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The New Normal: India

A blueprint to keep your talent motivated
in the Corona edition of 2020 India.



We're living in unprecedented times. The current business environment poses an unwarranted mix of ambiguity and curiosity, and companies are pulling out all stops to ensure a stable path to the other side. It just goes to show how much can change over a span of 30 days.

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It was merely a month ago when we hosted our first Galaxy of Leaders series for 2020 in Delhi. Our aim – to induce thought-provoking discussions with some of the most respected senior executives from India. We hosted interactions with people from across industries – hospitality, finance, private equity, information technology, multinational global food systems, you name it – from startups to Fortune 100 companies. Fast forward to today, and we're looking at what could be one of the most challenging times the global economy has faced in a century. Companies such as Maruti Suzuki, who are taking up the responsibility to scale up ventilator production in India, are also coming together to help provide masks, equipment, and collect contributions to help the healthcare industry combat coronavirus.

The nature of our business is such that it gives us unique access to senior business leaders across industries to understand how they are addressing the challenges resulting from this pandemic. It allows us to gather insights into the steps they are taking to protect their employees, customers, and financial results – all with the aim of making it to the other side.

With the Indian subcontinent on lockdown till the mid of April 2020, companies are finding themselves adjusting to new remote work environments. As the vice president for the hotel division of a leading Indian multinational conglomerate rightly told us, "technology has taken the front seat." Picture in-person meetings shifting to virtual interactions, team outings becoming virtual socials, and conferences turning into virtual roundtable discussions. While policies like BYOO – Bring Your Own Office – are keeping the technology

function on their toes, human resource teams are figuring out new ways to engage and motivate their employees efficiently, sans physical interactions.



The one motive each company is working towards right now is business continuity, and the most revered way to sustain it is by taking care of your employees. From counseling programs to ensuring salary-retention, remote work and flexible hours to implementing casual virtual meetups, organizations are currently creating entirely new frameworks to avoid any unnecessary hindrances to their workflow. Work communities are finding innovative and empathetic ways to withstand these trying times together – across industries and hierarchies.

As social distancing becomes the new normal, the concept of a 'work family' is growing stronger than ever. Managers are applying a more compassionate approach both in their external and internal communications, to a) ensure the brand identity and b) ensure the welfare of their employees, respectively. That's when it struck us. We're all in this together. The only way to successfully battle this pandemic out is we take care of each other. So, we reached out to our Galaxy of Leaders through a virtual discussion to understand the steps they're taking within their respective firms for the benefit of both the organization and the employees. We connected with leading senior executives in India to gather their insights to put together this blueprint as a beacon to guide us on our journey to the other side, together.



A New Language

When the pandemic in India was first announced, FICCI – the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry – reported 30% of organizations had already put their work from home policies in place¹. The last month of the Indian business financial year had officially been hit. With almost 80% of companies under FICCI reporting a decrease in cash flow, the imminent concern all employees had was their job and pay security. While some companies - particularly those in the aviation and hospitality industry - had to make harsh decisions which included stalling bonuses, increments, and even laying off certain employees, this was not the case for most firms.

“Communicate authentically and connect emotionally with the critical mass who are your value contributors.”

- Adil Malia

Chief Executive, The Firm

Arrman Chaudhry, President People and Culture at M3M India Pvt. Ltd., a leading realtor company, has completely shifted his focus on

reassuring his employees. “When the pandemic was announced, we sent out a formal email to everyone communicating to them that their family and their salaries will be protected and paid on time,” he said. M3M is also ensuring added help in case of emergencies for all their employees. A senior executive from a global paints and coatings firm also reiterated the same sentiment when we approached him on their current framework. “We’ve even taken back some of the resignations which had been put in prior to the pandemic to ensure a sense of job security for our workers,” he comments, adding that a tone of assurance is what is required right now.

The CEO of a leading global food systems organization ensures he engages more vigorously than usual with their talent daily. “Our factories are still open as we come under the Essential Commodities Act,” mentioned a senior leader from the same firm. “But we’re working at 45% to 50% capacity. Employees are demoralized because while the marketing function is still holding up their end of the bargain, the infrastructure required for executing

the demand is not available right now. So, we're ensuring the top management actively keeps their team members motivated with daily calls both at a personal and professional level."

With business continuity as the objective, compassion and empathy increasingly become the new need-of-the-hour communication strategy. As Adil Malia, the chief executive of a boutique business management consulting outfit called The Firm aptly stated, "Communicate authentically and connect emotionally with the critical mass who are your value contributors." Managers are finding themselves adopting a more colloquial approach to their daily virtual meetings with their teams. The "here is the task list for today" conversation now begins with "I hope you and your family are doing well," and most deadlines are now becoming more flexible as employees struggle to find the right work-life balance in their homes. Senior executives from large law firms and FMCG multinationals are even creating WhatsApp groups with their teams to continue non-work-related conversations as a means of social listening – something which was easier to implement in physical office spaces. "It is just to get the moment going, keep everyone upbeat in these dreary times," added a partner at a leading law firm who ensures he instigates these 'exchanges' daily.

The managing partner for another large law firm – Fidus Law Chambers – Shwetasree Majumder also ensured a smooth transition to the virtual space keeping the mental health of their employees in focus. They recalibrated their targets based on the financials and the current state of the industry, thereby redefining the breakeven point. "We ensure everyone is available on our daily linear and cross-functional team calls," says Shwetasree. "We've even reassured our staff workers of their salaries and are renewing their medical insurance," she adds. Her company's staff members are also currently leading the distribution of ration in their respective communities independent of the firm.

Such initiatives really open your mind to the plethora of opportunities that are available right now to help brands rebuild their identities. "This is the time to introspect. It's a great time to reflect what you want your brand recall to be,

" said Prabir Jha, founder and CEO of Prabir Jha People Advisory. "Leaders have so far imposed this sort of halo on themselves that they can't be seemingly vulnerable. Why not? Admit and accept your vulnerabilities and address these matters. This is the time when you can actually pause and acknowledge your employees for who they are," he adds.

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The way forward – albeit not clear – does not deter the firms from finding their ground. Organizations are setting up specialist cells internally on risk mitigation, audit, and rewards with dedicated teams who are taking full accountability to ensure they remain on top of things. Marketing teams of various firms are also turning to social media as a more creative approach to tackling the virtual world. Companies like Matrix Cellular Services are indulging their employees by asking them to send in write-ups on how they're keeping themselves productive during the day. "These posts offer a two-pronged benefit. One, it ensures the workers tackle the vicious cycle of boredom and isolation which arises when you work from home; and two, posting these write-ups on social media offer a sort of positive validation to both the employee and the firm," said Captain Rakesh Walia, the chief administrative officer for the telecommunications provider.

These virtual leaps of faith also include thought leaders from the country's largest multi-reward loyalty program indulging in daily video conferences to ensure everyone is on the same page across hierarchies – personally and professionally – plus, they managed to go online in a mere 24 hours. How? They are not a brick and mortar business. They're a web-based platform with an already existent work-from-home policy which made it easier for their employees to switch to the virtual space faster and more efficiently. This, however, is not the case for everyone.



Technology: Boon, Bane, or Both?

While technology may present opportunities, it does come with its own set of challenges. For firms that are not adept with such future-forward contingency plans, a significant cause of concern is the idea of data privacy – or the lack of it. With maximum budgets being invested in the necessary IT solutions required, companies are questioning the management of data and organizational security with their employees working remotely. The IT department of a leading chemical manufacture company went into overdrive to create a Webex platform for their executives (300 in number) to avoid continuity issues – and they were one of the first textile mills to shut operations. “We make sure to maintain contact with our employees daily using the infrastructure we have set up. We want them to understand that they will be taken care of,” commented a senior leader from the organization during our discussion. Some companies are also setting up VPN infrastructure for their employees to ensure increased security. Senior executives have narrowed down various platforms to help stimulate virtual conversations both at a personal and professional level, like WhatsApp

for personal updates, humor, and healthy banter vis-à-vis Zoom and Hangouts for official work. Project management tools like Asana are also being introduced to keep track of work and timelines.

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- Captain Rakesh Walia

Chief Administrative Officer, Matrix Cellular Services

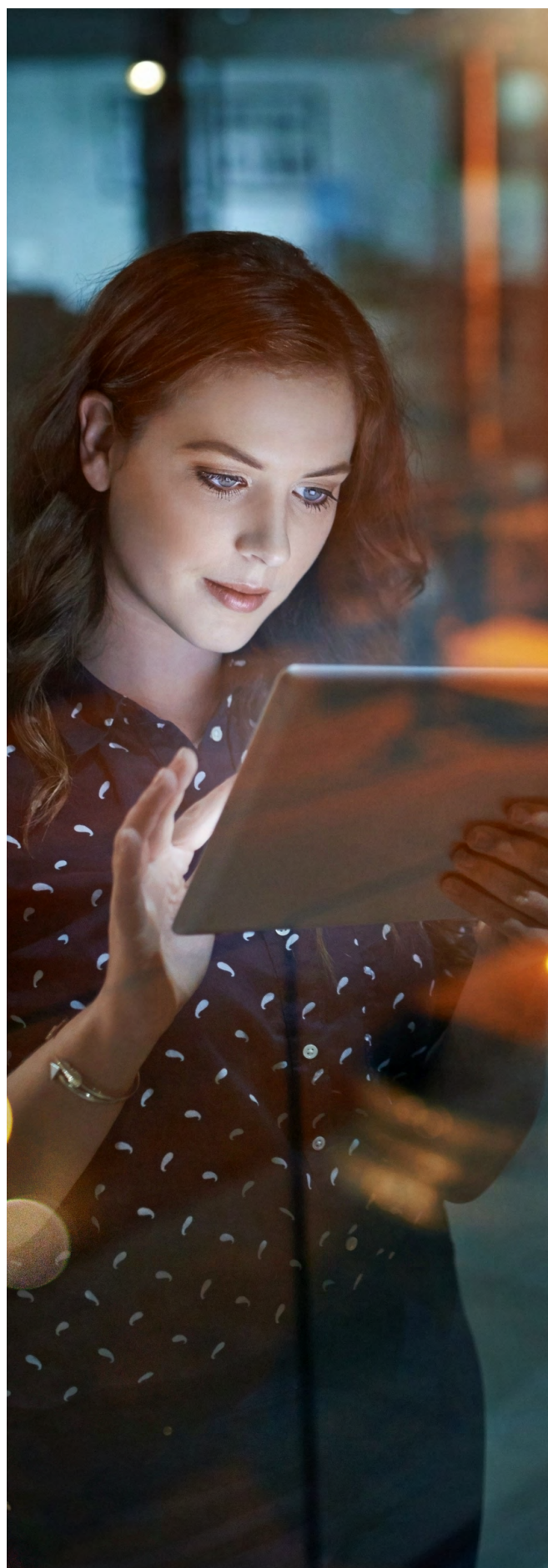
Although some companies might have pre-empted these situations and prepared in advance, this may not be the case for all. Employees who didn't have access to laptops or devices are being set up with new systems in their homes with shared server access. Most firms are also providing remote server access to all partners and department heads.

But investment in technology does not end there. One of the escalating issues today is the bandwidth of the internet available to sustain each company working online. Assuming most of the workforce is technologically equipped would be wrong at this juncture. While the majority of the senior management may have this access, ensuring the same throughout the firm may pose a significant problem. Not every individual has WiFi at home or even the luxury of a separate workspace. Most employees have also reportedly been using their mobile hotspots due to the lack of network capabilities. It doesn't help that the current network providers are switching between 4G and 3G services for sustainability – thereby hampering the progress of the work assigned.

How does the organization keep its employees engaged in this regard? Companies like Hewlett Packard are providing their employees with relevant infrastructure such as WiFi dongles and equipment for power backup to ensure uninterrupted internet connection and electricity, which can be unreliable in parts of India. "Our main focus here is to keep our employees engaged and feeling good about themselves," said Sailesh Menezes, Bengaluru-based senior director and head of HR in India for Hewlett Packard Enterprise, who also ensures daily follow-ups are done on video throughout the firm to maintain a familial connect.² Other firms are helping their employees rearrange their schedule and are becoming more understanding with the distractions which may exist from one person to another. But is that enough?

Hindrances like these have led to opportunities offering sustainable software solutions to firms who need them. GoScale and Pesto are two examples of the same. GoScale, a Bengaluru-based technology consulting and engineering company, is introducing digital timesheets – auto-monitoring tools – which can log how many hours the employee is spending on their laptops working on the project. Pesto, on the other hand, is addressing the distractions at a more granular level. A Gurugram-based startup that is into educating and training remote engineers, Pesto is offering educational content on how to manage remote work and has already received more than 100 registrations

across sectors. Their model 'Remotelli' offers sessions on the best practices to be followed to ensure the overall well-being of employees.³





Gender Inclusive Transparency is Key

While firms are adopting virtual strategies to balance business continuity and employee retention, the key plan of action must involve transparency. Since these are uncharted waters, companies are encouraging employees to be as transparent and open as possible when it comes to working from home, especially with deadlines in place. Although global reports have reported an increase in productivity due to the culture of remote work, the verdict may differ in a developing country versus a developed one.

Take the social dynamics in a typical Indian household, for example. Working women who are used to a certain nine-to-five lifestyle are suddenly finding it more tiring than men to juggle work from home. "A typical Indian woman, on an average, spends 300 minutes more than a man every day attending to household chores," says Saundarya Rajesh, Founder-President, Avtar, a diversity and inclusion strategy firm.⁴ They're not able to find that balance which they earlier had segregating their time for both their office and household work. This may also be due to the stringent measures being taken during the current lockdown which inevitably translates

into no help for these women. Managers have started getting calls from female employees who are, unfortunately, finding it difficult to cope with this new normal.

"Each manager is handling a diverse set of people whom they have to assess on their level of engagement during this time. We're also looking at working on research projects in the interim so that we get a head start once all this is over."

- Preeti Sharma

General Manager, Human Resources, Hines

Acknowledging these gaps is the first step towards helping women combat the novel CoronaVirus and its remote implications. This ensures top-down commitment towards building a culture of equal access to opportunities and resources.⁵ Developing a more robust support network by shifting focus from "time spent" to "quality of output" would be well appreciated and replicated. Another way would be to review all new policies from a gender lens therefore

offering a more valuable assessment of your employees and their work. Using internal communications to share tips and tricks on how to home-school, delegate household chores, and even create a home workspace are also some ways to ensure you don't unconsciously miss out on the gender divide.

Other aspects to keep in mind pertain to the socio-economic status of each employee. There may be individuals who are dealing with the elderly at home while others, for example millennials, are living on their own in a new

city without a family or help to support them. Global real estate investment firm, Hines, is approaching each case with an individual lens. "All employees have been given bite-sized goals which are more realistic and cater to each experience separately," says Preeti Sharma, general manager, human resources for the firm. "Each manager is handling a diverse set of people whom they have to assess on their level of engagement during this time. We're also looking at working on research projects in the interim so that we get a head start once all this is over."



So, what is the new 'normal'?

The new normal is an experiment. It's a means to an end. The end being the other side of Covid 19. While companies are adopting all the necessary hygiene and technological measures to sustain their businesses, they're not looking at the current plan of actions from a long-term perspective. The frameworks are not yet finalized because this is a new situation for everyone. We're all ultimately in the same boat.

Most companies are approaching the current crisis by taking the required steps and precautions internally to ensure their employees are active, engaged, and motivated to communicate consistently. Organizations are recruiting top psychologists to help their employees adjust to their new 'workstations.' Confident and empathetic communication is vital in tackling this new normal. Senior leaders

are shifting focus on taking care of their work families. An Indian multinational conglomerate has divided themselves in to two teams – a Survival team to handle the crisis at hand, and a Revival team to focus on how to kickstart the business once the lockdown is lifted.

“Let’s take this crisis as a humbling experience and focus on some of the softer virtues which are more important than making money and get through this together.”

- Prabir Jha

Founder and CEO, Prabir Jha People Advisory

Some are also taking this as an opportunity to instigate a sense of social responsibility within the company. Firms like M3M are housing their labor in hutments and providing food, water, and medicines to those in need. Others like Zomato and Paytm are taking donations to give the same to those who cannot fend for themselves.

That being said, organizations are also encouraging their employees to utilize their

potential to the tee by introducing self-learning programs, skill training webinars, and online assessment interviews like Athena to ensure a sense of constant development. “We’ve launched online courses for the leadership team on training and development,” a senior executive from the hotel division of a leading Indian multinational conglomerate told us during our discussion. “We want to make the most of this time to develop our skills as leaders and work on ourselves,” he adds. Hines, too, is identifying internal training programs that usually take a back seat during normal working conditions. Such investment in coaching methods inspire the employee to maintain the required work decorum even as they struggle to balance the new work-life routines at home.

Working on self-development, virtually, seems to be the direction everyone is headed towards for the foreseeable future. “Learn to laugh at yourselves and really introspect,” said Prabir Jha as we drew towards the end of our conversation. “Let’s take this crisis as a humbling experience and focus on some of the softer virtues which are more important than making money and get through this together,” he adds in conclusion.

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