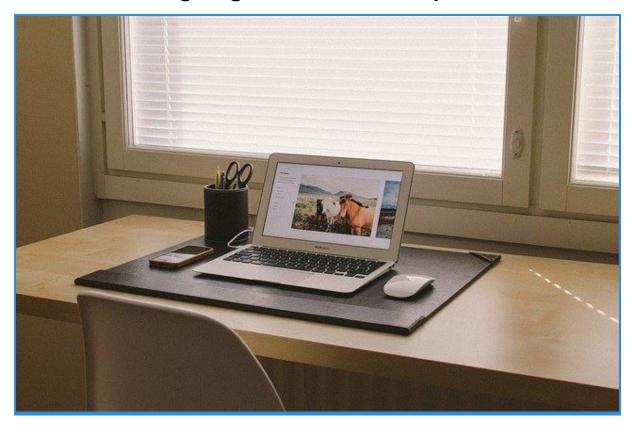# The virtues of going virtual in a workplace

COVID-19 has forced companies, both big and small, to go virtual. The initial weeks of working in this new paradigm were challenging – companies grappled with connectivity issues; employees struggled to carve out space and time for work in their home environments; and teams acclimatized to a completely virtual mode of collaboration. As weeks have gone by, many of these problems have been ironed out, and a new work rhythm is starting to take root. While the anxiety of lower productivity and a longing for water cooler conversations haven't gone away, there is an increasing acknowledgment of the benefits of going completely virtual. Our conversations with a number of entrepreneurs and managers have revealed three important but unanticipated benefits of virtual work– inclusivity, democratization and objective performance measurement. We discuss each of these below and explain the mechanisms that are driving them.

#1: Inclusivity

Workplace norms routinely place women employees at a disadvantage. In most organizations, a late evening get-together for a drink or a meal is quite common. These outings provide an opportunity for colleagues to bond socially. But very often, important work-related discussions and decisions spill over into these conversations. As women are expected to take on greater responsibilities at home, they miss out on these informal get-togethers and feel excluded both socially and professionally. While many managers are

aware of this problem and consciously make an attempt to be inclusive, the challenge persists. The move to virtual work has leveled the playing field for women.

In our conversations with managers on changing work relationships, several respondents talked about women team members taking on greater challenges and making contributions over and above their specified roles. An elderly entrepreneur who was not technologically fluent spoke about how his marketing manager called him a few days after the lockdown and advised him to start holding regular meetings with the staff. She not only supported him to get on the meeting platform but also coordinated the agenda for the meeting and since then, she has been in charge of operations. He said, "I was always worried about my second line. But I would never have imagined that Jaya (name changed) who has only handled marketing could step up and lead the operations in this manner. She has been with the organization for 11 years and knows the business very well. Coming to work on time and going back to take care of her family must have put so much pressure on her that her potential to grow and contribute like this was lost to the organization. I am sure that after we open also, we will make sure that she continues to contribute". Seemingly, as all social and professional interactions have moved into the virtual world, it has created a more inclusive environment.

#2: Democratization

Workplace meetings are greatly influenced by the personalities of participants and the symbols of hierarchy hidden in plain sight. Remember that confident extrovert who has a view on everything? And that shy person at the other extreme who rarely speaks up? What about the enormous importance given to the view of the person sitting at the head of the table or occupying a swanky office? Intentional or not, these visible personality traits and symbols can stifle participation.

In a completely virtual world, many of these undesirable team dynamics are muted. The virtual world gives people a cloak of invisibility, bringing forth participation from many who would otherwise remain reticent. It also removes the symbols of hierarchy (everyone is an equal participant in a virtual meeting) and creates a platform for equal participation. This change is apparent from the following quote by the manager of a large multinational company "I seem to have wrongly judged Vinay (name changed). He has been on my team for four years and he is so reserved and quiet that he hardly speaks. I have no complaints about the quality of work, but who would have imagined that he would find a solution to our customer problem and would win the best employee award for the month. His email communication skills along with his troubleshooting skills online seem to have helped solve the customer problem". Essentially, going virtual democratizes participation and encourages people to be more forthcoming.

#3: Objective performance measurement

Performance measurement and evaluation is ideally an objective exercise, reflecting the quantum and quality of output of an individual. However, in reality, it can be very subjective with the "perception of work" playing a major role. For instance, people who spend long hours at work and actively engage with co-workers may be perceived as working hard while the truth may be quite the opposite. On the other hand, people working for eight hours a day

but in a focused manner might be perceived as not taking the effort to go beyond the call of duty. In other words, physical presence in the workplace, long working hours and other factors may be seen as a proxy for performance.

Once again, going completely virtual has helped to bring objectivity to performance measurement and evaluation. In the absence of in-person interactions and informal updates that are commonplace in a physical workplace, managers have resorted to creating and tracking detailed work plans with clear deliverables and accountability. This has automatically shifted teams towards more objective performance measures. As a Director of a pharmaceutical company mentioned, "Non-performance is showing up easily. Earlier, our review meetings involved lengthy presentations and it wasn't always clear what/who caused delays. Since we now work remotely, everyone has sharply defined tasks. The review meeting is only for an hour and everyone is expected to report on the status of the task. Team members raise concerns and employees are forced to acknowledge that they don't know. This process has acted as a great leveler in the team and there is a greater orientation to learning from peers."

These positive changes in workplace norms and practices are still very new. However, they are gradually altering the narrative on managerial roles in the context of virtual work. It remains to be seen which of these benefits will continue to be in place after these trying times. The hope is that managers and entrepreneurs will find ways to hybridize and institutionalize these best practices as employees return to the workplace slowly.

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