

## Home, the workplace of the future?

**Are you ready for this?**

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Many executives working for Indian business process outsourcing (BPO) companies do not attend office these days. They just stay at home and process all office work sitting in the comfort of their bedroom or living room.

"These home agents barely come to office. But the work hours and workloads for these staff members are same as those working in traditional settings," Nitin M. Jadhav, general manager of product management (Internet data centre) division of Reliance Communications told AsiaNews on the sidelines of NetEvents press summit recently held in Langkawi, Malaysia.

This new working concept, known as telecommuting or telework, has helped companies like Reliance BPO—a part of Reliance Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group, one of the largest business houses in India—to cut down operating costs by up to 60 per cent in certain sectors, Jadhav said, clarifying only a part of 10,000 strong workforce of Reliance BPO currently work from home.

India's lucrative BPO industry has long been looking for ways to reduce overhead expenses—without compromising on quality—to compete with other emerging markets like the Philippines,

China and others in Eastern Europe. To cut down costs some companies have even moved to smaller cities or villages where rents are comparatively lower.

Studies have shown that BPO service providers can save 40 to 60 per cent on the operating cost if they open shops in suburban or rural areas. This shows BPO companies are spending huge amount on rents, which can be reduced significantly if a section of workforce is allowed to work from home.

Besides, companies can also save on utility bills and transportation costs if they send staff home to work.

"Employees can also benefit from work-from-home concept as they can cut down on long commuting hours during which they usually have to experience traffic nightmares," Jadhav said. And this facility also allows them to spend more time with family members, which ultimately contributes to enhancing job satisfaction level.

What more: it can also help reduce carbon emissions.

China, for instance, is expected to save 340 million tons of CO2 emissions in 2020 by embracing telecommuting, Guo Yonghong, chairman of China Mobile Hubei, was quoted as saying by China Daily. By 2030, the savings are expected to go up to about 623 million tons, thereby cutting commercial aviation emissions by nearly 40 per cent, according to Guo. Going by this statement it could be assumed that India could also reduce carbon emissions by similar levels if telework becomes popular in the country.

These are some of the reasons why many companies in the US, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and Japan encourage their staff members to telecommute. India's BPO service providers also want to follow in the footsteps of these developed countries and most of the leading outsourcing companies, call centres, and medical transcription companies have already adopted this practice—although no official statistics are available on what percentage of workforce telecommute in the country.

Despite this many bosses in India still want to see their employees in offices as they fear workers might get negligent and compromise on quality due to distractions at home.

"But workers can be equally productive away from the office if they are able to maintain discipline," Jadhav said. "And with technologies that allow employees to connect securely to the company's computer network, we do not fear of any mishaps taking place."

His advice: "Employers should look at end results not the place from where one is working."

What Jadhav said is true. Yet it might still take some time for this concept to gain a foothold in India as broadband is not available everywhere. However, many like Jadhav say, with demand for high speed Internet rising across the country and growing desire among people to work from mobile locations due to ubiquity of laptops, smartphones and tablets, ISPs will soon be compelled to expand their network.

Research company, Gartner, has predicted that more than 122 million employees worldwide will be doing at least some work from home by the end of this year. In another report published last year it also said workplace would be more or less virtual a decade down the line.

"The employee will still have a place where they work," the report said. But it will more likely be at their homes where they might end up working '24 hours a day, seven days a week'.

"Individuals, of course, need to manage the complexity created by overlapping demands, whether from the new world of work or from external (non-work-related) phenomena," the Gartner report said indicating that work and private life will be intertwined in future.

And those who cannot manage the underlying "expectation and interrupt overloads will suffer performance deficits as these overloads force individuals to operate in an over-stimulated (information-overload) state". -ANN