

ADDRESS AT THE WEBINAR

by



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on

**"Maintaining Mental Health: Working
From Home"**

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Disabilities and University of Melbourne,
Australia

Maintaining Mental Health: Working From Home

INTRODUCTION

It is indeed a great privilege for me to speak at the virtual mini-international conference on “Mental Health-Looking Beyond COVID-19” being organized by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities and the University of Melbourne Australia. I am thankful to Smt. Shakuntala Gamlin, Secretary to Government of India, Department of Persons with Disabilities for inviting me to this session to speak on “**Maintaining Mental Health : Working from Home**”. The first thought that occurred to me when I was invited to speak on the subject was that since the lockdown announced, I had attended over 1000 hours of online work, my son had attended 500 hours of online school and my daughter had attended 350 hours of online university. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the paradigm of life –virtual meetings, virtual classrooms and social distancing have become the new normal. It’s an unprecedented year for governance, education, health care, economy, jobs and travel.

The COVID-19 Pandemic - Redefining National Governance

The coronavirus pandemic has redefined India’s governance models. It’s important to recognize the importance of Leadership roles Public Administrators have played in the COVID-19 pandemic. The overwhelming motto has been - **Commitment to the larger public good against all odds.**

Getting to live with the coronavirus has meant less contact governance, officials having to work in masks and gloves and adoption of work from home policies for nearly 66-75 percent workforce. Institutions have become very important in the regulatory governance model with emphasis on cooperative federalism. The contributions of MHA, MOHFW, NDMA, NITI, DARPG, ICMR, Railways, Posts, Air India, AIIMS has become highly visible. There has also been an increased focus on centrally sponsored schemes with enhanced health sector spending under the National Health Mission and job creation under MGNREGS.

There has been a lot of emphasis on digital decision making in the central secretariat. Virtual offices were possible in those Departments where e-Office was implemented. Web-room meetings and new protocols were put in place, as the Central Secretariat shifted to a digital mode, the attached, autonomous and subordinate offices adopted digital practices. Virtual private networks and home working policies have become more streamlined.

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The implementation experience has been successful. 75 Ministries adopted e-Office, with 57 Ministries achieving more than 80 percent of work on e-Office. Nearly 17 lac e-files have been created in the central secretariat. The Central Secretariat Manual of Office Procedure, 2019 enabled the digital central secretariat with virtual private network facility being delegated to Deputy Secretary level. Quite clearly many of India's digital infrastructure initiatives have borne fruit in this period as the Nation's administrative systems braced to fight the pandemic. The significant impact of Bharat Net, Megh Raj, e-Sign and Digi locker were seen in this period.

Another feature of the redefined governance has been the emphasis on integrated service portals. The DARPG created a portal for COVID-19 public grievances through grievance redressal was provided to 1.5 lac citizens. As digital infrastructure became the core utility of every citizen, the focus was on ensuring high speed internet, providing unique digital identity and access to common service centers. E-Services had to be ensured on real time basis and government tried to provide integrated services across departments. The digital empowerment of citizens was most felt in online classrooms, literacy platforms and in participative governance. The benefits of several successful e-governance projects like e-Hospital, PMJDY, Aarogya Setu app, e-NAM, SWAYAM was seen.

During this long period of work from home, senior officials constantly interacted with staff in virtual meetings. This enabled employees to overcome a sense of feeling isolated, lonely or disconnected from an office environment. It also ensured that they stayed motivated and enabled prioritization of work-loads. There was an uncertainty about the progress being achieved and constant interactions helped instill a spirit of camaraderie and esprit-de-corps.

Employees were advised to create boundaries between 'work time' and 'home time'; create a specific place at home from where they could work, and to stay connected with co-workers and top leadership by regular virtual and phone meetings. They were advised to undertake manage stress through problem solving, relaxation and meditation, and doing activities which they enjoyed. Several employees were in containment zones for long periods of time and were confined to work from home. They had to learn new skills to ensure that work from home was successful. Once the containment zones lockdown was lifted, these employees returned to work gradually picking up routines. In India, we are yet to see a full return of office staff to work from the lockdown, but things are fast returning to normal.

The Corona virus Pandemic – Changing the face of State Governments

State Governments stood at the forefront of the battle against the corona virus pandemic. War rooms were created in State Secretariats for massive coordination with field formations. Health, Information Technology and Home Departments played

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the leadership role with Industries and Food departments handling issues of migrant labor. Several advanced e-Office systems were operationalized in State Secretariats – OSWAS in Odisha, RajKaaj in Rajasthan to name a few. The wifi facilities at village level and video conferencing facilities at Gram Panchayat level extremely useful for coordination.

Let me present 2 case studies.

The Karnataka government engaged with people with clear and simple communication. An effective communication strategy was adopted with concise do's and don'ts to reassure the public. The State Government leveraged technology effectively – pharma and druggists app to monitor OTC drugs related to fever, KPME app to crowd source suspect cases, monitoring tool for COVID-19 hospitals, readiness indicator – an advisory tool for self assessment of workplace readiness, COVID unified portal as a single source of COVID-19 related information, were used in this period.

Tamil Nadu has India's best health systems with good public health and private health infrastructure and a long-standing procurement agency for drugs, surgical equipment and services. The best practices introduced by Tamil Nadu included deployment of rapid response teams in districts, registration of stranded persons and e-pass system with web portals being launched to restrict people's mobility.

District Administration – Resilience, Courage and Conviction

The District Collectors have stood at the frontend in the battle against Coronavirus pandemic. They worked in shifts and coped with massive stress levels. There are numerous success stories of resilience, courage, sacrifice and conviction that have emerged from the Districts. In many ways, the young officers who have stood in the frontlines have shown maturity and commitment well beyond their seniority, implementing the strict lockdown, promoting social distancing, ensuring mobilization of village level COVID-19 taskforces and above all ensuring that the rural societies adapt to the new normal.

Districts have utilized e-Governance in a big way – the overwhelming message from hundreds of District Collectors has been that districts have leveraged technology and synergized developmental programs. Most districts adopted multiple surveillance practices: sero-surveillance, digital-surveillance, thermal screening, were widely used. New technology practices included use of IVRS systems, e-Sanjeevani app, Aarogya Setu app and e-Pass. Wage payments under employment programs were made through online portals.

Several District Collectors ensured that online education even in remote areas – the vidya-varathi app being an outstanding example, distributing library books and mid-

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day meals through village volunteers. District Collectors ensured students reached home safely, as in the case of Kota, Rajasthan. To help farmers, District Collectors mobilized National Rural Livelihoods Mission's self-help groups to identify progressive farmers and provide effective market linkages under e-National Agricultural Market. Many District Collectors also worked with SHG's to ensure door step delivery of services, some also worked with big businesses like Swiggy and Zomato to supply vegetables.

Conclusion

The Indian experience of working from has been successful at the National, State and District levels. Officials worked long and hard from home in at designated work places free of distractions. They managed to set a routine for working at home, using technology options and adopting a digital working style. Stress levels were overcome by frequent communications at work, flexible schedules, social distancing and adoption of government regulations. The performance of Indian civil servants can be – an inspiration to one and all.

Jai Hind.

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