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Businesses will have to adapt to the needs of a '1.5-metre' society



Companies must restructure and re-orient their workplaces to ensure physical distancing

Amidst the current global lockdown, there are undercurrents of a free-range spirit that is pushing people to start hating their homebound life. There are varying degrees of freedom that are already on display – from exploring ways of survival through getting back to livelihood options in frontier and emerging markets to expressing the right to live liberated, as voiced in some developed markets.

A review of this forced-to-stay-at-home state of affairs is on the cards, as one has to make a choice between fighting the pandemic versus fighting a depression. As conversations of stepping out in the open will gain currency, one inevitable change that everyone needs to be mindful of is the way to adopt the neo-normal social standards in public life.

Hugs and handshakes will be the most unwelcoming way of greeting one outside home. The practice of keeping safe distance from one another is predicting the emergence of a new sociological concept – the rise of the 1.5-metre society. Maintaining at least a distance of two steps from one another means a big shift not just for categories like transportation and retail but for every workplace.

The open seating that became a normative work culture in most contemporary offices in recent past, will have to rethink the floor plans.

Standing workstations

The work desk designing too will go through changes where easy and frequent cleaning can be carried out. So will we see more of standing workstations for the workforce that will be coming to office? How will students sit in their classrooms? Will that increase the number of sections in each cohort of students in teaching institutions? Can the banks, like before, allow the teller to be crowded? They might rigidly implement the queue management system, which now will have to be strictly adhered to by every retail consumer.

The public transport needs to rethink its entire business value chain. Especially in the developing countries like India, where trains, buses and other shared transportation systems have thrived on a burgeoning crowd for each trip, now need to ponder over new business models that offer safety even in terms of social distancing.

The revival of the automotive segment in this context is a plausible conjecture but not everyone can afford to buy a new two-wheeler or a car. Therefore, there is a need for not just increasing the fleet size of public vehicles but also a structured pre-booking system to ensure disciplined boarding and alighting. Bringing flexi hours into workplaces can help distribute the demand during off-peak hours. Digital aggregators might play a big role in this new society.

Business of retail experiences

The other important area of business that will require major restructuring is the business of retail experiences. The supermarkets and durable retailing could look at tweaking their value chains to a phygital business model while the biggest change will be in the hotels, restaurants and cafe business.

The social animal in humankind will come out sooner to meet and eat together. Not every party will be held at home. Dating apps cannot replace a coffee for a couple in the neighbourhood. However, a 1.5-metre society will demand that retail spaces reorient themselves to accommodate the new norms, and that will mean a recalculation of the number of table covers per retail space.

Why just restaurants? Even hyperlocal businesses like salons and parlours need to evolve. We will see fewer chairs at the barber's shop, and many more hygiene processes. Very likely this will be the case in the localities that imbibe the 1.5-metre principle early. Cleaning agents and other personal hygiene products, apart from their increased offtake at homes, will find larger usage at everyday retail as spatial hygiene will become the hallmark of a 1.5-metre society. Will open amphitheatres be the new cultural exchange hub over closed auditoriums? A 1.5-metre society will change many a rule of business as usual.

The vaccine will take time to be perfected, approved and reach the market. Some researchers are warning of a comeback of this virus, which indicates living with caution until 2022 or may be further. Wearing protective masks in public and frequently washing their hands, the 1.5-metre society will eventually become the new normal that businesses need to take into account as they work on their present, short-term and long-term commercial plans.

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The article can be read online [here](#).