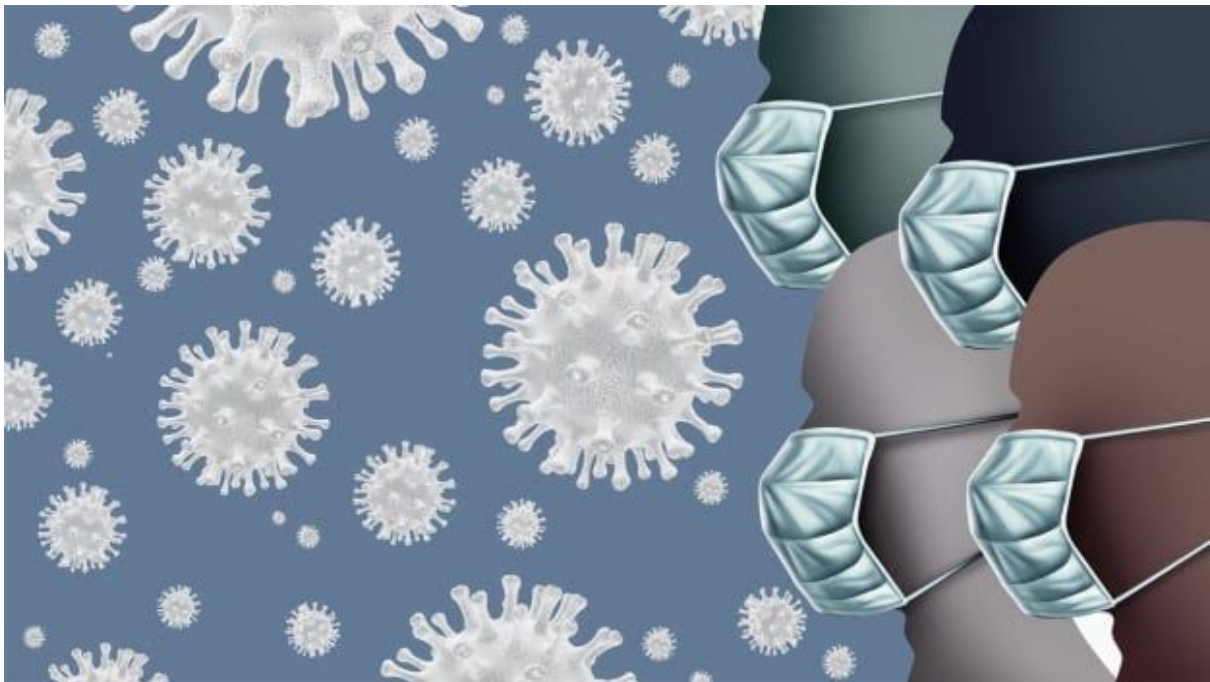


# ***Future of work: Post-pandemic workplace scenarios***

*Now, as the COVID-19 pandemic rages on in most countries of the world, and leaders move to take protective measures, there is a concern that things will never be the same and we need clear thinking as to the new future of work.*



*Since the proliferation of digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, cloud and blockchain, over the last decade or so, there has emerged a concern in both academic writing and in the popular press about the “future of work.” Work was largely understood in terms of that which emerged from the Industrial Revolution of the 17th century, with categories of blue-collar, white-collar, industrial, agricultural, manufacturing, and services. The future of work (FoW) studies examined these categories and whether they would remain the same with the digital future.*

*Now, as the COVID-19 pandemic rages on in most countries of the world, and leaders move to take protective measures, there is a concern that things will never be the same and we need clear thinking as to the new future of work. Will office work as we know it remain the same? Will the internet-based Gig Economy remain the same? Will organizations and their structures change significantly? The answers are many and varied, and we explore some of them here.*

*The Gig Economy got its name from independent, flexible workers who were hired through short-term, gig contracts. They proliferated as internet-based service firms like Uber and Swiggy became popular. People could join these firms without being formally employed and earn money based on what and how much they did. Though such workers have existed for decades, and across different industries, the difference was the scale that platforms could provide.*

*The pandemic has hurt those gig economy workers who were entirely dependent on being out and being called for work (taxi drivers, carpenters, casual labor, delivery agents). Those who were working from home, largely the white-collar workers, continued as before (data analysts, coders). Post pandemic the situation of both groups is likely to resume its earlier status. In the long-term, it is likely that their role will increase significantly. The work-from-home (WFH) workers will gain in numbers, as that may become the norm in many industries (including government), where information processing is the key task. The gig workers who need to move about will also gain, owing to the larger proliferation of platforms and networks.*

*A corollary to the rise of the gig economy is that wages will likely move to the piece-rate, effort-based calculation, rather than the monthly or weekly salaries. This is already happening, and the trend is likely to increase: “regular” employees will also have to accept remuneration based on minutes, units-worked, and other measures.*

*Many commentators have stated that the huge increase in digital workspaces has led to increased workplace monitoring and surveillance, and their facilities have become indispensable. This is likely to increase in the post-pandemic scenario. As WFH increases, the ability to monitor will consequently increase. This likely would be a double-edged sword. Whereas the physical boundary between work and non-work would be indistinguishable, the experience of being under surveillance during working hours might spill over to non-work time, causing undue anxiety and discomfort.*

*The stress-induced by the increase in use of IT at work and outside of work is likely to increase many-fold. This was already the trend in the pre-pandemic world and will be over-whelming from now on. People will have to constantly learn new technologies, learn how to re-negotiate and re-use older technologies, work longer and harder, be constantly on the job, be monitored relentlessly, and also be remunerated on piece-rates. In addition, with the rise in virtual interactions, people would have to worry about ‘screen-presence’. The digital technologies capture—or have the potential to capture— verbal and non-verbal cues, body language, facial expressions and other features implicit in techno-communication. These granularities were displayed, experienced, or dealt with differently in physical interactions.*

*Leaders would have to up their e-leadership skills and employees would have to measure up to the screen demands.*

*Along with the changes in work practices, there is likely to be a massive flattening of organizational hierarchies. In the gig-economy style there will be one “headquarter” of some managers and controllers, with a mass of workers distributed across the country or the world. It is likely that, based on piece-rates, workers will work in several firms at the same time. This new normal then may not fulfil the ‘belongingness’ needs as did the traditional workplace. The ties will be contractual and short-lived. The employees would try to look for teams and groups outside of work and would hanker for some form of recognition from the behind-the-platform employer. The desire to to live and thrive like humans and not bots is not new in the virtual workplace. These may be more acutely-felt in the FoW scenarios that we outline.*