

A New Beginning— Harnessing the Power of the Human Cloud



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My father used to work in a mid-sized company as a manager back in the day. Once in a while, particularly during summer vacation, he'd let me sit in his office and quietly watch his day. Quite often, a colleague would come in and he would dictate a letter, one that the colleague would write down in an alien looking script that made little sense to me.

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That person would then go back to their desk and type it out on a Remington typewriter, a marvel of mechanical engineering whose satisfying click-clack sound was the defining ambient background soundtrack of every office in the pre-computing era. Once typed, the letter would be inserted into an envelope and placed in a box labeled 'Out.' Every hour, a mail carrier would wheel a large shelf with many trays and collect items from the Out tray from around the office. Then the envelopes would be carried for sorting in a central mailroom for re-distribution. Again, a bunch of carriers wheeling similar shelves would go around to people's desks and drop the envelopes to the recipients at their desks into a tray marked In.

This is how office communication worked before emails and personal computers came along. Mailroom and mail delivering employees have disappeared from our offices, but several visual elements of our modern workplace user experience pay a skeuomorphic tribute to this past. Our send buttons still feature envelopes on them. Our email clients still have an Inbox and Outbox in them, and when we want to mark someone else on our emails, we still use a term most millennials would not recognize—Cc, or Carbon Copy, a wax and pigment coated paper that let you simultaneously make copies of letters that were being typed or written.

Old makes way to the new

Beyond this mere visual remembrance of the past, workplaces continue to perpetuate designs, both cultural and procedural, of the past, and these decisions often have aggregate outcomes that are significant. The design of our urban environments is a direct result of incremental decisions made over a century ago. Putting factories well outside cities while offices were concentrated in a central business district with people commuting large distances every day to get to work was a choice we made at the turn of the century when industrial automation, transportation, and logistics technology made global-scale companies possible. The introduction of the personal computer and digital communication technologies did not change this fundamental design. Our workplaces continued to have a large carbon footprint despite the introduction of smarter, sensor-driven climate control systems. Our employees still commuted long distances and flew millions of kilometers every year to attend business meetings despite the availability of high-resolution video conferencing tools.

This century-old cycle of this specific form of urbanization has had other societal consequences globally—the massive asymmetry between cities and small towns in terms of opportunities and economic growth, as well as the dangerous levels of pollution in some of the largest cities in the world. Most work continues to be location centric when it really does not have to.

Our strategy going forward has to avoid, unlike our email clients and software UIs, the incremental idea of skeuomorphically building on the past.

The paradigm shift

It took a global pandemic to force us to fundamentally rethink this model. Many of the design decisions we take for granted were challenged when a virus a few nanometers across brought the economic engine of the world to a near standstill. Organizations had to scramble to quickly deploy remote working capability for their employees and also rapidly scale cybersecurity operations for this situation. Companies struggled to measure and nudge remote worker productivity and faced high costs of collaboration. Employees not used to working remotely continued to use tools and struggled with a collaboration culture not suitable for remote work. Now, as organizations are heading back to the workplace and thinking about the long-term strategy for how to reimagine their future of work, it's worth taking a step back and getting the design right this time. Nothing in our past prepared us to deal with the impact of a global pandemic in a hyperconnected and urbanized world. Our strategy going forward has to avoid, unlike our email clients and software UIs, this incremental idea of skeuomorphically building on the past.



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Silver linings

Amidst the tragedy of lives lost and the economic damage that this pandemic has wrought, there are changes worth keeping for the long run. As employees stopped commuting long distances to work, urban air got cleaner. As employees worked remotely, they spent more time with their children and many were able to balance work and life better than they were able to in the past, and if I can specifically speak for TCS, we are starting to see the longer term promise of work truly being borderless. Work that can be performed effectively remotely also has the opportunity to tap into the full cognitive capacity of the human cloud. If someone does not have to move from her hometown in Tirunelveli in South India to Mumbai to be a Python developer building AI applications, it means more than just an improvement in the congestion of our largest cities. It means that we have access to Python developers anywhere in the world. When done at scale, it even holds the promise of a positive de-urbanization in the long run.

This is truly an inflection point for the corporate world as we know it. As opposed to calling it the **New Normal**, we prefer to call it the **New Beginning**. It is an opportunity to transform the future of the workplace. Beyond enabling remote work and a safe return-to-work for frontline employees, we believe this inflection point presents an opportunity to:

- **Create truly low-footprint** enterprises in terms of office real estate and long commutes for employees. The enterprise in this new beginning should be sustainable ground up and not as an afterthought.
- **Transform to a model** where talent is the full and flexible cognitive capacity of the human cloud that is location independent and temporally adaptable. This will be the one of the largest reimaginings of the corporation in its history, and organizations that can truly tap into a borderless talent pool will succeed.
- **A borderless workspace** is also an inclusive workspace, one that is able to offer equitable opportunities across existing societal disparities such as gender and geography.

The new workplace must be built on trust, federated self-governance, and an outcome-based approach to work delivery.

But this is not going to be easy. The looming shadow of the past is a powerful inhibitor of transformative change. A lot of the BAU rules have to be questioned and rewritten from scratch. The new organization needs to transform beyond just rolling out new and cool remote working technology. New people practices, workplace analytics, just-in-time learning, and a work-out-loud agile collaboration culture become critical. Enterprises will have to design new knowledge experiences to constantly foster an ambient awareness in a remote and frontline workforce. Automation has to be humanized for it to work better with human beings. While we design for physical distancing, we must design for social cohesion. And the new workplace must be built on trust, federated self-governance, and an outcome-based approach to work delivery.

Our promise

TCS' **Secure Borderless Workspaces™** is a full-stack solution framework for embarking on this journey. We can help you:

- Blueprint your SBWS™ journey and build a natively digital nudge strategy for change and transformation.
- Transform your IT infrastructure to enable a secure and smart elastic workspace on the cloud powered by a humanized Machine-First™ automation and self-service capability.
- Create knowledge and collaboration experiences that are optimally designed for virtual teams using unified collaboration platforms.
- Measure the employee cost of productivity, collaboration, agility, and innovation to drive real-time ambient awareness of change.
- Reimagine work delivery and governance for the borderless world with our location independent agile methodology.
- Foster a highly engaged and motivated workforce with redesigned people, processes, and technologies.
- And critically, build an ethos of cyber security that cuts across people, processes, and technology that will create a resilient and secure workspace for the future.

TCS has been helping its clients adapt to the new working model using SBWS™.

Two of our clients—Dutch insurer VIVAT and U.S.-based workforce provider ManpowerGroup—are now using our services.

Faced with lockdown, Dutch insurer VIVAT had to meet the twin challenges of ensuring service delivery while not compromising their employees' safety. TCS worked with the firm to map out its business continuity options. This involved creating a detailed risk assessment of all continuity options jointly with IT, security, and business teams. SBWS™ was then implemented, giving VIVAT the access, security, flexibility and reliability of remote IT equipment needed.

Knowing that its clients had new talent requirements to fill in the face of the crisis, workforce solutions company, ManpowerGroup, was keen to get back to work as soon as possible. The SBWS™ model was put in place seamlessly for 98% of the global ManpowerGroup workforce. This included locations across the U.S., Europe, and India, despite the varied requirements in terms of device access, availability, and permitted operations that could be performed remotely.

SBWS™ is also a natively agile philosophy, one that will take stock of your existing investments in technology, and incrementally and rapidly build momentum on your workplace transformation journey. And at the same time, this is a rapidly evolving space. To claim to have all the answers is not our style. We might be in a world where borders are closed right now, but this is the opportunity for ideas to flow more freely. We can help you embark on this journey. Let's collaboratively create the new beginning together.

About the author



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Ashok Krish is the Global Head of the Digital Workplace unit at TCS, that helps customers imagine the future of work for their employees. His team works at the intersection of design, technology and behavioral science, and helps conceptualize and implement modern, persuasive and immersive employee experiences. Outside of work, he is a columnist, musician and a food science enthusiast.

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