

Media Coverage

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Forget WFH. Work near home is the way forward



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Employees want the feel of being in an office without a long commute. Company solution: satellite offices or seats in co-working spaces

Rashmi Menon
rashmi.m@livemint.com

On any given day, Navin Valsakumar, co-founder of Chennai-based Notion Press, finds at least five people from his team in Pune or Madurai making plans to work out of the satellite offices the company has set up in these locations instead of logging in from home. The publishing services firm has collaborated with co-working aggregator GoFloater so that those working from their hometowns can still "get the feel of an office". "We left it to employees to decide which location they want to work from and just pay for the seats. People have formed WhatsApp groups and they coordinate and come to office together," he says.

His company has made arrangements for satellite offices in co-working spaces in Mumbai, Pune, Trichy, Madurai, Coimbatore, Hyderabad and Bengaluru. These have proved useful not

just for existing employees but also new recruits to meet their colleagues. Before the pandemic, the company would hire only in Chennai or ask people to relocate. With work going remote and productivity remaining unaffected, Valsakumar has gained the confidence to aggressively hire across the country and tap into a wider talent pool. "We decided to take the office to people's hometowns instead of making them come to one location," he says.

The interest in setting up satellite offices has surged after the second wave of covid-19. With a third wave imminent, employees are reluctant to return from hometowns, forcing organizations to provide alternatives for their remotely working teams. Even within cities, employees are showing a preference for a shorter commute. Organizations, too, are cognizant of the fact remote employees want to work partially from office but in space that is close to home.

In July, the Awfis Workspace Survey 2021 stated that 58% of the workforce wanted the flexibility of working from the nearest branch or co-working space provided by their employer, indicating that work near home is the way to go. "While the work from home model was a pleasant change for a few months, we also saw a positive shift in the overall employee sentiment to resume working from office. Employees now

demand flexibility, safety and comfort, which has resulted in a work-near-home scenario where employees do not have to commute long hours to reach their offices," says Amit Raman, founder-CEO, Awfis.

"There is a fatigue that employees are experiencing working from home. Organizations and employees are realizing that having such offices at multiple locations helps team bonding," says Sparsh Khandelwal, founder of Stylework, an aggregator of flexible workspaces.

In the past few months, Khandelwal says, the demand for satellite offices has quadrupled, with organizations blocking 10-25 seats that they can use once or twice a week.

This model, however, may not work for all sectors. "For manufacturing, services or SME companies, having satellite offices doesn't make sense as employees are required at a certain location. After the pandemic, organizations are likely to call back their employees," believes R.P. Yadav, chairperson of human resource consultancy firm Genius Consultants.

WHERE EFFICIENCY LIES

For most organizations though, flexible satellite offices is a model that seems to be working. Besides having offices in multiple locations within tier I cities, there is high demand for

space in cities such as Pune, Indore, Lucknow, Ahmedabad, Coimbatore, Madurai, Trichy, Vijayawada, Nagpur, Jaipur and Patna, say co-working space aggregators.

Having an office only 15 minutes away is not going to be an abstract concept anymore, says Harsh Lambah, country manager India, vice-president sales (South Asia), IWG, a provider of serviced offices. "We are witnessing a surge in demand for workspaces in tier II and III cities, as many businesses are looking for flexible, decentralized, and permanent office space solutions in these locations," says Lambah.

COLLABORATION CALLS

It's for a similar reason that Fitr, a community-based health and fitness app, set up "work-out spaces" by taking seats in co-working spaces in Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai. The Pune-based company encourages its teams to meet every two-three weeks at the office to work and socialize. "It makes the bond stronger. Even in Pune, we are identifying a satellite office at a mutually convenient location and will be using our main office to stock inventory," says Fitr founder-CEO Jitendra Choulsey. Of the 170 employees, about 80 live in Pune.

While they no longer want to spend hours on a commute, some employees don't mind a bit of travel. Having worked remotely for nearly 18 months, Raghu Rajagopal, an implementation consultant with a SaaS company in Chennai, doesn't mind travelling 9km to the co-working place that operates as a satellite office for his company. "It's still half the distance I'd travel if I was going to the head office," he says with a smile. Rajagopal joined the company in September 2020 and had a hard time creating a rapport with co-workers as well as learning processes. After the second wave, he and four colleagues decided to work from a co-working place in Chennai. "We did this in the last week of September 2021, and posted the photo in the office Slack channel. The next week, our company decided to book co-working seats for people who wanted to work together in any location they chose. I didn't expect it to have such a great response. I think people are grateful for this option," he says.

Besides having a chance to work in an office-like atmosphere once a week, Rajagopal has got the opportunity to meet colleagues from other teams. "There are days I meet people from sales, product or marketing. It's great to get to know colleagues since I joined remotely," he says.

Satellite offices are also useful because they help new recruits understand their organization's culture. "Many employees have been onboarded virtually and have not had a chance to know their team members or soak in the company culture. This has prompted many companies to look at satellite offices," says Shyam Sundar Nagarajan, the founder of on-demand workplace provider GoFloater.

For some, it's been a way to curtail attrition and attract new candidates. After getting positive feedback from employees for opening satellite offices in Andheri in Mumbai, and in Gurgaon, Navi Mumbai-based retail, e-commerce and marketing consultancy Growisto is opening an office in Indore. "Having a satellite office has definitely made hiring easier," says Growisto co-founder Pritesh Mittal. Growisto's employee strength is a little over 100. "Candidates are no longer worried about relocation. That's the charm of satellite offices."