



Leadership Edge

## Architecting Hybrid Workplaces and Humanising Work

**Ruchira Bhardwaja**  
Joint President and Chief  
Human Resources Officer  
(CHRO), Kotak Life Insurance

*As organisations grappled to stay afloat amidst the pandemic, the workforce went the extra mile to deal with challenges along the way. This compelled organisations to innovate and reposition for the long haul and address the needs of their fundamental asset—human resources. Are hybrid workplaces an interim arrangement or here to stay? How are industry and HR leaders resetting the workplace dynamics through hybrid work models and evaluating impact on employer-employee relations? Ruchira Bhardwaja, Joint President and CHRO at Kotak Life Insurance, shares her take.*

The period between early 2020 until now has seen unfathomable uncertainty in almost every sphere of our lives—be it managing the health and safety of our families or keeping our livelihoods intact. Organisations have strived to pivot and function under ambiguous circumstances, forcing them to take a hard look at their priorities and reengineer processes as they ensure some semblance of profitability. With a growing emphasis on empathetic, people-centric organisations, the goal is to provide physically safe working spaces and flexible work options that enable employees to deliver their best at work and home. This has led to the emergence of a ‘hybrid’ working model with about 95% of organisations agreeing to safety being their top priority, and 100% believing that meetings can happen from anywhere. In the last 15-16 months, both employees and managers have gotten used to being productive in a hybrid setup. With more people demanding it, the hybrid work model is here to stay.

One of the most significant mindset changes that we have seen is organisations being receptive to the idea of ‘work from anywhere’—a reality that has made us question the physical dimension of work.

“ Firms are not insulated to the fact that employees have had to deal with limited social interaction and experienced grief during stringent lockdowns. The need of the hour is, therefore, a culture built on the pillars of employee well-being and safety, along with empathy, trust, and care for human assets at the core.

An industry survey conducted by Gartner<sup>1</sup> in July 2021 revealed that more than 80% of corporate leaders surveyed, plan to allow employees to work remotely at least for some part of their work week, even after the COVID-19 pandemic.



<sup>1</sup>Golden, R. (2020, July 16). Gartner: Over 80% of company leaders plan to permit remote work after pandemic. HR Dive. Retrieved from <https://www.hrdiver.com/news/gartner-over-80-of-company-leaders-plan-to-permit-remote-work-after-pande/581744/>

## Transformative Effect on Employer-Employee Relations

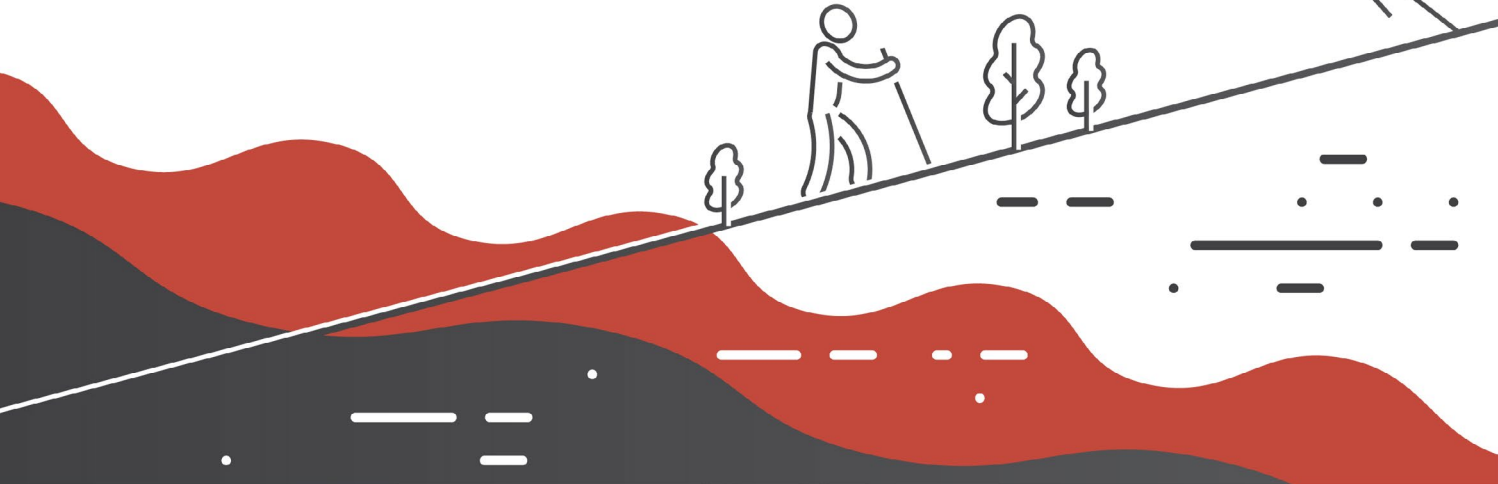
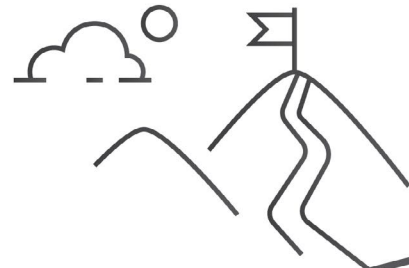
With the onset of the pandemic and experiments with the hybrid working model, we have witnessed the emergence of employee personas, which is very interesting. For instance, within a function, one can see the level of managing needed to ensure deliverables from a particular team member. Some tend to deliver at the highest level, irrespective of their location or facetime, while others may need micro-management. Additionally, role-mix in the organisation is getting redefined. The idea of ‘what next’ for an employee is becoming fluid with both employers and employees in an ambiguous space with tech. Certain roles are undeniably becoming redundant, owing to increased automation and multitasking teams with diverse skill sets.



Perhaps one of the best outcomes of the pandemic has been a spurt in personalised interactions and a shift in organisations' outlook towards their people who are putting in additional efforts to connect and empathise. Moreover, strict task managers have also now become more people-driven. Employers are adopting the people-first approach as opposed to customer-first. Cross-functional teams are getting together to deliver common objectives, and people seem keen to take the leap to the next level—be it processes, products, or services.

## An Uphill Journey for HR Leaders

Even though safety, empathy, and well-being have become very central to organisations, mindsets are not going to change overnight. So, the HR leaders have an uphill task ahead.





In order to drive a connected workforce remotely, one needs to have tools and processes in place and most significantly, a humane mindset to see that the collaboration experience is inclusive at its core.

From something as fundamental as making changes to the physical office environment (seating arrangements), to more complex processes of engagement, reviewing performance management systems, and leading learning and development activities—HR leaders need to re-articulate work norms and re-design the organisation culture to help carry on business-as-usual. The traditional cookie-cutter approach is not feasible anymore, as HR leaders and reporting managers increasingly realise that one size does not fit all.

It is not only about ensuring productivity but also maintaining a connected and cohesive culture that is a priority for firms under the hybrid work model. The Gartner survey<sup>2</sup> also reveals that a third of its respondents were more concerned about maintaining ‘corporate culture’ than getting work done by their teams. Frequent check-ins have a tendency to spiral into micro-management, so how do we achieve this precarious balance between maintaining team camaraderie, flexibility, and yet inspiring the team?

## **The Complexity of Going Hybrid**

As we aim towards security, safety, diversity, and inclusivity in our organisations, I propose that each manager be given a checklist that can be customised from manager to manager, organisation to organisation. Job roles will decide the degree to which remote work will be done; some positions will demand facetime and in-person interactions. For example, I have seen customer-facing sales teams preferring more in-person interactions to build trust and faith with their customers. Their team huddles and camaraderie are crucial to keep them motivated and chase business targets. However, there ought to be specific hygiene bedrocks—around employee presence, efficacy, and safety at work—that stay non-negotiable.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid

**Ensuring a safe haven:** It is a moral responsibility for employers to ensure that if people will be called to office premises, they are safe and vaccinated. In times of such crisis and uncertainty, keeping businesses stable and lives safe is a challenging task. Something as basic as planning the number of days when the employee shows up to office has become a critical decision in ensuring employee safety. Let me share an oft-cited example from my days at the Taj in Mumbai. During 26/11, the employees went beyond their call of duty to ensure the safety of their guests. The way I see it, the same spirit and resilience have been exemplified by essential service providers during the pandemic—banks, post offices, healthcare workers have never stopped working and have tried to overcome all odds to cater to the larger public. It is difficult to pinpoint where to draw that balance, so this dilemma about lives and livelihoods continues.



**Performance-oriented policies:** A massive task ahead is to tailor-make policies for employees based on their roles rather than a company-wide policy. A complete rehauling of the appraisal metrics is required—regarding compensation, performance reviews, and measuring productivity, or else we stand to lose some of the best talent. Recognition and promotion policies also need to be recalibrated and cannot be skewed towards people who are merely more visible. The focus is moving from Type A personalities to those working behind the scenes. Even during lockdowns, there have been people who stood apart from crowds and delivered great results using the same tools as available to everybody else. And here again, we saw different emerging personas—people with different working styles, values, and collaboration techniques. HR's job is to propagate the thought process of rewarding these people who are leading by example and inspiring others.



**Inductions and mentoring:** Right from the smooth onboarding of new recruits to their induction and mentoring, employers will have to ensure that the prerequisites to work remotely are met. Some organisations have been swift to implement changes for their workforce for both the fresh hires and existing employees at a commendable pace. Some are in-between two ends of the spectrum, and this is an enormous work-in-progress.



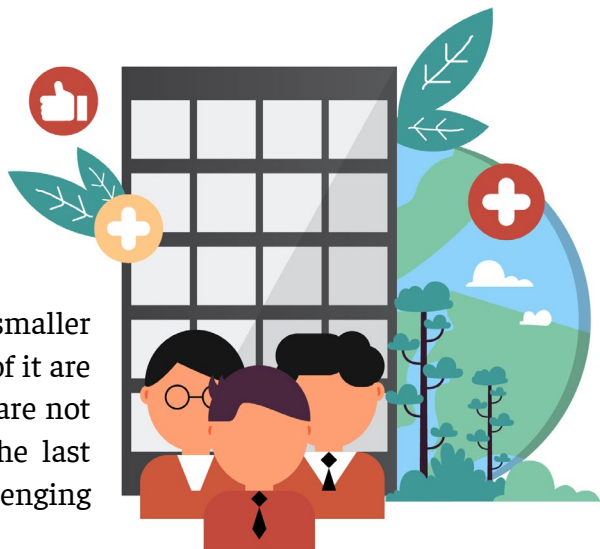
**Promoting a culture of openness:** In my view, managers and HR leaders are the custodians of a firm's culture. We also have a moral duty towards each other for creating a safe space for people to speak up and foster a connected ecosystem.



## The Advent of 'Gig' Workforce and Inclusive Workspaces

Employers want to cast their nets wider and attract a global workforce as they envision designing agile and inclusive workplaces. They are more open to seeking the right talent without bringing in any barriers of a preferred location or gender, leveraging technology to their benefit. It is cost-effective, and that is how the 'gig' workforce comes in with its project-based and task-oriented approach. Given the ability to multitask, employees today demand a free market and independence along with short-term commitments. They are transitioning to many jobs in a lifetime than being bound to one. Ranging from blue-collar jobs to white-collar jobs, 'gig' has extended to everything from creative work and data-keeping to consulting.<sup>3</sup>

Global companies like HUL, TCS, and Dropbox, are capitalising on the trend and accessing the plethora of talent available through the 'remote-first' approach. Earlier, only sales firms knew how to manage a fully distributed workforce but now even smaller companies with no prior knowledge of it are handling this quite well. Those who are not pivoting basis their experience of the last year or so are going to have a challenging phase in finding the right talent pool.



## The War for Global Talent

I see the emergence of a war for talent, that is no longer confined to a specific country or region within a country. Talent is being tapped into from every nook

<sup>3</sup>Menon, A. (2021, August 5). What does Unacademy's move to offer stock options to teachers mean? Let's crack it. ET Prime. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-commentary/what-unacademys-move-to-offer-stock-options-to-teachers-means-lets-crack-it/articleshow/85049142.cms>

and corner of the world—the avenues and opportunities are being made available to people—which were hitherto not easily accessible.

In this scenario, the organisations which are moving at a faster pace to reach out to talent globally, across boundaries, will have an edge over others which are still contemplating how to leverage this opportunity. Closer home, we are witnessing actuarial and tech talents being provided the flexibility to work from the comfort of their chosen locations on multifarious and new-world projects.

## Converging Technological and Strategic Imperatives

Coordination and collaboration between teams is crucial—for delivery, outcomes, and customer service—through newer tools. Hence, digital acceleration, cultural transformation, and capability-building are the biggest organisational priorities on the C-Suite radar. At Kotak Life, we have already deployed the strategic framework of ‘complete digitalisation’ with respect to HR. Through the ‘My HR’ platform, every people-related decision or process—onboarding, induction, performance reviews, training, marking attendance, accessing policies, filing reimbursements, claims, leaves, incentives—has gone digital and accessible from a handheld device. We aspire for this to percolate to every division and function of the organisation along the lines of complete digitalisation. To make it happen, we are investing in assessing our people’s ‘digital dexterity.’ Digital dexterity has now been added to success behaviours under our vision to create an agile

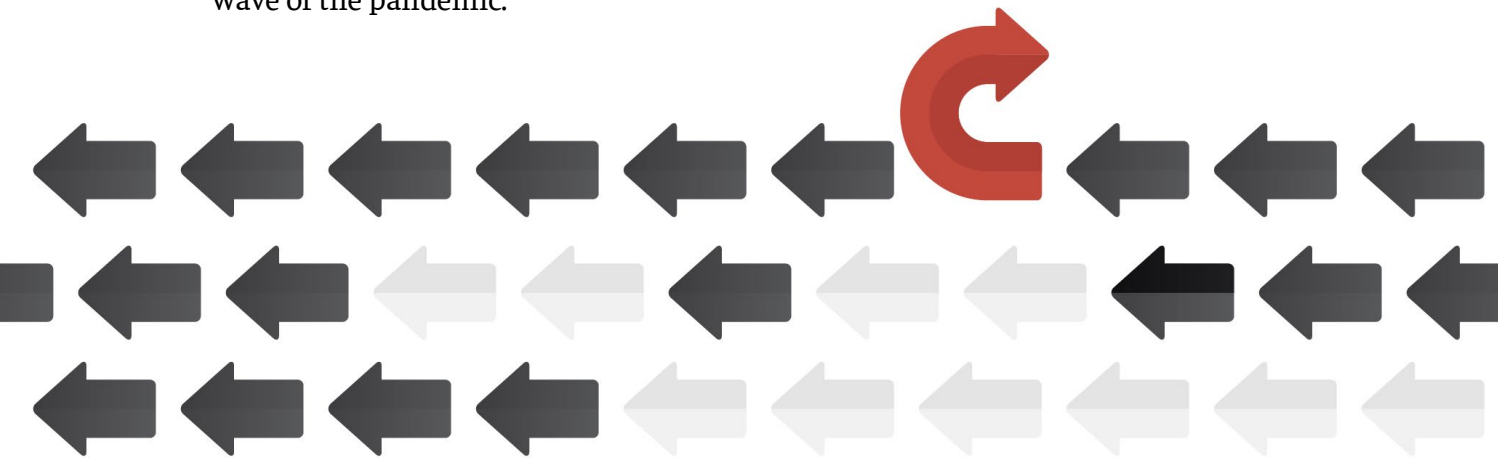
and flexible workforce—which entails that it will be a component of our selection process, internal promotions, as well as the learning and development journey.



## Headed in the Right Direction

Transitioning towards operational efficiency and cost optimisation, hybrid work is a huge opportunity to save real estate costs and reduce carbon footprints. Small steps taken together in minimising travel, optimising, and augmenting meeting schedules, virtual gatherings come a long way in making the environment sustainable for generations to come—though understandably, certain industries like airlines and hospitality are already bearing the brunt of it financially and need to rethink their strategies in a big way.

As organisations transition towards safeguarding the interests of all stakeholders, they must be prepared for rising uncertainty, market volatility, or even the next wave of the pandemic.



***Ruchira Bhardwaja** comes with over 25 years of experience spanning diverse industries and multiple functions across manufacturing, consulting, hospitality, retail, banking and insurance, bringing in a combination of strategic HR and cross-functional expertise. She has played a significant role in the transformation journeys of Axis Bank and Future Generali India Life, in the BFSI sector. Prior to this, Ruchira has worked with the Tata Group for 14 years. She is a Global Fellow, Talent Management from the Wharton School and a visiting faculty at NMIMS, Mumbai. In her personal capacity, Ruchira is zealous about mentoring women professionals.*