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THE FUTURE WORKING CLIMATE

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The Future Working Climate

A Whole New World

There was once a time where the working life was anything but enviable. The idea of being a working-class citizen was often associated with not having free time, being too tired, being too busy for loved ones, not being able to do the little things you find joyful, and basically just slaving away to a system that you could easily be exhausted from.

Picture this: Pre-pandemic, you worked an 8-to-5 job and your workplace required a long drive in the morning due to rush hour, so you pre-planned your night before. You cancel plans that allow you to socialise to get an early night in, you wake up at 5am to make sure you get to work before everyone crowds the roads but somehow you get stuck anyway, and when you finally reach your workplace—you feel half of your energy is gone. You are less productive because you are not in the right headspace. You feel dull and cannot wait to go home at 5pm. In recent times, however, due to COVID-19—the new concept of working has become a very attractive lifestyle.

People now get to avoid the pre-planned work life altogether. The pandemic introduced the concept of remote working that we are all currently familiar with, and contrary to popular belief, people do not want to go back to physical offices. Why is that? You get to wake up later, your attire gets to be more casual, you have the time to enjoy simple things that you otherwise could not do at the office like cook a simple meal, spend time with children, walk your pet, and even take a short nap! Plans that would have otherwise been cancelled due to traveling time constraints are now more doable because you do not have to go through a traffic jam, you just have to log off.

COVID-19 forced the economy into a decline and caused 22 million jobs or more to be lost. It is an unprecedented devastation that a large part of the working-class society had to be retrenched due to the downsizing of companies and the temporary if not permanent extinction of certain businesses in different industries. However, the situation is not all bad; jobs with higher physical proximity (requiring more physical, on-site/on-the-job presence) will see a substantial transformation post-pandemic. As we come to view the ending horizon of the pandemic, we are faced with the question of how work will change for everyone once this is all fully over. Here are several key changing elements of the future of work.

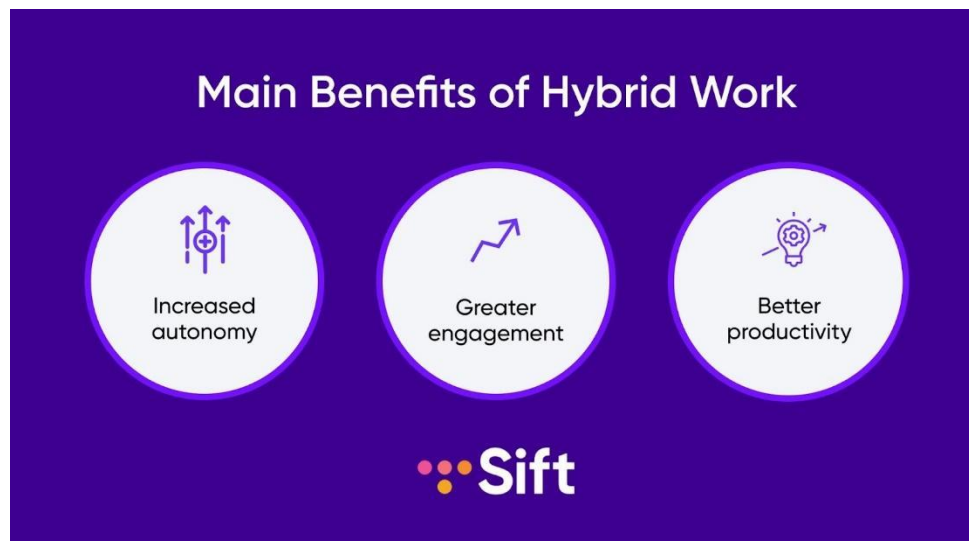
Hybrid Flexibility

As mentioned, remote working has made a mark on improving the comfort of work for many as they get to work from home, or anywhere that allows them to practice social distancing safely. As most of the world is making the effort to live with the virus in terms of standard operating procedures and vaccinations, remote working is likely to stay. In an attempt to lessen the pressure of only working from home and causing a lack in many technological facilities—primarily a stable internet connection, smart devices, and laptops—a hybrid working arrangement will be more in favour, as it already is now.

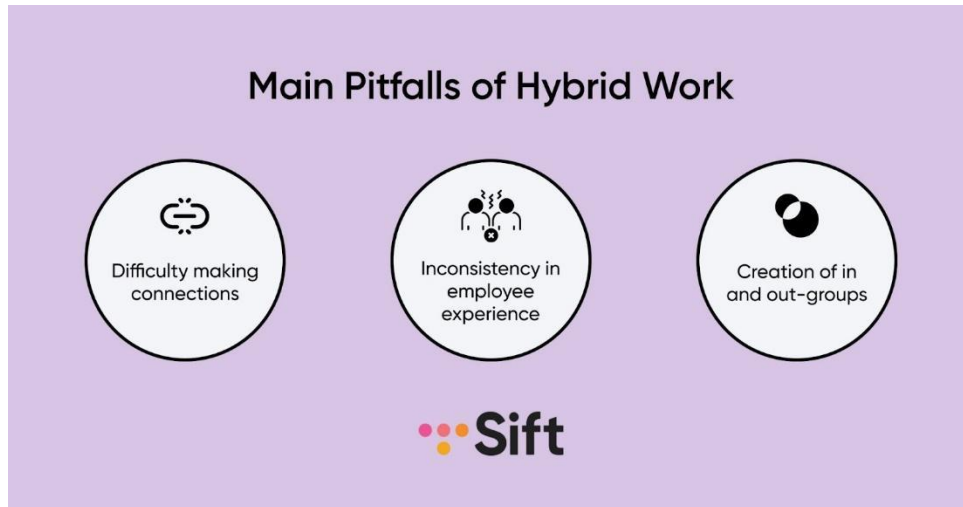
A hybrid working arrangement is a combination of remote working and working in the office (face-to-face). Based on a simple poll conducted by MyConsultancy on Twitter, it will tell you that 57% of respondents would like to stay at home to work; 85% would like a hybrid work arrangement; 55% would not return to a fully face-to-face work life; and 71% of the respondents' employers

allow for a hybrid work situation instead of going back to the office in full scale. This is because there is an obvious loss of effectiveness when critical business decisions, sensitive feedback, negotiations, brainstorming sessions, and employee training are done online in a remote manner. A hybrid style working environment has its benefits, but there are also some inevitable challenges—luckily, these challenges have viable solutions.

A major benefit of the hybrid working arrangement is that it presents the opportunity to reconsider the structural and cultural organisation of the workplace. It allows for a work-life balance, reduces the carbon footprint produced by companies in general, reduces commuting time, and provides employees with the privilege of working from independent locations—work does not even have to be done from home, it can be anywhere! Here is where the challenges of this working style begin.



Among the challenges of the hybrid working arrangement include the difficulty of evaluating employees in an objective way and on equal terms. This is considered a challenge because some employees will spend more time in-office than at home, while some others will spend more time at home than in-office. Employers and supervisors are bound to be slightly biased to a certain degree—as human nature permits—towards employees who work more in-office. There is also the challenge of ensuring that everyone feels included as well as to keep them learning from and interacting with each other, as some employees might feel the frustration of having to work with the talents of only half a team in-office. This would cause end-results and productivity levels to be less satisfactory.



It is possible that employers may unconsciously practice the saying, “Out of sight, out of mind” and overlook employees that are not in the office. However, it is vital that company leaders acknowledge their personal biases, as it is also their responsibility to determine the expectations of employees with clear goals even though everyone is situated in different locations. To evaluate everyone fairly, an employer may have to have regular check-in meetings with employees more often to monitor how they are doing and provide necessary feedback. At least 4 sources of feedback on each employee are recommended for employers to have access to in order to evaluate them objectively. These evaluations should then be discussed and reported formally among higher roles in the company, to ensure that productivity is met with consistent regulation. This is also where new employee training programmes can be devised, ones where newer technological tools—especially collaborative tools—are explained, taught, and eventually incorporated into daily operations.

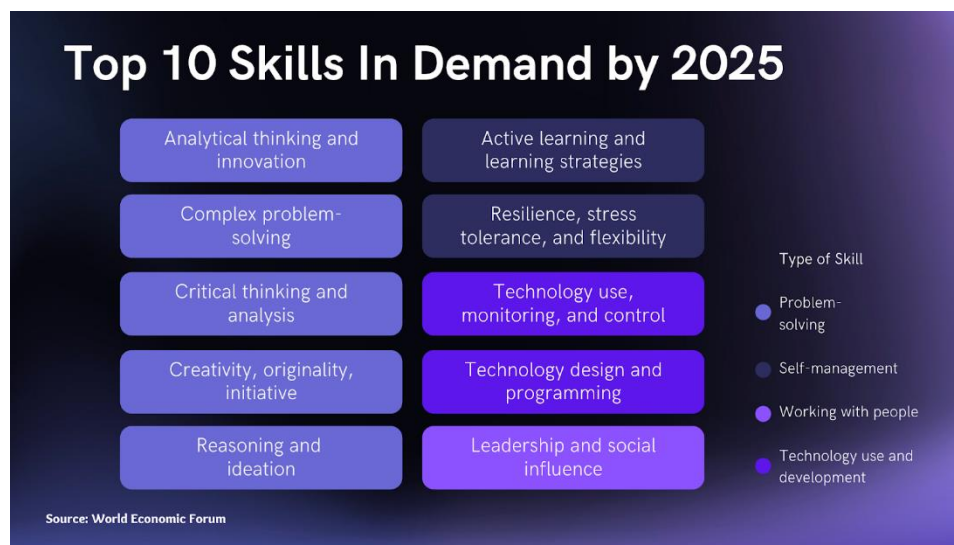
To aid in lessening the frustration of having half a team, employees are and should be encouraged to deepen their personal connections to improve cohesion within their teams. Companies should organise social meetings and events where colleagues can interact with each other in a way that still allows them to be a team—hobbies and sports interests come in handy here. Employees should also schedule for the entire team to be in-office at specific times where everyone is available without clashes to gain the most of each other’s specialties. Here colleagues will have the chance to collaborate and gain the experience of learning from each other.

Upgrading Skill Sets

The combination of automation, global recession, and the pandemic was a big blow to low-wage workers and their occupations—an unfortunate kind of common knowledge for everyone today. Examples of low-wage occupations include jobs in the administrative segment, food preparation and serving, construction, manufacturing, production, and logistics—jobs that could otherwise be automated or have the workload lessened with the use of machines. It is now estimated that this impact will cause a surge in labour demand for high-wage jobs. The industry of logistics—including transportation and warehousing—will see a rise in job vacancies as the pandemic acted as a catalyst for e-commerce and delivery services. This, however, will not be enough to overcome the loss and disruption of numerous low-wage jobs. What happens to low-wage workers, then?

Employees in the line of food and beverage, customer sales, and general service roles are said to be the most impacted negatively. The World Economic Forum foresees a displacement of 85 million 'old' jobs that could be replaced by 97 million 'new' and adapted ones in the next 5 years. One in every two workers will need reskilling, and those remaining in their previous roles would have to take up entirely new skills. This means that anyone who is not considered a high-wage worker will have to start acquiring new and different skill sets, upgrading themselves into higher-wage jobs with (possibly) multiple if not different roles to fit the new mode of tasks. The trend of being a skilled worker today includes being multi-talented and multitasking, with constant creative productivity at their disposal.

The direction that the jobs of tomorrow are heading in require a certain degree of knowledge in current technology for people to adapt to. It will take some time for everyone—low-wage workers especially—to transition and adapt to the new labour market and its required skills, but this is where the government and employers play a prime role to step in. The World Economic Forum has surveyed and listed down the top 10 skills that will be in demand by 2025, as depicted in the diagram below.



Curating New Company Policies

The government and employers play a key role in enabling a smoother transition for workers in this new labour market adaptation process. In fact, this period of change escalates the urgency for policymakers to aid in additional training and educational programmes for workers to upskill without having to suffer financially for it. Some companies, if not most, have already begun updating company policies and training programmes for employees to be able to embrace the future of work.

Peak pandemic, we saw companies pull through with work flexibility—adapting to new norms of working at home and ensuring a purposeful and innovative work experience during a massive crisis. It is appropriate to expect that they will do the same now, repurposing their adaptations into the future standard of work. A stark approach that companies could adopt in aiding transitioning workers—or even new workers with lower skill sets—is to focus on providing them with specific tasks rather than whole jobs that may encompass too many roles. This could be facilitated by

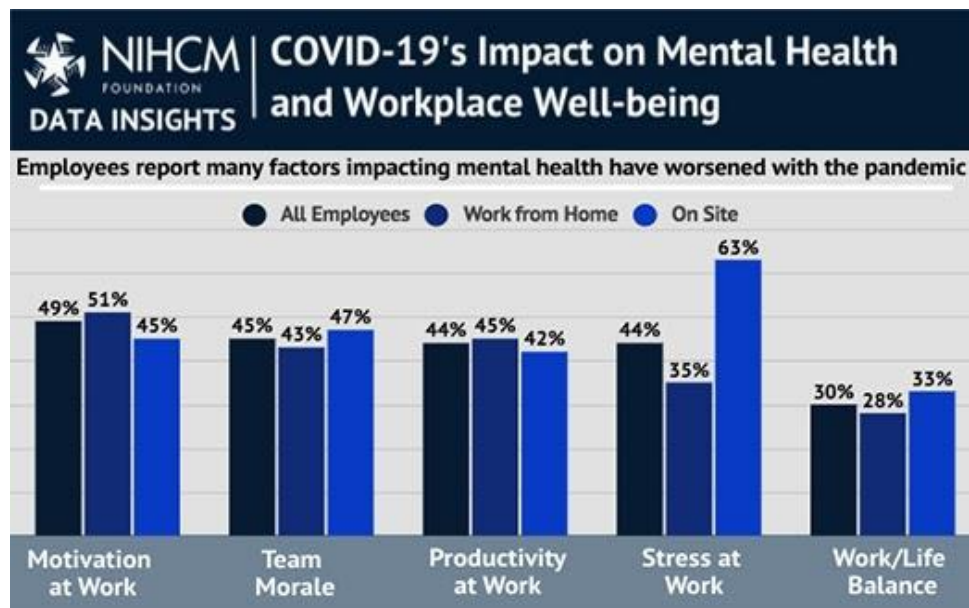
concentrating on providing them with training programmes tailored to the skills they need instead of looking for academic qualifications.

As for the government: Policymakers could and should aid companies and the workforce in general with a better digital infrastructure, and by allocating aids for the advancement of this growing practice of hybrid working especially. Internet access is not ubiquitous, workers in rural areas still struggle with connectivity issues or lack thereof. It is important for governments to extend protection and aid of connection to its people, especially since it will greatly contribute to the economic productivity of a country.

Focusing on Mental Health

COVID-19 threw many people into the deep end in terms of mental health, and here we had to experience the fight-or-flight responses of everyone we know, including ourselves. Mental health discussions and infographics within social platforms boomed in support of people not realising the reason for their extreme productivity or extreme unproductivity. In a global survey conducted by Microsoft, 54% of respondents express that they feel overworked while 39% say that they are exhausted by the pressure to keep up with work.

According to a WHO survey, there has been an increase in the demand for mental health services since the peak of the pandemic in 2020. Therefore, it is fitting that employers are now realising the severity and impact of the current crisis on employees everywhere.



Before the pandemic, research conducted by Gartner revealed that well-being budgets in companies were already increasing by 45% to be allocated for emotional well-being programmes and mental health services. Since then, employers have introduced wellness benefits in aid of employee mental health. In the near future, these benefits will be expanded to further spread awareness on the importance of taking care of your mental health. A foreseeable “collective mental health day” will be implemented, where an entire company shuts down for a day in support of employees taking a day off to practice mental self-care.

Final Thoughts

The future of work has its pros and cons; it is undoubtedly a challenging time for most. However, change is vital for advancement, and we are moving in a direction that aims to be as inclusive of all levels of the working-class as possible. From flexible working arrangements to cater to every person to personal career advancements by way of skill set upgrades and from holding companies and governments accountable for aids in better human productivity to being one step closer to destigmatising mental health issues—the future of work looks relatively bright.

Engaging in new work arrangements will make us all more adaptable to inevitable future changes, especially changes that bring forth a livelihood-type crisis. However, it is important that we set the stage right for the younger generation at work. The current intensity of our workdays is significantly high; Microsoft reports that 50% of people on Microsoft Teams (organisational communication platform) respond within 5 minutes or less and are constantly on the grind for work. It is a clear indication of the current expectations of employees today.

In the expectancy of Gen Z entering the work scene, Microsoft states that this generation and the one prior are more likely to start their careers early on and to remain single for work. This makes them more vulnerable to the impacts of isolation and lack of motivation to work. To avoid another generation of burnouts, we need to pass on a work culture that excites the future workforce and allows them to seamlessly transition into the work roles of tomorrow for optimum productivity.



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