

# Everything Remote

The philosophy of working  
from anywhere



**ThoughtWorks®**

# FOREWORD

## Hello, (Remote) World!

In the good old days, new programming languages were tested with the 'hello, world!' program — a test for both, the language and one's ability to navigate it. With COVID-19 affecting the world in ways imaginable and not, it's clear we need a new language to navigate the new reality. So, we sat down with leaders of some of the best enterprises in India to learn about their language of resilience.

Namrita of the Aditya Birla Group points out, the first step is to shun 'dinosaur-age beliefs' around working from home. This is mirrored in Shivoo's experience. He says Synosys' clients are now more willing to embrace remote support.

Deepak of Kotak Mahindra Bank talks about how this new mindset is impacting how leaders manage productivity, support, security, access and platforms geared towards business continuity management. And, to do it right, Anita of VMWare suggests that one keep their eye on the future with agility and openness to ideas. Jaspreet Bindra agrees with this notion and discusses how the new world will open a myriad of possibilities for collaboration outside of geographical restrictions — 'work from anywhere' could become a mainstream possibility.

This will naturally change the way we hire, onboard, train and retain people. 'Trust' and 'purpose' become fundamental to a remote-first world, believes RR Donnelley's Kaushik. It calls for a holistic view of employee's 'lived' experiences. Not just work, but of homes and families as well, which is what Rajesh and his team at Paypal are focussing on. In spite of the significant learnings, Abhijit of Falabella sums it up well when he says, "I don't think any of us has the right answer for what we should do. So, we are innovating as we go."

And, innovate we must. Because the Gordian knots are yet to be unravelled. Is meaningful collaboration truly possible with remote teams? How do we foster spillovers — the idea that skills build on each other and skilled people in the same location contribute to rapid levelling up? If your workforce is here, there, and everywhere, how do you nurture culture?

ThoughtWorks is an organization built around its culture — our beliefs, structures and ways of doing things. When you walk into any ThoughtWorks office, you'll see this culture in practice. If we are hiring and working remotely, how do we sustain the intangibles that make us ThoughtWorkers?

This ebook is an effort to answer these questions. As we get deeper into the new ways of doing things, we promise to continue to observe, collaborate and share with you.

Stay safe, stay aware.

**Sudhir Tiwari**

*Managing Director, ThoughtWorks India*





FALABELLA

# Listen. Adapt. Innovate.

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*We have been remote from day one, since we set up Falabella India two years ago. We had the infrastructure and the tools to work remotely. What the COVID-19 situation has taught us is that preparedness from a mindset perspective is equally important.*

**Abhijit Deshmukh**

*Senior Director eCommerce Engineering, Falabella, India*

**Falabella India** is the technology innovation hub of the Chilean multinational integrated retailer. It serves as the digital retail backbone of Falabella Global, focusing on the customer's discovery experience, account management, and seller relationships.

As a young team, Falabella India is a dynamic and energetic IT organization, working from a buzzing office in Bangalore, India. And, COVID-19 struck confining everyone to their homes.

## Tools don't make the team

Fortunately for the team at Falabella, delivery was hardly a problem. The team which is used to working from home had the assets and access they needed to continue their work.

They continued to push key deliverables to production. Even the skeptics — leaders who weren't convinced that work could be delivered remotely — were coming around.

"From a technology perspective we were ready. But culturally, we couldn't have been prepared for a pandemic," says Abhijit.



***"The office was the primary place for collaboration. In the initial days of the lockdown, people missed that! But, regular and proactive communication helped our people internalize the changes and adapt accordingly."***

## Empathy over efficiency

The more they spoke to people, the clearer it became that they couldn't 'bucketize' employee problems and build blanket solutions, because each individual's experience is unique and so are their challenges.

One employee might have a child to care for; another might be living in a paying guest / shared accommodation without the privacy or quietude to take calls; some might even be living in places where there isn't stable electricity. At Falabella, though, these adversities only made the team's bond stronger.

"The team at Falabella India has shown a great sense of accountability and ownership. In the last two and half months, we've also noticed that everyone's tone of voice has turned strongly empathetic," says Bhavana Kuka, Director of Communications at Falabella India.



## Listen before you lead

The leadership was taking note of these changes. They soon learned that to build a remote working organization, they needed an observant, empathetic and adaptive leadership. So, they began to put ideas to work.

Employee engagement programs went online, with care not to add to the 'Zoom fatigue'. They set up a one-to-one helpline for all their employees experiencing stress, anxiety, depression etc. They encouraged self-learning, for those who wanted to use the downtime to grow their skills.

"The key is innovation," presses Abhijit. "I don't think any of us has the right answer for what we should do. So, we are innovating as we go. We have a core team at Falabella that is observing people on a daily basis, and flagging issues. We are actively listening to stories from our individual team members.

This could be as small as — he had a fever today and what did he do about it; Or her father has a health issue and these are some of the difficulties she is facing when taking him to the hospital. From each of these stories, we are learning how to adjust our thought process, our policies and our way of working to support our people better.”





# Plan ahead. Stay nimble.

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*We have two key stakeholders — employees and customers. The worlds of both these stakeholders are changing. As leaders, it's our responsibility to make sure they are both well-supported.*

**Deepak Sharma**

*President & Chief Digital Officer, Kotak Mahindra Bank*

**Kotak Mahindra Bank** is the second largest private sector bank in India by market capitalisation. With over 1,600 branches and over 50,000 employees (as of 31, March 2020), Kotak Mahindra Bank has a national footprint.

Already at the forefront of digital solutions, Kotak was better prepared than other banks might have been, to handle the crisis brought on by COVID-19. Yet, no one could have imagined that a business ecosystem heavily reliant on in-person contact would need to move entirely to the digital world.

## Evolution, not interruption

Most of Kotak's teams across digital, technology and operations, began working from home almost two weeks before the government announced the lockdown. The infrastructure they needed, be it laptops, VPN, VDI etc. was arranged. Their business contingency plan kicked in seamlessly.

*"BCP is for the short-term. We realized that this lockdown isn't going to end in 15-20 days. So, we launched our business continuity management program, to evolve the work-from-home model for the long-term."*

They set up a task force that would take an end-to-end view of the business. "We looked at every single aspect of our business: employees, customers, channels, branches, facilities, infrastructure, security, communication etc. It was a massive exercise, which helped us take stock and adapt," he says. Their teams also worked closely with the Department of Telecommunications, and other industry authorities to get the permissions they needed to make this work.






## Mitigating risk with technology

Once the lockdown was announced, Kotak Mahindra Bank's customers were unable to reach their branches or meet their relationship managers. To reassure customers, Kotak enabled 24x7 online support.

They moved several service requests to the pre-login phase, making it more convenient for customers to use. "We launched India's first video-based KYC process. The entire account opening process can be completed online, without the need for physical interaction," says Deepak. "For customers who were wary of using digital banking tools, we began educating them on using WhatsApp Banking for their needs," he adds.

Kotak also upgraded their conversational customer service bot, Keya, with over 200,000 skill sets.



*"We launched a campaign called 'you can train your bot', through which all customer-facing employees trained the bot with little nuggets of information."*

Deepak foresees changes in the way we conduct business and go about our lives, and he's happy about most of it. In fact, he's delighted in a future without long waits in city traffic or inter-city travel for short meetings, as everyone will be getting things done online.

"But, the challenge will be ideation and brainstorming," he says. "How can one be at their creative best in their living room, which is perhaps not the kind of environment that inspires creative collaboration!" This will indeed be one of the problems to solve.



# Connect. Share. Inspire.

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*We celebrated our first ever virtual 'Kids@Work' last week. We organized a series of fun and learning activities for employees' kids including a puppet show, face painting, bringing your pet to the video call etc., replicating the non-work human connections we have at Paypal India.*

**Rajesh VT**

*Director Strategy & Business Operation, PayPal India*

**PayPal** is a global leader in digital payments with over 325 million active users across 200+ markets. The India technology centers are PayPal's largest outside the US. In fact, we also have a Command Center in our Chennai tech center that helps us contribute to PayPal global operations. In India, we work on technologies like AI and Blockchain. Combined with our superior fraud detection capabilities, we are effectively leading the tech revolution when it comes to money management.

Their technology centers house a best-in-class team of software developers, architects, user experience engineers, web developers, data analytics and project managers. They work across risk, operations, settlements, data analytics, reporting etc. to provide cutting-edge digital payments solutions to their customers worldwide. This meant business continuity plans needed to prioritize providing employees with all the necessary resources to continue servicing our customer base.

## No one size fits all

"Our employees who had laptops were able to seamlessly continue working from home. However, our customer service organization wasn't as ready. Some didn't have laptops, broadband internet connections or even a desk. A cross-section of teams joined hands to deliver the necessary equipment where it was needed.

As the entire world was seeking more and more digital solutions to their financial transactions, their business actually grew during the pandemic. But, so did the pressure on their customer service teams. "We basically yanked machines from the customer support folks' desk and shifted them to their houses," laughs Rajesh.





But, computers aren't the only requirement. Organizations need to understand the burden of having an effective work from home setup cannot lie on the employee alone. "So, we offered them a number of support measures like internet routers and ergonomic furniture to help them work comfortably," he adds.

## There is more to work than work itself

While the organization quickly adapted to the new way of working and delivered value without interruption, the leadership strengthened the timbre of the organization — collaboration and community.

They set up a 'Work from home India' Slack channel for water cooler conversations. Of the 1500+ employees regularly engaging on the app, some shared music, some played the guitar, a few shared pictures of their pets - it helped keep people connected and feel part of a team.

*"Working from home also means that the extended family of every employee is enabling them to do the work, so we set up online 'bring your kid to work' days. Elders from our employees' families also joined calls and shared interesting recipes & anecdotes."*

It obviously hasn't been all fun and games. Their leadership team keeps a check on what's working and what isn't. Policies have been introduced and adapted to ensure that employees feel comfortable. For instance, the employee advocacy team regularly sends out best practices to ensure work from home is not just productive, but also healthy. They conduct a weekly survey checking in on how employees feel and their ability to maintain a work-life balance etc. Leaders understand the need to be available, empathetic and carry out casual check-in meetings with teams. Their global leaders have also continued their engagement and stayed connected with teams, albeit virtually.



# Remote. Not distant.



*COVID-19 or not, we're still in the same game. Only the playbook changes. And the new playbook places significant emphasis on engagement — be it with your customers, community, employees or their families.*

**Dr. Shivananda (Shivoo) R Koteswar**

*Group Director: Design Group Implementation Site-Leader and  
R&D Head, Synopsys*

**Synopsys** is a global leader in Electronic Design Automation (EDA) with a yearly revenue of over 3.4 billion USD. The 4000+ member India team supports research, design, and development of key technologies for the global electronics market. They had a record quarter, with their stock prices at an all-time high.

Riding on this momentum, even as COVID-19 struck, the team was determined to deal with the crisis without softening their ambitions. This needed long-term vision and an agile strategy.

## Same game. New playbook.

Synopsys is a public company, measured by its growth and operational efficiency. They are being scored on the basis of EPS, valuation, growth, operating margins etc. The rules of the game remain the same. But the new world needs a different game plan. “We are deliberately evolving our customer engagements across support, training, marketing etc. We aim to invest in newer markets, and forge new partnerships,” says Shivoo.

The IT/cloud infrastructure, collaborative tools, distributed R&D and development teams, and the ability to offer remote support ensured that Synopsys achieved 100% productivity in less than a week. It also helped that customers’ situations were as disrupted by COVID-19 as Synopsys’. “Our Asian customers who would never give their IPs outside their network and always expected onsite support have now moved to remote,” he says.





## Engagement is key

The leadership team soon learned that it would take deeper person-to-person relationships to sail through the crisis and they focussed on continuous engagement.

For customers, they opened up their e-learning platform, with resources across key products and technologies, for free.

They received over 18,000 registrations from 355 corporations, across 51 countries. They conducted an executive forum, entirely online, with their CEO and leaders from the semiconductor industry. “I am very happy to share that multiple chip tapeouts were done during this period without a glitch,” remarks a proud Shivoo.

For employees, they began with regular and transparent communication to ease anxiety levels. Synopsys enabled virtual open office hours for unscheduled meetings — to replicate the tap-on-the-shoulder conversations that are common in the office. They increased the frequency of their all-hands meetings but are keen to eliminate ‘engagement overkill’. “We have a disengagement day, when employees can take a day off without feeling the pressure to stay connected,” he says.

Synopsys is also preparing for the future, while navigating the present. They have introduced a diversity program in TechPubs called ‘Re(Launch) Women in Writing’ — “We hope remote working will make it a lot easier for women or anyone who has taken a personal break from work to return effortlessly.” They are also reviewing their social responsibility programs, most of which were supporting education for underprivileged children, adjusting their programs for the present situation.

*“As things slowly return to normal, some people will be ready for the change. Some others might feel a sense of loss. So it’s very important as a leader to understand the pulse of every individual and engage with him/her on their needs.”*



# Recalibrate. Agile. Responsive.



*Be it partial, complete, local or infrastructure outages, our business continuity plans were tested across scenarios to ensure minimum disruptions. In terms of preparedness to work remotely, we were and continue to be well equipped. But, the scale and the duration of remote working is something we did not anticipate.*

**Shekar G**

*Senior Director, Customer Support and Services, VMware India*

**VMware** is a global software leader in the areas of compute, cloud, mobility, networking and security. In addition to building and deploying solutions for the India market, VMware India also offers support to global customers.

As an organization building foundational technology products and innovating to forge the future of digital experiences, VMware had a robust business continuity plan in place. While they were prepared for interruptions and had sufficient backup, COVID-19 was the true test of their resilience.

## The power of foresight

As someone managing the Asia-Pacific and Japan region, Akash Shetty, Senior Director, Colleague Experience and Technology, knew there was a pandemic afoot as early as January 2020, and VMware began preparing to face it.



“We knew our remote access tools would be under heavy use. We began monitoring and adding capacity to tools essential for accessing company resources like VPN pools, networks, workspaces etc. We also added capacity to Horizon, VMware’s Virtual Desktop solution both on-prem and on-cloud. This would ensure that all new hires to whom laptops couldn’t be shipped out, could be productive from Day 1 by connecting to their virtual desktop in the cloud using their personal device.”

VMware created an inventory for additional hardware, anticipating supply chain issues. And, in the midst of lockdown, dispatched monitors, keyboards, wifi dongles, UPS power backups etc. to critical staff. Once the lockdown relaxed, VMware implemented the self-service zero contact hardware and peripheral pick-up programs. “It was like a flip of the switch,” quips Anita Vijaykrishnan, Vice President of IT at VMware.

***“We knew it was coming, and we were prepared to work remotely even before the government made it the only option.”***



## Comprehensive planning

Preparing to serve the customer effectively means thinking of various scenarios and developing fallback options.

*"From a customer experience point of view, we made sure that critical services for hospitals, police, government departments etc. functioned seamlessly and were supported adequately."*

In parallel, VMware also expanded their impact by helping customers solve problems, even those who hadn't purchased the company's software yet. "We deployed software that would have taken us six months to roll out, in a matter of days, because it was the need of the hour," Shekar confirms.



VMware has the capability to help global customers enable their employees to work remotely - while maintaining productivity, increasing connectivity and providing continuous secure access to applications regardless of the endpoint. This helped the company actively engage with their customers on an on-going basis.

VMware quickly trained their physical IT support teams to handle calls and seamlessly transitioned them to provide online support via remote. They also leveraged global teams to balance the workload for India and other regions. The company worked closely with industry bodies like NASSCOM, and the Government of India - Department of Telecommunication (DoT). This helped VMware quickly build a VPN infrastructure that complied with relaxed DoT regulations and enabled contact center employees to work from home. This was done in record time, almost a week ahead of the government declaring the lockdown.

Even with all the preparation from a technology and infrastructure standpoint, the human element of this transition was uphill. Parents with young children, employees sharing their living space and those caring for the elderly couldn't have expected this sudden disruption to their lives.

Anita shares, "We anticipated productivity loss in the interim and remained flexible with deliverables, milestones, and expectations to let our employees know that we always have their backs."



This made sure that the business impact of COVID-19 was close to nil. "In spite of the sudden disruptions, as a result of the crisis, we completed the largest release in the history of VMware on time," adds Anita, who is keeping a close eye on the present while envisioning the future.



ADITYA BIRLA GROUP

# Proactive. Disruptive. Adaptive.



*When you visualize a manufacturing plant, you see people walk in and work at desktops. When COVID-19 hit, not only did we have to provide laptops, wi-fi and collaboration tools for employees across 20 such plants worldwide, we also had to educate them on cyber security and more.*

**Namrita Mahindro**

*Chief Digital Officer, Aditya Birla Chemicals, Agriculture & Insulators*



**The Aditya Birla Group (ABG)** is a multinational conglomerate with interests in industries such as metals, cement, chemicals, fertilizers, financial services and telecom. And, Aditya Birla Chemicals, Agriculture and Insulators sector consists of nine businesses across US, Germany, China, Thailand and India.

As a manufacturing organization, ABG didn't think they could have their entire workforce working from home as, much of their work revolves around a plant. When COVID-19 left them no choice, the teams surprised themselves with their agility, adaptability and resilience.

## Championing change

When it became clear that lockdowns were inevitable, the leadership team at ABG leveraged simple measures; procuring laptops, enabling wi-fi access at homes, choosing online collaboration tools and awareness around cyber security. Every part of this change was managed proactively.

"At ABG, we saw it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," says Namrita. The kind of digital transformation that takes enterprises years to complete, now had to be done in a few days. "No one would have imagined that we could adopt the kind of shifts in mindsets, culture and collaboration in such a short span of time, but it happened. Almost seamlessly," she adds.



## Disruption vs. organizational evolution

The lack of choice in working from home reaffirmed Namrita's faith in people being far more responsible when they are trusted. This is just the beginning, though. She sees more opportunities for paradigm shifts in the way we work.

While ABG is eager to return to their plants, they are also building resilience across their IT organization to utilize their newfound capability to work remotely. They're also taking several steps to address cyber security.

*"Finally, we can discard our dinosaur-age beliefs about remote work and reset our minds."*

Additionally, teams follow simple everyday rituals like a 15-min group video call to ensure the much sought after connection between colleagues. And, incrementally, teams are delivering outcomes that make Namrita hopeful for the future.

She believes that women and those who with personal constraints will find blooming careers working remotely, in a post-COVID world. She sees an ability to engage the gig economy for niche work. She also envisions a world where enterprises have better visibility into the needs and problems of their customers, empowering ABG to forge new paths and business models for a healthier and sustainable future.

*"The supply chain ecosystem is completely being reconfigured as we speak. Lead times are getting shorter. Regional markets will take the lead in a future powered by digital transformation."*



# Build trust. Inspire purpose.



*In India, people stick to an organization because they have a personal relationship with their peers and managers. Replicating that in the virtual world, within a distributed workforce can be a huge challenge. And, building trust in such a situation, more so.*

**Kaushik Sarawgi**

*Managing Director of Global Outsourcing Solutions, APAC, RR Donnelley*



**RRD (RR Donnelley)** is a leading global provider of marketing and business communications. With more than 50,000 clients and 36,400 employees across 29 countries, RRD offers the industry's most comprehensive solutions designed to help organizations communicate better with all stakeholders.

As an organization serving investment banks, financial institutions and healthcare establishments that all regularly handle sensitive information, work from home was not a feasible option at RRD. Until COVID-19 became the wave of change.

## Empowerment and ownership

"We pride ourselves on top-notch security. The infrastructure within our office is impenetrable. To the extent that USB drives are disabled on work computers," says Kaushik. Moving to a model where every single employee works from home was a true paradigm shift.

Like any professional organization, RRD had a great business continuity plan in place. The plan had been tested for various scenarios where backup automatically kicked in. Leadership believed they were prepared until COVID-19, for the first time ever, shut down operations across all locations simultaneously. The command-and-control structure, which worked well thus far wasn't enough any longer.

*"In a crisis like this, our network of teams needed to rise to the occasion. We empowered local teams to adapt and make decisions. We were fortunate to have leaders who took charge and delivered."*

Within 72 hours, RRD had moved assets to employee homes and continued operations seamlessly.

## Alignment of purpose

"Today's generation is online and social. Digital adoption is turbocharged. A distributed workforce and rising gig economy will become the norm when it comes to how work happens," says Kaushik, as he talks about how his teams have navigated unreliable electricity, internet, lack of privacy for calls, lack of ergonomic personal workspaces etc. to remain productive. Today, 87% of their workforce is effectively contributing from home.

"But, in the long-term, how do we replicate aspects of personal relationships, trust and emotional attachment to the organization when we can hardly shake hands with each other?," asks Kaushik. To him, this will be the defining question for the next generation of leaders.



At RRD, they are investing time and energy in continuing and adapting their employee engagement programs for the virtual organization. They began by using video communication to mimic face-to-face conversations. They sent regular communications, even as simple as an SMS a couple of times a day offering reassurance for anxiety. They replicated the office, where small teams huddled together and worked closely, by setting up virtual rooms for people to hangout in. They encouraged employees to use any downtime they have for upskilling and e-learning.

*"In the future, employees will stay only if there is alignment of purpose. Leaders need to regularly engage and communicate with their teams to make sure everyone knows their purpose and are motivated by it."*



# Future is 'Work from Anywhere'

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*Crises force people to adapt faster. And, COVID-19 is no different.*

**Jaspreet Bindra**

*Cofounder, UNQBE*



**Jaspreet** is a thought leader, advisor, entrepreneur and author. He advises some of the world's foremost organizations on digital transformation, blockchain, future of work, and AI. He teaches at Indian and global business schools, and is a Global Moderator at Harvard Business School.

From his experience of working with business leaders across industries, he brings his best advice on how to tide over the COVID-19 crisis and emerge resilient at the end of it.

## Actively adapt

An organization's ability to have a remote workforce is determined by two aspects: infrastructure and culture. While tech companies have some experience with both, non-tech companies don't. Many non-tech organizations can't work from home — factories have to run, shops need to open, banks might offer contactless products, but security needs to be water-tight.

Organizations that have been dragging their feet on digital transformation are expediting their initiatives. Crises force people to adapt faster. And COVID-19 is no different.

## Prepare to decentralize

"In the last three months of lockdown, people's lifestyles have changed. New habits have formed. COVID-19 will pass, but the habits will remain," observes Jaspreet. He believes that decentralized solutions will be the way of the future. Customers might prefer local kiranas to large supermarkets, smaller Airbnbs to large hotels etc.

*"Organizations have to quickly leverage digital technologies to adapt to new customer journeys. Only the agile organizations will win."*

## Think of hybrid solutions

Even the most cynical of business leaders have seen first-hand that, work from home works. People are as productive as they are in office, if not more. But, this situation won't last. It is not healthy for people to sit in front of their computers for 12 hours a day. Without in-person social interaction, creativity will take a big hit too.

"What we need are hybrid solutions. Meeting periodically for brainstorming and social engagement, while primarily working from home will soon become the norm," he says. In fact, he believes hybrid models that combine online and offline engagement might soon become common for education and events too.



## Build for the future

"The total number of cars sold by Maruti — which has a close to 50% market share — is zero. Many retail companies have had a 95% drop in sales. The situation is much worse than those of us in tech can even imagine," he warns. While tech leaders, who are able to do their work remotely, might thank their stars for the relatively better situation, it will take a year or more for non-tech businesses to return to full capacity.

And, the ripple effects might even last a decade. "Successful leaders will build solutions with an eye on the long-term future, while being agile to the market needs in the interim," he suggests.

## The Team



*Michelle Surendran*



*Smitha Hemmigae*



*Karthik S*



*Swaram K*



*Vasudha Veeranna*



# Conclusion

ThoughtWorks is rooted in a culture of learning and sharing. As we deliver cutting-edge tools and technology to our enterprise clients, we're always learning new things. And, we believe in sharing them with the larger community.

We have brought together over 20 years of location-independent delivery experience to help you set your organization up for remote-work success. Click here for [more](#).

You might also enjoy wading through the intimate profiles that are part of our [#HumansOfRemoteWork](#) illustrative knowledge series. They are interesting stories of people who are adapting to remote work environments amidst life's challenges and opportunities.

If you would like to better navigate the future of work or what we are now recognizing as 'work from anywhere,' please write to [godigital@thoughtworks.com](mailto:godigital@thoughtworks.com) for a quick discussion with our team.



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