

CAREERS

# Is the corporate needle pointing to hybrid work?



Prince Frederick

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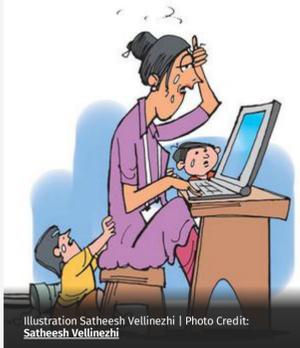


Illustration Satheesh Vellinezhi | Photo Credit: Satheesh Vellinezhi

Employees seem to have discovered a more habitable Goldilocks zone between fully remote and fully office-based work

Human nature shrinks from extremes. At this moment in time, that is resoundingly true of work models. As organisations now firm up how – more precisely, where – sections of their workforce will work in a post-COVID scenario, human resource teams report that the hybrid work model is ahead of the competition by an 8 x 12 size cubicle. A majority of the employees view hybrid work as the more habitable Goldilocks zone, one lying between fully remote work and fully office-based work.

A recent survey by AscentHR – “Changing people practices and trends” – one that picked the brains of “over 360 senior executives (CXOs/SVPs/VPs/Sr Managers) from across industries and segments” – noted a pronounced bias towards the hybrid work model “with ITES (72%), IT (62%), and NBFC (70%) sectors leading the hybrid model bandwagon”.

HR pundits feel the inclination for a hybrid work model is likely to beetle over the pandemic, and settle into a preferred work norm.

## Serendipitous learning

Kissflow, a SaaS company based in Chennai but functioning with a distributed workforce, adopted a heavily customised form of hybrid work model well over a year ago. And three months ago, they initiated an informal feedback process, one that put its hybrid work model to the vote. The vote went in its favour, with a thumping majority.

Lalitha Yalamanchi, who heads Corporate Communications at Kissflow, remarks: “Some learning happens through serendipitous conversations and absorption through osmosis. We solely missed that during the fully remote phase. The best part of our Remote+ hybrid model is that it allows the entire business unit – that is anywhere between 15 and 80 folks – to come together for much needed face-time. We spend this week in the office celebrating, learning and brainstorming. We usually reserve the deep work for the other three weeks.”

Kamal Karanth, cofounder, Xpheno, a specialist staffing company, who writes on organisational leadership and team dynamics, underlines the one overriding factor that causes fully-remote work to hole out tamely to the hybrid work model – “social facilitation”, actually the lack of it.

## Co-action effect

Kamal had in fact discussed this factor in an article he wrote for *The Hindu BusinessLine* – “The positive impact of peer presence and crowd pressure” – in October 2020. In a conversation with the *The Hindu Opportunities*, he notes that the pandemic has brought the idea of social facilitation down from the rarefied tower of sociology and caused it to be understood by alienated remotely-functioning workforces as a deeply experienced reality.

He points out how fully remote-working teams lost out on the benefits of two major building blocks of social facilitation: “co-action effect” and “audience effect”. Both of them – particularly the latter – usually lead an employee to step up their performance when their peers stand alongside and do the same work. There are any number of studies demonstrating how social facilitation improves performance, and Kamal calls up one of the more popular ones: it is about how the mere presence of other ants caused an ant engaged in digging to magically increase its capacity for digging, three-fold.

## Magic of leadership

The benefits of physical presence go beyond team performance and extends to leadership performance, notes Kamal.

The presence builds the leader as much as it builds the team. Kamal explains: “Leadership comes from connection. The connection is experienced through the reciprocity the leader feels while in front of the team. Besides, most of the leaders have always worked in a template of physicality, where they are in front of their team. So, the team got the charisma and the best of the leadership impacts while working in person.”

## Dialogic leadership

The fully remote work scenario – particularly witnessed in the first year of the pandemic – spotlighted the possibilities that lay curled up within remote work – both for the organisation and the employee. It graphically illustrated how, except for work that required the making of physical, tactile things, work can be delinked from the cubicle. It upheld the wisdom of an outcome-based work culture, and also helped the employee achieve a sense of proportion in terms of time for the office and for the home. As the pandemic cruelly turned the knife, work-from-home fatigue set in, and leaders complained of lack of connectedness and employees were missing the water-cooler conversations and the *esprit de corps* they fostered among team members. From all of these experiences, the hybrid work model seems to have emerged organically as a one-shot solution. If leaders use the office component of hybrid work for mentoring employees and capacity-building exercises – drawing upon dialogic and generative leadership models which thrive on non-judgemental communication and a flat-structured approach to brainstorming for ideas, within a team – they would be making the most of it. After all, there is always the home to do the regular work.

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