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Busy office hubs fall silent as virus noise gets louder



A security guard screens employees at the Brigade World Trade Centre in Bengaluru, which houses Amazon India headquarters as well as offices of several other MNCs SAGGERE RADHAKRISHNA

Coca-Cola India, which has its offices on the 16th and 17th floor of One Horizon, is one such. At the office's reception on the 17th floor, another round of temperature scanning takes place, followed by hand sanitisation. The office is almost 25 per cent empty. A few kilometres down National Highway 8, Nestle India is closely tracking employees with any recent health issues and those who have recently returned to the country from abroad. It is also conducting hygiene-related awareness drives in its offices across India.

Facebook has asked its employees to compulsorily work from home, as has TikTok parent, Bytedance. Starting Monday, work-from-home will also be in operation at two prominent public relations agencies in Gurugram, Weber Shandwick and Genesis BCW.

But everyone realises that working from home is not fail-safe either. "No matter how much you distance yourself socially, our houses are porous. The domestic help, delivery people and others, come in contact with so many people. There is only so much you can do," said an employee of a technology major in Gurugram.

Masks all over in Bengaluru

More than 2000 km away, in the Silicon City of India, the mood is similar. With most of its employees working from home, Amazon India's headquarters in the 32-storeyed World Trade Center (WTC) in Bengaluru, wears a deserted look. At the building's entry point, four people wearing masks check the temperature of every person who wants to come in.

"If the temperature exceeds 37 degrees celsius, the person is immediately taken to the neighbouring Columbia Asia Hospital for a check-up," an Amazon employee told this newspaper. The office's lobby, which normally swarms with employees, is vacant as no one is being allowed to gather in the common areas.

Almost 90 per cent of Amazon's employees operating out of the WTC tower are now working from home on Amazon Chime, the company's communications service that lets employees meet, chat, and place business calls inside and outside the organisation, on a single application. The same communication infrastructure is also being used for audio calls, video calls, and screen-sharing capabilities.

Apart from regularly sanitising its offices, the company is also working with medical experts to "ensure that we take the right precautions as the situation evolves," said an Amazon India spokesperson.

Walmart-owned e-commerce major, Flipkart, which has extended the work-from-home facility for all 10,000 employees at its Bellandur office in Bengaluru till March 20, fumigated its premises over Thursday and Friday.

Flipkart's internal communications teams are sending regular mailers about the ethics related to working from home. "Heads are advising teams to be active on WhatsApp groups while internal meetings are happening on Google Hang-outs," said a

Flipkart employee. "Functions where physical meetings are key, such as vendors and supplier meetings, are the only ones that are getting affected," he added.

At B2B unicorn Udaan, all employees will be working from home till March 20. Meetings are taking place on Google hang-outs. Employees who need to attend office have to wear a mask. They also have to give a declaration that they do not have any flu symptoms. Udaan's office canteen has been shut and those who are attending office have been asked to get home-cooked food.

Uber India, which has advised work-from-home till April 6, has also shut down the office canteen.

Travel history check in Mumbai

In the financial capital of Mumbai, absence of crowd in local trains is the biggest giveaway of things gone terribly wrong. "You are safe, Sir," declares the receptionist at Embassy 247, a complex belonging to Embassy Office Parks in the Vikhroli area of Mumbai, after doing a body temperature check with a thermal gun thermometer. Questions on whether one has visited China, Italy and Korea in recent weeks follow.

Embassy Office Parks, which has complexes in Bengaluru, Mumbai and Pune, has taken a number of precautionary measures. "Isolation rooms have been created across all our parks, ambulance facilities are available, and a list of hospitals affiliated for treating Covid-19 has been prepared," a company spokesperson said.

The company is creating awareness about the disease through educative messages via video, social media, WhatsApp, posters, and so on. It has also trained over 2200 vendor-employees on personal hygiene and protection, symptoms and response requirements, the spokesperson added.

Co-working space provider, WeWork, has asked any employee who has recently returned from a high-risk country to mandatorily work from home for at least 14 days. The same goes for anyone who exhibits flu-like symptoms.

"We have also introduced mandatory temperature screenings at our locations," a WeWork spokesperson said.

It will also temporarily suspend all events in the common areas across all locations until further notice, the spokesperson said.

Chennai IT corridor buzzing still

But, the IT corridor in the Old Mahabalipuram Road (OMR) is buzzing as usual. While most companies in Chennai are watching the virus outbreak closely, not many have asked their employees to work from home. The exception is Software as a Service (SaaS) major Zoho.

The 8500 employees at its facility in Chennai have been advised to work from home unless it's absolutely necessary for them to be present in office.

Zoho has, in fact, adopted work-from-home at all its offices worldwide as a precautionary measure. This pol-

icy will be in operation till the threat of the virus has passed or reduced substantially, said Rajendran Dandapani, director of technology, Zoho.

IT firm Cognizant has suspended non-essential business travel. Employees are being directed to seek medical attention and stay home if they feel ill or experience flu-like symptoms.

"Cognizant's facilities in India and elsewhere are fully operational and it is business as usual. A dedicated, cross-functional team is engaged in daily contingency planning with various stakeholders to ensure continued services for our clients around the world. These plans include preparations to enable some associates to work remotely if necessary and appropriate," said a Cognizant spokesperson.

It has enhanced cleaning processes at its offices in India and around the world, and have increased the number of hand sanitisers in high-traffic and common areas.

However, another Chennai-based IT products company said that the infection was currently at the first level on their distress scale, since no coronavirus-positive case had been reported from the city's companies so far. But those who have returned from other countries are being asked to work from home for the stipulated quarantine period.

An official from Intellect Design Arena, another IT products company, said that it is monitoring the situation and has designated flu managers in offices, who will be the go-to persons if an employee has some health issues. Meetings and discussions are being done via video conferencing.

Vinod AJ, general secretary of the Forum for IT Employees (FITE), however, said there seemed to be little awareness about the pandemic and not many companies were allowing employees to work from home. Tamil Nadu has not reported many cases so far.

Kolkata on guard

At Kolkata's IT hub in Salt Lake Sector V, it's mostly business as usual. Of course, the area's roughly 100 IT and ITES companies are following precautionary protocols.

"My office has instructed us to avoid any gathering or public meetings as well as public places," an employee at Cognizant said. However, the area's cafes and eateries continue to be full.

Like Cognizant, most of the IT biggies, like Wipro and TCS and other large office complexes have kept hand sanitisers on every floor, including the washrooms, and have instructed employees to maintain personal hygiene. Those with cough and cold or with flu symptoms are being discouraged from attending office.

Most of those who work at the city's IT hub feel West Bengal is a relatively safe place as far as the coronavirus outbreak is concerned. Not a single positive case has been reported here so far, although the state government has directed all schools, colleges and universities to remain closed till March 31.

(With inputs from Arnab Dutta, Samreen Ahmad, Raghavendra Kamath, Gireesh Babu, Avishek Rakshit, Yuvraj Malik and Neha Alawadhi)

CORONAVIRUS IMPACT

Multiplexes' revenue likely to be hit by up to 25%

SOHINI DAS
Mumbai, 15 March

The COVID-19 virus outbreak has caught the country's entertainment industry off guard with multiplexes shutting down across several states and big releases like *Sooryavanshi* getting postponed.

Analysts expect the revenues to dip by 20-25 per cent in the March quarter compared to the previous one.

One of the most awaited releases, *Angezi Medium*, which featured the return of ailing actor Irrfan Khan, managed to collect only ₹4.03 crore on its opening day last Friday.

Trade analysts like Taran Adarsh said the film's business had been severely affected because of the closure of cinema halls in several states

According to sources, the box office collections of *Angezi Medium* dropped by 25 per cent on Saturday. The film has done business mostly in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana. Tiger Shroff starrer *Baaghi 3*, too, has seen a similar drop in numbers on Saturday.

Theatres have been asked to shut down in major cities such as Delhi and Mumbai. Karnataka, Odisha, Jammu &



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PHOTO: SAGGERE RADHAKRISHNA

Kashmir, Kerala, Goa are also following the same.

A multiplex chain owner said there were around 3,000 screens in India. At present, more than 50 per cent of multiplexes are closed and he expected more to follow suit.

There are around 6,600 single screens in the country. SBICAP Securities had noted in a recent report highlighting that single screens had seen a negative CAGR of 4 per cent in the past nine years. These are also shutting down, making it unviable for produc-

tion houses to release their movies.

Sources said Reliance Entertainment and Phantom Films' upcoming biopic on Kapil Dev, 83 is also getting postponed. "At least 20-days of March would see no business for the multiplex owners. This would mean 20-25 per cent loss on a sequential basis," said a Mumbai-based media analyst. Box office revenues in Q3 were around ₹453 crore for PVR, while its total revenues were at ₹924 crore. Inox had posted revenues of ₹518 crore for the same.

While the listed firms did not wish to comment on revenue loss, they admitted business was seriously impacted.

Inox Group Director Siddhath Jain said, "We are optimistic that big releases will bring people back to cinema halls. It is not just *Sooryavanshi*, but movies like *Gulabo Sitabo* and *Gunjan Saxena* will also play an important role in bringing the cinema routine to normalcy, whenever they get released."

Multiplexes are expecting the government to help the industry after the scare is over, he said. "I am hopeful that we will come out with some plan sooner or later to alleviate the sector. This is a very important sector of the economy," he said.

Cine bodies to halt productions from Mar 19

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Mumbai, 15 March

To contain the spread of novel coronavirus, film bodies in India including Federation of Western Indian Cine Employees (FWICE), Indian Film & Television Directors' Association (IFTDA) and Producers Guild of India on Sunday decided to put shootings of films, TV shows and web series on hold from March 19 to March 31.

The meeting of the film bodies was also attended by the representatives of Indian Motion Pictures Producers' Association (IMPPA), Western India Film Producers' Association (WIFPA) and Indian Film and TV Producers Council (ITFPC). "The health and safety of our colleagues is of paramount importance to the Producers Guild of India. The industry's united decision to suspend shooting between the period March 19 to 31 is the need of the hour and we fully support it," Kulmeet Makkar, Chief Executive Officer, Producers Guild of India, said in

a statement here.

"In the coming days, we will discuss the details with our members on the modalities of postponing our production plans, keeping in mind the on-going threat of COVID-19. We will continue to monitor the situation and take further decisions accordingly," Makkar said.

Various events, award functions, interviews, shooting schedules have been called off in view of the novel coronavirus outbreak. "Important bodies of film and entertainment industry met today to deal with the issue of coronavirus. After a lot of discussion, we came to this conclusion that from this coming Thursday, all shootings will stop till March 31. After that, we will take a call," Ashoke Pandit, president of IFTDA, told reporters here.

"We have given a gap till Thursday so that people get ready accordingly, pack up and return from outstation. Our TV industry is an important one and even they will get time to organise things," he added.

Pandit said the move comes at a time when there are rising health concerns over novel coronavirus and the associations collectively decided that the health of workers is paramount. "We have also decided that all our sets, despite not being used, will be sanitised, cleaned. Every production house, with their members, will constantly take care of the sets. The daily wages of the workers will be affected so we have decided that they will be taken care of by all the producers associations and federations. We will take care of them," he added.

JD Majethia, chairman, TV wing, ITFPC, said they are in talks with broadcasters and all have been sensitive in dealing with the pandemic.

"Precautions were duly taken and more precautions will be out in place till Wednesday. We have put up posters to spread awareness, have provided masks and even given the option of paid leaves for anyone who feels sick. All measures are in place."

