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## WORKPLACE ADAPTATION IN THE ERA OF COVID-19 - A NECESSITY IN TESTING TIMES

<sup>1</sup>Dr Yashoda Tammineni, <sup>2</sup>Teja Dakuri

<sup>1</sup>HOD, HSE Department, <sup>2</sup>M.Tech, Pursuing Industrial Safety (SBTET)

<sup>1</sup>National Institute of Fire Engineering and Safety Management,

<sup>2</sup>National Institute of Fire Engineering and Safety Management

### Abstract:

*As the world fights a relentless battle against the pandemic, novel Corona virus has impacted not just on a single sector but on whole human life resulting from the lockdown of schools, educational institutions, companies, theatres, malls and various other sectors. The effect of lockdown has brought about a complete change of lifestyle of many, the rules are shifting for what people can do in their daily lives. The spread of the new coronavirus is testing our globalized world and the world has to adapt to a new kind of normal. It's truly astonishing that people have become accustomed to changing the routines, learned to focus and concentrate while in a new environment, and modified the way of existence in such a short matter of time. In the meanwhile, employees are also encouraged to get connected, stay focused and productive and continue to develop to their maximum in a work from home environment.*

**Keywords:** Outbreak, Pandemic, COVID-19, Lockdown, Social distancing, PPE, Work place, Productivity.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Humans are the most adaptable species on the planet. Our ability to align with our environment is something we probably take for granted. Yet it is precisely what enables us to function so well even in the ever-changing reality of the 21st century.

The outbreak of covid-19 has started in December, 2019 from the Wuhan city of China. At the end of December, public health officials from China informed the World Health Organization that they had a problem: an unknown, new virus was causing pneumonia-like illness in the city of Wuhan. They quickly determined that it was a coronavirus and rapidly spreading through and outside of Wuhan and declared 'Pandemic' by WHO. The symptoms of the corona virus are diagnosed to be mainly fever, tiredness, sore throat, dry cough, cold. The corona virus spreads through the droplets of saliva or discharge from nose by the infected person through cough or sneeze. If these droplets make it into another person's eyes, mouth or nose, they can get sick. The viruses in those little droplets can also fall onto surfaces, like tables or doorknobs and if someone touches that surface and touches their eyes, mouth or nose, they can also get sick. On an average it takes 5–6 days from when someone is infected with the virus for symptoms to show, however it can take up to 14 days for some others. The structure of SARS CoV -2 is well built to enter into the host cells and attack the tissues or cells of throat, trachea, and pulmonary tract on its onset with pneumonia like adverse effects and eventually leading to the damage of the other tissues and cells of the body causing multiple dysfunctions of organs and severing the condition of the host leading to death. The mutation caused in the SARS corona virus structure promised a great challenging structure to the world.



Figure 1: Spread of Corona virus.

The China government has decided to lock the city of Wuhan and took various measures to stop the spread of this virus. It has imposed international travel bans, shutdown of all public places, shopping malls, schools, offices, etc. to stop the spread of virus. China took aggressive action at the start of outbreak, shutting down transportation in some cities and suspending public gatherings. Officials isolated sick people and aggressively tracked their contacts, and had a dedicated network of hospitals to test for the virus. And the measures proved to be effective in stopping the spread of this virus. Most of the countries that presently have a high rate of spread of the virus are still viewing the lockdown as the only option to control the virus. The relaxation has been given to emergency services and essential services to avoid the public from gathering outside for any type of activity.



Figure 2: World Lockdown



Figure 3: Disneyland Closed due to Covid-19.

The sudden lockdown has largely impacted on all the sectors due to thinning of financial cycle all around the world. As all the public places, gatherings, workplaces, etc. are shutdown except for a few essential services it has led to the fall down of finances, shares and all types of incomes. While this is viewed as a big hurdle by most of them, some of them view this as an opportunity to redefine the way things are done. The world of work is severely affected during this crisis; therefore, all sections of society including businesses, employers and social partners must play a role in order to protect workers, their families and society at large.

The nature and extent of the restrictions, such as on suspension of non-essential activities, differ between Countries, States and sectors, but a substantial proportion of workers either have to work from home, or if their work cannot be performed at a distance, they stay at home often under an income replacement arrangement.

Once the physical distancing measures achieve a sufficient reduction in COVID-19 transmission rates, national administrations are authorizing a gradual resumption of work activities. This is being done stepwise, with work that is considered essential for health protection and the economy authorized first and work that can be done effectively while working from home last. However, regardless of how and to what extent normal work activities resume, it is highly likely that some measures will remain in place for some time to avoid a steep increase in infection rates. WHO guidelines and recommendations for preventing the spread of corona virus is presented.

## 2. 'WHO' GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS DURING THIS PANDEMIC

World Health Organization (WHO) has been actively monitoring the health reports from all the nations and suggested some basic measures to prevent the spread of the corona virus that are listed below.

a) **Practice Social Distancing:**

- Avoid gatherings such as melas, haat bazars, gatherings in religious places, social functions etc.
- Maintain a safe distance of at least one Meter between you and other people when in public places, especially if they are having symptoms such as cough, fever etc. to avoid direct droplet contact.
- Stay at home as much as possible.
- Avoid physical contact like handshakes, hand holding or hugs.
- Avoid touching surfaces such as table tops, chairs, door handles etc.

b) **Practice good hygiene**

- Wash your hands frequently using soap and water:
  - After coming home from outside or meeting other people especially if they are ill.
  - After having touched your face, coughing or sneezing.
  - Before preparing food, eating or feeding children.
  - Before and after using toilet, cleaning etc.
- While coughing or sneezing cover your nose and mouth with handkerchief. Wash the handkerchief at least daily
- It is preferable to cough/sneeze into your bent elbow rather than your palms
- Do not spit or shout in public places to avoid the spread of droplets.
- Do not touch your eyes, nose and mouth with unclean hands.
- Ensure that the surfaces and objects are regularly cleaned.

c) **Stay informed and follow advice given by your healthcare provider**

Follow advice given by your healthcare provider, your national and local public health authority on how to protect yourself and others from COVID-19. They are best placed to advise on what people in your area should be doing to protect themselves.

### **3. WAYS OF STAYING ENGAGED, FOCUSED AND PRODUCTIVE DURING PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN**

The world is witnessing a time of tremendous change. With its far-reaching consequences, coronavirus has brought life to a standstill. Most of the organizations are striving to continue business as usual while working from home and ensuring their team members stay engaged, motivated, and productive and don't feel disconnected during these pandemic times. For every organization, engagement and ensuring productivity are the primary concerns at the moment. It can be tough to engage employees, who are staying at home without work. An idle mind takes a toll on the mental and physical health of a person, especially with the added uncertainty and stress that the lockdown has imposed upon all. In such a critical time, it is vital that employees are kept engaged using the best possible means, to upgrade their skills and to remain preoccupied. Hundreds of events are making the shift from onsite to online for the first time. Here is how the people can be productive during lockdown that can minimize the risk of exposure of employees to the virus and also manage the operations at the same time.



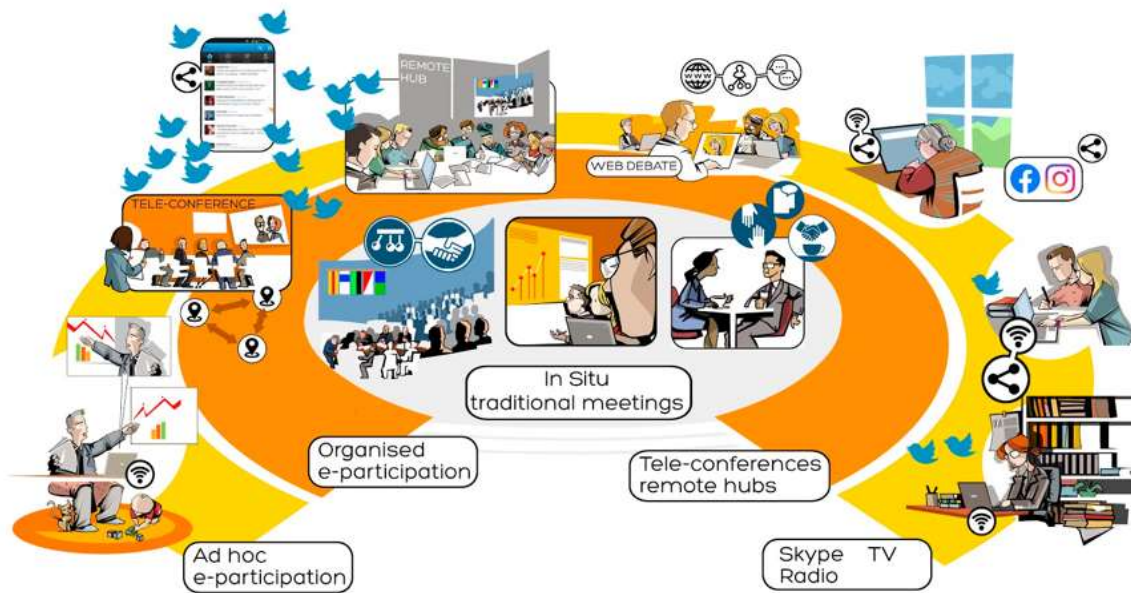


Figure - 4: Various activities through digital medium of communication

### 3.1 Work from home

The novel corona virus pandemic has given wings to work from home culture as people across the world are forced to stay at home to prevent the spread of the virus. Interestingly, it took an outbreak to realize the true potential of digital mediums of communication. Working from home doesn't have to be that hard, or at least not with the right tools and tech. From Adobe to Zoom, these companies are offering products and services free of charge to help employers cope with the consequences of the corona virus pandemic. Technology has made telecommuting easier than ever before with so many varieties of videoconferencing software applications.

Structure your day, when you are working from home. You have to be your own manager and therefore you have to manage your work and health. Provide yourself with breaks so that you can keep focused and avoid burnout. Apart from work, one can improve their state of mind by being with their families sharing household chores, dealing with child care issues and even watching television together can bring families closer.



Figure - 5: Work from Home.



Figure - 6: e-Learning.

### 3.2 e-Learning.

Online classes for thousands of students are scheduled in the wake of the nationwide corona virus lockdown by various educational institutions. From Skype to WhatsApp to zoom app, professors and students are using all types of digital platforms to continue with studies. The courses are being conducted of varying length from a few hours to regular weekly schedules typically involving video lectures, reading texts and regular tests to evaluate student's performance and understanding of the syllabus.

Some free courses are being offered by top universities and institutions in various branches to explore new things of their interest and make their time utilized. This is also a best time for students to try various career options and plan their future accordingly as per their choice.

### 3.3 Skeletal staff

Some of the essential service providers like electricity, telecom, sanitation etc. cannot be done without minimal employees in that particular field. So, for these services instructions have been given to operate with the skeletal staff during the period of lockdown who rendered essential services within each department. The skeletal staff who reported for work are provided with masks, gloves and hand sanitizers to control the spread of corona virus. The staff is assigned duties on rotational basis so as to get rest periods. Even the essential governmental offices are advised to work with 50% staff on rotational basis with less work hours. The staff are not allowed for work if they are sick and it's important from a public health perspective that people can take the time they need to recover.

While the focus should be on social distancing, some companies can't offer remote work for all employees. For example, many offices have critical office staff that's unable to work from home, like R&D teams and security companies where home Wi-Fi may not be suitable due to security reasons. To help limit the number of people coming into the office and standing in elevators together, let people into the building in 15-20 minutes intervals, one floor at a time. This can help isolate any exposure on a given floor. Elevators and doorknobs can be cleaned in between entries. Also, seat people that are on essential teams in separate areas, so that if someone does get sick, it won't impact an entire department at once.

### 3.4. Telemedicine

In these pandemic times, many governments, hospitals, e-pharmacies and even health care practitioners have adopted to telemedicine which would protect the patients and the doctors from virus transmission, and does not disrupt the lockdown measures. Telemedicine is well suited for scenarios in which medical practitioners can evaluate and manage patients by providing medical services using the technological advances like video calling to guide the patients rather than bringing them to hospitals. A telemedicine visit can be conducted without exposing staff to viruses/infections. Basic facilities like availability of high-speed internet and video conferencing through webcam or smart phone are adequate, if the doctors need to advise patients on minor ailments such as cough, cold or check their diagnostic reports to prescribe medicine. Even the psychologists and other medical personnel have teamed up with industries to suggest employees on things like how to fight stress, boredom and other issues. The pharmacies are giving medicines using online services and door deliveries.



Figure - 8: Telemedicine.

### 3.5. Construction workers

Some governments have given permission to use the construction workers residing within the construction premises to continue working with the available workers but the outsiders must not be allowed into the site. If anyone is ill or sick care must be taken to immediately inform medical team to treat them. Construction activities in urban areas are permitted where workers are available on site. Under the guidelines, contractors along with developers will need to ensure that social distancing is maintained at the sites and will need to find ways and means of achieving it. For basic hygiene and safety precautions, companies can regularly sanitize sites and provide laborers with masks, soap and sanitizers for washing hands frequently.

### 3.6. Agriculture and Agrobased industries

The country is now strengthening agri-marketing as well as the public distribution system (PDS). All agricultural and horticultural activities are remained fully functional, such as farming operations by farmers and farm workers in field, agencies engaged in procurement of agriculture product taking proper care by maintaining social distance and use of protective equipment like masks and others. The food processing industries are also given exemption to collect and process the food produced by farmers.

## 4. MEASURES TAKEN BY COMPANIES

The worldwide outbreak of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, is a serious public health threat. But what exactly should companies be doing aside from the widely prescribed social distancing measures? Companies are stepping up to take appropriate precautions especially when it comes to their workplace and staff. Social distancing is the first tool that public health officials recommend to slow the spread of COVID-19. Let's take a look at ways to adapt your workplace in the coronavirus pandemic.

There are a number of ways to prepare your employees to work remotely, but perhaps the most important to start with, is communication. Employers should communicate clear guidelines as to what is expected from employees to ensure productivity remains high, for example, setting clear expectations for work hours and holding all remote employees accountable to meet their goals and deadlines.

Software and cloud-based tools like Google Drive, Slack, Zoom, Asana, and Workplace by Facebook can encourage digital collaboration and socialization, while providing employees with the tools they need to do their jobs effectively.

Ensure communication is top of mind, and that the executive team, the HR team, the facilities team, and the IT team are all working together and on the same page to provide one message. Many companies have already merged their IT, HR, and Facilities teams, which is helpful during times like these, when cross-functional coordination is essential. A clear message across the entire company needs to be unified, especially when communicating essential information to the rest of staff.

Companies need to know exactly who is going to be coming into the office and who is going to be working remotely and then plan accordingly. So, how can facilities managers and companies leverage workplace management software to make the office safer for those coming into work? Before you make any changes, you need an accurate picture of what's happening. The first step is to update your floorplan software so that employees are marked as absent or in the office. Then, reseat staff so that everyone keeps the appropriate amount of space between them to adhere to social distancing recommendations of six feet (two meters). Temporarily suspend hot desking or hoteling, and opt for employees seated in their same workspaces on a daily basis. Avoid sharing any workstations and equipment.

Just as under normal working conditions, the identification and assessment of risks in both physical and psychosocial working environments is the starting point for managing occupational safety and health (OSH) under COVID-19 measures. Employers are obliged to revise their risk assessment when there is a change to the work process and to consider all risks, including those affecting mental health.



## 5. PREVENT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 AT WORKPLACE

**Employers and workers can reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission in the workplace by:**

The implementation of safe work practices to limit exposure to COVID-19 at work requires first assessing the risks, and then implementing the hierarchy of controls. This means putting in place control measures to first eliminate the risk and if this is not possible, minimize worker exposure. Start first with collective measures and if necessary, supplement them with individual measures, such as personal protective equipment (PPE).

- Carry out only essential work for the time being; it may be possible to postpone some work to when the risk is lower. If possible, deliver services remotely (phone or video) instead of in person. Ensure that only workers who are essential to the job are present at the workplace and minimize the presence of third parties.
- Reduce, as far as possible, physical contact between workers (e.g. during meetings or during breaks). Isolate workers who can carry out their tasks alone safely and who do not require specialized equipment or machinery that cannot be moved. For example, whenever possible, arrange for them to work alone in a spare office, staff room, canteen, or meeting room. If possible, ask vulnerable workers to work from home (older people) and those with chronic conditions including hypertension, lung or heart problems, diabetes, or who are undergoing cancer treatment or some other immune suppression and pregnant workers. Workers with close family members who are at high risk may also need to telework.
- Eliminate, and if not possible limit, physical interaction with and between customers. For example, through online or phone orders, contactless delivery or managed entry (while also avoiding crowding outside), and physical distancing both inside and outside the premises.
- When delivering goods, do so through pick-up or delivery outside the premises. Advise drivers on good hygiene in the cab and provide them with appropriate sanitation gel and wipes. Delivery workers must be allowed to use facilities such as toilets, cafeterias, changing rooms and showers, albeit with the appropriate precautions (such as allowing only one user at a time and regular cleaning).
- Place an impervious barrier between workers, especially if they are not able to keep a two-meter distance from each other. Barriers can be purpose-made or improvised using items such as plastic sheeting, partitions, mobile drawers, or storage units. Things that are not solid or that have gaps, like pot plants or trolleys, or that create a new risk, such as from tripping or falling objects are to be avoided. If a barrier cannot be used, additional space between workers should be created by, for example, ensuring they have at least two empty desks either side of them.
- If close contact is unavoidable, keep it to less than 15 minutes. Reduce contact between different parts of your business at the start and end of shifts. Arrange the timing of meal breaks to reduce the number of people sharing a cafeteria, staff room, or kitchen. Ensure there is only one worker at a time in bathrooms and changing rooms. Place a sign on the main door indicating when one of the toilets is in use to ensure that only one person at a time enters. Organize shifts to take account of cleaning and sanitation tasks.
- Supply soap and water or appropriate hand sanitizer at convenient places and advise workers to wash their hands frequently. Clean your premises frequently, especially counters, door handles, tools and other surfaces that people touch often and provide good ventilation if possible.
- Avoid excessive workload on cleaning staff by taking appropriate measures, such as assigning additional staff to the tasks and asking workers to leave their workspace tidy. Provide workers with tissues and waste bins lined with a plastic bag so that they can be emptied without contacting the contents.
- If you have identified a risk of infection despite having applied all feasible safety measures, then provide all necessary PPE. It is important to train workers in correct use of PPE, ensuring that they follow the guidance available on use of facemasks and gloves.

- Place posters that encourage staying home when sick, cough and sneeze etiquette, and hand hygiene at the entrance to the workplace and in other areas where they will be seen.
- Facilitate workers use of individual rather than collective transport, for example by making available car parking or a place for storing bicycles securely, and encouraging workers to walk to work, if possible.
- Put in place policies on flexible leave and remote working to limit presence at the workplace, when needed.

## 6. COPING WITH A HIGH RATE OF ABSENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

Depending on the infection rates in your local area and the protocols in effect, many of your workers may be absent because of COVID-19. If a worker is in isolation at home as a precaution, they may be able to continue their work remotely, or if this is not the case, the worker will not be able to work for a period.

Workers who are confirmed as having COVID-19 will be absent and unable to work for significantly longer and those who become seriously ill may require a further period of rehabilitation once cured of the infection. In addition, some workers may be absent because they have to take care of a relative.

- The absence of a substantial number of workers, even if only temporary, may cause a strain on continuing activities. While the available workers should be flexible, it is important that they do not find themselves in a situation that will endanger their health or safety. Keep any additional workload as low as possible and ensure that it does not last too long. Line managers have an important role in monitoring the situation and ensuring that individual workers are not overburdened. Respect the rules and agreements on working hours and rest periods and allow the workers the right to disconnect when off work.
- When adapting work to cope with a reduced workforce, for example by putting in place new methods and procedures and changing roles and responsibilities, consider whether staff needs additional training and support, and make sure that all workers are competent to carry out the task they are required to perform.
- Cross-train workers to perform essential functions so the workplace can operate even if key workers are absent.
- If relying on interim staff, it is important to inform them about workplace risks and provide them with training if necessary.

## 7. GUIDELINES FOR THOSE WORKING FROM HOME

- Provide teleworkers with guidance on setting up a workstation at home that applies good ergonomics, such as good posture and frequent movement, as far as possible.
- Encourage workers to take regular breaks (around every 30 minutes) to stand up, move and stretch.
- Give teleworkers support in the use of IT equipment and software. Tele and video conferencing tools may become essential for work, but may be problematic for workers not used to them.
- Ensure that there is good communication at all levels that include those working from home. This ranges from the strategic information provided by top level management to line manager's duties, without forgetting the importance of routine social interaction among colleagues. While the former can be addressed in scheduled online meetings, the latter can be encouraged through online chats or 'virtual coffee' meetings.
- Do not underestimate the risk of workers feeling isolated and under pressure, which in the absence of support can lead to mental health problems. Effective communication and support from the manager and colleagues and being able to maintain informal contact with colleagues is important. Consider having regular staff or team meetings held online or rotate which employees can be present at the workplace, if a gradual return to work has been initiated.



## 8. FUTURISTIC CHALLENGES

In only a few months, the coronavirus pandemic has upended the daily lives of people around the world. The economic impact of the virus has led to new categorizations of “essential” workers, a large-scale move to remote work and skyrocketing unemployment that is expected to continue increasingly. With more than 30 million people filing for unemployment in the past six weeks, the U.S. is predicted to experience a coronavirus-induced recession through 2021.

And amid stay-at-home orders across the countries, office workers have ditched their daily commutes to work from dining room tables, couches and beds in their own homes. Many may find themselves in this situation for the long haul, as businesses struggle to find a path forward while restrictions slowly lift. In this context the opinions of the managers, experts, futurists about what becomes a common thing as the crisis continues is presented.

- People will still gather for work. But the amount of time we work in proximity with others, and what our work week looks like seems to be the biggest cultural shift moving forward.
- With more people working remotely, companies may open regional hubs or provide access to co-working spaces wherever their workers are concentrated rather than have the majority of their workforce at one central office.
- The pandemic has been a technological equalizer of sorts, where people previously unaccustomed to using tech tools in the workplace have had no choice but to adapt. And in some cases, workers are becoming more efficient.
- People have been more patient in learning new technologies and engaging with them, simply because they've had to. I think those best practices will live on. I think we're all developing new muscles to work virtually.
- To that end, expect a generally more agile way of working and communicating with colleagues: More meetings will become emails, and more emails will become instant messages.
- For team members who no longer work together in a central office, phone calls and meetings may move to video. This could help to build trust among workers who can't interact in person.
- As travel of all kinds is halted, telecommuting is adopted at scale and companies attempt to cut costs and balance their budgets, many experts believe business trips as we know them will be a thing of the past.
- Changing consumer preferences and greater interest in social distancing will limit large group events such as conferences and conventions for the foreseeable future and permanently decrease the volume of business travel.
- Additionally, during this time, companies will learn that some business travel is unnecessary and can be done via video meetings. As organizations attempt to recoup their pandemic-related losses, travel budgets will be cut.
- Workers will want the security and control of having a personal space they come to every day or every few days and can clean frequently.
- In shared spaces, expect more touchless fixtures, such as door sensors, automatic sinks and soap dispensers and voice-activated elevator banks.
- Architects may also design spaces with durable building materials, furniture, flooring and other surfaces that can stand up to frequent deep-cleaning, which is expected to be a lasting necessity of the future workplace for years to come.
- Health and legal experts predict that on-the-job medical screening, such as temperature checks and antibody tests, will be a reality for those who return to work in the months ahead.
- And in many cases, it's already happening: To combat the spread of coronavirus among essential workers, some of the biggest employers, including Amazon, Walmart, Home Depot and Starbucks have begun taking the temperatures of their employees before they are allowed to work.
- Not only are employers legally permitted to check employees' temperatures, they are also currently being encouraged to do so by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- While futurists have long warned of “job-stealing robots,” the coronavirus pandemic has heightened fears that automation will replace the jobs of workers. Because of social distancing measures, many organizations, from restaurants to retailers have been forced to find ways to operate with as few employees physically present as possible. An added bonus: Robots and algorithms can't get sick.
- For years, companies have been working toward automating repetitive jobs through algorithms that can complete administrative tasks, robots that can streamline manufacturing and drones that can deliver goods. And researchers have found that this kind of automation is more quickly adopted during economic downturns.
- With schools and offices remaining closed, one silver lining in this situation is that more government officials will see the need to increase broadband infrastructure, especially if remote work becomes a more common option for employees.

## 9. CONCLUSION

As the new reality of the coronavirus pandemic has set in, people around the world are experiencing the trials of isolation and exclusion of quarantine and social distancing for the first time. We are entering a new norm where a video call is the new meeting, virtual travel is the new weekend activity, and “self-isolation” is a common phrase.

The impacts of the Covid-19 outbreak have been astounding for nearly everyone, and devastating for many. In the midst of this entire disturbance, these changes could also be promising for a more inclusive future. We’ve seen adjustments being made on a widespread scale. Businesses and communities have made significant adjustments to adapt their working conditions and culture to new norms. As more measures are made to control the spread of infection, working remotely and flexibly has become standard across almost all sectors as workers across the globe are being asked to work from home to reduce the spread of outbreak. Employers are working closely with their employees to navigate the associated challenges in communication, productivity, and wellbeing. Buried within this crisis is a lesson that must be taken forward to the future of workplace behavior: Businesses have clearly demonstrated that when it becomes an absolute necessity to drastically adapt working culture and introduce flexible models, the shift for many corporations is possible and can be implemented within an incredibly short timeframe.

It hasn’t been without its challenges, and understandably, not every corporation’s infrastructure can support such widespread measures. But companies are putting in genuine efforts, actively seeking solutions, and seeing rapid results. It is truly promising and reassuring to see how in the face of a crisis, we are witnessing businesses coming together to work with their employees to ensure working life can continue while protecting their wellbeing.

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