The Impact of COVID-19 on Organizational Culture & Employee Engagement: An Exploratory Research on Information Technology (IT) Professionals in Delhi/NCR (India)

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Abstract: Covid-19 Era has presented several challenges to the organizations & has transformed the organizational culture. To adjust to this 'New Normal' companies are shifting and adapting new norms of working & re-establishing their businesses. In order to mitigate the hazards of this pandemic, individuals are using Facemasks, gloves, sanitizers & social distancing as integral part of their lives. Also, people have started giving more thrust to personal hygiene & fitness along with family life. On the other hand, companies have resorted to remote working or telecommuting since it was the only way to survive during this pandemic. This new way of working hasits own pros & cons which have been discussed in detail in the current research paper.

In the current research paper, researcher has made an attempt to study the impact of the outbreak of Covid-19 on the working professionals of IT sector in Delhi/NCR (India) and the trends that emerged thereafter.

Keywords: *Organisational Culture, Employee Engagement, Remote working, Covid-19*

1. **INTRODUCTION :**

1.1   Impact of Covid-19 on society & IT Industry -

The coronavirus outbreak that started in China's Wuhan district late last year flings numerous unprecedented challenges. In just a few weeks, it was realized that this viral infection has impacted the entire world and was declared as a pandemic (Bavel, et al) on 11th March 2020 (Ducharme).

Though, Covid-19 crisis is biological and sociological, but it has postured numerous challenges for business. According to the ILO (International Labour Organization), it had stated that due to COVID-19 situation, it is expected that there might be around 25 million job losses and hence, brings forth human brittleness. Moreover, this unexpected situation which has arisen because of this pandemic has given rise to a lot of ambiguities & inhibitions amongst individuals as well as corporates, pertaining to the basic question of existence. All organizations, whether MNC's or start-ups, were forced to device means and ways to adapt to this abrupt change in their working culture and style. Also, they have been abruptly mandated to look out for options that will help them to sustain themselves in such a life-threatening crisis.

Even the IT industry in India which has been contributing enormously to economic growth (GDP) (Sharma & Garg, 2017) is now witnessing a substantial slowdown in growth during this fiscal year. It has been clearly stated in Reports that even the top software exporters, like Infosys, TCS and HCL Technologies, will be adversely impacted because of lessened technology outlay from their clients in the US and Europe.

1.2   Challenges of handling Socio-behavioural change –

COVID-19 pandemic struck the world and disrupted not only human routine, lifestyle, but also economies and the workplaces. As the virus began to spread, government imposed stern social distancing and lockdown restrictions to break this deadly chain of infection. As a result, not only the employee experience was completely disrupted but also brought about changes in the lives of people culturally, socially &behaviourally. The new norms besides social distancing are regular hand washing & sanitization, wearing masks and evading congested places like shopping malls, educational institutes, places of worship, etc. (Bavel, et al).

According to various researches, prior to Covid-19 only 16% of companies operated fully remotely. Whereas, 44% of companies didn't offer any option to work remotely. The remaining 40% of companies provided hybrid offerings having both the options of remote as well as in-office.

But on the onset of this pandemic, there was a dawn of new era of Digital Workplace and companies had to adjust themselves rapidly to this remote way of working. According to the reports, it is estimated that two-thirds of the 4.3 million ITBPO workforce are working from home to ensure uninterrupted services. Moreover, it is predicted that not only it is impacting the working culture but also the lifestyle of people i.e., the way people shop, live, etc. (Merriman). Also, the outbreak of Covid-19 is expected to adversely impact the overall economic operations for years to come.

1.3 Challenges of Digital Workplace -

Covid-19 brought with it an urgent need to adapt to the technology as businesses had to allow for WFH (work-from-home) as it was the only way out to survive under this crisis. Therefore, employees will have to get more comfortable with Technology and learn to use new communication software's /tools /systems, which might get challenging if not used earlier or if there is lack of IT Support. Moreover, it was challenging more especially for start-ups or SME's or corporates outside Tier-II cities or metros because of dearth of strong technology infrastructure and/or adaptability to the remote working procedures (Sharma). Also, this can have direct implications on individual performances and hence on overall business cycles.

Corporates have started using extensively varied tools available in the market for uninterrupted interactions with employees and clients like Zoom, Zoho, Google Hang-outs, Microsoft Office 365, etc. Moreover, cloud-based process management tools such as Jira, have also contributed to making life easier. Stacey Jones (Head of corporate communications at Accenture), mentioned that, "Her company has been supporting employees around the globe to maintain ties with each other and clients." These tools have enabled employees to combat this challenge. However, the benefits of WFH on a huge scale has been counterpoised by cultural and social challenges (Chadha). And the question that still persists is that we might be prepared technically but are we prepared for this new world, culturally and emotionally?

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 Definitions:

Organizational culture can also be defined as a set of values, beliefs and behaviour patterns that distinguishes one organization from the other organizations (Ortega-Parra & Sastre-Castillo, 2013).

Organizational culture includes the norms that the members of an organization experience and describe as their work settings (Schneider et al., 2013). These norms define how members behave and adapt themselves to achieve the said goals in the organization. Organizational culture is how the members of an organization interact with each other and other stakeholders (Simoneaux & Stroud, 2014).

The credit of laying down the first formal definition of employee engagement goes to William Kahn, as he defined this term as- "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (1990).

Employee engagement "represents an employee's enthusiasm, passion and commitment to their work and to the organization, the willingness to invest themselves and expand their discretionary effort to help the employer succeed". (This definition has been adopted by researcher named Myrden and Kelloway, 2015).

2.2 Engagement & Culture Link:

TINYpulse collected the data from over 25,000 thousand employees across 20 industries from January to December 2018. The size of organizations surveyed range from 10 to 10,000 employees, with companies spread across Northern America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. "THE 2019 EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT REPORT" stated that, the biggest driver of employee engagement boils down to one thing: culture. The report mentioned that the mostsignificant decision whether to separate or stay with a particular organization, as stated by majority of the respondents was culture as the most significant factor in their decision. According to this report, "The Secret of Employee Engagement in One Word is Culture".

2.3 Becoming irresistible through Work Culture & Employee engagement Practices during Corona times:

Delloit University Press conducted a research titled "Becoming irresistible: A new model for employee engagement" by Josh Bersin (2015), which strongly recommends that some employees now seek improvising work culture rather than concentrating on individualistic approach to employee engagement. The study suggested 5 major elements, strategies and approaches that work together to enhance today's workforce engagement levels-

- Creating a meaningful work culture
- Foster great management through leadership team
- Establish flexible humane inclusive workplace
- Generate adequate opportunities for the growth and sustainability.
- Transparency in vision and decision-making process.

The above-mentioned points are very much apposite in today's vulnerable times of Covid-19 crisis because all the CEOs, CIOs, CHROs of big or small companies have worked hard & have efficaciously handled the 3 important aspects - remote work, prompt reporting & communication.

2.4 Post-Covid: Challenges & probable transformation in work culture:

Undoubtedly, this novel Coronavirus has impacted not only our work, way of socialization, education, communication but rather the overall culture itself (Huen). It's an era, where everyone is not only expected to accept & adapt to these changes but also welcome this new work culture (Gautam).

During these unexpected difficult times, there are certain responsibilities which employer/s are mandated to cogitate so as to withstand amiable employee relations, which have been stated by Abrol, S. & Madan, V (2020) as:

- Design plan of action to deal with situation of calamity & exigency.
- Providing a protective workplace and appropriate resources for remote working that are well-organized and maintained;

- Supervising and guiding office-related activities to ensure the welfare and support of all its human resources;
- Promoting a sense of belongingness amid its employees by usage of video- conferencing for F2F discussions, webinars, etc.

Across the globe, the employees were mandated to work from home once the lockdown was declared. As mentioned by Patti Clarke, the Chief Talent Officer, Havas Group, "In today's world, the flexibility of where, when, and how employees work is no longer a trend but rather a requirement if you want to be competitive in the market." Also, the companies permitted employees to work remotely taking into consideration the well-being & safety of the employees on one hand & business continuity on the other. Because of the sudden outbreak of the pandemic, companies had to face various difficulties but the management & HR continuously worked together to timely resolve the issues & concerns of their employees on timely basis. Some of the challenges encountered by them includes -

- **Revamping of HR policies & procedures:** Companies were forced to formulate & revamp the policies & procedures related to attendance & leave, core working hours, timesheet reporting, etc. Moreover, policies were also required w.r.t equipping the employees with laptops/ computers or supplementary work connected tools, internet reimbursement, etc. While formulating these polices HR had to be cautious since it was required to clearly establish certain protocols, parameters & expectations. Earlier, the aspects covered only a set of resources whereas now it was to be applied to the complete population.
  Policies had to be framed keeping in view that professionals have entered into a new phase where the homes of all the employees got converted to Mini-offices and the companies would in long-term encourage this home work culture (Sharma). Moreover, according to the results of one of the recent research done by Gartner, it has been revealed that post pandemic around 75% of the employers are planning to perpetually move their employees to WFH to continue saving cost (Parungao).

- **Evaluating the performance of team members –** Initially, the managers found it difficult to track whether the team members are completing the assigned tasks as per defined SLA's or not, etc. They had various inhibitions w.r.t whether their project was running as per the schedule, risks were getting mitigated or not. But through implementation of various Tech tools & chat apps, managers were able to define the expectations and goals clearly to all their team members & also take theirinputs to collectively resolve the said concerns. Frequent video-calls with team members helped to improvise the collaboration and communication amongst the team, leading to better team performance and is preferred over e-mails and voice calls (Dhawan and Chamorro-Premuzic)

- **Safeguarding the official data:** With the sudden shift to remote working, professional especially of the IT domain/industry had to ensure that their official data saved on various clouds, etc. is not being misused and is easily accessible at the same time. As a result, the IT support team of the companies continuously made efforts to create awareness related to data theft and other kinds of malware attacks/ cybersecurity in order to safeguard the data as it is the most critical thing if the companies have to function in the current virtual world. Also, with the increased use of technology and evolution of Artificial Intelligence, IOT (internet of things), robotics, automation of various internal organizational processes, etc., it is evident that if the companies have to protect their Big-data from hacking they will have to invest in cybersecurity (Indo Asian News Service).

- **A Big Challenge – Keeping Employees Engaged & maintaining the Work-life balance:** With the outbreak of Coronavirus, remote working became a necessity for every business, if they had to survive. Employees while working from home had to work in isolation & hence felt underrated. This in turn has led to low engagement levels and consequently increased attrition rate. Companies realized that this is also the outcome of the fact that their resources are simultaneously dealing with numerous situations at personal & professional front and which is adversely impacting their well-being and hence productivity. Ergo, companies have made attempts to offer swift rewards & recognition for exemplary contribution on any demanding task or new assignment/project. Also, corporates have made endeavours to introduce programmes that will stimulate a healthy work-life balance and keep employees engaged (Sharma).Also, the engagement levels of the employees can be enhanced by use of consistent communiqué, webinars and L&D sessions.

- ▪ **Maintaining the Organizational Culture –** With the sudden declaration of lock-down, life came to a standstill. Companies were concerned if they would be able to inculcate similar degree of customer service especially when the employees & people around the world are dispersed and struggling with stress because of COVID. After few months of isolation, companies and people gradually started working though remotely and it became the "New Normal". Companies have evolved new ways of functioning & things changed overnight because of the occurrence of this unexpected event. Initially, there were issues relating to stress, mental well-being which impacted the productivity of the resources. But gradually when people adapted to this way of working, their productivity also improved. According to the study conducted by SAP Concur, results reveal that 88% Of Indian Workforce Prefer to have the flexibility of Working from Home. Moreover, WFH policies have significantly helped women to come back to work who were forced to take career break because of their kids at home (Gautam). It also has another benefit of having a diversified workforce since talented resources can be hired globally anywhere and put to work and the productivity shall remain the same (Sharma).

Though remote working has its own challenges but if strategically instigated, will result in improved productivity with cost reduction and ultimately a more engaged employees since it provides them flexibility, saves travelling time, promotes work-life balance and a sense of belongingness in the workforce.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES :

   i.   To explore the impact on working culture & Employee Engagement instigated by Covid-19
   ii. To explore & scrutinize the trends which have emerged as a consequence of remote working

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS :

   i.   What is the impact of covid-19 on working culture & Employee Engagement amongst Information Technology (IT) workforce in Delhi/NCR (India)?
   ii. What are trends which have emerged as a result of remote working? Challenges and opportunities.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The objective of the current study is to explore the impact on working culture & Employee Engagement instigated by Covid-19 crisis and also to explore & scrutinize the trends which have emerged as a consequence of remote working. A quantitative study with the help of a descriptive survey method was used on a population of two hundred working professionals in Information Technology (IT) sector of Delhi/NCR, India during July to Sept 2020. For the purpose of the study, an exploratory simple random sampling was considered most appropriate, as the result generated by it would produce empirical evidence. Also, the survey was conducted using Google forms for gathering the requisite information from IT professionals over emails and phone calls due to WFH. Moreover, the researcher had contacted & conducted discussion with other senior HR professional, leaders and industry colleagues to gain better acumen.

5.1 *Design of the Study:*

For the purpose of this study a mixed approach was adopted. Primary data was collated using qualitative and quantitative survey. Secondary data was collected from existing review literature, articles published in newspaper/journals/ research papers, industry reports and case studies. Extensive data analysis techniques have been done with the usage of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

5.2 *Respondents Profile:*

Gender		Range	Age
Male	147	20-25	14
Female	53	26-30	47

Marital Status		31-35	86
Married	144	36-40	29
Single	53	41-45	18
Divorced	3	45 +	6
Total	200	Total	200

Table 1

6. **FINDINGS ANDRESULT**:

On the basis of the objectives mentioned above, the findings and results of the paper are as follows -

Objective 1: The first objective of this paper is to explore the impact on organizational culture & Employee Engagement instigated by Covid-19. The researcher concluded with the below outcomes upon evaluating the quantitative data and qualitative semi-structured interviews:

i.　**Hybrid working** – Majority of the employees indicated that they would never want to return to the old way of working. Only 14 % of the employees said that they would prefer full-time work while 86% showed their preference for a hybrid remote-office model in future. The above findings are also supported by the findings of the survey done by Future Forum research.

　　Moreover, through the qualitative interviews it could be analysed that 80% of the employees now felt that their productivity has increased while working from home. This fact is also being buoyed by the literature review & researches done by Blount and Gloet.

ii.　**Impact on Overall Wellbeing of employees & measures taken-** More than 85% of the employees agreed that remotely working from the precincts of home during & post lockdown has adversely impacted their overall wellbeing. Since employees have been away from their workplaces for an elongated period, their Engagement levels have gone done, adversely impacting the motivation levels, resulting in augmented stress and anxiety levels and also feeling of solitude amongst them. However, the employees mentioned that companies have understood that these are difficult times for all the employees and in order to keep the employees engaged they have implemented Wellness Programmes, Yoga sessions, online counselling & mentoring sessions, Online events like Fun Fridays, etc. Satya Nadella, CEO, Microsoft mentioned the same in a media interview and has been discussed under literature review as well.

iii.　**Blurred Work-Life Boundaries-** Majority of the employees inevitably accepted that initially when they started working remotely clear boundaries between their professional and personal lives had blurred. But as they got acquainted to this New Normal way of working, the managers and their team members made combined efforts to ensure that a proper balance between personal and professional life can be upheld.

　　Similar results were obtained from the survey & more than 70% of the employees confirmed that currently while working from home they are able to sustain healthy boundaries between their professional and personal lives. In the qualitative interview, 7 out of 10 respondents stated that they have been able to retain a healthy work life balance even while working from home since they are acquainted to this way of working for some time now. Similar results have been reflected in Harvard Business Review through the research of Giurge and Bohns.

iv.　**Bridging the Collaboration & Communication gap** – In the qualitative interviews, 6 out of 10 respondents stated that communication gap amongst colleagues had increased because of incessant elongated work from home. However, few respondents indicated that companies whether big or small have decided to adopt hybrid-work model wherein some employees would work from office on certain days and remotely on other days.　Companies have been successfulin adopting this model and grow

because of various communication & collaboration tools like Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Team,Slack, Google Meet, etc. Furthermore, to add to it, Eric S Yuan (Founder and CEO, Zoom) stated that, "Companies will use video communications to be completely remote. Both models will enjoy increased productivity and deeper collaboration, and the ability to attract a more diverse workforce."

v. **Increase in gender equality –** Researches have shown that if organizations are able to give flexibility of choosing when and where to work then it will definitely lead to increase in gender equality. More than 70% of the respondents agreed that prolonged work from home will help mothers in balancing their personal & professional lives and hence will not be forced to quit jobs in order to take care of their family responsibilities. In the qualitative interviews, 8 out of 10 respondents agreed that now more couples share personal responsibilities more equally than before. One of the respondents mentioned that males are spending more time with their kids than earlier and also contributing to household chores. These findings have been supported by the literature review & research done by Gajendran, R. S., & Harrison. So, if this trend continues then more women are expected to be a part of the workforce.

vi. **Career Opportunities and job searches-** The economic impact of Covid-19 in India has been majorly divisive. According to the 'Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy', unemployment rate had augmented by around 19% within a month by 24th April, which further increased to 26% across India. However, in May some companies started their operations with the employee strength of 33%, while few others with even 5%. As a result, by mid of June the unemployment levels were same as they were during pre-lockdown. The same gets reflected in the qualitative interviews, wherein 7 out of 10 respondents mentioned that they felt job insecurity initially, but later when economy started reviving, they started feeling secured gradually. One of the respondent also stated that various Employers have resorted to reduction in salaries by 5%, 10%, 15% or even more. While few others have even curtailed appraisals.

In this context, Karin Kimbrough, Chief Economist, LinkedIn said, "With the rise of remote work, one of the most exciting trends that we're going to see is a democratization of opportunity and movement of skills all around the globe. Companies may be able to source diverse talent more easily, especially from groups that are underrepresented in their area, or for skills that are locally less available, through remote-work options."

vii. **Safeguarding and retaining of organisational culture -**On the onset of Covid-19, companies were forced to trust their resources and the technology as employees started working from home leaving behind the earlier office set-up. Now, the individual homes became mini-offices and the show-up official culture was dead. 90% of the respondents stated that there is a crucial requirement to safeguard and retain the organizational culture & its values. Similar findings have been indicated in a research done by Gerard McDonough. Respondents further stated that for the purpose, the companies will have to rethink of their working arrangements and in order to settle comfortably with hybrid workforce and distributed workplace, leadership team will have to more strongly connect and communicate using Town-hall & Deep-dive meetings, etc.
Moreover, if we need to manage our resources effectively while working remotely then we'll require managers who possess emotional intelligence and social skills. The above statement is further being supported by the research conducted by Cary Cooper at Manchester University.

Objective 2: The other objective of the current research paper is to explore & scrutinize the trends which have emerged as a consequence of remote working. Post extensive literature review and evaluation of the said data, the researcher concluded with the below outcomes:

i. **The New Normal @ Work :**With the outbreak of Covid-19, companies across the world experimented with WFH since had no option besides it, keeping in view the safety & security of their workforce and this has undoubtedly brought about a paradigm shift in the working culture. On analysing the results of the quantitative survey, it can be stated that more that 80% of the respondents preferred for WFH since it gave them the opportunity to balance their professional & personal life and since now they have got accustomed to this way of working and gradually their productivity has also increased. This is also reflected in the literature review & findings of the research published by Prithwiraj Choudhury in Harvard Business Review.

ii.   **More Flexibility @ Work:**Companies are incessantly putting efforts to utilize the technological systems and support to enable mobile working. The respondents indicated that both Managers and teams are continuously devising ways and means to collaborate better though they are working from distant locations and leaders are constantly channelizing their efforts so that they can effectively manage work and resources on the basis of upshots/results and purposes rather than their physical availability.

Also, after analysing both quantitative and qualitative data it can be explicitly stated that all the employees wants to avail the flexibility of choosing on their own as to whether they want to opt for WFH or WFO based on their project requirement/s.

iii. **Emergence of Digital Workplace –Dawn of a New Era:** During this pandemic, companies have been constantly working to devise creative and innovative ways to use technology to ensure that employees stay connected even though they are physically distanced. There are numerous suggestions received from respondents regarding how business houses can organize contests. Many organizations have used the available tech collaboration tools and conducted various hackathons, contests & challenges to ensure that employees suggest & come-up with certain real-time actionable ideas which would help companies to overcome the repercussions of COVID-19.

iv.   **Learning and development @Work:**During these difficult times, companies have realized that if they want to retain their competitive edge, they will have to ensure that learning and development of their employees will have to continue in the similar manner. In regards to the same, over 60% of employees stated that their companies which have an Employee-friendly culture, they have attempted to introduce new forms of L&D programmes using Live-sessions, Webinars, Online counselling sessions to upgrade their skills and effectively manage their talent.

v.   **New initiatives of Employee Engagements:** More than 90% of the respondents agreed that in order to keep the employees engaged and stress-free during this pandemic, companies have come up with innovative ideas. Some companies have introduced daily morning wellness programs which includes Yoga while others have initiated Home Strength Training and High-Intensity Trainings. Companies have also launched Official fun channels and through this medium there are pop-ups with random questions and jokes, gifs & funny responses which helps in maintaining zeal & enthusiasm amongst employees. In order to continue the momentum of employee engagement, companies have also started organizing various competitions preferably on Fridays like cooking classes & competitions, musical evenings, etc. on team basis so that employees still feel the sense of working together and team spirits are highly maintained. Hence, it will not be incorrect to say that in these difficult times, Technology has been our Rescue Partner and has helped to retain and engage our workforce. Since the major challenges confronted by contemporary organizations are retention and engagement (Bersin, 2014). Also, if the organizations wants to remain competitive and successful for a very long term then it must have an engaged workforce. (Long et al., 2012).

vi.   **Neater & Cleaner Workspace:**Post Covid-19, some corporates still resorted to WFH while some others based on government protocols have issued directions stating that only 30% of the workforce will work from office. Those companies which have started operating have gone extra mile and enhanced cleaning techniques through use of hand sanitizers, floor cleaners & disinfectant, fumigation, etc. The respondents mentioned that Employers have also spent good budget to ensure that public utility items like washrooms, water dispenser, etc. are now censor controlled using advanced technology such that human touch on various commonly used surfaces can be avoided.

7. **CONCLUSION :**
    The outbreak of Coronavirus has proved that this not just a difficult time but rather a testing time for the companies across the globe to check and ensure how swiftly they adapt themselves by thinking and planning differently. And in order to sturdily arise from this adversity, companies have implemented several tools such as Zoom, Zoho, Google Hang-outs, Microsoft Office 365, etc. which have facilitated the employees to collaborate and communicate leading to greater engagement and synergistic teamwork. And at individual level, people have become very cautious of personal hygiene & safety. They have started

taking more care of their personal fitness and sanitizers, facemasks & social distancing have become vital part of everyday life.

Though, massive spread of Coronavirus has brought about various challenges like cybersecurity, blurred work-life balance, psychological stress, job insecurity, collaboration & communication amongst team members, impact on overall organizational culture, etc. On the other hand, telecommuting has its own benefits like reduction in office cost, flexibility, increase in gender equality, neater workplace, etc.

To conclude, Covid-19 has presented significant changes & challenges in the manner the organization's used to function or brand its culture. Ergo, amongst its instability, insecurity, intricacy, and obscurity, there lies innumerable opportunities for innovation and growth at both levels i.e. employee as well as employer and it would depend on them how they leverage it in their favour and emerge as victors in future.

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