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## A Study of Challenges of Working from Home during COVID-19 in Indian Industries

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**ABSTRACT:** 95% of businesses in the Indian market are planning to continue with WFH for at least the next two years as per a study by Manage Engine of Zoho Corporation. This is reflective of the current mindset of companies around the world.

According to research conducted by Stanford University, 20% of full workdays will be constituted by remote working as compared to just 5% before the pandemic. Some reasons for this shift include - adoption of AI and other technological innovations supplementing and enabling remote working; an open minded approach to WFH; better results and experiences associated with it; Increased investments in human and physical resources and fear of contagion risks. "COVID-19 saw businesses ramp up their resilience and agility. Businesses needed to respond to a new reality, almost overnight. And, that response has given business and technology leaders the belief that nothing is impossible.

KEYWORDS: business, COVID-19, pandemic, innovations, Indian, industries, technology, home

#### I. INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the year 2020 was marked by a major global public health crisis. The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) that supposedly originated from Wuhan in China during December 2019 made its presence felt in more than 100 countries by the first week of March 2020. On March 12, 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) characterised COVID-19 as a "controllable pandemic" (WHO, 2020, COVID-19 Situation Report-52, 12th March). In India, the first case of COVID-19 was reported on 30 January 2020, and by mid-March a total of 25 confirmed cases were reported.[1]

Considering the fact that currently, no medicine or vaccine was available to treat this pandemic, "social distancing" was suggested as one of the possible measures to protect individuals from being infected or infecting others. On 24 March, Indian Prime Minister announced a 21 days' nationwide lockdown till 3 April 2020, which got further extended till 3 May 2020. Following the Government's mandate, some of the industries made their employees "Work from Home" (WFH) during this lockdown period. WFH, also known as telecommuting or telework ,has now become a popular practice due to the advancement in information and communication technologies (ICTs). Telecommuting enables employees to perform the tasks allocated at the workplace by being at a place away from the normal workplace. Some employees prefer WFH as it helps in attaining work-life balance (WLB), but managers become sceptical as it could lead to shirking from assigned responsibilities while being home. COVID-19-induced lockdown has forced businesses to run through WFH. [2,3] After the announcement of nationwide lockdown in India to contain the spread of the infection, WFH policy was opted by the majority of organisations. During this lockdown, the scenario at home was quite different from the previous times, as all family members were lockdown together inside home. On the one hand, if this lockdown gave an opportunity for good family time, but on the other hand, it created challenges to manage family responsibilities. Restriction on out-door movements changed the lifestyle of every individual. Keeping all the family members engaged during the lockdown and facilitating their psychological well-being required a lot of effort from every member of the family. Many Indian households have a practice of hiring the services of paid domestic helpers to do the basic household chores. Due to the lockdown, the services of domestic helpers were hindered. In such a scenario, most of the working professionals got loaded with some household chores that consumed their time and energy and possibly made them feel exhausted. [4,5]

Working from home during this lockdown was quite challenging for most employees. Irrespective of whether they were staying single or with family, they had to get involved in some household chores. During the lockdown, coordinating between work and family demands was a daunting task for every employed individual. Boundary theory suggests that people create and maintain physical, temporal and psychological boundaries around them to simplify their functioning



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in the world around them . Formation of such boundaries enables employees to minimise the interference of work and non-work life with each other. Drawing on the boundary theory, it is posited that while working from home during the lockdown, employees could have struggled in creating and maintaining the temporal, physical and psychological boundaries due to which they might have experienced some difficulties in maintaining WLB. The chances of work—life interference with family life, or family life interference with work—life or both, during WFH in lockdown may not be denied. Due to such conflict between work and personal life during the lockdown, employees might have felt emotional exhaustion. This study attempted to explore the relationship between WLB and emotional exhaustion experienced by employees who were working from home during COVID-19-induced nationwide lockdown, and how this relationship differs between male and female employees. The possible association between perceived participative leadership and work interference with personal life was examined, and how does this association affect emotional exhaustion was also explored.[6,7]

Work life and family life are intertwined and consistently affected by each other. Boundary theory is a popular framework facilitating the understanding of how an individual creates and manages the boundary between work—life and family life domain as an effort to simplify and classify the world around them . It explains the dynamics of transition from one life domain (such as family) to another life domain (such as work). Throughout the day, people cross various physical, temporal and psychological boundaries during the transition from one domain to another domain . Physical boundary corresponds to the place where role-domain behaviour occurs, and temporal boundary specifies when role-domain work occurs . Going to office for work means employee physically enters the office premises and stays in office for the duration during which work is done. Psychological boundaries correspond to the rules developed by people regarding which thinking patterns, behaviour patterns and emotions are appropriate for a particular role-domain . So, when a person enters an organisation, he/she adheres to contextually relevant behaviours as per the requirement of work-domain-related roles.[8,9]

It has been suggested boundary theory as a supportive framework for understanding the unique challenges related to WFM. According to the authors, the traditional boundaries between work and home get changed in the case of WFH. Due to the proximity to family life, an employee could get distracted by the different demands of the family members while working on some official tasks. During WFH, individual transitions from work—life to family life and vice-versa throughout the work-day. [10,11] Such frequent transition between work—life and family-life demands extra efforts to sustain and adhere to the psychological boundaries, particularly when attending work—life. Individuals need to mentally prepare themselves for every transition from one psychological role to another and such frequent transition could make individuals feel exhausted.

### II. DISCUSSION

The coronavirus pandemic that marked its presence with the need for social distancing, mandatory self-isolations, quarantines and administrative regulatory lockdowns, has, in turn, ushered in a major transition into an all-consuming digital realm, from the physical, material world. The significance of the virtual interactions on digital platforms have increased manifold with tele-mediated interrelationships occurring at work (within the work-from-home mode), education (with stay-at-home schooling), in consumption patterns (online shopping and delivery of products) and political undertakings (such as mailed in polling). As a direct outcome, the idea of space — both physical and social — are undergoing transformations in the way they are being perceived today, more so, within the economic sectors and labour processes. Remote working in India skyrocketed under the influence of COVID-19 and set newer trends in motion making it intriguing to understand how work patterns have changed under this modus operandi. Adopting a primary survey method, conducted online, among IT sector employees of India, results have been generated across various socio-demographic categories to answer questions of efficiency and productivity, availability of infrastructure and work environment, major challenges and benefits encountered and the desired continuity of work-from-home. Through this, the study seeks to highlight whether changing work practices is leading to an overarching sense of digitality over space. [12,13]

As claimed, "No other technological innovation in human history has affected the practice of geography in such a profound way as the computer. It has drastically transformed both geography as an academic discipline and the geography of the world."



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The trajectory of human civilization spans across a wide temporal scale encompassing different phases of Revolutions (starting from the Homo erectus man and his accidental discovery of fire); and the Digital Revolution is latest in that trend. With the emergence of digital technologies, characterized by their ubiquitous nature, they have taken over the mediating role of our everyday, mundane tasks such as work, travel, consumption, production and leisure. Digitality becoming an aesthetic itself, captures the pervasiveness of digital technologies and shapes how we understand and experience space and spatiality as always-already 'marked by circuits of digitality' that are themselves irreducible to digital systems .As we adopt and ubiquitously embed networked digital technologies across physical landscapes, they come to enact progressively routine orderings of quotidian rhythms, interactions, opportunities, spatial configurations and flows . What has happened in turn, is that profound effects have been generated on the nature of space and it is socio-economic, socio-cultural, socio-technical and socio-political linkages.[14,15]

Consequently, as geography, from the age-old times, have been concerned with the notions of space and it is economic relations; the management and governance of places; the production of (social and physical) space, spatiality and mobilities; the processes, practices and forms of mapping; the contours of spatial knowledge and imaginaries; and the formation and enactment of spatial knowledge politics — these effect-led shifts within the contemporary digital world manages to allure geographers . Although geographers are not alone in this race to unravel the mysteries of the digitally-ruled, new world, rather sociologists, anthropologists, engineers, architects, planners and others — have all stepped in, bringing out many interdisciplinary perceptions . But 'space' (physical, social and digital) continues to remain as an integral question within geography, within the larger technological debate, within our daily lives and also for us in this article.

Since the early 1990s, there have been a series of studies that have examined how the digital is mediating and augmenting the production of space and transforming socio-spatial relations. Initially, this work concentrated on how ICTs, and the internet in particular, were transforming economic, cultural, social and political geographies. Some of those work took a technologically determinist position, where it was assumed that networked ICTs flattened or removed the concept of distance and rendered geography irrelevant by overcoming space with time through the instantaneous transfer of information. However, there were others who opposed this view and argued that while ICTs produced space—time compression and distantiation, geography and geographical knowledge of space remained critical in our everyday lives; not denying howsoever the many shifts and transformations that the discipline underwent. One such transformation is seen prominently in the socio-economic arena within digital cities.[16,17]

This article makes it further clearer by adopting a political-economy perspective in the analysis of the contemporary digital cities and workplaces therein. The new information economy of today is responsible for the changes in the spatial structuring of companies and employment patterns that earlier were dependent on the processes of concentration and dispersal. This, in turn, has induced significant urban-regional restructuring and the creation of a post-industrial landscape. The industrial times were hallmarked with the industrial cities and towns (for example, London) that arose surrounding the industries and factories. The spatial structuring of these cities were so that one would find cheap labour migrating from the rural parts to live in squatter settlements, under unhygienic conditions, near the site of the industry itself; whereas, the then aristocrats were settled in the peripheral suburbs. The industry itself was located in the optimum point from its raw materials, source of power, water and even market. With the advancement of transportation and communication technologies, the premium on space as a localized focus declined over time. Workers could now commute over larger distances, raw materials could be brought in overseas and finished products could be dispersed far and wide for people's consumption. This was the era of Imperialism and India being a colony to the British Imperial Rule itself (that started with the advancement of the trading East India Company) had witnessed these socio-economic processes very closely, first hand.[18,19]

As wealth and power accumulated within certain areas (geographically, the European countries were most fruitful with Britain in the lead), further advancements were continually achieved that ushered the world into the digital era — an era of 'computers and the internet'. The Digital Revolution swept in subtly and quietly, yet it brought about massive changes to this industry-led societal landscape. To start off, there was a major shift in demand and aspiration of individuals from blue collar jobs to white collar ones, and associated changes in their livelihood, quality of life and lifestyles. Society, as a whole, climbed a step higher in fulfilling the hierarchy of needs (see Maslow, 1943). Economically, this marked a complete upheaval in the concept of space-centred industries and factories, breaking them



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down and dispersing them far and wide, thus, paving the way for a New Division of Labour, that further gave rise to the mushrooming of the multinational corporations (MNCs) in different parts of the globe. Consequently, many office activities, business services and production centres were decentralized to the suburbs, peripheral cities or other countries to take advantage of cheaper rent and labour costs. [20,21]

These new economic trends have been further responsible for creating other socio-spatial hierarchies and creating a world completely different from that of the Industrial and Colonial times. Geographical research has highlighted how urban hierarchies today have been reinforced through the concentration of command and control, and the agglomeration of information-rich business into key places thereby allocating power and information in the hands of certain geographical and societal sections (such as the USA; the upper and middle class, white collar employees and so on) .This decentralized post-industrial economic landscape, over time, further gave way to more new patterns of work that emerged under the rapidly developing ICT systems. One such pattern that we see today in great prominence, especially in the present pandemic times, is that of Remote working or the 'Work-from-Home' system.[22,23]

#### III. RESULTS

The pandemic sweeping the world, COVID-19, has rendered a large proportion of the workforce unable to commute to work, as to mitigate the spread of the virus. This has resulted in both employers and employees seeking alternative work arrangements, especially in a fast-paced metropolitan like Hong Kong. Due to the pandemic, most if not all workers experienced work from home (WFH). Hence WFH has become a policy priority for most governments. In doing so, the policies must be made keeping in mind the practicality for both employers and employees. However, this current situation provides unique insight into how well working from home works, and may play a vital role in future policies that reshape the current structure of working hours, possibly allowing for more flexibility. Using an exploratory framework and a SWOT analysis, this study investigates the continuing experience of the employer and employees face in Hong Kong. A critical insight and related recommendations have been developed for future policy decisions. It will also critically investigate if this work arrangement will remain as a transitory element responding to the exceptional circumstances, or whether it could be a permanent arrangement. [24,25]

The world has witnessed many turbulences and four significant recessions over the last seven decades. Each recession of 1975, 1982, 1991, and 2009 has resulted in global GDP contraction, economic activity, employment, and consumer spending disruptions. The Pandemic has a profound impact on global economic growth and can be worse than the Great Recession of 2008-2009. The tentacles of the Pandemic will not leave any nation unscathed. All sections of society, all sectors, and all developed, emerging, and underdeveloped economies will bear the brunt of unemployment, lowered revenues, and grave disruptions in education, health, and leisure. Due to the Pandemic's gravity, most industries are forced to shut down or grapple with alternative ways to work and generate revenue. While the sectors like the airline, tourism, and retail are hit the hardest, there are sectors like Information Technology (IT) and education and some other industries which can look towards alternative working strategies like remote working. The outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID 19) made the world face an unexpected challenge that it had never encountered before. In December 2019, the highly contagious corona virus surfaced in Wuhan, China. Later in the year 2020, the novel coronavirus had a faster spread in countries worldwide, where the World Health Organisation (WHO) had declared the outbreak as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Many countries, including India, went on complete lockdown to limit the alarming spread and severity during the first and second quarters of 2020. The announcement had created an unexpected drift on employees' work patterns, allowing many knowledge workers to adapt to the remote work strategy. The government of India's announcement of 21 days nationwide lockdown on March 25, 2020, had significantly impacted the Indian IT sector companies' work strategies. The News Minute (2021) states that the IT sector is one of the pillars of modern India, contributing around 8% relative share to national GDP and providing more than 4 million direct and 10 million indirect employments. The COVID 19 pandemic and the continuous lockdown had created a new normal situation for the IT companies to allow their employees to Work-From-Home (WFH). The IT companies such as TCS, Infosys, Wipro, and Tech Mahindra had allowed their employees working at their overseas offices to fly back to India and allowed them to Work-From-Home (WFH). Even though there were initial hiccups, the government's support by easing the policies to facilitate the remote working conditions enabled many IT sector companies to accelerate their digital transformation due to the sudden lockdown situation. The IT companies showed their resilience by embracing the new normal, allowing almost 98 percent of the IT workforce to Work-From-Home or select a hybrid work environment. The pandemic has stimulated the Indian information technology (IT) industry to accept a hybrid



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workforce strategy that offers the radical flexibility required to build organizational resilience. Simultaneously, the Indian IT Industry society National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) is working on a framework to address the hybrid workforce and its implications on several aspects of the industry. Various industry players have taken the first step towards embracing this paradigm shift from Work-From-Office to Work-From Home.[26,27]

The taste of remote working during the lockdown period allowed most IT companies to rethink a permanent change in their work strategies. One large player of the sector, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), had decided on a permanent shift of 75% of their 450,000 employees to Work-From-Home at any given time by introducing a 25/25 model for remote work. Another IT giant, Infosys, had informed that their future workplace is hybrid, allowing flexibility for their workforce to Work-From-Home (WFH) or Work-From-Anywhere (WFA). Work strategies such as Work-From-Home (WFH), Work-From-Anywhere (WFA), home office, hybrid work are common among knowledge workers today, especially in the IT industry. There is no doubt that companies' remote working models had brought about significant benefits to the companies and employees during COVID 19 crisis. However, there are negative impacts also felt by both companies and employees due to a high degree of isolation and work flexibility. Against such a potent backdrop, this research paper explores the experiences and nuances of the Work-FromHome (WFH) approach adopted by Indian Information Technology (IT) sector companies. Despite the challenging circumstances, infrastructural impediments, and lack of advanced technological and digital capabilities, most of the Indian Information Technology (IT) sector companies have been able to adopt variations of remote working and ensure uninterrupted client deliverables. India had made remote working a possibility. Yet, there are many issues regarding employee welfare, enhanced digital readiness that poses bottlenecks in the years ahead[28,29]

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

During the financial crisis of 2008, technology and economic turmoil were intertwined, and technology spending took a downturn. Still, with the beginning of the pandemic, technology adoption has grown much faster than businesses and the economy. Strangely the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital transformation.[30,31] With the acceleration of digital technologies, digital offerings have found their way across sales, customer service, and operations. The developments on the technology front have given rise to a revolution in workplace strategies across the globe. One of the most common approaches in the 'new normal' is the Work-From-Home Strategy (WFH). Major Indian IT giants like Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, and Wipro have adopted this model or variations. Though 15% to 50% of the staff report to work the new corporate strategy for many IT companies are Work-From-Home (WFH) or Work-From-Anywhere. From the selected eight IT companies in India 75% had informed its novel work strategy as Work-From-Home and 25%.

The birth of remote work culture to place during the COVID-19, when India went for complete lockdown, the line between office and home began to blur. Now flexible workspaces, decentralized offices, Work-From-Home (WFH), Work-From-Anywhere (WFA) are the new workplace strategies that have created a seismic change in employees and organizations globally. India is emerging as the second-largest market for flexible workspaces in the region. Globally, many organizations, including tech giants Facebook and Twitter, have already given their staff the option to permanently WFH. The accelerating remote work culture has eliminated travel times. It has added hours to the day, enhancing organizational productivity as many employers are looking at remote working as a long-term practice. The hybrid work model helps the organizations acquire a better talent pool, accomplish innovation, and create more value for stakeholders. It is more flexible, digital and is enhancing employee productivity and satisfaction. This is the beginning of a new change, but the difference comes with its ramifications. On one side, it has increased productivity, but the flip side has holistically impacted the employees' life schedules and has bought mental health issues to the surface. [32,33]

The qualitative study of vast literature and interactive interviews with Information Technology (IT) sector experts and the selected top Indian IT companies' financial statement analysis indicates the work strategies and implications of these work strategies in response to Covid-19. The study explicitly describes that the Indian IT sector has rekindled a Work-From-Home (WFH) strategy and applied it to survive, grow, and sustain the present volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous business landscape. The Indian IT sector is leveraging the trend that "The office concept is giving way to a new concept that is taking the workplace anywhere." The findings of the study describe the organizational and employee implication. The environmental and Economic impact of adopting the hybrid model is explicitly spelled. Most of the top IT companies have taken these changes in their stride as long-term methodology changes. Our study



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also concludes that IT companies have embraced this new norm of doing client deliverables through Work-From-Home (WFH) despite the various infrastructural and socio-cultural challenges. However, our study has some limitations. The first is that the Pandemic is an ongoing phenomenon, and the hybrid work model is still in its nascent stage of application. The study focused only on Indian IT sector. Therefore, applying the outcome of the study on various other geographical contexts could be a limitation. Due to time and resource limitations, the study's sample size had to be limited to eight main IT companies from the Indian IT sector. Another limitation is that it is a qualitative study of extensive literature review and expert interviews. To reinforce and expand the findings of this study, an empirical analysis of employees and top management would reveal more insightful observations. Additional research could explore the hybrid work strategy experiences in other countries and sectors. Further, the study is limited for a short period, which is not enough to fully evaluate the trend of companies implementing work strategies and their financial implications. In the future, research can be expanded to observe the change in the indicator. [34]

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