

Plug And Play New Joiners During Pandemic Times: Creating A Sense of Belongingness

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Abstract

COVID-19 has forced several companies to swiftly switch to remote working. The Information Technology (IT) industry responded early by adopting a remote working model. It is now clear that, remote working is here to stay. This model will be an integral part of the working world more than ever. IT organisations have been able to make this migration considerably well in a short span of time. However, it is important to realise that implementation of remote working is a much broader subject. Organizations expect the new joiners to integrate into the organization in a manner similar to a plug and play device. New joiners take time to adapt to a new work environment. Those who joined during the pandemic missed the opportunity to get a first hand experience of their organization due to the remote onboarding. We studied two groups of employees, those who joined in their respective offices in 2019 and those who joined remotely in 2020. We tried to understand and compare the sense of belongingness amongst these two group of employees. The survey approach was adopted for analysis, and a total of 144 employees participated from 27 IT Companies across India. A One Way ANOVA was performed to compare the means and the outcome of the survey. The result was conclusive and corroborated the fact that, the sense of belonging in virtual workers stands low. Some of the significant reasons were due to the lack of regular connect with managers, irregular performance feedback and the dearth of instant recognition for work done. As remote working is going to be a part of future work strategy, it is important to bring the sense of belongingness early on amongst new joiners. Recommendations to address the belongingness gap were provided based on our discussion with a group of HR Managers.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, HR Challenges, Onboarding, Remote Working, Employee Engagement

JEL Classification: M14, O15

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INTRODUCTION

Remote working is defined as “a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, the worker has no personal contact with co-workers there, but is able to communicate with them using technology” (Di Martino, V. & Wirth, L.,1990)¹. Remote working could be from home, alternate work sites and also working on the move (Task, Taskin. 2010)². Prior to the pandemic, remote working was not a widely used practice as it is currently. Because of this, prior to COVID-19, most workers had very little remote working experience, and neither were they or their organizations prepared for supporting this practice long term. Now, the

unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has forced millions of people across the world into being remote workers, inadvertently leading to a de- facto global experiment of remote working (Kniffin, K.M. et al, 2020)³. As we step into the era where remote working is no longer a discretionary option but rather a compulsory requirement, organisations must shift focus from understanding whether or not to implement remote working to understanding how to get the most out of remote working. Several Indian IT companies have already announced that they are going to go ahead with a hybrid working model even after the pandemic is over.

For new joiners in any organization, the initial weeks is spent on understanding the work

environment and company culture. They learn about the company's founders, its values and why they should be proud to be a part of the organization. The overriding goal of the managers is to show new employees "how things are done around here" and to instil in them a sense of pride in their new affiliation (Cable, Daniel. Gino, Francesca & Staats, Bradely. 2013)⁴. Since everyone is working from home, it has become a common practise to onboard employees remotely using technology and successfully transition new hires into the system. It was identified that there are four key remote work challenges such as work-home interference, ineffective communication, procrastination, and loneliness (Bin, Wang. Bin, Liu, Yukun, Qian, Jing. 2020)⁵. A study conducted by EY called the EY Belonging Barometer⁶, found how more than 1,000 employed adults defined belonging, what made them feel they belonged at work and what made them feel excluded in the workplace. The finding of the study showed that belongingness is linked to the following occurrences: the chance to speak freely and voice opinions, when unique contributions are valued, regular check-ins personally and professionally, public recognition and inclusive meetings with senior leaders. The linkage between understanding the organization culture and employee engagement was highlighted in several studies (Krishnaveni, R. 2016)⁷. All these occurrences are difficult in the current work from home scenario. It is the focus of this paper, to understand remote working and its effect on employee belongingness among new joiners in the IT Industry who are directly working from home without experiencing an office environment.

SURVEY, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of the survey was to understand if there is a difference in the sense of belongingness between those who joined in 2019 and those who joined during the pandemic in 2020. The idea was to pilot the

study with a minimalistic questionnaire and delve deeper based on the findings. The survey contained 8 questions. While there was one main question that summarised the overall sense of belongingness, the other questions tried to understand the reason behind the response. Other than the demographic related questions and an open ended question (to understand the improvement areas), the remaining questions captured ratings on the Likert Scale (5 point scale). We targeted around 120 responses split equally between the two groups, A total of 144 responses was collected from 27 IT companies across India. The data was analysed using SPSS v22. A One Way ANOVA was performed to compare two means from two independent (unrelated) groups, that is between 2019 and 2020 scores using the F-distribution with respect to employee belongingness.

FINDINGS

The results from the survey that was undertaken by 144 professionals employed in the IT sector across 27 organisations in India led to the finding that the overall sense of belongingness is significantly lesser for employees who joined virtually in 2020 when compared to the employees who joined in 2019 and were working from office. By testing the responses from the two groups, there was a statistically significant difference between groups, the sense of belonging to the organisation for employees who joined the organisation in 2019 and 2020 as determined by one-way ANOVA ($F(1,142) = 4.503$, $p = .036$). The F-value was at 4.503 which was significantly greater than the critical value 3.84 (at degree of freedom between groups and within groups- 1,142, Critical value stands at 3.84) and the p-value, .036 which was lesser than the significance value (.05), hence we reject H0 and accept H1. We have statistically significant evidence at $\alpha=0.05$ to show that there is a difference in the sense of belongingness to the organisation for

employees who joined the organisation in 2019 and 2020.

The significant reasons that contribute to this finding are as follows: nearly 24% of the respondents onboarded virtually did not feel integrated to be a part of their team because, nobody reached out to them in the first month of joining / communication was only via emails / no discussions apart from daily tasks. 35% of the respondents did not feel inclusive in virtual discussions or decisions made at work and as a result they felt their contributions are not being valued. 32% of the respondents felt there is lack of periodic feedback on performance and personal growth given by their managers. This again could be due to non-availability of one-to-one time with their managers. It is clear and conclusive from the data, that working remotely has reduced the sense of belongingness to an organisation. This could pose a threat in the long run for newly hired employees working from home. There is a risk that the lack of attention could create a void of dissatisfaction at work and lead to disengagement at work. If it is too late then it could become harder to retain them, should they decide to quit the organization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While many IT employees used to occasionally work from home, the percentage of employees permanently working from home used to be very small. Even these employees would have joined their organization physically and would have interacted with their managers in person on a day to day basis. The current remote onboarding process was not in practise before and it was forced upon by the pandemic situation. Hence, there were no past studies conducted on this topic in Indian IT industry. Remote working during the pandemic is different from the normal remote working. It has a lot of challenges including forming social connections with the team (Rodeghero, P.2020)⁸. From the findings, it is clear that there are numerous challenges while working

remotely which could affect the sense of belongingness of the employee. Based on the responses, suggestions and discussion with human resource professionals of various IT Organizations, the following recommendations could be made with respect to remote onboarding.

The significant factors causing the decrease in the level of belonging of new hires as per the findings are: irregular connect with managers, lack of performance feedback and not recognizing the good work done by the employee. In remote discussions, new joiners are not made to feel inclusive. The experience of a team sitting around the same area, going for lunch/breaks together, booking a conference room for a brainstorming session etc. is something that no digital collaborative tool has been able to match. It is recommended that the managers have a structured daily informal connect with the new joiner or a daily stand-up call with their teams. Work should be distributed evenly. The new joiners can be assigned a buddy to bring them up to speed on the work front. It is important to have clear goals and managers should ensure that feedback is shared regularly. Especially, in the context of a new joiner, the expectation would always be more frequent feedback and instantaneous appreciation. Spot appreciation works like magic with employees. There is a misconception that while working from home, employees do not work to their full potential and would work only on important tasks (Prasad, KDV. 2020)⁹. It is important to create opportunities for social interactions. These interactions provide encouragement and emotional support to employees who are working remotely. Having a virtual team lunch or a birthday celebration on video call are some activities that will bring teams together and create a sense of belongingness. In a physical meeting, it is always easy to recognize the presence of someone and ask for their input, however in a remote call, the manager should ensure that everyone has a chance to speak and express their views. If the

feedback is acted upon it instils confidence about the organization with the employee and increases their sense of belongingness (Jampala, S. 2021)¹⁰. This is a critical step to making everyone feel inclusive and valued. Remotely hired employees develop perceptions about the team and organisations early. Sending timely invites, involving team members in relevant meetings or a gesture acknowledging small contributions in meetings, go a long way in creating lasting first impressions. In the open-ended response, many employees pointed out their task or assignment completions are not acknowledged by their managers and hence they do not feel appreciated. People managers need to be trained & equipped to manage the complexities associated with remote working employees. As geographical boundaries collapse in the new world, it is equally important to ensure cultural sensitization people managers. If managers engage employee effectively then remote work would be a future of an effective working system, as employees would be connected to the family and there would be no psychological pressure of their bosses, hence this can lead towards high productivity (Ahmed.T, 2020)¹¹. Creating a sense of belongingness among remote employees is not a onetime task. It is about creating every-day experiences by making effective use of technology and other means . It is about adding unique flavours to daily interactions and routines that will help the new joiners experience the organization and create a sense of pride and belongingness.

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