AVTAR
The Power of Diversity

VIEWPORT 2020

Remote Working in COVID Times and After: India Inc. Speaks

Remote Working in COVID Times and After: India Inc. Speaks

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Foreword

Dr. Saundarya Rajesh

Founder-President, AVTAR Group

Even as I write this, we are moving through unprecedented times. World over, the COVID-19 pandemic has rattled lives and what we knew as normal. Lockdowns of gargantuan proportions and stringent monitoring of the same by law enforcement authorities is SOP in over 200 countries. It is disruption to a new order. Let us all accept that - but there is more to this than meets the eye.

What I have also learnt as I navigate my own team through these testing times, is that discerning organizations today demonstrate a high degree of resilience. They have innovated, strategized and executed BCP algorithms helping their teams settle into new routines and patterns of work. Technology which in industries such as IT/ITES, Consulting and BFSI had already enabled flexible to fluid working, was employed even by industries which until that momentous night, had not considered such large scale transition.

Even when a 100% operational efficiency was probably unachievable, companies in sectors such as FMCG and manufacturing have sustainably ported many roles to remote work. In other words, they have successfully flexidised many of their roles – identified roles and key activities which can be performed remotely without any significant loss in employee productivity and revenue accrued thereof!

Against this backdrop, we embarked on a pan Indian research to understand how India Inc. has taken to this phenomenon of COVID induced remote working. What is the comfort level of Indian professionals – men & women, at various career and life stages, engaged in different industries, in this 'Operation Remote'? How do they view the dynamics of virtual collaboration? What does India Inc. feel about its remote effectiveness? What is the direct/indirect revenue hit of this whole transition? These are some questions this research delved into, seeking answers.

The insights emerging from this study would be critical for organizations to tailor and create new operating work models, as we walk out of this lockdown and subsequently tide over this pandemic. It will hold a mirror to employee preferences towards remote work in the post COVID era, which I hope will help leaders strategically and smartly flexidise their operations.

Dear India Inc., we are in this crisis together. The economic after-currents are probably non-negotiable. But as leaders and as professionals intentional about our futures and that of our organizations, let us build resilience of never-before levels, as we tackle this corona curveball.

Good luck to all of you! Stay safe, stay healthy!

Saundarya Rajesh

Introduction

Remote working or work from home, as a way of work, has been around for more than a decade. Not as that of mainstream work, but more as a measured and conservative model of work, to engage with talent that had work flexibility as a key aspiration, specifically women.

Come 2020, the tables have turned. The world was hit unexpectedly and almost unsparingly by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a response to contain the contagion, governments world over declared lock-downs. Businesses – large and small were left to devising smart ways of keeping their employees connected to work. Those organizations which were more strategic about flexible working found themselves rolling out their remote working policies in full throttle, others gained inspiration from these market leaders, took technology by their side and set sail on unexplored waters! To cut a long story short, remote working became the new normal for 60-70% of the world's workforce.

Let us now examine the Indian workforce for certain specs. 35% of India's population is in urban India and deducing labour force statistics from the Periodic Labour Force survey, there are an estimated 6.4 crore workers in the Indian corporate sector - 4.9 crore men and 1.5 crore of women. Even when remote working was formally offered as a work structure, the utilization rates remained abysmally low amongst these 6.4 crore workers, primarily limited to the talent pool of a few designated working mothers. This is indicative of the fact that familiarizing themselves to work from home or remote working is a challenge that a vast majority of the Indian workforce had to take upon themselves, quite suddenly, without proper planning or foresight. This alongside managing the VUCA-ness (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) of the whole situation.

Amidst this evolving situation, this research was undertaken to gauge the Indian workforce's response to COVID induced remote-working, the key areas examined being:

1) Perceptions of work effectiveness

This would broadly help one understand the extent of support professionals have from their companies as also employee perception of their work effectiveness.

2) Comfort in virtual collaboration

This refers to the extent of comfort professionals experience in collaborating and working, as the operate remotely.

3) View on technology and tools

This encompasses the technology enablement that professionals have access to, that are typically provided by their organizations to fulfill their professional responsibilities.

4) Revenue impact as perceived

This refers to professionals' perception of how their remote operation has impacted their productivity and the organizations overall revenue stream.

5) Engagement levels

This is an important factor that takes into consideration the engagement levels of the professionals, as a response to efforts of their employers.

6) Overall well-being

This refers to the overall well-being levels, including physical and mental health, as experienced by the remote workers.

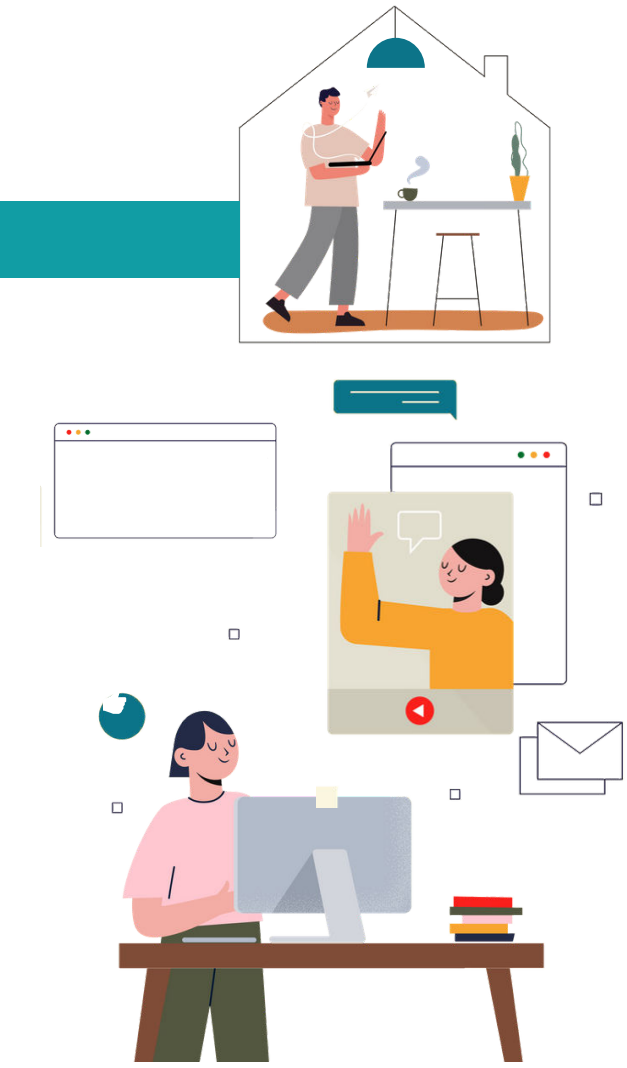
What will emerge from this deep dive into the Indian workforce's psyche are their preferences towards remote working in a post COVID era. These insights would be extremely critical for businesses looking to restore their operationally efficiency even as experts predict a staggered and slow return to normalcy.

This report begins with a global review of remote working strategies and their established efficacy before moving on to introducing the study contours and methodology. The key insights from the research along with certain highlights from demographically segmented analyses (segmented vis-à-vis gender, career stage and functional expertise) is then presented. The inferential recommendations follow before we propose the way forward for organizations looking to adapt to and adopt remote work as a WIN-WIN work architecture.

Literature Review:
Evolution of Remote Working

Flexibility has been an important aspiration of the working population, for over a decade. In today's fast-moving economy wherein businesses are highly competitive the "flexible options" offered by the organisations often serve as the USP to attract and to retain top talent. In 2017, Global Workplace Analytics [1] reported that approximately 3.9 million workers work from home globally. The number of employers offering work-from-home options has also grown by 40 per cent in the last five years.

In extensive researches conducted by Gallup, Harvard University, Global Workplace Analytics, and Stanford University, it has been proved that workplace flexibility will benefit both the employer and the employees [2].



Productivity
Teleworkers are an average of 35-40% more productive than their office counterparts, and have measured an output increase of at least 4.4%.

Performance
With stronger autonomy via location independence, workers produce results with 40% fewer quality defects.

Engagement
Higher productivity and performance combine to create stronger engagement, or in other words, 41% lower absenteeism.

Retention
54% of employees say they would change jobs for one that offered them more flexibility, which results in an average of 12% turnover reduction after a remote work agreement is offered.

Profitability
Organizations save an average of $11,000 per year per part-time telecommuter, or 21% higher profitability. (Farrer, 2020)3

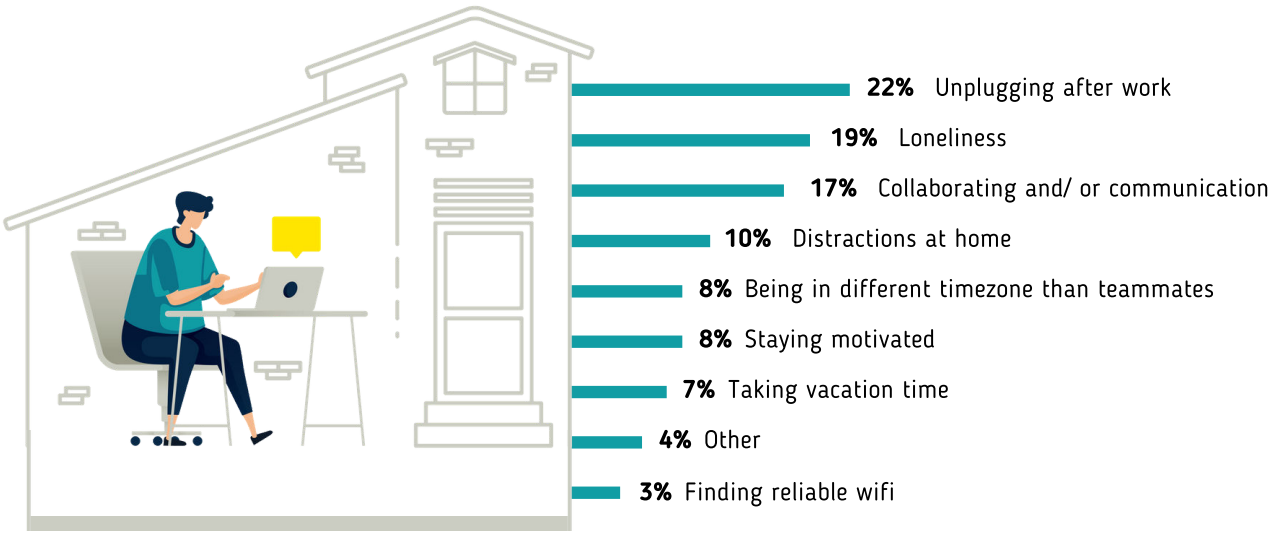
As per another research by Wework (2019) [3], "35 per cent of employees would change jobs if it meant the ability to work off-site full-time". The study claims that organisations that offer a flexible working arrangement, such as full, half, or partial remote work, could make the difference for a candidate selecting their next career move".

All this suggests that the world was gearing up to embrace remote working, even while the COVID-induced phenomenon of global remote working struck. A recent study by Indeed India [4]reported that job seekers in India are increasingly searching for terms like 'remote', 'work from home' and related phrases, with searches for remote work witnessing an increase of over 261 per cent since February 2020. Interestingly, a previous study by Indeed India showed that 83 per cent of job seekers consider remote work policy an important factor when searching for a job. This is a change in the right direction given that for generations, Indian professionals have been conditioned on the presenteeism culture, that suggests that office-based work should be done only at the office premises with the strict 9-5 schedule.

The IWG study (2018) [5] reinstated this shift. The research study analysed the flexible working attitudes on the data collected from a range of different industries across 96 countries, over 18,000 professionals. The study claimed that two-thirds of global employees work remotely every week. 58 per cent of Indian office-goers work remotely every week. More than one in 10 (11 per cent) people work outside of their company's main office location five times a week.

Before we conclude on the discussion on Remote work, it is also important to consider the flip side of Remote work "Staying Connected with Remote Work". The Buffer's 2019 State of Remote Work report has identified the most common challenges faced by remote workers [6]. The study suggests that it is an inevitable truth that that isolation, anxiety, and depression are significant problems while working remotely.

What's your biggest struggle with working remotely?

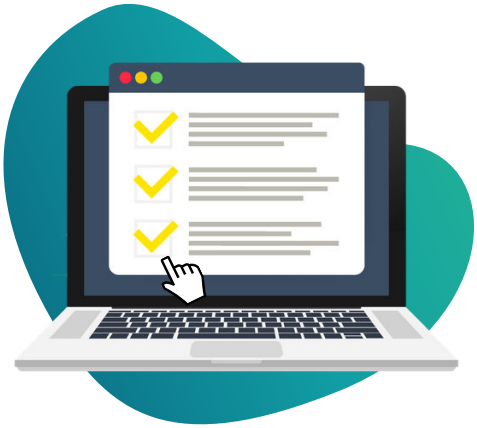


***Source:** State of Remote Report 2019 | buffer.com/state-of-remote-2019*

To bridge the gap, organizations need to take an intentional approach. Lowy (2020) study emphasises that substituting face-to-face with periodical interaction with video chats and recordings, encouraging communication outside of meetings, and allowing for informal conversation can all support to overcome the challenges of remote workers [7].

Study Methodology

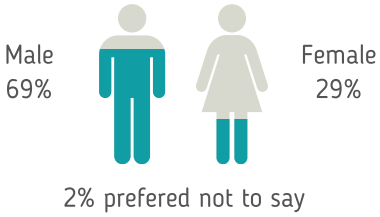
The research was conducted via an online survey portal. Respondents clocked their responses to a perceptual questionnaire to document their remote working experience, on an online link. The choice to respond anonymously was provided to the respondents, alongside a voluntary demographic section. This India wide study was launched on April 16th, 2020, garnering responses between 16th April and 20th June 2020.

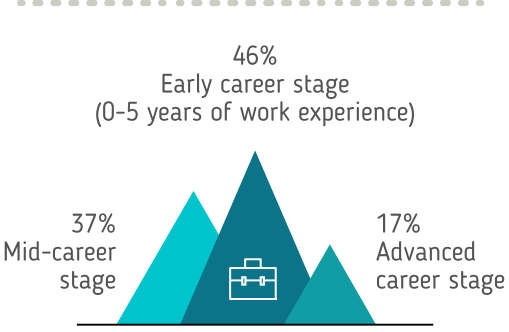


Study Contours

The survey recorded a total of 1504 responses. The demographic dimensions of the respondent sample were as follows:

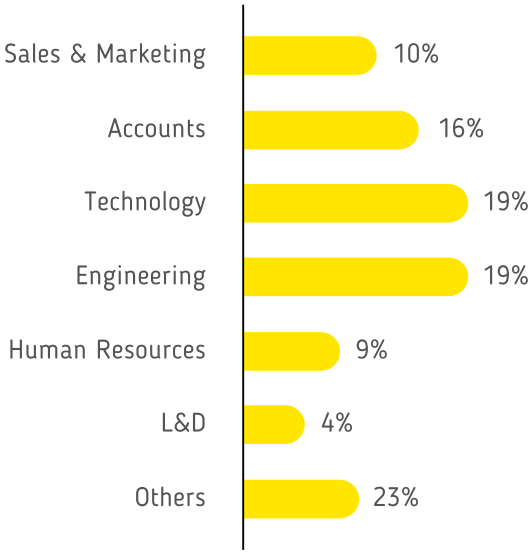
Gender





Career Stage

Function



Key Insights

In this section, we present the key insights based on response analyses. While we cover what the respondents (a representative sample of the remote workforce) felt about the six key dimensions of remote work, we also present interesting highlights from the responses across three key demographic dimensions – gender, career stage and functional expertise.

Effectiveness/Productivity

34% of remote workers aspire for greater support from their employers, for better remote working effectiveness.

69% of respondents feel they were more effective at work, when they were working from their offices.

This is an indication that employees aspire for greater support from their organizations, to improve their effectiveness. Given that the transition to remote work was sudden and almost disruptive, it is important that organizations take cognizance of this majority employee need. Training to improve flexi-working effectiveness apart from creating remote work grievance redressal units can help.

Collaboration

84% of respondents felt that the manager connects they have virtually are effective and they are able to collaborate and work together.

44% of remote workers felt that they were finding it difficult to collaborate and function on virtual platforms when it comes to team collaboration, another 10% was unsure of their experience.

These insights suggest that while one-one-one connects are not hindering collaborative outputs of remote workers, what requires greater organizational attention is when larger teams come together on virtual platforms to ideate and collaborate. Laying down ground rules for virtual collaborative meetings and using session recordings to get better at these sessions, are some suggestions to resolve these challenges.

Technological Aid

81% of respondents felt that the support they received from organizations in terms of technological enablement was sufficient.

47% of employees felt hassled because of the technological glitches while working remotely, 19% reported not having a consistent experience.

Technology being the greatest leveller of the remote working field, it is important that organizations in their capacity address the employee challenge. Raising awareness on bandwidth conserving practices can help employees proactively avert some glitches. In crucial meetings that involve external stakeholders/clients, it is good to have a back-up for the key presenter, for employees to have a low stress, low hassle experience.

Revenue Impact

77% of respondents said that they were able to keep with the designated productive work hours and they did not anticipate a challenge in keeping up with their contribution to the company's revenue.

33% of remote workers said they experience challenges in scheduling meeting with clients and stakeholders, thereby impacting their productive work hours.

While majority remote workers did not anticipate a challenge in clocking their productive work hours, the challenges experienced in scheduling client meetings need to be looked into. Such challenges may become more pronounced when employees are operating in time-zones different from their clients. Given the global scale of the COVID induced remote working, it is possible that clear guidelines are set for client briefings and meetings, around mutually agreed timings.

Engagement

82% of remote workers said that they felt engaged at work and felt motivated working towards their goals.

60% of respondents felt that they needed greater clarity from their employers on the strategic goals they are pursuing.

It is heartening to note that even amidst the ongoing crisis, employees felt engaged at work, establishing the efficacy of engagement interventions companies are running today. However, it is important that organizations, specifically leaders engage in more transparent communication about their revamped strategy and goals for employees to deepen their belief that they are in this together.

Well-being

77% of respondents felt that their workload is reasonable and they are able to manage it in a remote scenario.

64% of employees felt overwhelmed integrating the two, when it comes to managing work along-side responsibilities at home.

While employees feel that the work expectations on them are reasonable, they feel overwhelmed managing the dual responsibilities of home and work. Now is the time for empathetic working and that for leadership to show the path. With blurring boundaries of work and home and the stressful environment of a health scare, the onus is on organizations to help employees focus on their emotional and physical well-being. Helping employees set boundaries to communicate close of working hours, to pre-designated no meeting hours for employees to cater to demands of home, there are several best practices we observe in the market.

What is presented next are the important insights that emerged when we examined responses on the three demographic dimensions of gender, career stage and functional expertise.

Gender

While employees generally feel that they were more effective working from offices, more women than men felt they were as effective at work, operating from home, as they were while working from office. 20% women felt so, while 17% men agreed to this.

There wasn't substantial gender difference in the way employees perceived their ability to clock in productive work hours - 79% women agreed to this, while 78% men agreed to this.

Near equal proportions of men and women felt that the workload they experienced was reasonable (78% men and 79% women, respectively).

More men than women reported facing difficulties in scheduling remote meetings (56% men and 48% women).

Men 66% Women 67%

Men and women almost equally, feel technologically enabled by their organizations.

Men 43% Women 40%

Fewer women than men reported having challenges in ideating and collaborating, virtually.

64%

Equal percentages of men and women reported feeling overwhelmed catering to the responsibilities of that of home and that of work.

Career Stage

Early career professionals seek more support from their organizations to be effective while working remotely - while 75% of matured career professionals and 72% of mid-career professionals are happy with the current support, only 59% of early career professionals reported feeling satisfied.

Early career professionals are 12% more likely to feel hassled by remote connectivity issues than mid or senior level professionals - expressing a greater need for driving a sense of belongingness and inclusion amongst early career professionals.

While 15% of early career professionals reported experiencing heightened work-load during the session, 12% of mid-career and matured career professionals, felt so.

Professionals in the mid-career stage were most confident of their investment of time in generating revenue for their organizations - 84% professionals expressed confidence.

The senior the remote workers, the lesser they gauge their own effectiveness of working from home - Respondents in the matured career stage are 10% more likely to feel less effective while operating from home, as against early and mid-career professionals.

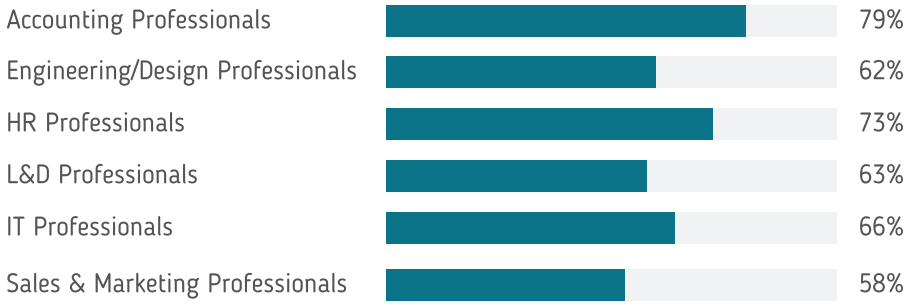
Over 60% of professionals across career stages reported feeling overwhelmed managing commitments at home and work, simultaneously. This goes on to show that the COVID-19 induced remote-working has affected professionals' psyche across career levels and work-life integration challenges have now become a universal experience.

Early career professionals reported encountering more challenges interacting with supervisors and team members as against mid and matured career professionals:

- While 82% of matured career professionals and 89% of mid-career professionals felt that collaborating with supervisors virtually was not a challenge, 81% of early career professionals felt so.
- 12% more early career professionals reported facing challenges during the course of virtual collaboration with team-mates (51%) as against 39% of both mid and matured career professionals

Functional Expertise

We observe that it is professionals in the accounting sector who experienced the maximum drop in effectiveness while working from home.



Professionals engaged in the engineering and design, sales & marketing and L&D sector experienced the maximum challenges in access to tools and technology, as they operated remotely.

Accounting professionals are 10% more likely to feel hassled by the technological blips than professionals in other sectors.

Except for sales & marketing professionals of which 31% expressed having challenges virtually collaborating with their managers, professionals from all other streams recorded a very favourable response (over 80% professionals said virtual collaboration with managers is not a challenge).

The spike in work-load as professionals started operating remotely was most significantly experienced by sales & marketing professionals (Over 24% of them reported experiencing significant spike in workload, while in other streams, an average of 13% reported spike in workload).

Over 60% of professionals from Accounting & Sales & Marketing opined that they need more transparent communication from their organizations to understand strategic goals better.

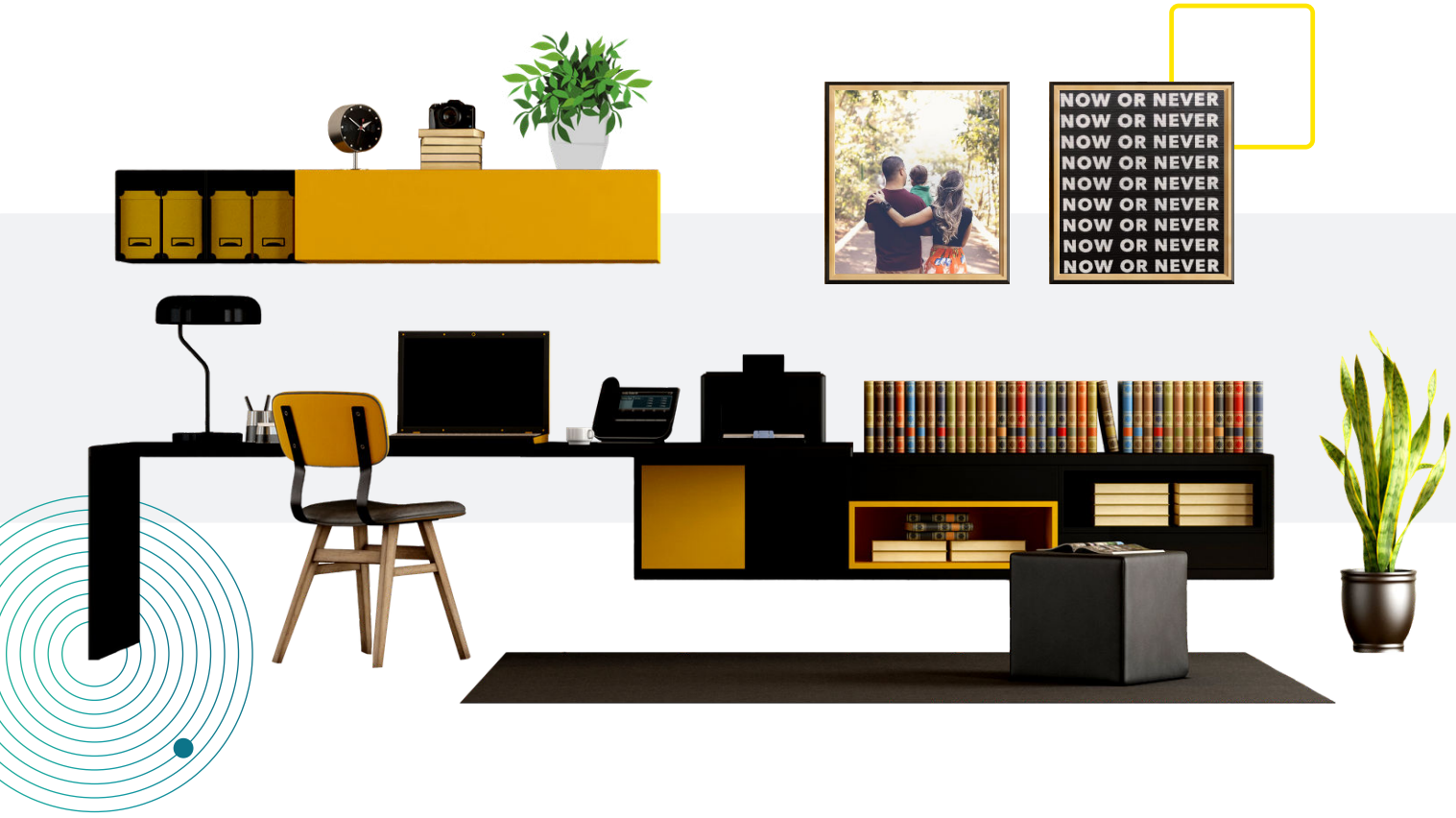
Over 50% of professionals engaged across sectors reported feeling overwhelmed managing the dual responsibilities of home and work, reiterating the need for organizations to address the blurring work-home boundaries.

Way Forward

Remote working as a way of work is here to stay. What we initially perceived to be a temporary paradigm shift has now become the key lever for powering the economy, during these disruptive times. The results from this pan India research shows that India Inc. has adapted to the shift in gears to remote working. Technology has enabled the transition and with effective and innovative tools for virtual collaborations, organizations have been able to port a significant part of their operations to the virtual world. While for certain industries like manufacturing and FMCG, operational challenges continue to emerge, pursuing the most optimal route, given the present situation has become the norm. As the world of medicine continues its pursuit for effective vaccines/remedies to COVID-19, it is important that organizations address key employee expectations for effective remote operation.

With blurring work-life boundaries and work zones entering employee homes, it is important that organizations take initiatives to help employees across career stages pro-actively avert work from home burnout. Interventions to drive flexi working efficacy, leadership messaging on organizational strategy to tide over the crises and guidelines for remote work hygiene, require cross-industry attention. Organizations can also explore the opportunities that this crisis has presented us with – that of engaging with a diverse talent pool, across gender, geography and generation.

We are in a historical phase – unprecedented and unexpected. It is our collective synergy in tiding over this phase that can lead us on to better times. Even as we brace ourselves to walk into a no-COVID future, let us take forward the learnings of this challenging phase, for a more inclusive future!



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About Avtar

AVTAR
The Power of Diversity

Avtar set up in 2000, is India's premier Diversity & Inclusion Solutions firm. Renowned for its extensive work in the space of Diversity & Inclusion and more specifically, women's workforce participation, it is the country's largest provider of second career opportunities for women and is also the earliest to begin working on diversity audits and measurement.

Lead by the visionary Dr. Saundarya Rajesh, Avtar has ventured into areas of women's empowerment and career creation, which are firsts to India, such as – 1) Creating a marketplace for second career women to meet potential employers, 2) Developing a comprehensive set of career enablers which companies can implement in their workspaces, 3) Spearheading original research that has provided cutting edge insights to organizations 4) Re-Skilling, Up-skilling and Counselling of women to pursue sustainable career paths and 5) Building career intentionality amongst under privileged girl children.

Over its 19 years of existence, Avtar has helped charter Diversity & Inclusion plans for several organisations in the IT, FMCG, Manufacturing and Financial sectors in the country. Avtar in association with Working Mother Media (a celebrated gender parity champion of the US) conducts India's largest gender analytics exercise – Best Companies for Women in India (BCWI), which is in its fifth edition in 2020. In 2019, Avtar in association with Working Mother Media launched India's largest and only inclusion Index, called the Most Inclusive Companies Index that looks into diversity strands of LGBTQ, PwD (People with Disabilities), generations and culture.

To know more, visit **www.avtarinc.com**

About the Authors

Dr. Saundarya Rajesh

Founder-President, AVTAR Group

Dr Saundarya Rajesh is one of India's most respected thought leaders on Diversity & Inclusion. An award-winning social entrepreneur, she is best known as the pioneer of Second Career opportunities for women in Corporate India. She has been recognised as a "#100Women Achiever" by India's Ministry of Women and Child Development as also listed in the United Nation's "Women Transforming India". As part of the UK Government's initiative to recognize leaders from all over the world who are making transformational changes in their home countries, Dr. Rajesh was recognized as one of the Top 35 Global Changemakers and was featured in a specially-commissioned exhibition of portraits at a London Art Gallery. In early 2019, she won Twitter India's #Web Wonder Women Award for disseminating positive energy via the web. She is also, the only Indian to receive the "Winds of Change 2019" award by The Forum on Workplace Inclusion, Minnesota, USA.

As a banker in her early twenties, Dr Saundarya Rajesh discovered the anomalies between men's careers and women's careers that existed in the workplace. A relentless advocate of the potential of women's workforce participation, Dr. Saundarya is the advisor of choice for an impressive list of organizations and leaders on the benefits of Inclusion and Diversity. She has personally trained and mentored over 10,000 leaders in the Indian corporate. One of the earliest voices in India to speak about the need for gender balance in the workplace, her diversity immersion sessions have benefited varied audiences, ranging from industry bodies to the police force, from entrepreneurs to college goers, from organizations like Accenture, Deloitte, IBM, Mahindra Group and Tata Group to small and medium businesses. Inspirational in her approach to tackling systemic issues faced by women, Dr. Saundarya has irrevocably changed the game for the Indian Woman Professional, by introducing the concept of "Career Intentionality" and "Career Re-entry" to Corporate India. Avtar Women, a service focused on women's careers, has counselled and placed over 15,000 second career women and over 35,000 women professionals.

An entrepreneur who has created successful, growing enterprises such as Avtar Career Creators, Flexi Careers India and Avtar Human Capital Trust, Dr. Saundarya is also counted among India's early stage innovators in the space of Artificial Intelligence in HR. Bruhat Insights Global, founded by Dr. Saundarya provides cutting edge predictive and prescriptive analytics for hiring solutions. Bruhat was recently featured at the World Artificial Intelligence Show at Dubai.

"You cannot raise a girl to be ambitious and competitive and then cut off her wings with biased systems" she says. Widely quoted on women's careers, entrepreneurship and inclusive leadership, Dr. Saundarya is a highly sought-after speaker at conferences - both national and international, and a firm believer in integrating work and life. Her book, "The 99 Day Diversity Challenge™" broke records in its pre-order window on Amazon, selling out within hours of its launch. The 99DDC™ has won several acclaims from industry leaders and has been designed to develop diversity and inclusion mindset in any organization or even individual within the proverbial 99 days.

Karthik Ekambaram

Senior VP - Consulting Services, Avtar

Karthik is a Diversity and Inclusion specialist who has completed several seminal projects successfully for various organizations. An MBA, with over 25 years of experience in business analysis, talent strategy and workforce consulting, Karthik has devised flexible working policies and created diversity-ready workplaces for several fortune 500 organizations. He brings with him a rich experience of managing a wide range of requirements for creating futuristic workplaces.

Karthik has conducted several D&I audits & assessments of organsiations such as Accenture, Amazon, Asian Paints, Aditya Birla Fashions and Retails, Ford, Walmart Technology, Schindler India, Max Life and Credit Suisse. He has also conducted workshops for Senior Leadership Team in companies such as Abbott, JSW Group, Boeing, Sundaram Fasteners and PepsiCo India. Karthik has worked on many research studies on Diversity & Inclusion, Second careers for women, Generations in the workforce, Flexible working and Work-life balance. He has also co-authored several papers that have been published in Journals of National and International repute. He has been conferred the DIVERSITY LEADERSHIP AWARD by World HRD Congress.

Anju Rakesh

Assistant VP - Research & Solutions, Avtar

Anju Rakesh, a CBSE national topper is a Computer Science Engineer from BITS, Pilani – one of the premier institutes of technical education in India. Research had always been her passion and in her career spanning 13 years, she has published several papers on women careers in national and international journals. In 2010, she was chosen to present her research paper at AAAI (American Association for Artificial Intelligence), a highly prestigious Artificial Intelligence conclave in Atlanta (USA). A listed co-inventor of two patents at the USPTO, Anju's tryst with 'gender analytics' started about half a decade back when the 3 Ms in her life – Marriage, Maternity and Motherhood reshaped her approach towards women's careers.

As Asst. Vice President - Research & Solutions at Avtar, Anju (a second career woman herself) has played pivotal roles in several workforce centric studies undertaken in-house - on career intentionality of Indian professionals, on generational diversity in India, economic centeredness of Indian women, gender inclusion in a VUCA world, to name a few. Anju leads a team that works across the length and breadth of D&I metrics for companies to produce strategic insights for corporate India. She is also the focal point at Avtar for Corporate India's largest diversity analytics exercise – Working Mother & Avtar 100 Best Companies for Women in India study, which is in its 5th edition in India, after 4 extremely successful runs between 2016 and 2019.

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