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CYNERA RODRICKS AND AASTHA ATRAY BANAN

COVID-19 has upended the workplace dynamic, with employers and HR teams brainstorming on ways to woo staff back to the office environment while keeping their well-being at the centre of policy decisions

IF people were asked to return to work anytime soon, our bet is that those who've experienced Work-From-Home fatigue wouldn't mind it, but physical and mental health priorities would remain top of their mind.

Also, the underlying fear of having to travel in crowded trains where social distancing is next to impossible, or even interacting with colleagues who do not follow COVID-appropriate behaviour or are hesitant to take the vaccine, is discouraging many. The push-pull equation has turned this on its head, with employers doing all they can to woo staff back.

American multinational technology company Google LLC, which was one of the first last year to announce that employees could work from home till June, 2021, recently shared its hybrid return-to-work plan. Google and Alphabet Inc. CEO Sundar Pichai communicated with the staff via an internal message.

As per the plan, 60 per cent of the staff will be called to office for a few days of the week, while 20 per cent would work in new office locations and the remaining 20 per cent would work remotely. Though Googlers have been given a choice to work from home, Pichai said that their salaries would be adjusted accordingly. Google knows it faces a dilemma. People are getting used to the work-life balance they have grown to enjoy while working from home, and realise that it's pointless to waste hours commuting to work. The firm has therefore been building and repurposing office spaces as cool places to hangout.

As reported by the New York Times, Google has been designing Team Pods, and has created a new type of meeting room, called Campfire, where employees can sit in a circle with huge screens for video conferences. It is also building outdoor leisure spots.

Another company, Hager UK, which is a manufacturer of electrical installations, has a plan in place to combat employee anxiety surrounding COVID-19. They have introduced an optional wristband for staff to wear, a different colour to represent the employee's state of mind. The red band, for example, states, "I'm keeping my distance", alerting colleagues to stay away, while the yellow band implies, "okay with talking, but not touching". The green band denotes, "okay with hugs and high-fives".

Django Digital in Lower Parel welcomed its employees back after the second Coronavirus wave recently, by introducing a hybrid model of operation. A hybrid office is a flexible workplace model that is designed to support a distributed workforce both, in-office and remote workers. "When you opt for the hybrid work model, you offer your staff more flexibility in terms of when and where they can work. It's like offering them the best of both worlds: structure and sociability on the one hand, and independence and flexibility on the other. Such a culture will make employees feel less anxious at a time like this," says Natasha Bhatia, PR and influencer manager with the company.

When Django asked its employees to return to work, it set aside a day in the week, which was christened Mental Health Day Off. It was a time when employees were asked to stay away from work and focus on personal well-being if needed.

Miss interacting with colleagues: Employees

A survey by Space Matrix threw up these findings on returning to work

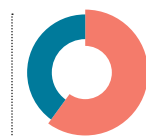


51% of respondents said being able to work from home when they want to would make them feel safer about returning to the office

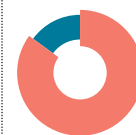


30% felt overworked working from home

One million sq ft. physical workplace has been redesigned



60% of the clients are re-calibrating their physical workplace post pandemic



85% of respondents mentioned they missed collaborating with colleagues



"For me, it is little things like these that matter," says Bhatia.

Like Django, digital marketing agency WATConsult, which has a staff of 400, asked them to return to work but not without addressing the need for an empathetic environment. All staff are offered one-on-one therapy sessions to address their queries and worries through expert professionals. "The employee decides if s/he needs one or ongoing sessions," says Mahesh Nazare, director, HR and Learning and Development.

Nazare, who was attending to an employee vaccination drive when we reached out to him, says, "We have noticed how the therapy sessions have helped boost morale. Also, if an employee falls ill and is unable to cook at home, they are free to order in their meals, and the company will foot the bill. We want our employees to be as comfortable as possible."

Most HR heads agree that to

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Aashay Shah, founder of Django Digital, scribbles notes on a white board while participating in a virtual meeting on his phone at their office in Lower Parel. The marketing and ad agency has adopted the hybrid work model, with half the staff working from office, and the rest remotely. A lower head count at the workplace means that empty work stations between colleagues help them keep distance. **PICS/ BIPIN KOKATE AND SHADAB KHAN**



MAHESH NAZARE,
HR HEAD, WATCONSULT

'Asking for WFH is common today'



Julia Manke,
founder,
Fingertips,
recruitment
agency

Fifteen months ago, very few would consider asking for flexible timings or work from home options. But today, it is a common query among others such as health benefits, compensation etc... I read about a large American bank saying, 'If you want Manhattan salaries, you need to work in Manhattan'. So employers will read that and maybe adjust salaries according to what you choose. All the tech giants, who had said they will make WFH work, are now calling people back. Companies are keen to have their employees come back to office.



StashFin, an online lending startup, is encouraging employees to work out of smart and convenient work pods at co-working spaces near their homes instead of expecting them to work out of one office



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draft a strategy to ensure that employees are happy and safe is possibly the only way forward. A recent global survey titled, The Way We Work, conducted by workplace design consultancy Space Matrix, found that 85 per cent people don't mind being at their workplace, but for two to three days a week. This indicates that a majority of them prefer the hybrid work regime. Sixty four per cent of the respondents had never worked from home before the pandemic. Southeast Asia had more experience with work from home (43 per cent), while India and China had less (29 per cent). Given a choice, 50 per cent would go back to offices but only for team meetings, collaborations and brain-storming, while 20 per cent would go for client meetings, and 20 per cent would agree to go for town halls and social interactions.

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Natasha Bhatia, PR manager and influencer, Django Digital

68%

Percentage of employers who believed that employees need to be in office at least three days a week to maintain corporate culture, according to a 2020 survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers

While speaking about the findings of the survey, Space Matrix MD, Titir Dey was quoted as saying, "Business leaders are increasingly focusing on ensuring safe, stimulating and comfortable work processes in their organisations."

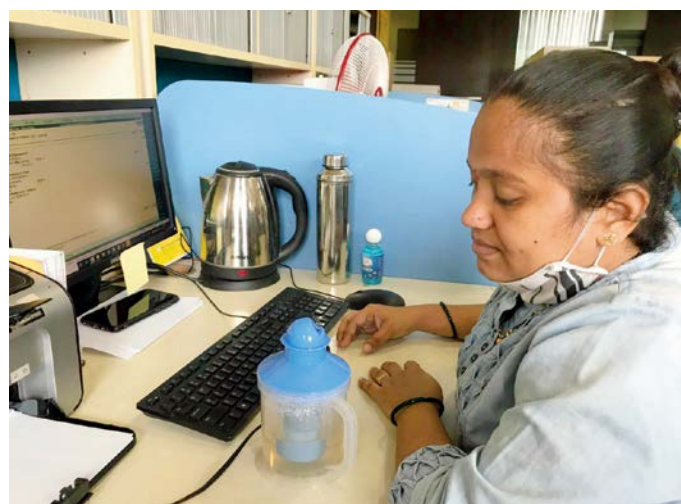
But, the office space continues to be sacred for employers at least. A survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers, a multinational professional services network of firms, late last year revealed that "68 per cent of employers believed that employees needed to be in the office at least three days a week to maintain corporate culture".

And this is the balance that most offices in Indian metros also seem to be supporting. Film production company Eros International has devised something called the Quiet Hour. "From 1 pm to 2 pm, employees are expected to stay away from work duties and encouraged to postpone meeting requests and work calls until later," says Rohit Bhargawa, Vice President and Head, Human Resources and Administration, Eros.

We Naturalists, a startup that runs a social networking site for environmental lovers, has been organising nature trails every



(Above) Acrylic partitions have been installed between workstations at Fine Jewellery Manufacturing Limited's Andheri office, to avoid face to face contact; (Left) Every employee's desk is provided a hot water kettle and steam vapouriser



'Staggered workspaces should be the future'

I think we have all realised that we need to meet each other, for great ideas to be born. And once we do, then masks come off. So, instead of redesigning existing spaces, why not go with the concept of staggered workspaces. So, a firm can rent our multiple small spaces, say one in town, a western suburb, and eastern neighbourhood. This way, they can tap into talent from everywhere. I think the way people will commute will change. What's happening right now, with creating partitions and such, is adhoc, temporary and reversible.

Alan Abraham, architect



weekend for its employees to de-stress, and picking up the cab and auto tab, so that they don't have to take public transport, while travelling to and from work. Fine Jewellery Manufacturing Limited in Seepz, Andheri, is providing bus services from multiple locations for employees to reach work without resorting to public transport which could put their health and those of others at the workplace at risk. At any given point, only 25 employees are permitted on a bus, which has a seating capacity of 49. An admin staffer is assigned the duty

of going around to not just check body temperature of staffers, but oxygen levels too. Every desk now has a hot water kettle and a steam vapouriser. "Our employees are offered an ayurvedic kadha every day to boost immunity, as well as a 30-day course of immunity boosting vitamins and supplements," says Madhuri Prabhulkar, senior manager, HR. To avoid person-to-person direct infection, they have installed acrylic partitions between work desks. Even the layout of the canteen has been restructured in a zigzag pattern to allow for social distancing. "If, at any point in time, an employee exhibits COVID-like symptoms, they can be taken to an isolation facility that has been set up within the factory premises to quarantine them temporarily," Prabhulkar says.

Some other offices are relying on rewards programmes as a way for the organisation to express gratitude. There are a few others who are adding job benefits to make sure employees feel like they are being appreciated.

Shruti Aggarwal, founder of StashFin, an online lending startup, says they have ensured that all employees have been provided the vaccine shot, and a health insurance plan. A tech rewards idea involves offering staffers the choice to upgrade to better machines. "They can upgrade their computer system to a cutting edge, expen-

sive one like a Mac, and buy it at a subsidised rate from the company. The said amount would be deducted like EMIs from their monthly salary. We want them to feel like we care about their standard of living and working, regardless of the pandemic," says Aggarwal, who adds that the StashFin employees have been working out of work pods created at co-working spaces near their homes rather than having to all troop to the office in Bengaluru, Delhi and Mumbai. This then simultaneously addresses the problem of some employees not having a home that offers a work-conducive environment.

What COVID-19 then has inadvertently done is change the employer-employee dynamic. Joseph B Fuller, professor of management practice at the Harvard Business School, described it as the "next normal" on the institute's website. "[It] will be a function of changes in the way many workers—especially those possessed of the skills most in demand—view their relationship with employers. In responding to COVID, employers publicly and unambiguously elevate their employees' health and well-being to be their highest priority," he wrote, adding, "Employees are unlikely to return happily to a workplace driven by the 'old deal', in which the employer sets standard rules of employment and the workforce acquiesces. They will expect not only the right to determine the adequacy of workplace safety measures, but also expect employers to consider their individual circumstances, like caregiving obligations, when designing their roles and evaluating their performance." This, he says, will be a major departure from the time-honoured definition of the employer-employee relationship.



Rohit Bhargawa, Vice President and Head, Human Resources and Administration, Eros International, says the company has devised the Quiet Hour, where every day from 1 pm to 2 pm, employees are expected to switch off from work duties and encouraged to postpone meeting requests

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