

WFH to 'phygital' and virtual commute: How Covid has changed working world

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What is 'normal' going to look like for offices in the new year?

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'WFH', among Oxford Language's recently chosen "Words of an Unprecedented Year", is likely to continue into 2021 too

Working lives became truly "flexible" in 2020. Homes morphed into co-working spaces. Teapoys, dining tables and kitchen counters doubled as desks. Comfortable pyjamas -- or, in Anand Mahindra's case, *lungis* -- became permissible workwear. Ten months after workplaces first emptied out in the final weeks of March, a large portion of the salaried population is still operating remotely. 'WFH', among Oxford Language's recently chosen "Words of an Unprecedented Year", is likely to continue into 2021 too.

For companies and employees alike, the relationship with remote working has swung between love, hate and acceptance. The most proudly rooted organisations are dropping words like “agile” and “hybrid” now. As corporate celebrations — including ones for this yearend — move beyond just head offices to cover all centres with help of the internet, companies are also touting a sense of inclusivity. Much of the hiring and orientation activity is expected to happen over web conferencing next year as well. Skilling, too, will be an important workplace priority going forward.

Low angles of faces and views of ceiling fans, a staple of early pandemic web calls, will be left behind. Architects report getting requests from executives to design well-appointed home offices with art lining the walls and shelves covered in books. Made-up words such as “phygital” are here to stay in our lexicon.

Technology companies are boosting their video communications tools with more lively touches — Cisco Webex will introduce animated meeting reactions; Microsoft Teams will bring in a ‘virtual commute’ mode so people can book meeting-free times; Zoom has enhanced security by allowing people to pause and kick gatecrashers out of meetings. (The ‘virtual commute’ mode will remind people about the end of the workday and suggest tasks to help them wind down before getting into tasks and chores at home.)

Even as digital offerings improve, companies are letting go of a few, but not all, of their physical workspaces. Some plan to offer multi-location options to ease the burden of travelling.

“Offices aren’t going away anytime soon — human interaction is the best way to catalyse creativity and resolve intractable issues,” says Ruzbeh Irani, group human resources & communications, Mahindra Group. Urvi Aradhya, chief human resources officer at real estate developer K Raheja Corp, agrees, “They are a place for congregation, mentorship, learning and camaraderie, something that cannot be replaced with a digital tool.”

In sectors including health, banking and finance, manufacturing, education and the arts, employees have been slowly returning to office a few times a week. Depending on how new strains and vaccines progress, these numbers could increase. But office layouts will rarely be as full or as fixed as before. Rotating shifts and hotdesking — where seats are not assigned but used as required — will take over to free up space. Apart from masking and social distancing requirements, touch-free doors and voice-command elevators will be par for the course on bigger campuses.

THE NEW NORMAL

Expectation from office in new year

- **59% want workplace to show greater consideration** to hygiene, health, safety
- **44% cite mental wellbeing as second most important** consideration

Covid-save at work

- **Hiring, orientation activity to continue** over web conferencing
- **Skilling to be** workplace priority
- **Some offices to offer employees multi-location options** to ease burden of travelling
- **New norm:** Rotating shifts, hotdesking, touch-free

doors, voice-command elevators, fresh air components in heating, ventilation, air-conditioning

- **20 businesses have applied to Green Business Certification Inc** for pandemic safety accreditation

Source: Survey by job site Indeed

More offices are also adding plants to the decor. Fresh air components in the heating, ventilation and air-conditioning will be the norm. “A lot of start-ups are bringing out digital sensors as well. As we walk into 2021, such measurements in buildings are going to be made transparent to employees,” reckons Gopalakrishnan Padmanabhan, managing director, Southeast Asia and Middle East, Green Business Certification Inc (GBCI).

In addition to regular health and wellness metrics, his firm introduced pandemic safety credits three months ago. So far, 20 businesses in India have applied for such accreditation, and he expects that figure to rise to 50-60 by the end of January.

As Indian workers look to the future, 59 per cent out of 1,015 employees surveyed by the job site Indeed said they expected workplaces in 2021 to show greater consideration to hygiene, health and safety. Importantly, 44 per cent of those surveyed further cited mental well-being as the second most important consideration.

Research by Microsoft concurs. Its Work Trend Index, which considered 6,000 information and first-line workers in eight countries including India, revealed that close to one-third of workers in India are facing increased workday spans and corresponding burnout at work; and another 41 per cent of remote workers said the lack of separation between work and personal life is negatively impacting wellbeing. Ira Gupta, head of Human Resources, India at Microsoft, says the company is offering its own employees paid pandemic leaves and all-day telehealth facilities. Some other companies plan to bring yoga and meditation, which were once being offered on campus, into the virtual space.

The pandemic has made it so that questions about “work-life balance” are no longer unfairly aimed only at women. Across the board, people have been alerted to the fatigue and challenges linked with such enmeshed circumstances. What steps employers take will decide if 2021 will be gentler on the working world.