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With hybrid model, we can balance a multitude of responsibilities: Ashwani Singla

As the deadly Covid-19 pandemic has now slowed down, many firms and agencies have decided to reopen their organizations and call their employees to be present physically. There are chances that the flexibility in terms of coming to the office may create a sense of insecurity among people who have now adapted to the hybrid model of work as it is quite easy to have a balanced work and personal life.

Prior to the pandemic, the issues at work involved new technologies. For the first time, Covid-19 has uplifted the importance of the physical dimension of work.

Some PR agencies are considering reopening their offices by next year and some even have resumed their work offline. As the agencies reopen, many questions are circling in every professional's mind -- How will they cope with the physical working environment as now they have adapted to the Work from home scenario? What are the possibilities of staying safe while working together with so many people? Will there be any perks provided by the top management for the safety of employees?

With these questions, exchange4media approached the notable PR agencies' heads and spoke about how they are analyzing and working on the situations at workplaces as they open. We engaged with Founding Managing Partner, Astrum, Ashwani Singla, and asked about the situation at Astrum and what is the way forward in the coming days of the work culture.

Professionals have now adapted to the hybrid working model. Do you think it will be easy to go back to the same routine as offices are now reopening?

Hybrid working model is the future of work for professionals and knowledge workers. The experience of living and working through the COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated its adoption as the expectations of both employees and employers have evolved through this experience.

While remote working brings with it its own serendipity benefits of reduced corporate real estate, quality of life, higher productivity, and so on. However, it also comes with the challenges of disconnection, isolation feelings too much screen time, and such. Most importantly, the value of human interaction cannot be denied in cementing belonging and collaboration amongst co-workers.

Given my own experience at Astrum reputation advisory, with the hybrid model, we can find the balance to address the multitude of responsibilities and challenges that we have to deal with. Therefore, the right way to look at it is as the best of both worlds and not 'all-or-nothing option.

During the pandemic, the agencies and corporates have recruited many young talents to their organizations. Do you think they are prepared for joining physically?

In my opinion, the hybrid work model helps find some balance in life and work and those who have joined virtually will indeed join back physically. There may be pushbacks and holdouts, but a significant portion of the younger workforce also recognises the benefit of professional in-person interaction.

For e.g. at Astrum reputation advisory, we have a number of Millennials and the Gen-Zs who are considered to be the 'digital natives and living in a digital world is a natural part of their lives. Whilst they may have found it 'easy-peasy' to go virtual, without the in-person interaction they would miss out on the critical lessons one inculcates through social interactions and a learning curve that comes from collaborating and interacting. The social, cultural nuances, travelling, visiting new places, etc., all have an impact on shaping one's ideologies towards different aspects of life.

How have businesses and firms adapted to the changed norms due to the pandemic?

We have been seeing a number of changes in the workplace over the last 18 months. However, the adoption of work-from-home / remote work models, digitization of business, online modes of entertainment and engagement, etc., all were already underway much before the pandemic hit the world. This global crisis has accelerated the pace of adoption by about 5-7 years.

In its own way, this is a good thing as digital transformation is making processes transparent, agile and streamlined by automating repetitive tasks, allowing the workforce to spend their productive hours on more critical, cognitive tasks. As the business ecosystem becomes more interconnected, geographical boundaries are fast blurring and giving rise to innovative business models where technology and humans work together to create a better tomorrow.

Post-Pandemic, what are the employees' demands? What perks are you able to provide them?

At Astrum, we stand on the scaffolding of three main tenets: one, working with like-minded professionals with a shared passion for the 'science of reputation'. Two, a work environment where we can be the best version of ourselves; and three, have access to the best-in-class resources and tools to do our job effectively.

We look for work that challenges us and yet gives us the opportunity to strike a balance between our professional and personal responsibilities. We are 'asset-light, talent heavy', our work model is 'hybrid', which is flexible by leveraging technology. We don't see our health and wellness initiatives such as cashless medical insurance for self and family, mental well-being counselling and annual health check-up "perks" but as essentials for the physical and mental well-being of our colleagues.

How will you take care of the employees who recovered from covid-19 disease?

At Astrum, we put the welfare of our colleagues at the pinnacle of our priorities as they are the 'capital' of the firm. Thankfully we only had a couple of moderate cases that needed shelter-at-home'.

What do you think are some of the changes that the communication industry will undergo in the times to come?

The change is already here. There has been a significant acceleration in the 'digitization' of economic activity. Consider this fact we have over 20 Unicorns in 2021 and the year is not over yet. This will have a significant bearing on how communication will be consumed and produced. The rapid shift from monologues (advertising) to multilateral conversations (engagement) is already changing how companies connect with their consumers.

We are moving from 'broadcast' to 'narrowcast' of communication. Case in point, the growth of OTT, SM and other digital platforms in comparison to their traditional brethren and the shifts we are seeing in media investments. For companies to stand apart, they will need "insights-driven persuasive communication that inspires and engages with authentic stories". That we at Astrum believe that 'the convergence of science and creativity to understand and shape public opinion ethically' is an idea whose time has come.

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