

Covid-19 and the Future of Work

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Abstract

Covid-19 is going to have a profound impact on how we manage our work. The increasing tendency to decouple the workforce from the workplace is creating both challenges and opportunities. Amidst fear of decline in staff productivity, experience of this past year shows that employees working from flexible locations, including their own home, are becoming more productive than previously thought. Four major shifts are taking place in the world of work. Firstly, the concept of fixed location of an office is giving way to the idea of flexible locations leading to a reconfiguration of the traditional office. Secondly, managerial focus has moved from efficiency to resilience. Thirdly, control as a management principle is losing ground to trust leading to disintermediation and de-layering of decision-making. Finally, organizational leaders are increasingly emphasizing the need to complement technical skills with social Skills. Much innovation is taking place in all these areas. These shifts are happening not just because of Covid-19. They were already set in motion; the pandemic has accelerated them. Work from home is a good response to the pandemic, but it cannot be an alternative to the office for ever. Going back to the nineteenth century idea of office as a fixed location is neither efficient nor desirable. What we need is a hybrid model. Based on a review of national and international practices adopted as a response to Covid-19, this article argues that the pandemic has given public-sector agencies an opportunity to use available technologies for improving business processes through flexible working arrangements, including the hybrid model. And this process has already started. In many countries, public-sector organizations are catching up with the private sector in terms of introducing the hybrid model. We in Nepal can learn much from this and adapt some of these practices to our specific socio-economic and cultural context.

Keywords: Hybrid Office, Leadership Skills, Management by Trust, Reconfiguration of Office, Remote Working

Introduction

The year 2020 has been a turbulent time for managers, policymakers and political leaders. The uproar created by the Coronavirus crisis continues in 2021 constraining a rebound of economic and social life in many parts of the world and Nepal is not the exception. While the pandemic continues, scholars and practitioners are already thinking about a post-pandemic world of work.

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The most important legacy of Covid-19 is likely to be an increase in state power (cf. Ng. 2020). The ‘big government’ aspect of the legacy is already manifested, for example, in the USA where President Biden’s plan for infrastructure spending is being compared to Roosevelt’s New Deal (rolled out in 1932 in response to the Great Depression). India’s new *Mantra* of self-reliance is also about portraying the state and its leaders as the nation’s saviours in these times of crisis. The public health emergency created by the pandemic has made state agencies stronger than ever. They can bend the rules and impose restrictions of all kinds, with considerable degree of acceptance among people. In our own case, for example, public procurement rules have been amended to accommodate demands from medicine suppliers without much resistance from the public, or oversight from the Parliament. It seems that people would tolerate anti-competitive rules, as long as they purported to protect their health from Covid-19.

While all-powerful states and governments are perhaps a necessity in times of crisis such as Covid-19, there is a risk of the misusing the state power. One important area vulnerable to such mismanagement is personal data/information. Yuval Noah Harari, the acclaimed thinker about the post-Covid-19 world, reminds us of the dangers of ‘digital dictatorship’ or a surveillance state in the wake of this crisis (Harari, 2021).

Covid-19 has also awakened us to the interconnectedness between the state and society. A recognition of shared humanity encouraged compassionate communities to support the victims of the pandemic in whatever way possible. This found resonance in state agencies who have an obligation to protect the vulnerable. As we have seen in Kathmandu and elsewhere throughout the pandemic that civil society organizations, youth activists, and private industries have collaborated with government bodies and public-sector agencies. Areas of cooperation included procuring medicines and vaccines, managing hospital services, improving the access to ventilators, creating digital products, and mobilising volunteers. This has blurred the lines between the public and other sectors.

More importantly, the pandemic has legitimized society’s restrictions on the behaviour of individuals in the interest of public health, although this has also faced legal and political challenges in some cases. This sense of interconnectedness between the state society will likely strengthen the notion of a ‘new social contract’ which has been attracting much academic interest in recent times. In her recent book *What We Owe Each Other*, Minouche Shafik advocates for a new social contract in terms of mutual obligations not just within our families, but within communities and nation states, far in excess of our narrow self-interest (Shafik, 2021). It is important to note that, in view of rising inequality in economic relations, the World Bank has joined the chorus (Bussolo et al, 2018).

Together, the government agencies and their non-government companions have expanded the frontiers of knowledge and are now in a better position to deploy technologies in protecting and promoting human health. However, epistemic advances alone do not guarantee progress. We have yet to see political willingness to act on the achievements of science. One example of dark spot is the much cited ‘vaccine nationalism’ emerging across the globe. This is igniting fundamental challenges for international cooperation on development and progress in which such problems can only be tackled at the political level.

Impact of Covid-19 on the Workplace

Covid-19's profound impact is being observed in work places and its management. The increasing tendency to decouple the workforce from the workplace is creating both challenges and opportunities for managers. Amidst fear of productivity decline, experience of this past year shows that employees working from flexible locations, including their own home, are becoming more productive than previously thought. This has debunked the myth that the productivity of workers can only be managed under the watchful eyes of their supervisors. As a result, remote working has emerged as a strong option in managing offices, including in the public sector.

The world of work has been undergoing four major shifts in the present context. At first, the concept of fixed location of an office (a product of industrial revolution in the eighteenth century) is giving way to the idea of flexible locations. Second, managerial focus has moved from efficiency to resilience involving provisions for organizational resources to maintain supply chains. Third, control as a management principle is losing ground to trust leading to disintermediation and de-layering of decision-making. Finally, organizational leaders are increasingly emphasizing the need to complement technical skills with social skills such as emotional intelligence (Boland et al. 2020). This represents, therefore, a real opportunity to move from turbulence to transformation. It is very important that Nepali managers, in both public and private domains, adapt their organizational strategies by applying these emerging trends.

Much innovation is taking place in all these areas, including in Nepal. It must be mentioned here that these shifts are happening not just because of Covid-19. They were already set in motion; the pandemic has accelerated them. In other words, the future of work has arrived ahead of schedule! Organizational leaders are increasingly required to manage what Peter Drucker would call *asdiscontinuous change*. During periods of discontinuous, abrupt change, the essence of adaptation involves a keen sensitivity to what should be abandoned – not what should be changed or introduced. A willingness to depart from the familiar has distinct survival value (Drucker, 1969).

Employee Productivity Re-assessed

With Covid-19, an unprecedented global experiment has taken place: most office workers have relocated from office to their home. In other words, the workforce has been separated from the workplace. The workplace or, the office evolved in the nineteenth century as a result of the industrial revolution. The assembly line, for example, required all employees to work together during office hours. In today's service-oriented economy, people can work differently. Much of the office work can be carried out remotely and from home. The influential writer Fareed Zakaria tends to see this as work returning to what it was like for much of history closely tied to life at home. So, in a sense, this is moving 'back to the future' (Zakaria, 2020).

Work from home was already an option during pre-pandemic office system but the people didnot use it as it is used today. Managers were perhaps concerned that unsupervised staff working remotely would be less productive than their colleagues working from the office. Experience of the past year or so show that employees working from home can be as productive as those working from the office, if not more. The myth of productivity decline has been dispelled. In a McKinsey

research (2020), for example, 41% of respondents said they were more productive working at home than they had been before, with 28% saying that they were as productive (Boland et al., 2020). The UK Chartered Institute of Personnel Development finds that 30% of British employees felt they worked more hours at home (Bartleby, 2021). A Humanyze research concludes that remote working has extended people's working time by an average 10–20%, while also reducing work-related stress and negative emotions (Frankiewicz et al 2020). A study done in eight Asian countries shows that in India, remote workers work 60 hours/month extra. A US Federal Work Life Survey shows that teleworkers are 16% more engaged, 19% more satisfied, and 11% less likely to leave than onsite workers (Braier et al, 2021). Closer to home in Nepal, a study on *Kantipur* interviews with managers concludes that their fear of 50% efficiency loss was unfounded, and whatever loss was there could be attributed to logistics and connectivity problems (Pant, 2020).

Organizational leaders and their staff seem to be taking note of this process. For example, Microsoft's work trend index 2021 based on a study of more than 30,000 people in 31 countries concludes that the future of work is here, and it's hybrid. The index shows that 73% of employees want flexible remote work options to continue after the pandemic. On their part, 66% of managers are considering redesigning physical spaces to better accommodate flexible (hybrid) work environment (Microsoft, 2021). A survey among 1000 US-based employees shows that people like remote work very much and are even willing to take a pay cut (5%-25%) and give up benefits, if needed (Brown, 2021). This doesn't, however, mean that the traditional office has lost relevance.

Office as a Social Unit

Apart from its production function, the 'office' was important as a social space serving five important purposes. First, it contributes to organizational culture. Organizational culture is the collection of values, expectations, and practices that guide and inform the actions of all team members. It is manifest in the aggregate behavior of all employees. Good organizational culture leads to positive traits, and eventually to improved performance. Poor culture will be a performance challenge even for the most successful organizations. Second, the traditional office provides a spontaneous platform for informal exchanges among employees. The social capital built up through 'water-cooler conversations' (also dubbed as heartbeat of the office), informal meetings, and social engagements is very important for feedback and innovation. This gives employees the opportunity to develop rapport and relationships outside their team. Third, the physical *office goes beyond providing a physical space to work from. It also facilitates bonding and camaraderie among employees and helps promote* belongingness, which is very important for boosting staff morale and productivity (Carr et. al., 2019). Fourth, the office strengthens our sense of security. It is said that a sense of place is often a sense of purpose. For most employees it is important to have the facetime of their supervisors. Presenteeism is an important way of dealing with job insecurity, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty. Finally, imposing office buildings, often located in city centres, have been a good medium to attract young talent. They represent corporate image and prestige. While some of these features of a physical office may be adapted to the new reality, others remain important.

The Home-based Office

‘Work from home’ has become a good solution to the difficult challenge of restricted mobility imposed by the pandemic. In the beginning, the idea of being able to work from anywhere was also ‘romanticised’. It was soon discovered that working from home also brings challenges. As part of the ‘always on’ culture enabled by information and communication technologies official meetings are happening any time of the day, and immediate response to communication has become the norm resulting, among others, in multi-tasking. This has increased workload requiring employees to work longer hours. For example, a study in eight countries found that India had the second-highest percentage of workers facing increased burnout in Asia at 29%. More than 40 percent of employees cited the lack of separation between work and personal life as negatively impacting their wellbeing, and increased levels of stress.

Concerns over job security is another factor for stress. Being ‘out of sight’ can indeed mean being ‘out of mind’, especially for mid-level staff that could be dispensed with during times of crisis. Already in the early nineties, Hammer and Champy have hinted at the ‘vanishing middle manager’ given the need for organizations to constantly look at what value middle management adds to the decision-making process (Hammer and Champy, 1993). The pandemic-induced drive to cut costs poses a real security risk for staff. Managing this activity in isolation is not an easy job.

“Leaving” the office after work is also a challenge in view of blurred lines between work and personal life. With no change of location and defined working hours, many employees have a difficulty around clearly dividing their personal and professional time. In a survey carried out by the World Economic Forum, 22% of all respondents referred to ‘unplugging after work’ as the top issue for them. And one-third of them expressed concerns that the full extent of their professional efforts would not be appreciated by their managers because of a lack of in-person contact with the office (Routley, 2020).

When working from home, one may experience distractions. Responding to the needs of family members, friends, and neighbours diverts attention away from work. This is a more difficult problem for female employees who are often expected to carry out household chores alongside their professional work. A study in Nepal reveals that women have also been victims of domestic violence and abuse (HCI, 2021).

A significant disadvantage of working from home is about the absence of mentoring opportunities. Mentoring helps employees do right things in a proper way by exposing them to senior employees who have both knowledge and experience. This helps employees perform more effectively and gives them more satisfaction.

The Becker Friedman Institute for Economics at the University of Chicago has published an influential paper in this subject. Using personnel and analytics data from over 10,000 skilled professionals at a large Asian IT services company, the paper compares employee productivity before and during the work from home period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Total hours worked increased by roughly 30%, including a rise of 18% in working after normal business hours. But this extra effort did not translate into any rise in output. The paper analyses how much time the employees spent in “collaboration hours” (various types of meetings), and how much time they had as “focus hours” (uninterrupted by calls or emails) and finds that the employees had less

focus time than before the pandemic. All their extra time was taken up by meetings (Gibbs et al, 2021). This is an important lesson for managers in terms of how to organize the work.

The Hybrid Office

As we have seen, working from home is a good response to the pandemic, but it cannot be an alternative to the office for ever. Going back to the nineteenth century idea of office as a fixed location is neither efficient nor desirable (although many managers are hoping to go back to the ‘good old days’). In fact, the time has come for a hybrid model. Many people speak in favour of the hybrid model, although what constitutes hybridity may be subject to interpretation. It involves some combination of working remotely and from an office. In other words, the hybrid model is a plan that incorporates a mix of office-based and remote work in an employee's time plan. It enables employees to work from different locations: home, on-the-go, or the office. The writer Julia Hobsbawm likes to call this arrangement a “nowhere office”, which is both virtual and physical and allows employees to move between home, the coffee shop and a co-working space in the office. There is no need to commute to office every day at the same time. There is also no need for self-isolation.

As the hybrid model is basically about flexibility, it offers a variety of choices for individual offices and their employees in terms of their work plan: there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ hybrid model. The model is shaped by the needs of both the organization and its individual employees. In the absence of a uniform work week, a columnist at *The Economist* advises people to “get ready to ask people you meet not “where do you work?” but “when do you work?” (Bartleby, 2021).

With the pandemic into its second year, all of us are trying to adjust to the ‘new normal’. Organizational leaders will have to specially prepare themselves for new working arrangements after the pandemic. McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm, recommends five key steps for managers in terms of reinventing the office (Table 1).

Table 1: Role of managers in re-inventing the organization after the pandemic

Steps	Actions
Resolve	Address immediate social and mental challenges
Resilience	Ensure near-term resource management issues to stay afloat during lockdown
Return	Work out a detailed plan to return the business back to scale
Re-imagine	Think of the ‘new normal’ – what a discontinuous change looks like – and plan for re-inventing the institution
Reform	Be clear about how the regulatory and competitive environment change and position yourself accordingly

Adapted from McKinsey & Company 2020

It is important to emphasize that the hybrid model is not about a blueprint for all organizations. It may look different for every organization. There are three popular approaches to institutionalizing it in an organization. They are: ‘remote-first’, ‘office-occasional’, and ‘office-first, but remote allowed’. The remote-first approach will adopt online communication as its default arrangement: people will work from home or any other location. They will only come to the office, if their job

requires physical presence. This does not mean, however, that employees never meet in a remote-first environment. They can occasionally opt for working together from the office. The purpose is to strengthen the sense of belongingness and team spirit. In an ‘office occasional’ arrangement, employees come into the office 2-3 days a week and work collaboratively with other colleagues. Employees will have the flexibility to spend more time in the office than required (Griffis, 2021). The office becomes a ‘club’ for staff to mingle with friends and socialize. In the ‘office-first’ model, most employees will work from the office, with some staff working remotely for a specific reason. Some offices were already practicing this model even before the pandemic struck.

It must be noted here that some large companies, notably investment banks like Goldman Sachs or JP Morgan, have indicated that they plan to bring all employees back to the office “as soon as possible”. They have expressed concern that “staff have been abusing work from home privileges”. This relates mostly to “young graduates and new hires” who need to be immersed in the culture and values of the organization. For the majority of large corporates, however, the future *is* hybrid (Partridge et. al, 2021). It is yet to be seen how the ‘back to the office’ plans evolve.

Organizational Imperatives for a Post-Covid Hybrid Office

Managers will have to re-design their organization for the hybrid model to be more effective. This would involve re-defining work processes, methods, and even the governing rules and regulations. But first, the organization chart itself needs to be looked at. The organization chart, first conceived by Daniel McCallum in 1854, is generally associated with the notion of ‘pyramidal structure’ of an organization. McCallum, a railway engineer by background, had in fact proposed a reversed hierarchy providing authority over day-to-day scheduling and operations of railways to superintendents down the line. The reason was that they were closer to the action and had the data/information needed to take a decision. Instead of the hierarchical pyramids depicted in most of today’s organization charts, McCallum’s chart was modelled after a tree, with the board of directors seen as the roots, the general manager and his chief officers as the tree’s trunk, and the railroad’s divisions and departments as the branches (Caitlin, 2013). Organizational leaders need to go back to this idea of delegating authority to those who have the best data/information.

At the same time, they should be asking three basic questions before starting to draw a new organizational chart. They refer to the organization’s identity (e.g., purpose, value, culture), optics (e.g., flat structure, de-layered decision-making, talent management), and future (e.g., ecosystem perspective, technology, and learning). These questions require leaders to move away from boxes and lines and focus on “connectivity” (who works on what with whom). One example of this would be the “Helix organization”. A helix organization separates the traditional management hierarchy into two parallel and equally powerful lines of accountability, each headed by a manager. One of the two managers helps develop people and capabilities; the other focuses those people and capabilities on organizational priorities (Smet et. al, 2019). In this sense, we would not only be re-designing the office but also re-defining it.

Logistic Arrangements for a Hybrid Office

If the ‘home’ is going to function as the office, employees working from home should have access to the same level of connectivity and ergonomic services. Apart from the logistics, appropriate

laws and rules need to be in place to address duty of care, which is a situation where managers have a responsibility to maintain the health, safety, and well-being of their staff. This includes such issues as providing safe working conditions and offering constructive feedback. For example, there have been issues with insurance coverage for work-related illness or injury at a home-based office. Working hours, leave, and overtime payment are other issues that need to be defined properly for remote-work arrangements. As we have seen above, work from home also leads to isolation, stress, and burnout among employees. Organizations must have proper counselling services to handle these challenges.

Under the hybrid model, logistic arrangements at the central office will also change. With many employees away from the office, there will be no need to assign spaces (e.g., rooms or cubicles) to individual employees. Hybrid offices are assigning the office space for specific purposes (e.g., conferences, meetings, and recreation). Hot-desking has become another popular practice. This reconfiguration of office has also led to a reduced need for office space itself, with the possibility of significant levels of saving on rents, especially in city centres. Recent reports on declining rents for office spaces in cities like London and New York provide evidence to this.

With the hybrid model, a new type of office is emerging, which may be called a ‘dispersed office’. A dispersed office is a small facility with a couple of meeting rooms and workstations created in the neighbourhood. The purpose is to accommodate employees’ preference for a mix of in-person and at-home work. It serves the social purpose of an office for employees without having to face traffic problems and meet the requirement of standard office hours.

Leadership Skills for a Hybrid Office

For too long, management has been mostly about efficiency and control systems. The Covid-19 crisis has shown that an overemphasis on efficiency can jeopardize the resilience of organizational operations. An example is outsourced services such as masks or personal protection equipment, which could not be delivered in time because of disruptions in the supply chain. The widely popular ‘just-in-time’ inventory system under a lean management structure is now being reviewed in favour of ‘just-in-time-plus’ where the ‘plus’ means “just in case,” indicating the need for an improved risk management system for a crisis situation. In other words, resilience should be part of the thinking about efficiency.

The other question is how to lead people remotely in a hybrid model where traditional instruments of control will not be very effective. Control must give way to trust. The demand for ‘management by trust’ is not new (for example, Dwivedi, 1983). Charles Handy, known as a management philosopher, is perhaps the strongest proponent of trust-based management. As far back as 1995, Handy spoke of the importance of trust for a virtual organization. “Where information is the raw material of work, it has never been necessary to have all the people in the same place at the same time”, he said some 25 years ago without referring to the hybrid office that we see emerge today (Handy, 1995). But, trust needs to be understood properly in a management context.

Trust is defined as a state, belief or positive expectation on other people. It is a psychological state to accept vulnerability to actions of another party, and it reflects confidence in the ability of others. And of course, trust is dynamic, not static: Managers’ level of trust in their colleagues may change with experience in how they behave and deliver.

An empirical study based on survey data on U.S. federal employees finds that trustful relationship between organizational leaders and employees is associated with improved organizational performance. Leadership can be transactional (meaning that leaders clarify roles or reward good performance) or transformational (meaning that leaders provide an overarching sense of direction and vision, leaving details to their colleagues). The same study concludes that transformational leadership has a higher potential for improving organizational performance than transactional leadership (Asencio, 2016).

Interpersonal trust building is an interactive process and requires positive relationship, good judgement, and consistency. Trust in the organization is often reflected in people's trust in management, although these are two different things. Managers willing to promote a trust-based relationship with their employees must not see them merely as 'human resource', to borrow a statement from Handy (Neilson, 2018). Employees are human beings with their own identity, and this must be recognized.

Practical skills for nurturing a trust-based relationship include an ability to empower staff and provide autonomy to them within the framework of mutually agreed performance metrics. A caring culture and empathy are other determinants of success.

Public Sector Perspectives

Many people tend to associate hybridity with organizations in the private sector. This may be attributed to the fact that private enterprises are the first to resort to remote work arrangements when the pandemic struck. Some of them have been practicing remote work even before the pandemic. They are anyway ahead of the public sector in innovation. Meanwhile, public-sector organizations are catching up with the private sector in terms of introducing the hybrid model. After all, it is said that management in the public sector is different from management in the private sector 'only in unimportant matters'! The hybrid model is important enough to attract policy attention in public-sector organizations. International experience of the past one and a half years shows that governments in several countries are formalising hybrid office arrangements.

The UK, known as the mother of parliaments, was the first country to introduce the concept of a hybrid parliament in April 2020. For this, MPs adopted a set of 'hybrid proceeding measures' which enabled them to take part in oral questions and statements – including Urgent Questions – virtually or in person. MPs were also able to participate virtually or in person in substantive proceedings under these arrangements. The House of Lords also decided in June 2020 to move towards hybrid proceedings, with up to 30 Peers being allowed in the chamber at any one time. At the same time, remote voting was introduced. Outside of the chamber, many Lords committees have been conducting hybrid or remote evidence sessions (Lilly, 2020).

Brazil, Mongolia, Maldives, Canada, and Poland have also adopted "hybrid parliament" with different stages of development (with Poland and Mongolia allowing online voting). The European Parliament allows voting by email.

Other government businesses are also being conducted from hybrid offices. In April this year, the UK government decided to open 'drop-in' offices in 10 cities outside of London to enable Whitehall staff to work from any of these offices. The government sees these working practices as "that civil servants can work efficiently and flexibly from home without the costly overheads

of office spaces and time-consuming commuting for employees”. Cutting down on costly office spaces through a ‘hybrid’ model of work for civil servants is supposed to be a win-win scenario. For civil servants, this will mean the best of both worlds, allowing them to socially interact in-person once or twice a week, and reap the flexibility and cost-cutting benefits of home working outside of that. This is also supposed to simultaneously save government and local council money, which could be reinvested in more pressing issues (Rees et. al, 2021). This also eases traffic congestion, thereby reducing the impact of climate change, even if in a limited way.

In the USA, government agencies such as the Navy, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Labor are inclined to continue with some degree of telework/remote work and flexibility (Braier et.al, 2021).

In India, the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) has issued a work from home protocol for civil servants with flexi-timing schedules, handling of confidential documents, disposal of VVIP references and ensuring the confidentiality of government communication in electronic mode. This framework aims at ensuring that there is no impact on the productivity if a great number of employees work from the safety of their homes. With this, the existing attendance system will be reassessed by government officials in consultation with the DoPT.

These examples show that the model is not only applicable, but also desirable in various government organizations.

Is Nepal an Exception?

Covid-19 has affected the business of the government in Nepal same as the cases of other countries. During the past 18 months or so, Nepalis have had to experience complete or partial lockdowns several times. This has impacted the delivery of public services, including many critically important jobs. However, there was a silent reluctance to introduce the hybrid model. For example, when several countries were finalizing their working procedures for hybrid parliament, Nepal decided to prorogue the House in the wake of some Covid-19 cases in April 2020. The House did not choose to use the technology available for hybrid sittings. Likewise, services of several government offices remained out of reach for the general public because of Covid-19.

In the context of Nepal, the pandemic has explored and augmented people’s ‘intention’ to offer services online. Some examples include:

- Local Government App released by the Department of Information Technology
- Smart Palika rolled out by some municipalities
- No objection certificates from the Ministry of Education
- Export import code renewal by the Department of Customs
- Registration and renewal of companies at the Office of the Company Registrar under the Department of Industries
- E-payment systems introduced by FCGO for revenue collection (i.e., Citizen-to-Government Payment Portal)
- Driving license services at the Department of Transport Management

- Online app introduced for accessing land records (*mero kitta*) by the Department of Survey
- Services related to customer acquisition, new product development, service delivery, and improvements in operational efficiency offered by banking and financial institutions

These innovations are supported by digital technologies. Nepal has made significant progress in digital adoption, with mobile penetration exceeding 100% and Internet penetration reaching 63%. The Digital Nepal Framework adopted by the government aims to “leverage the potential of digital technologies to drive accelerated growth” (MoCIT, 2019). This shows that there is significant technical capacity within the government system. A commensurate level of management capacity is needed to maximize the use and benefits from these services.

Government officials were asked to work from home during the pandemic, although there were no systematic efforts to enable everyone to work remotely. *Ad hocism* dominated the whole process. One major decision taken by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration was that all local governments were asked to hold online meetings using the Zoom platform. This happened because UNDP helped with the authorization license (THT, 2020). While this is a good response to the immediate challenges imposed by the pandemic, it is not going to be enough for ensuring full functionality of government agencies.

What is perhaps exceptional, therefore, is that Nepal’s Covid-19 Preparedness and Response Plan (CPRP) prepared with support from UNDP (UNDP, 2021) doesn’t discuss the ‘preparation’ of government offices in terms of their functionality and continued delivery of all types of government services. Nowhere in the 11 clusters of the CPRP does this aspect find even a passing reference!

The Way Forward

It is said that opportunities are usually disguised as problems. The pandemic has given public-sector agencies an opportunity to use available technologies for improving business processes through flexible working arrangements, including the hybrid model. This is the only way to ensure resilience of government operations in similar crises in the future. For this, two things need to happen simultaneously: development of digital infrastructure and management capacity to use it. While this will take time, one step could be taken immediately, which is to formalize and build on, what is already happening – hybrid work.

The government should adopt an ‘enabling framework’ for hybrid working. This entails looking at which operations can be hybridized, who can undertake them, and how to monitor performance and learn lessons. These could be integrated into a hybrid work protocol.

The enabling framework should include legal and procedural standards, technological requirements, and capacity building measures as its key components. The discussion above shows that Nepal can learn much from international experience. Of course, ‘one size doesn’t fit all’. Adapting international practices to Nepal’s specific needs should be the major guiding principle.

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