

FUTURE AT WORK

This anniversary issue looks at the future and we ask some leading Indian CEOs to share their vision of the workplace, impact of technology and finally, management principles that will lose relevance and those that will survive the test of time.

Predicting the future has never been easy, always fraught with problems whether it is political polls or predicting the end of the world!

Today, however, it is more difficult than ever before. Volatility and uncertainty in the environment, disruptive technologies, wild cards and black swans are upsetting the best laid plans of companies. Most businesses are now hiring futurists who talk about not what the future *will be* but what it *can be* through scenario building.

BMW has begun to plan corporate strategy based on worst case scenarios. BMW's chief executive admitted that the austere climate in many Western countries, and slowing growth in emerging nations like India and China, made forecasting hard, "I don't know what will happen in 2013". In response, BMW is trying to prepare for "black swan events", or 'unknown unknowns' that can have a major impact economies and companies. This means that they build flexibility in all their plans with assembly lines switching from SUVs to sedans depending on consumer needs and fancies.

FLEXIBILITY, ADAPTABILITY and AGILITY are the backbone of the new workplace.

What is the future of 'work' and the 'workplace' as we know it?

Jobs are disappearing, but there is still a future for work albeit different from the one we knew - by 2030 over 2 billion jobs will disappear according to Thomas Frey, author of *Communicating with the Future*. Automation has impacted jobs not just in manufacturing, but also in white-collar work. Robots, software algorithms, artificial intelligence and next gen computers are replacing humans – referred to as 'off-peopling' and 'othersourcing'.

However, the nature of work has not changed as Vinita Bali says, “ ‘work’ remains the same, it is how work gets done that is changing- as functions go through greater specialization and complexities increase, there is a greater necessity to integrate different processes together to deliver a result”. All the CEOs on our panel agreed that this will not be contingent upon fixed hours, fixed location or fixed jobs anymore

It will not be about a fixed location because telecommuting and Internet have made physical place irrelevant. According to Ashok Soota, “Virtual teams will be predominant compared to co-located teams with more problems thrown into the open source or crowd sourcing domain for greater creativity and variability in costs.” This also allows for older people to continue working longer than they would have done as it allows for logging in from home.

A 40 hour week is becoming an anachronism. For businesses to be nimble and quick to respond to change, the work force will be a combination of part timers, experts and full-time employees. A poor economic environment also makes long term job contracts expensive while the Internet facilitates subcontracting jobs to professionals at different locations. There are a growing number of temps, subcontractors, freelancers and self employed accounting for one third of the work force in the US.

A blurring of work, play and professional development; a 24x7 workplace– The rise of virtual offices with people working on mobile devices from any location will end up in great deal of flexibility.

“The distinction between work and leisure will get even more fuzzy. Workplace will be anywhere from where you can find a broadband connection, or send an online mobile message on your ever smarter phones,” says Soota.

Aruna Jayanthi calls it the 24x7 work ethic, “This is the kind of environment that exists and work is extended to 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Infact, I find the whole notion of ‘out of office’ messages archaic. You can no longer tell people, “I am traveling and will get back to you in two days.” It is irrelevant whether you are at work, traveling or on a vacation.”

However, there is a darker side to this ‘freedom at the workplace’ with work life bleeding into our personal space. And is this really good for productivity?

Qimat Rai Gupta is concerned, “But today, people] work on their iPhone, iPad, Blackberry or laptop. These virtual offices might be more of a concept for the future. But this means that not only are working hours increasing tremendously but also that productivity might be reducing. People in the future might want to strike a balance between their personal [and professional lives”

Will this location, time and age agnostic workplace leave some human debris in its wake?

Multiskilling/Multitasking careers – There will be a growing need for multitasking careers due to various reasons. A generation before us believed in lifetime employment. We (read Baby Boomers) are likely to make a couple of career moves. It is different with the younger generations as their career paths look like a patchwork quilt with multiple jobs held together.. This allows them a better work life balance. In a recent survey by Ogilvy and Mather, 76% of respondents reported that they would rather spend more time with their families than make more money. It is also possible that single job is not big enough to cover all of their expenses. Grant McCracken, well known cultural anthropologist, feels that the millenials have been witness to outsourcing of jobs, disruptive technologies that have wiped out entire industries and companies, the financial collapse which led to professions disappearing - and so they would rather work on multiple things – anything else would be a “pretty bad career strategy”. *Ashok Soota emphasised the need for re-skilling among older people due to growing automation of white collar jobs.*

Rana Kapoor finds companies revisiting and redesigning their talent management strategy to accommodate frequent movement and shorter tenures of employees – “today’s corporates have a framework which has been created assuming that an employee will continue with an organization for 10-15 years, whereas the talent inventory that is churning out people in the market is only for 6 months to 2 years”

Rewards based on just results – Futurists see workplaces where productivity will be about output and quality of ideas rather than time spent. This is in contrast to the earlier model of reward based on time input and a predictable remuneration. Going forward, this will impact our economic security.

“Increasingly, roles need to be scoped and compensated according to the task performed – rather than by the time invested. In this approach, employees can be assigned specific tasks and required to apply only as much time as it actually takes to get the work done, removing the need to keep regular hours or show up at the office each day, allowing people to work asynchronously, instead of in standard 9-to-5 routines, and from virtually any location. The distinction between ‘full’ or ‘part-time’ positions would give way to differentiation in the complexity of the task assigned. In essence, a time will come when organizations will need to advocate what many people call ‘flexible work’ or ‘mobile work’”. – Rana Kapoor

Given the rampant invasion of technology in learning and education, what do you think is the future of human interaction and personal mentorship?

“Everything that can be digital, will be.” Jeff Dachs, Founder of Razorfish

‘With technology advancing at increasingly rapid rate, and researchers making serious headway into discovering the mysteries of the brain, it seems as if we'll all be reconstituted as a computer someday’ – The Futurist

Here's a summary of what our future will be like according to Kurzweil, co-founder of Singularity University, famous for creating the first text-to-speech software:

- Our brains will extend to the cloud, which will allow us to learn new things at any age.
- We will be able to selectively erase pieces of our memory.
- We'll be in augmented reality at all times (AR is a live, direct or indirect, view of a physical, real-world environment whose elements are *augmented* by computer-generated sensory input such as sound, video, graphics or GPS data
- By 2029, machines will be able to match the intelligence of humans, and they'll be able to make us laugh and cry.
- Around the 2030s, tiny "nanobots" able to repair and preserve our organs will keep us healthier and smarter.
- Within 25 years, computers will be the size of a blood cell and we'll be able to connect it to the brain without the need for surgery.

-Society will reach a state of "technological singularity" in 2045 where technology enables superhuman machine intelligences to emerge and people and machines become deeply integrated.

Our panel of CEOs was agreed that technology, despite the radical change in efficiency and cost reduction, can never replace human interaction and personal mentorship.

Ashok Soota says – “While change will be dramatic, I think you will also see an equal and opposite reaction. People will long for working in high human interaction environments, working in tightly bonded teams. Just as culture became global, a longing for localness increases. In a fluid, virtual job market, the only glue that will help hold a desired set of people together is - Shared vision, culture, values and concepts to talk about but difficult to show”.

Rajeev Karwal concurs – “With the automation [of technology], you can learn from [anywhere] but personal interaction and mentorship are extremely important because they actually make people understand things much better. [With only technological] communication, the more we do the less people understand. The biggest misnomer in this over-communicating world is that we feel the other person understands [what we mean to say] but the same words mean different things to different people. So the interaction, mentorship and guidance of good mentors, managers and leaders is more than essential in this highly technology-dependent and automated world today”.

“However, there is part which is related to action and experiential learning built around knowledge. These are softer aspects of learning, which cannot be taught through technology. You may get the basics across but these cannot be transferred without a person-to-person interaction. And actually, despite all the technology additions, I see companies investing in coaches and mentors”- Aruna Jayanthi

However, the most telling indicator of how important human interaction comes from Silicon Valley and Bangalore – both hubs of tech experts. They best understand that communication and business has been made location agnostic and yet they all prefer to share the same physical space or State.

Ten years from now, in your opinion, what will be

- the most overrated and overused management principle that will lose its relevance

The most overrated management principle according to our panel was traditional **hierarchical organization structure** with rigid chains of command and control.. Aruna Jayanthi feels that business has already made the shift

“Organization structure as we know it today [will no longer be relevant]. The very clear lines of responsibility and accountability, the heavily drawn lines and hierarchical models,

those will completely go. I can, already, see it today. I think organization structure will be amorphous. Intuitively, I feel that the very well drawn organization structures will not be relevant anymore” – Arun Jayanthi

Alongwith change in structures, business must become more responsible to other stakeholders other than just shareholders. Vinita suggested moving from MBO to management by purpose and holistic thinking.

There is a compelling need for companies to move to more open, collaborative and flatter structures as the younger generation expectations are different from their older peers. Retaining young talent and keeping them motivated for best performance will decide HR policies and Organisational Design

“Young workers today want and expect fast and frequent feedback—daily interaction, ongoing input, instant response. Day by day, it is getting more necessary for organizations to operate in a collaborative way. It is also critical to incorporate peer-based feedback mechanisms and measures of intra-group interactions for organizations today, who more than ever, need employees who are open, willing to learn and flexible enough to execute complex strategies”. – Rana Kapoor

- the single most important thing that a manager will need to know in order to succeed

The panel was unanimous in voting leadership skills and people management as most relevant and important for a manager. It is interesting that despite the all pervasive automation and a jobless future it is ultimately EQ, empathy and people skills that will win that day at the workplace.

“People management is something that is important today and will be 10 years from now. A manager has to be a people’s person first, the rest of the things are just [learnable] skill” - Qimat Rai Gupta

In addition managers will need to manage data and information overload and use it profitably.

“The single most important thing that a manager will need to know in the future is how to manage and monetize information. There is a veritable explosion of data and we live in a world of information overload. Those who have access to the right information, at the right time, duly dissected for better decision making, for quicker course correction will be the most successful” – Ashok Soota

CEOs interviewed

Ashok Soota - Founder, Happiest Minds; Co-Founder, MindTree; Ex President , Wipro Infotech

Vinita Bali – CEO Britannia....

Rajeev Karwal, Founder & CEO, Milagrow Business and Knowledge Solutions Private Limited

Aruna Jayanthi, Chief Executive Officer, Capgemini India

Rana Kapoor, CEO, YES Bank

QR Gupta, CEO, Havells