

Working at home & missing office chats

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MUMBAI/BENGALURU: From digital meetings and IT support teams offering solutions on-the-go to companies planning online town halls and large group video conferences — organisations and their HR departments are working towards making ‘work-from-home’ (WFH) a seamless experience for employees.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, most employers have already implemented telecommuting policies. But the challenge is keeping employees motivated and productive. In a virtual WFH world, employees can no longer have informal ‘chats’ across physical desks of co-workers, or have conversations at intersections like water coolers and coffee machines.

To ensure this doesn’t demotivate employees, some companies are enabling video calls that go beyond work-related matters to emotionally connect with employees and create informal “chit-chats”.

Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) associate director (knowledge & advisory services) Ashish Kaul said, “Most employers are in a frantic mode right now, worried about their businesses getting impacted. We are telling companies to be more compassionate and cognizant about the fact that not all employees may be comfortable working from home as it’s a new environment. Conversations employees have in a physical office go beyond work. Some companies are enabling informal chats on video calls to emotionally connect with employees.”

To engage its employees who are working from home, Siemens India plans to use the intranet to put out stories of employees working at its factories and in business-critical roles who report to work everyday. “We plan to bring these stories alive, of people who are in the frontline, working hard to ensure the company keeps going. When employees see these stories, they would certainly get motivated to do even better,” said a Siemens India spokesperson. The company also has its own audio-video chat system that is actively used by employees to stay connected.

Software company Amdocs said it launched an internal platform that provides solutions on remote working well-being and parenting. The remote working solutions support development teams working from home and solutions for virtual teamwork, including remote management, advanced multi-participant video-conferencing and real-time content sharing, as well as a variety of digital and collaborative learning platforms.

Experts are advising companies that no amount of communication during this critical phase will be termed over-communication. “We are communicating much more frequently through daily updates to offer as much clarity as we can, and also to get feedback,” said Godrej Industries Limited and Associate Companies (GILAC) group HR head Sumit Mitra. In the week ahead, the group plans to host online town halls and larger group video conferences.

SAP Labs India senior vice-president and managing director Sindhu Gangadharan said, “Culturally, we Indians are a gregarious lot and also prefer to work in teams rather than isolation. Hence, for many, prolonged work from home becomes a challenge as they miss their routine, bonding with their teams and mingling with their social circles. For some, balancing their work with the pressures of being in a home with other members of the family, especially small children, becomes an issue. We constantly communicate with our employees on how to deal with some of the challenges they encounter.”

However, manufacturing companies and employees working in a team-based set-up could face practical challenges. Nishith Desai Associates head HR laws (employment & labour) Vikram Shroff said managing performance while working from home may not be easy and may require employers to implement new HR software tools. “Confidentiality of client information continues to remain a key concern. But this coronavirus pandemic might hopefully and eventually bring a change in the entire organisation’s mindset that it’s not me against you, but we are all together,” said Shroff.