

Future workplace will be WFH-office hybrid

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Mumbai: The pickup in the Covid vaccination drive has encouraged several organisations to raise queries with consultants on whether the process of returning to office can begin. However, what's increasingly becoming clear — and large companies are setting an example — is that a 'hybrid' workplace is going to be the way forward. What set the tone of this trend is a LinkedIn post by Unilever CHRO Leena Nair, where she said, "For all the sadness the pandemic has brought and is still bringing, one thing I hope we can take from this is the flexibility it has brought to businesses and to people. It would be dreadful to return to the way so many of us were working — 40-hour weeks, long commutes."

Nair said businesses have an opportunity to change for the better, adding that, while Unilever already had flexible and agile working practices, the organisation is embracing that even more. "We're still developing our plan, but one thing is certain: Things will never go back to the way they were before 2020," said Nair.

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PepsiCo recently announced its global shift in workplace policy for corporate associates under 'Work that Works'. Under the new policy, there will be no default day-to-day workplace for employees in headquarter locations, and associates along with their managers can choose what work can be done remotely and what needs to be done in their office. Citing studies, PepsiCo said employers who offer flexible work see a 15% increase in productivity, 31% less absenteeism and 10% less turnover.

PepsiCo India CHRO Pavitra Singh told TOI, "In the past, employers had doubts about it as there was fear of productivity being impacted. However, that myth is completely busted now. It seems to be a great step forward and the current situation has been

instrumental in changing the mindset. Today, people seem to be more convinced naturally of the advantages of a hybrid way of working.”

Singh said employees love the flexibility but miss the connect and camaraderie at the same time. They would prefer coming to office a few days a week, as it also gives them a break from the usual scenario and an opportunity to meet their friends and colleagues. “If we look at this model through an employers’ lens, output is being delivered and, in fact, productivity levels have increased now. Therefore, the hybrid model is a win-win situation that provides flexibility to our employees. I feel that it is here to stay, given that employees have had an experience of how it works and seem to like it as well. We need to understand that employers don’t want to compromise on innovation, creative thinking and happiness of the employees and this is where a hybrid model plays an integral role as it helps to create, collaborate, connect, and celebrate,” said Singh.

Nishith Desai Associates head (HR laws) Vikram Shroff said as the second wave subsides, employers are looking to gradually restart offices. He said a hybrid approach to working from office is already on the cards, with staggered timings, alternate days, flexi-hours, and the like. “We are seeing a phase-wise approach with front desk employees and key managerial staff being required to resume office initially. From a duty of care perspective, some employers may prefer vaccinated employees to return to office first. In any case, employees will need to follow the standard operating procedures to help reduce Covid risk,” said Shroff.

He also added that since the government has announced that vaccination is voluntary, employers may not be able to mandate employees to get vaccinated, irrespective of whether the vaccination drive is coordinated or sponsored by the employer. “The Meghalaya high court recently held that forcing vaccination is a violation of fundamental right. I expect other courts to come up with similar judgments in due course,” said Shroff.

In a note to employees on Friday, KPMG India said it plans to reopen its offices in all locations from September 1 this year, subject to central and state government guidelines on the Covid situation. KPMG expects most of its colleagues to be fully vaccinated by August-end. Arjun Vaidyanathan, COO of KPMG in India, said, “We will most probably follow a hybrid model once we reopen. Details will get firmed up closer to the reopening date and the government norms then.”

