenges is the lack of a legal framework for hybrid work in India. Labor falls under the Concurrent List of the Constitution. Therefore, both the parliament and state legislatures have the power to regulate labor through legislation. There are over 100 state and 40 central laws regulating various aspects of labor such as industrial disputes, working conditions, social protection and wages.⁴³

The year 2020 saw a reform in the labor laws, with the government enacting four labor codes. While the codes deal with various issues, they do not consider the regulatory framework for hybrid or remote working models – the codes

regulate employee-employer relations, and various forms of social security (such as pension and maternity benefits), but they struggle to lay out clear obligations for the new work environment.

For example, let us consider the definition of an establishment or workplace under the new labor codes. The [Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020](#) (OSH) defines “establishment” as a place employing workers, connoting a physical space where work takes place. The [Code on Social Security, 2020](#), defines a “home-based worker” as a person engaged in production of goods and services other than the workplace of the employer. While the latter definition could broadly include hybrid and remote models, both the codes nowhere deal with the use of ICTs for work, which is integral to hybrid work. Any other

place other than the physical workplace is not covered under the OSH code, raising questions about the safety and health of workers working outside a physical workplace.

But given the increasing relevance of hybrid work, there is an urgent need for rethinking India’s current labor policy standards. The [draft Model Standing orders issued vis-à-vis the Industrial Relations Code, 2020](#)⁴⁴ are the only guidelines that include clauses related to telework (termed work from home in the order). The guidelines offer a framework to industrial establishments having over 300 workers, on formulating rules of conduct for workers. As per the rules, an employer can allow employees to WFH, subject to conditions of appointment or agreement between the two parties, for a predetermined period.

→ Government enabling flexible work strategy

Back in April 2021, the Irish Government announced a €5m fund (approx. INR 41.3 crores) to support the development of Ireland’s first National Hub Network and help promote remote working around the country.⁴⁷

The Connected Hubs Fund is part of the five-year rural development strategy to tackle rural challenges like higher population decline and aging than cities. The government aims to onboard and upgrade all 400 existing remote working hubs across the country to the ConnectedHubs platform till 2025. Currently, 242 co-working hubs have been added to the ConnectedHubs.ie platform.⁴⁸

Under the initiative, grants are being provided to expand the facilities of existing hubs, build broadband connection points with hot desks, office spaces and meeting rooms as well as electric car charging points, upgrades to disability access and improved IT facilities. A minimum

€10,000 grant is available per single-hub application while a minimum €30k to €50k grant is available for a multi-hub application.

The Irish Government has also introduced The Right to Request Remote Work Bill 2021 which sets out a legal framework for requesting, approving or refusing a request for remote work. The Regulatory Impact Assessment Report⁴⁹ of the proposed legislation makes a case for hybrid work by saying that it increases participation in the labor market, enables balanced regional development, alleviates accommodation pressures, improves work/life balance, improves child and family wellbeing, reduces the amount of time spent commuting, and reduces carbon emissions and air pollution. While the facilitation of remote working requests by an employer is likely to lead to at least some increased costs for employers, the report notes

that most employers have already invested in IT infrastructure and mobile technology over the past 20 months to adapt to remote and hybrid working during the pandemic. Therefore, accommodating the legislation may require no or very less additional investment.

In some instances, costs incurred in equipment may be somewhat offset by reductions in office rental space savings, and in reduced spend on related costs such as electricity, heating, cleaning, catering at potentially commercial rates. However, to give employers the room to make independent business decisions, the proposed bill identifies excess costs as a reasonable ground for businesses to refuse a request for remote work.

However, introducing such guidelines for all sectors would require considering the diverse needs of different establishments. For example, while in some sectors, flexible work timings during remote work may be possible, in some other sectors, this may not be feasible. Therefore, drafting a common set of WFH clauses would require industry-level consultations to make the upcoming laws optimal across sectors and in consonance with the different state rules and orders.

Many labor regulations in India require employers to maintain compliance records, registers, etc. With employers moving to a hybrid setup, the definition of a workplace has been complicated.⁴⁵ As many regulations suggest, a workplace is only a physical space and therefore, if interpreted strictly, maintaining records as per statutory requirements might become difficult.

In addition, implementation of wage codes, minimum wage regulations etc. might become difficult as an employee may work in a different state or city than where the employer's physical workplace is situated. **As it stands currently, there is an inherent dissonance between the central labor rules and the state laws.** For instance, take the professional tax (PT) and Labor Welfare Fund (LWF) laws. Employers are responsible for deducting PT from an employee's salary, and make contributions to the state LWF. Employers will likely face procedural challenges around these, such as submitting locally issued documents for remote employees, who might be located where the employer does not have an office address. Given such dissonance, it could be burdensome for employers to assess their exact statutory obligations and employee benefits.⁴⁶

In addition, tax exemptions given to employees will need to be re-jigged, as employees who live in rural areas or smaller towns would likely face fewer expenses compared to those living in metropolitan areas. But they might face a different set of expenses altogether – electricity bill costs, costs of ICT tools such as devices, software subscriptions and internet connection costs, and food too, as many large firms have in-office eateries that provide subsidized food for their employees. These costs need to be accounted for separately. Provisions will need to be made for infrastructure support such as in the form of computers or other devices to enable employees to work from home.

B. Challenges around managing productivity and efficiency

Most employers have adopted hybrid work models only in the pandemic, and the transition to the new mode of working has been accompanied by skepticism as well as challenges. One of the main employer concerns surrounding hybrid work is regarding its impact on employee productivity and efficiency, as well as its impact on organizational culture and team cohesion. Another practice has been the practice of “moonlighting.” This refers to a practice where some employees do paid work besides their primary job, typically hidden from the employer.⁵⁰ Many Indian companies have been grappling with the issue over the past year although there are no specific legal restrictions on working with two employers at the same time. There is also concern about cybersecurity issues in hybrid settings, as the devices being used by employees are not always controlled at a central administrative level. As more tasks become online, the attack surface for cyber attacks increases proportionally with it.⁵¹ Home networks and devices of employees are also more vulnerable to attack because of a lack of adequate cybersecurity methods or tools, which can put employers at a severe risk of data theft, loss or other forms of compromise. While none of these issues are impossible to address, organizations will need to evolve their way of working to be able to address challenges and tap the potential of hybrid work. The focus may need to shift away from the conventional understanding of availability and office productivity to

→ Future of Work perception

A 'Future of Work' perception study by research firm Censuswide found

35%

of respondents in India were suffering from burnout due to excess workload

34%

were being impacted by work-related stress.⁵³

meaningful use of time. Organizations will also need to implement new cybersecurity practices including new protocols and controls to ensure that data security risks from remote work are minimized.

Work-life balance/mental health

Hybrid work brings a new set of challenges for employees, both individuals and teams. The suddenness of the pandemic required a rapid transition, and employees sometimes struggled to adjust to the fast changing environment at their workplaces. But even now, the lack of legal regulation means that working hours, overtime etc. remain regulated by the (often vague and open-ended) contracts between the employer and the employee. In such a situation, the work sometimes spills beyond the assigned work hours, due to the pressure to remain available. Some research has shown that remote employees sometimes are working longer, spending time in more meetings and having to keep up with more communication channels.⁵²

Over the last two years, the virtual environment saw people unable to take mental breaks as they were always digitally connected, which led to serious burnout issues. With growing awareness of the role of mental health, companies also need to focus on the emotional-social needs of their employees while cultivating resilience and adaptability.

A very worrisome trend that also spiked during the pandemic in WFH settings was the heavy dent on social capital – benefits arising from regular interactions with co-workers. The shift to remote work has changed social capital and knowledge flows in organizations and despite more meetings than ever, employees reported more isolation and less connection. Organizations could potentially leverage hybrid work to reduce these issues, and create structured spaces for employees to physically connect with their co-workers and managers. This would also increase informal interaction and enhance opportunities for learning and sharing within the organization.

Gendered impact

Although time spent on domestic work among men increased during the pandemic, in most cases, as primary caregivers, women, in the absence of a support system, which lay paralyzed during the pandemic (i.e. no creche, no domestic help, elder care etc.) shouldered the bulk of the domestic work.

Women, especially those in decision-making roles, have noted that carrying out full-time work can work efficiently

if they have a strong support system to take care of their household responsibilities. But having experienced telework in an exceptional circumstance like the pandemic, was perhaps a reason for their mixed responses to adjusting to the norm of WFH. Even the responses to an ILO survey showed that, with a normal support system operating, the WFH option may not have been so overwhelming.⁵⁴

Many women also worry that even if a WFH option is available, it may work to their disadvantage. Unfortunately, even facially neutral policies might end up perpetrating discrimination. For instance, biases against employees working from home need to be accounted for, as these could end up disproportionately affecting working women if they opt for remote roles because of their circumstances. If biases are not addressed through corrective policies, there is also a risk of perpetuating gender inequality in hiring. In cultures where women are traditionally expected to partake in care responsibilities, women might get restricted to teleworking roles, thus creating a dual burden of work and household responsibilities. **For these reasons, it is important to prevent hybrid work from becoming an alternative to office work only for women, thus reinforcing stereotypes and discriminatory practices.** In addition, questions arise about the legal protections accorded to women employees. In India, this includes protections such as The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, and Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013, among others. These regulations may need to be revisited in light of the changes in work environment that hybrid work may entail.

How are other countries supporting hybrid work?

Several countries have taken measures to support remote and hybrid work, giving incentives to employers and providing adequate labor protections for employees. While many countries are still in the process of developing a framework, some countries have created them already. Developed countries, which rely on the service sector extensively, have especially moved quickly to create suitable frameworks for governing remote and flexible working arrangements.

Some like the UK have taken an approach that affords flexibility to the parties to determine their contracts, while others like Spain and Colombia have created positive obligations on employers to provide both on-site and

off-site employees similar facilities. Some countries have even created long-term plans to improve their country's infrastructure to facilitate hybrid work. Some of these approaches are summarized below.

Ireland

Ireland released its National Remote Work Strategy (NRWS) in January 2021, to create a framework to support remote work.⁵⁵ The objective of this strategy is to ensure that remote work is a permanent feature of the Irish workplace. The three pillars of the strategy are:

1. Creating a conducive environment
2. Developing and leveraging remote work infrastructure
3. Building a remote work policy and guidance framework

The first pillar would involve passing laws allowing employees the right to remote work, and a code of practice on the right to disconnect. Tax arrangements would be reviewed keeping in mind remote work. In the 2022 Budget speech, Paschal Donohoe, Ireland's finance minister, announced that employees working from home will be able to claim back 30% of their energy bills against their income tax.⁵⁶

The second pillar focuses on creating and using existing infrastructure to support remote and hybrid work models. Under this pillar, Ireland would establish a national network of 400 remote working hubs by 2025.⁵⁷ It also proposes to make significant investments to establish hubs and infrastructure in underserved areas while accelerating its National Broadband Plan to improve connectivity across the country. It also plans to incorporate video communications into local government bodies like local councils.

The third pillar would involve collecting national level data on remote work and creating a cross-departmental knowledge base on the impacts of remote work on areas such as, employment, transport, carbon emissions, broadband, and equality.

Spain

Teleworking increased from about 10% to almost 40-50% of the Spanish workforce from 2019 to 2020.⁵⁸ Keeping this in mind, the Spanish government approved a legislation called the *Royal Decree-Law 28/2020* in September 2020, to govern remote work.⁵⁹

The law defines teleworking, as a sub-category of remote

working that occurs exclusively or predominantly online. The regular basis of work is defined as at least 30% of the working week, the equivalent to approximately two days a week for a period of three months.

As per the law, teleworking must be a voluntary arrangement, with possibility to opt out at any time. Remote workers have the right to disconnect after work hours, and are entitled to all the same protections as on-site employees. They also have the right to privacy and data protection.

Under the law, the Labor and Social Security Inspectorate (ITSS) has also been given the power and resources to investigate legal violations and complaints of fraud or undeclared work.

USA

The Telework Enhancement Act 2010 governs telework in executive branch departments and agencies in the US. In light of the pandemic, the US Office of Personnel Management released a guidance called the 2021 Guide to Telework and Remote Work in the Federal Government to help federal agencies adopt best practices in hybrid and remote work arrangements.⁶⁰ For private employees in the US, such work arrangements are usually governed by a contract between the employee and employer.

Some states, such as the state of Maine have also started funds like the Coworking Development Fund in recognition of the contribution of coworking spaces to local economies and their roles in creating communities for remote workers. Maine's fund in particular is designed to support the success of coworking spaces by providing financial assistance and opportunity for collaboration and connection with other such spaces.⁶¹

UK

The UK decided that legislation on flexible work needed to "build on good practice, be light touch and recognize the needs of small businesses."⁶² It is based on a foundation of dialogue and negotiation between employers & employees.⁶³

The UK allowed Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA) in 2002, with employees having the legal right to request flexible working through a statutory application after having worked with the same employer for 26 weeks. This includes work from home and hybrid arrangements. Employers must deal

with requests in a ‘reasonable manner,’ failing which an employment tribunal can be approached.⁶⁴

Employers have the same health and safety responsibilities for employees working at home as for on-site workers.⁶⁵

Colombia

The new Remote Working Law (Law 2088) came into force in Colombia on 12 May 2021.⁶⁶ Under it, employees would have the right to receive salaries and social welfare measures corresponding to their employment status, even when working remotely.

The employer can determine the frequency of work from home, performance evaluation criteria etc. as per the employment contract. Employees would be permitted to use their own devices or equipment. If not, employers would have to provide these to them.⁶⁷

Recommendations

Hybrid work holds a lot of potential for India, especially considering the fact that more and more employees are ready to embrace the flexibility it offers. With the right enabling policies, hybrid work can enhance employee-employer relationships and aid economic growth, providing society-wide benefits.

Below, we outline some key recommendations through which governments and employers can boost the trends already underway and unlock the benefits of hybrid work for an inclusive workforce. These recommendations were arrived at following a thorough review of available literature and detailed conversations with stakeholders within academia and industry, and thought-leaders in the civil society.

In arriving at the recommendations, we have also studied emerging insights from field surveys. While numerous dip-stick surveys have been conducted over the past few months, academically rigorous studies are still lacking. So a key priority should be data collection and research to truly understand the extent of adoption of hybrid work models in India, and to measure its likely impact on labor force participation across social groups, workplace travel and also internal migration. Collection of good data and its analysis can help identify the sectors and industries

where such models are most prevalent, which locations employees are taking up such models from, and help identify challenges and opportunities, which can further inform the design of hybrid work policies.

We divide our recommendations into two broad sections below.

Policy Enablers

1. Infrastructure support for hybrid work

Governments can invest in building supporting infrastructure that can facilitate hybrid work, such as work-near-home hubs, coworking spaces and similar spaces. A network of such hubs, especially in tier-II and tier-III cities, can help people access the benefits of hybrid work without having to migrate to densely populated metro cities for work. It can also help businesses and organizations reduce costs of expansion, and allow them to hire talent to work from multiple locations without the need to set up new office spaces. Besides ensuring that these hubs are centrally located and well-connected, such facilities should be integrated with creches to provide an option for caregiving parents to work from these centers.

In India, we have seen the emergence of two broad models of such work-near-home hubs. One such model is the West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation's (HIDCO) work-near-home hubs called “Happy Works”. Here, employees, freelancers, working mothers etc. can work close to the places of their residence without the need of a specific office space, at affordable rates.⁶⁸ These hubs are financed by the workers who pay a nominal fee to use the facilities. The second model is the remote co-working spaces being provided by L&T Metro Rail Limited in Hyderabad, which they are calling ‘Office Bubbles’. This model is financed by the companies themselves, who may be keen on adopting a ‘Hub and Spoke’ model to open strategically dispersed smaller offices across the city.

For both the models, subsidized availability of land and/or other financial incentives extended by state governments can go a long way in encouraging such hubs in smaller cities. Governments could also look at repurposing and equipping facilities in unused or underutilized community spaces such as community halls, public libraries, etc.

2. Focus on boosting internet connectivity, particularly in underserved areas

Internet connectivity with reliable speed and latency is essential for hybrid work, especially for video communication. Therefore, mobile tower density and Optical Fiber Cable (OFC) connectivity need to be enhanced to ensure faster and more reliable internet and connection speeds across the country, especially in smaller cities and remote locations.

Although broadband connectivity has expanded throughout smaller cities and towns in India, reliable quality remains a concern.⁶⁹ The Digital Quality of Life Index 2021 ranked India 67th out of 110 countries in internet quality, with mobile and broadband speeds and stability as metrics.⁷⁰

Consistent internet connectivity is important to ensure that hybrid collaboration remains seamless. Therefore, a key priority should be boosting internet infrastructure programmes and strengthening their implementation. To increase opportunities in hybrid and remote work for people across the country, the government must continue improving the Quality of Service (QoS) of Indian broadband and mobile internet services.

3. Incentivize through tax benefits, both for employers and employees

Hybrid work requires employees to have a work setup at home, which can involve some expenditure. These include costs of the devices and furniture needed for a hybrid setup, and also recurring expenses such as electricity, internet charges, etc. Some companies are granting allowances and/or reimbursements associated with these expenses.⁷¹

The government can look into retooling deductions for employees and independent professionals who work from home either part-time or full-time and exempt taxes on expenses incurred for buying home office infrastructure, such as furniture, computers, broadband connections, etc. The government could also allow standard deductions up to a certain limit per month to cover recurring expenses such as electricity. Like in the case of other deductions, they could make these deductions applicable based on proof of expenses incurred, submitted to employers.

4. Digital skilling programmes

The government must continue to expand its digital literacy programmes such as the Digital Saksharta Abhiyan or National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM). It could expand

the curriculum in such programmes to include modules on using business and collaboration tools, including productivity software, e-mail/messaging platforms, video communications services and other tools required to perform hybrid work. The Education Ministry can also consider working with schools and higher education institutions to develop such digital skills programmes that can be taught alongside their regular coursework. This will ensure that the younger generation is prepared for the future of work.

Besides the above, the government could look at creating a guide or training modules for public sector undertakings, as well as the private sector on best practices for cybersecurity, providing knowledge of zero trust models⁷², and setting safe use standards for employers.

5. Reconciling labor laws

In addition to all the above measures, labor laws must be amended to provide more clarity on the status of remote and hybrid work. Some court decisions have talked about remote work, and the Model Standing Order (MSO) for the service sector released by the Ministry of Labor and Employment has also provided some legal recognition to work from home arrangements. In addition, a recent amendment to the SEZ (Special Economic Zones) Rules, 2006, has also allowed for WFH for up to 50% of employees.⁷³ However, remote and hybrid work arrangements remain dependent on the contract between the employer and the employee. These arrangements also continue to be plagued by the dissonance between central labor rules and state laws.

The government will likely need to come up with enabling regulations to provide an overarching framework for hybrid and remote work models, with a focus on relevant social, economic and mental protections suited to their needs. This could include the right to make an application for hybrid or flexible work, the right to disconnect after work hours and more. In addition, state and central laws will need to be harmonized to reduce difficulties for employers in complying with labor laws.

Industry Initiatives

Organizations will have to work closely with employees to create an effective hybrid work environment. While each organization is likely to be confronted by distinct challenges because of sectoral differences and varying requirements of

on-site presence, there are some broad principles and best practices organizations can embrace if they are looking to implement hybrid or flexible work models.

1. The right to opt for hybrid work

Where feasible, organizations should give employees the choice of opting for a work style that best suits their needs. Employers can designate specific roles for hybrid work, or extend the choice to all employees depending on the specific needs of their business. Surveys of employee sentiment, as discussed, have shown that they greatly value flexibility in their jobs. Therefore, offering employees a choice of on-site or hybrid work can help them feel empowered, and can help mitigate high rates of employee turnover.⁷⁴

2. Providing solutions that give all employees the same capabilities

In a hybrid work setup, there will be a mix of off-site and on-site employees operating in organizations. This can bring up challenges for managerial staff. Therefore, organizations must work with managers and human resource departments to clarify policies and create roadmaps and guidelines to reasonably accommodate personal preferences, and facilitate collaboration among various teams.

In addition, employers must provide solutions to their employees to collaborate and perform their duties with similar ease in both environments. Implementing unified communications solutions can enable collaboration and address some of these challenges. Employers can also improve collaboration by scheduling in-person team meetings and regular check-ins. This will be crucial for team building and may also help ensure parity between employees working on-site and off-site.

3. Inclusivity matters

Creating an inclusive work environment must remain a top priority while opting for hybrid work models. Hybrid work could present specific challenges for employees belonging to marginalized backgrounds. For instance, disabled people and caregiving parents could face specific challenges such as lack of face-time within the organization.

Therefore, providing the right tools and incentives will be critical. For instance, disabled employees might have different flexibility needs than other employees. Specific measures for including disabled employees can include

vetting productivity and other enterprise software for accessibility measures, establishing career progression and leadership training irrespective of the work style chosen, etc.

Similarly, parental leave, maternity benefits and flexible hour policies must be retooled, keeping hybrid work in mind, and policies must be drafted in a gender-sensitive manner to ensure that women do not face specific disadvantages under this model.

4. Best practices for employee welfare

Needless to say, organizations will need to work closely with their employees and HR departments to create an effective hybrid working environment. As organizations codify HR policies for hybrid work, a test-and-learn approach could prove beneficial. Employers can consider implementing policies for better work-life balance, such as the option to choose work slots, allowing employees with parenting/caregiving responsibilities to take compensatory breaks between work hours, and allowing employees to disconnect from work devices after work hours. These can go a long way in improving employee morale and health.

Employees must also be made aware of their rights in a hybrid work setup. For instance, they must be informed that their rights under laws such as the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, Maternity Benefits Act etc. will be available to them irrespective of their work model.

5. Cybersecurity measures

In an increasingly digitized world, organizations must create resource libraries and training tools for employees at all levels to use workplace technologies in a secure manner. To accommodate the hybrid work environment, organizations will also need to implement new cybersecurity practices, including new protocols and controls, to ensure that they minimize data security risks from remote work.

In addition, employees must be guided on the best practices for cybersecurity, such as password management, two-factor authentication and other such safeguards against cybersecurity breaches. These will go a long way in reducing the attack surface and potential leaks of information.

APPENDIX I

Sectors with heavy use of hybrid work models:

Hybrid work models are usually more prevalent in sectors with heavier reliance on ICT tools or other computerized solutions. An extensive analysis of over 2,000 job roles by McKinsey found that the potential for remote work is highly concentrated among highly-skilled, highly-educated workers in a handful of industries, occupations, and geographies.⁷⁵

However, as more jobs and sectors come to rely on ICT tools, it is likely that firms in other sectors will have at least sections of their workforce that can rely on a hybrid work model. Some of the sectors which hold promise are listed below⁷⁶:

- IT and ITeS
- Telecommunications
- Accounting and finance
- Professional and technical services
- Banking
- Customer Service and BPO
- Legal services
- Education and training
- Marketing

APPENDIX II

SURVEYS

Opinions on WFH:

1. The BPO giant, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), reported that around 85% of its 400,000 employees in India and around the world shifted to working from home because of the lockdowns in the first wave of the pandemic in 2020.⁷⁷
2. A 2021 NASSCOM survey on the tech industry in India showed that 70% of organizations were looking to adopt hybrid work models in some form after returning to the workplace. This increased to 80% in IT services and GCCs.⁷⁸ A survey commissioned by Zoom and conducted by BCG found that 47% of surveyed Indian businesses expected over a third of their employees to work remotely after the pandemic.⁷⁹
3. A 2022 news report by ET Now found that Tata Steel, TCS, Mercedes-Benz India, KPMG and Deloitte incorporated hybrid working models in 2022.⁸⁰ Other companies like Ceat, Tata Steel, ITC, Mahindra Finance, Thermax and Forbes Marshall also are allowing flexible work options for certain sections of their workforce like finance, legal, HR and other tech roles.⁸¹

Cost savings:

4. Dell reported saving over \$12 million pa in real estate costs by creating flexible work options.⁸²
5. For example, the USPTO estimated that increases in remote work in 2015, well before the pandemic, saved it \$38.2 million.⁸³ The US Department of Justice even allows employees to give up designated workspaces to increase their teleworking days.⁸⁴
6. A survey conducted by Gensler India among 2500 full-time employees⁸⁵ in India found that 67% of them would prefer a hybrid work model where they have at least a few days a week of hybrid work. Another survey showed that over 67% of companies were facing difficulties in hiring for on-site roles.⁸⁶

7. At least 6 out of every 10 employees responded to a survey by recruitment and staffing firm CIEL HR Services said they were prepared to quit their jobs instead of returning to the office or the place of work. Almost a similar number of employees would forgo an offer for a higher-paid job which requires them to compulsorily come to office, according to the findings.⁸⁷ This shows that work-life balance is likely highly valued by employees.⁸⁸
8. TCS posted a decline of Rs 2,215 crore in its travel costs in FY21. Similarly, Reliance Industries and Bajaj Auto saw their travel cost decline by 70% and 93% respectively in FY21; compared to the same period in FY20.

Disability:

9. A meta-analysis of studies conducted in the USA showed that disabled employees were likely to benefit from expanded Work from Home opportunities, particularly in sectors with a high potential for home-based work.⁸⁹ A UK study found that one in three disabled people without employment stated transport as a substantial burden preventing them from working, and that flexible work schedules were positively correlated with being employed at the time of the survey.

Women:

10. 17% of mothers wanted to downshift their careers compared to 13% of fathers, and 23% of women compared to 13% of men planned to leave the workforce altogether.⁹⁰

Productivity:

11. Another empirical analysis showed that self-managed work time (SMWT) arrangements can have a positive effect on effort put by workers towards their roles.⁹¹
12. A report from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) in the USA showed that the average workday lengthened by 48.5 minutes in the weeks following stay-at-home orders across the U.S. in March 2020.⁹² The number of meetings and internal email activity also increased.

Security:

13. A survey conducted among chief information security officers (CISOs) across several countries found that almost 64% of those surveyed believed that their organizations were at a higher risk of suffering cyber attacks in 2020. They identified Business Email Compromise and Cloud Account Compromise to be pressing concerns.⁹³ Over half of the CISOs surveyed also said that allowing remote access to company information negatively affects security teams' ability to manage the control and classification of sensitive business data.

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Acknowledgements



This report has been authored in collaboration with The Quantum Hub (TQH), a public policy research and communications firm based out of New Delhi. The research team included Kaushik Thanugonda, Sneha Pillai and Rohit Kumar.

Valuable feedback and inputs were provided by Sabina Dewan, President and Executive Director, JustJobs Network; Swarnima, Partner, Trilegal; Mala Khullar, Independent Researcher & Co-Editor, Asian Journal of Women's Studies; Ratna Sudarshan, Trustee & Former Director, Institute of Social Studies Trust; Krittika Paul, People Strategy Lead, South Asia, Unilever; Ujwala Thirumurthy, Senior Manager, Creative Content, JobsForHer; and Meera Shenoy, Founder-CEO, Youth4Jobs.

This report is largely based on data from secondary sources, coupled with insights from consultations held with stakeholders by TQH.