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Coronavirus Challenge
*Propelling a New Paradigm
of Work from Home*



COVER STORY

Coronavirus Challenge Propelling a New Paradigm of Work from Home

Anand Parthasarathy

The coronavirus pandemic forced governments and corporates worldwide to switch to a new paradigm: Work From Home. Could this be a viable option, even after the crisis passes?



THE more things change, the more they remain the same, runs a French proverb. Here is a striking illustration. Some five years ago, this correspondent had an interview fixed with an IBM executive in one of several offices of that company in Bengaluru.

On the appointed day I made my way to the office and was met in the lobby by one of IBM's corporate communications officers. "We need to go to Meeting Room no 2. Let me try and find it," she said. I was a bit surprised. Surely someone who worked there would know the geography of the place? Turned out she didn't work there – or in any of IBM's half a dozen locations in the city.

Like thousands of IBM staff, she 'worked from home' and came to office on rare occasions like this when she had to organise a media meeting. If for some reason she needed to work from office, she had to "book" a workstation in advance. She showed me a large hall with dozens of such cubicles, with a floating population of IBMites. After my

interview was over, I went back to my home – and the lady did likewise, to hers.

More recently, I heard from a manager at the multinational tech company, Cisco, that some 60 percent of their staff, particularly in Indian metros, had the option of working either from home or from one of those serviced "workspaces" available for rent near their homes. Cisco saw no sense in thousands of staff spending three hours or more of productive time, commuting to the city's IT clusters.

"Work From Home" is therefore not a new concept. It has been around for over a decade (see box: "Flashback: the first home worker"). The concept has been called many things including Telecommuting and Remote Working. But the coronavirus pandemic suddenly made this a compulsion rather than an option.

The Indian government mandated that corporates allow as many as possible of their employees to operate from home – and set an example within its own walls. When an

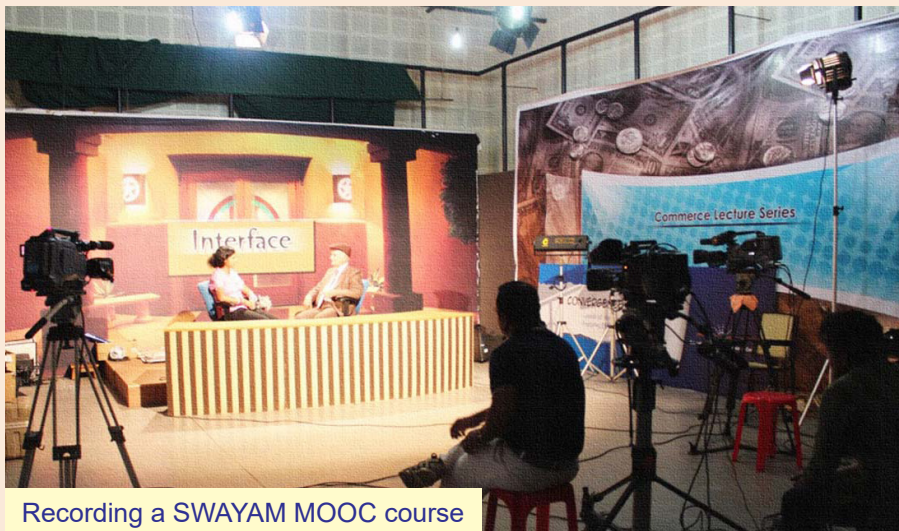
e-Learning: Touching a Broad Spectrum of Students

With students and professionals forced to stay indoors, the appeal of distance learning is compelling

For parents with young children, the challenge of how to slip in some study time into all those hours of TV binge watching has been met. The answer is e-learning: Internet-based curriculum-based coaching, at which leaders like Byju's, Unacademy, Khan Academy, etc. have excelled for some years.

There are over a hundred India-specific e-learning apps, most of them in the form of Android apps. And many lifted their paywalls during the Covid-19 lockdown. The walls will come back once full normalcy is restored – but many parents may see the value of distance learning as a long term investment.

At college and university level, India is fortunate to have in place a platform like SWAYAM which offers hundreds of free MOOC – Massive Online Open Courses – which are recognized for obtaining credit towards degrees by many universities. This has ensured uninterrupted learning to lakhs of students in recent weeks of academic upheaval.



Recording a SWAYAM MOOC course

The other emerging stream of learn from home addresses the mid-career upskilling of professionals, largely in the IT sector where entry-level knowledge can quickly become obsolescent. Leaders like Simplilearn, Edureka, Coursera and Udemy manage to connect tutor to student in times of national disruption – as long as an Internet connection works.



Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi in video conference on coronavirus crisis with G20 leaders (PIB photo)

Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit was convened on March 26 this year, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi joined the other leaders from his official home, via video conference.

Since then multiple conferences with senior bureaucrats and state government heads have been conducted with each participant in his or her own home. The central ministries too were able to send almost all their staff home – and still work, thanks to an electronic file movement system called e-Office that has been refined since 2014. With e-files colour coded for priority, the virtual office handles all inter-ministerial traffic, tracks the time taken by each official and highlights inordinate delays. e-Office had already created over 12 million e-files by 2020, so the transition to remote decision making in recent weeks has been smooth.

Prepared or not, remote working became the only viable option across vast sections of Indian enterprise and government, making Work From Home, an idea whose time has come.

Many state governments set a target of 50 percent staff working from home, at all large enterprises. With infotech companies, the number was almost 100 percent with daily teleconferences ensuring smooth client support and contract fulfillment. For some the transition was easier. Said Peter Quinlan, Vice President of Unified Communication and Collaboration at Tata Communications, “For some time now we’ve had in place flexible working policies – like work from home, flexible working hours, bring-your-own-device (BYOD) and virtual collaboration environments. Our teams are quite comfortable leveraging chat, voice, video and collaboration



Image credit: pressfoto www.freepik.com

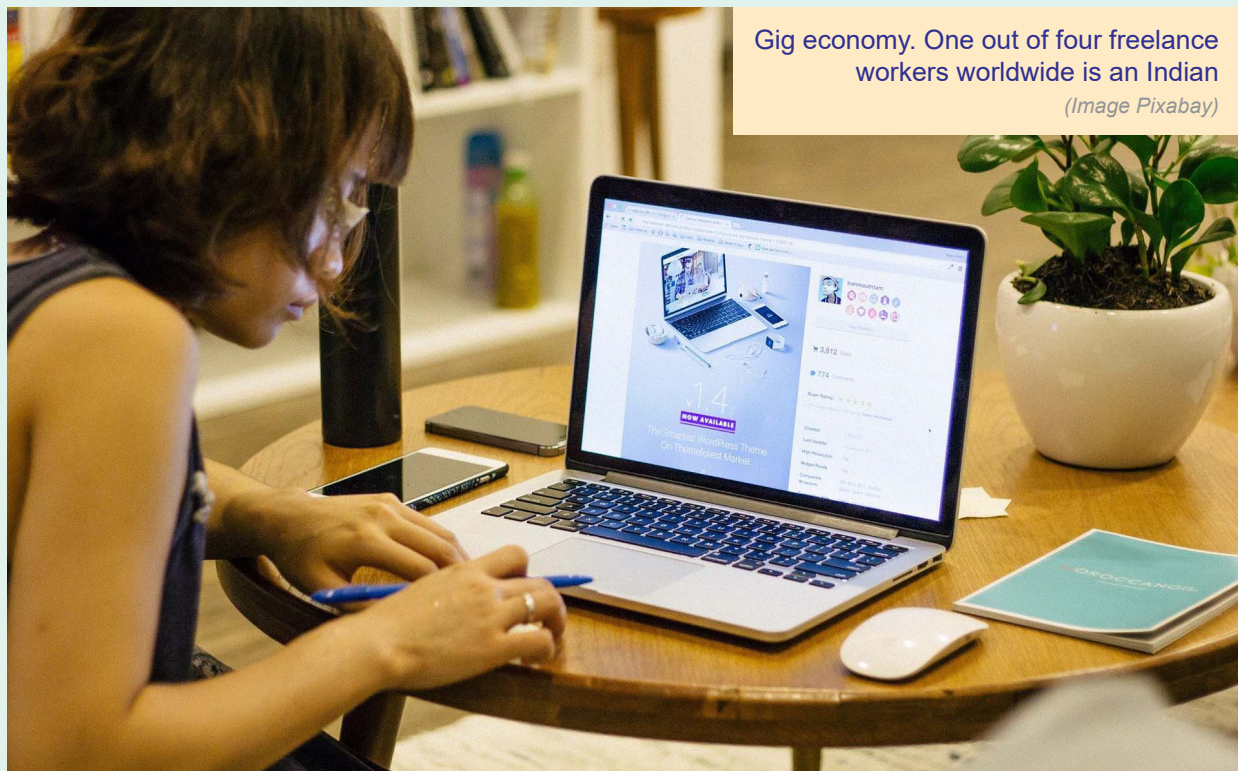
The Gig Economy: When Workers Roam Free

Online payment platforms create a vast unorganised sector of Indian freelance workers

A Gig Economy is a labour market characterised by short-term contracts or freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs. The term “gig” is a slang word meaning “a job for a specified period of time” and was originally used in referring to musicians. Examples of gig employees in the workforce are freelancers, independent contractors and temporary or part-time hires.

In India, it also includes the huge army of delivery persons working with e-commerce sites like Amazon and Flipkart as well as local food and other services like Zomato, Swiggy, Dunzo, etc. None of them works out of an office.

Many who earn a living as freelance professional work from home. They serve a global clientele, commanding an hourly dollar rate that could be anything from \$20 to \$100. The



Gig economy. One out of four freelance workers worldwide is an Indian

(Image Pixabay)

smartphone has become such a powerful platform for productive apps that many gig workers proudly say: “My phone is my office”.

The digital e-commerce platform Payoneer recently brought out a *Freelancer Income Report* which shed new insight on freelancers, their motivations and how this unique workforce empowers global collaboration by connecting top talent with businesses anywhere in the world. The freelance workforce is young, with nearly 70 percent of freelancers under the age of 35, and 21 percent under the age of 25.

Randstad India’s 2016 survey on workplace flexibility revealed that 1 in 2 Indian employees prefer telecommuting. Says Bhasker Kode, Founder of Bon, a Pune-based fin-tech company that provides instant credit to many gig workers: “Today, 1 in 4 of freelancers globally is from India. The future of work will include business models where technology will empower the rise of self-employment leading to a greater gig economy.”

tools to get their jobs done. Companies that find this a new experience need not despair, as today's technologies can be readily deployed from the cloud and introduced to users with really minimal training."

India's biggest Information Technology company TCS shipped 6000 laptops a day for many days to ensure that 85% of its 4.5 lakh employees could work from home. Players in the call centre or customer contact centre business – known as Business Process Outsourcing – faced a bigger challenge since they had obligations to global clients. The Department of Telecommunications relaxed norms for such IT-enabled services to shift their operations out of licensed premises.

But challenges remained: how to divert incoming calls to agents working from their homes using what is known as Voice over Internet Protocol or VoIP; how to let agents attend to calls from the browsers of their laptops; how to ensure that

they had access to the company's database, which resided on servers back at their headquarters.

Smaller BPO players received a helping hand and free resources from cloud-based collaboration specialists like Avaya, Cisco, Ozonetel and others to help make a smooth transition. They were helped by one pre-existing condition: international quality optical fibre based data connectivity to the home in all major cities, at gigabit speeds (1000 megabits per second), offered by all leading telecom players: BSNL, Reliance, Airtel, Idea-Vodafone and others.

Work From Home: The Essentials

But the majority of professionals suddenly restricted to their homes, managed with whatever home WiFi network they already enjoyed. Thankfully lakhs of homes today have a

Telemedicine Provides the Edge

Kerala's enviable record in public health rests on a bedrock of remote service delivery

Kerala's response to Covid-19 has become a model for other states. It is a reputation built up over the years, handling the after-effects of earlier epidemics as well as the widespread floods of 2018.

And at its centre is the consistent practice of remote service delivery, overcoming a shortage of specialist medical manpower by harnessing Internet connectivity and video conferencing.

Dr M.S. Biji is head of the department of Cancer Palliative Medicine at the Malabar Cancer Centre, Thalassery, Kannur, Kerala. Together with the director Dr B. Satheesan, she has helped put in place the state's first e-Palliative care and support network, a variant of telemedicine that uses technology to provide real-time visual and audio patient assessment and online counseling to bedridden cancer patients who are too sick to come to the hospital.

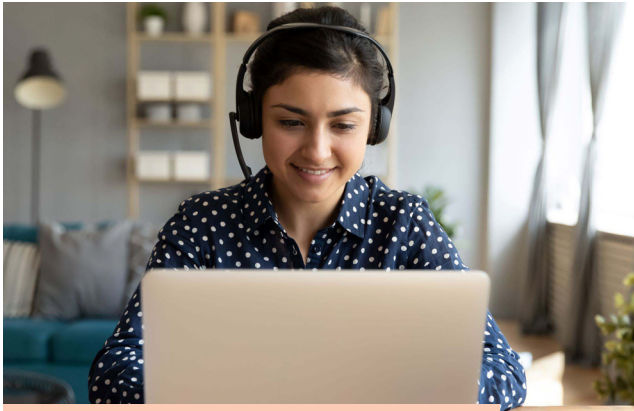
E-Palliative is grounded in reality: most patients don't have Internet connections or devices at home. So a nurse or medical worker travels to the patient's bedside with all the equipment to create a video link to MCC where on many days of the week Dr Biji is in attendance at a graphic workstation. The nurse on-site feeds the patient's vital readings and Dr Biji studies them in real time and counsels the cancer victim, bringing the warmth of a personal meeting.

The initiative has become hugely popular and helps reach out to hundreds of cancer afflicted in Kerala, even while winning accolades at international forums for its cost-effective use of appropriate technology in oncology aftercare.

Dr M.S. Biji of Malabar Cancer Centre in video conference with a patient



More recently, Dr Aneez Arakkal who runs a hospital in Kozhikode, Kerala, took on the challenge of reaching out to locked-down patients during the coronavirus crisis. He motivated a dozen other doctors to join him in forming a group through Facebook Messenger that could respond to queries from the sick who had no way to reach a hospital, rendering advice and helping to quell anxiety. When direct examination of patients is not possible, Dr Arakkal and his colleagues try to do the best they can, prescribing over-the-counter medicines.



Call Centre from home (Credit Ozontel)

data modem and a router which was used to create a WiFi home hotspot. A data speed of around 25 mbps is adequate to maintain a working link to office.

Those who had installed the new generation gigabit routers with MUMIMO (Multi User Multiple in Multiple Out) technology, can insulate their office stream from other home

Flashback: The first home-worker Work From Home was born 11 years ago in a Chicago office

The 8 June 2009 issue of *Time* magazine was a special issue on The Future of Work. It highlighted the story of a Chicago (US)-based tax accountant with Deloitte, who is today recognised as the world's first practitioner of Work From Home.

Chris Keehn, aged 33 realised his baby daughter was growing up fast and he was missing it all. He met his employers and said he wanted more time for his family. They agreed. In January 2009, he started telecommuting four days a week... and continued till baby Katherine was 4 years old.

Deloitte already had a Mass Career Customization (MCC) programme to keep talented women in its workforce, but it realised that women were not the only ones seeking flexibility in the workplace and working hours. Young parents needed more time to share child-care duties and older workers wanted to slide gradually toward retirement. Spurred by the positive experience with Chris Keehn, Deloitte rolled out MCC to all 42,000 US employees by May 2010 and encouraged its clients to do likewise: 80 companies followed suit. Work from Home was born.

applications like a TV or a smart speaker and ensure more bandwidth for the office app. If they have access to a 2020 model like the made-in-India D-Link AC1300 smart mesh router, they have the added advantage of being able to mix-n-match additional mesh units, dedicating one mesh to the office work. Netgear is the first in India to launch routers to the new, faster WiFi6 standard (SR, July 2019 pp 26-29).

One inherent danger in doing critical work at home is security. Home networks rarely offer the level of data protection that enterprise installations mandate. But thanks to the constant 'trickle down' effect of technology, it is possible today to install a Virtual Private Network or VPN on any home computing device: desktop PC, laptop or even a smartphone at little or no cost, ensuring a secure connection to the office.

It is also sensible to invest in an external portable hard drive and keep a backup of everything you do on an office device. Any device can cease working necessitating a reboot – and loss of all saved information. Today a 4 terabyte (4000 GB) external hard disk can be had for around Rs 10,000 from WD or Seagate in India.

IEEE advises home office workers to follow some rules: ensure both WiFi and router are password protected; use only devices provided by your employer to do office work; ensure you are running the latest versions of your key software tools. The coronavirus crisis saw dozens of new malicious softwares emerging from under the rock to exploit the huge jump in traffic – and almost all of them were neutralized by new patches or releases of popular software tools.

Finally, it is almost impossible to work from home without a secure and reliable video conference link to co-workers and supervisors. A few weeks ago, Cisco offered free and unlimited usage of its market-leading conference tool 'Webex Meetings' to help users stay connected and to support work from home. Other home workers routinely use free tools like Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts or FreeConference, though they have some limitations on the size and length of meetings.

As India Inc increasingly embraces facets of remote working and virtual offices, Anand Mahindra, Chairman of Mahindra Group predicts: "I think the crisis is making the world press a permanent 'Reset' button. It'll accelerate working from home, lead to more digital 'virtual' conferences, encourage more video calls, less meetings and less air travel, leading to a greener footprint. Anything else?"

Who can foretell? One thing is clear: in the coronavirus-fuelled change in how we work, the benefits of encouraging a proportion of any company's workforce to work from home are already manifest. Studies show that businesses cut real estate costs by 20 percent and payroll by 10 percent, besides avoiding expenses like travel allowance. So will this be the new option, if not the new normal?

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