

# Thriving in the pandemic

## Technology Sector in India



# Introduction

This white paper is a compilation of key findings from a series of interactions with Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and Chief Human Resource Officers (CHROs) on the Leadership Confidence Index report released by Odgers Berndtson in association with Harvard Business Review Analytic Services.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this paper is to share a consolidated perspective on leadership issues that resonate across Indian organisations operating across the technology sector and sectors that are enabled by technology. It carries key takeaways and leadership learnings from the crisis.

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<sup>1</sup>Odgers Berndtson Harvard Business Review Analytic Services. 2020. The Odgers Berndtson Leadership Confidence Index 2020. Odgers Berndtson. <https://www3.odgersberndtson.com/LCI2020>

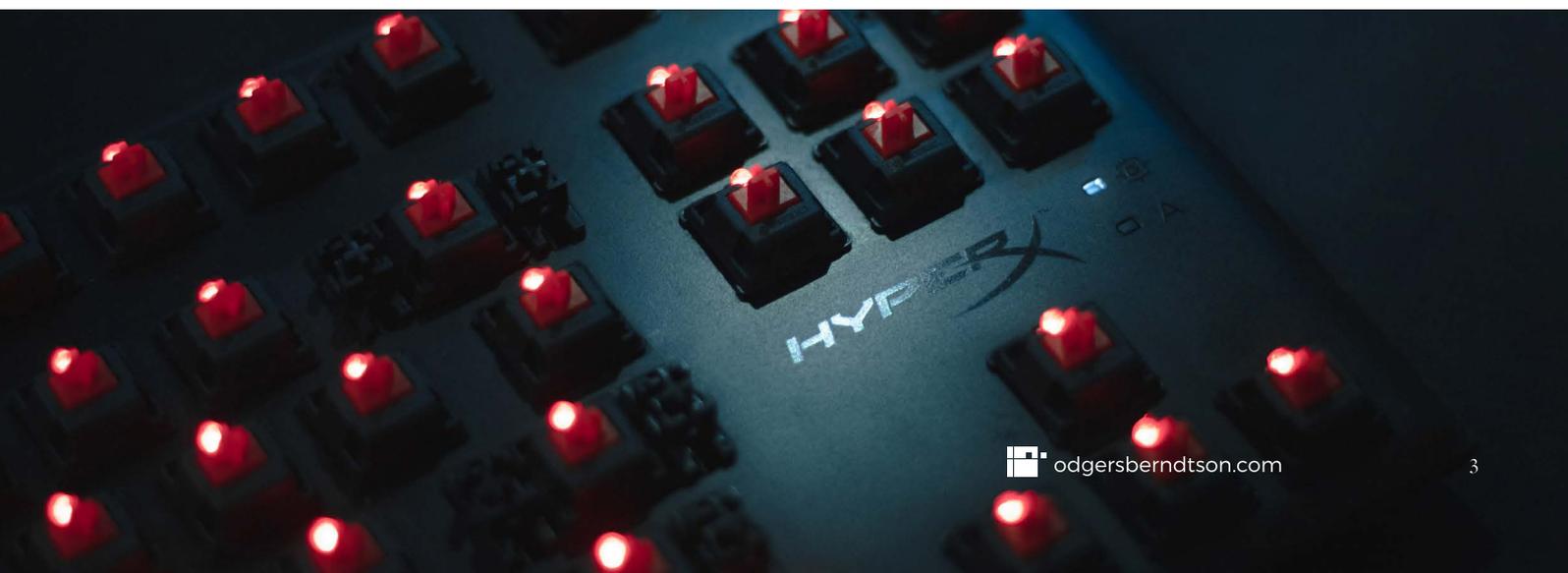
# Thriving in the pandemic – Technology Sector in India

Historically, advances in technology have been the major cause of disruption. It is not surprising that the technology industry, which is a disruptor, is itself undergoing significant changes under the pandemic, particularly in India.

The big four technology firms – TCS, Infosys, Wipro, and HCL Technologies have all reported operating profits above expectations, and GIC's (Global Inhouse Centres) continue to spring up and grow. Three factors have had a very positive impact during Covid-19:

- **Increased demand:** The pressure on companies worldwide to cut costs, has accelerated outsourcing to India for IT services, operations, and products. In terms of domestic clients, there has been a surge in business for online streaming platforms, online education platforms, and e-commerce websites. Many companies are increasingly moving to digital distribution models, particularly in the consumer retail and financial services.
- **Digital disruption:** It has become imperative for companies across sectors to fast-track digitisation of their internal processes and drive productivity. This has led to a surge in demand for Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) & Machine Learning (ML) technology.
- **Leadership and talent:** Leaders in the Indian IT industry have successfully risen to the challenge thrown by the pandemic. They have demonstrated adaptability, resilience to bounce back, and lead innovation within their organisation. They have shown employee-centricity, along with a focus on safety & security at an organisational level. With the support of technology and secure IT & Telecom infrastructure, entire teams have seamlessly moved to the 'work from home' model. This has created a huge opportunity for the industry to go forward, with an increased pool of qualified professionals, with the flexibility of working from home.

However, this global pandemic has caused disruption on a large scale across all industries. As per interactions with industry representatives, the pandemic has made digital transformation & technology upgrade imperative. As an example of how tough the market is, asset reconstruction companies collected only 4% of their average monthly recoveries due to the nationwide lockdown. For some leaders, the pandemic has served as an opportunity to re-look at their entire range of products & services and develop hybrid offerings. Successful leaders are aiming to come out stronger from this crisis.



“ More than 95% of IT and IT enabled companies who are enlisted with NASSCOM have transitioned to working from home during the March-April period which was remarkable. Our entire workforce continues to be very productive in ‘Work from Home’ model and we have not experienced any significant challenges in this transition. The role of the frontline manager has become significant in these times wherein over 95% of staff feel that their frontline managers are fully supportive in these times. ”

**Asit Suri, Empower Retirement, Country Head - India**



# The disruptor as an enabler

Online platforms, especially education platforms and e-commerce websites, have seen a surge in business. In the banking sector, automation has picked up the pace, and banks are quickly shifting to digital distribution models.

Reluctance to adopt technology has been replaced by a change in the mindset of leaders to fast-track the digitisation process to aid business operations. It is not surprising that digital transformation companies are much in demand, especially in the banking, insurance, and healthcare sectors.

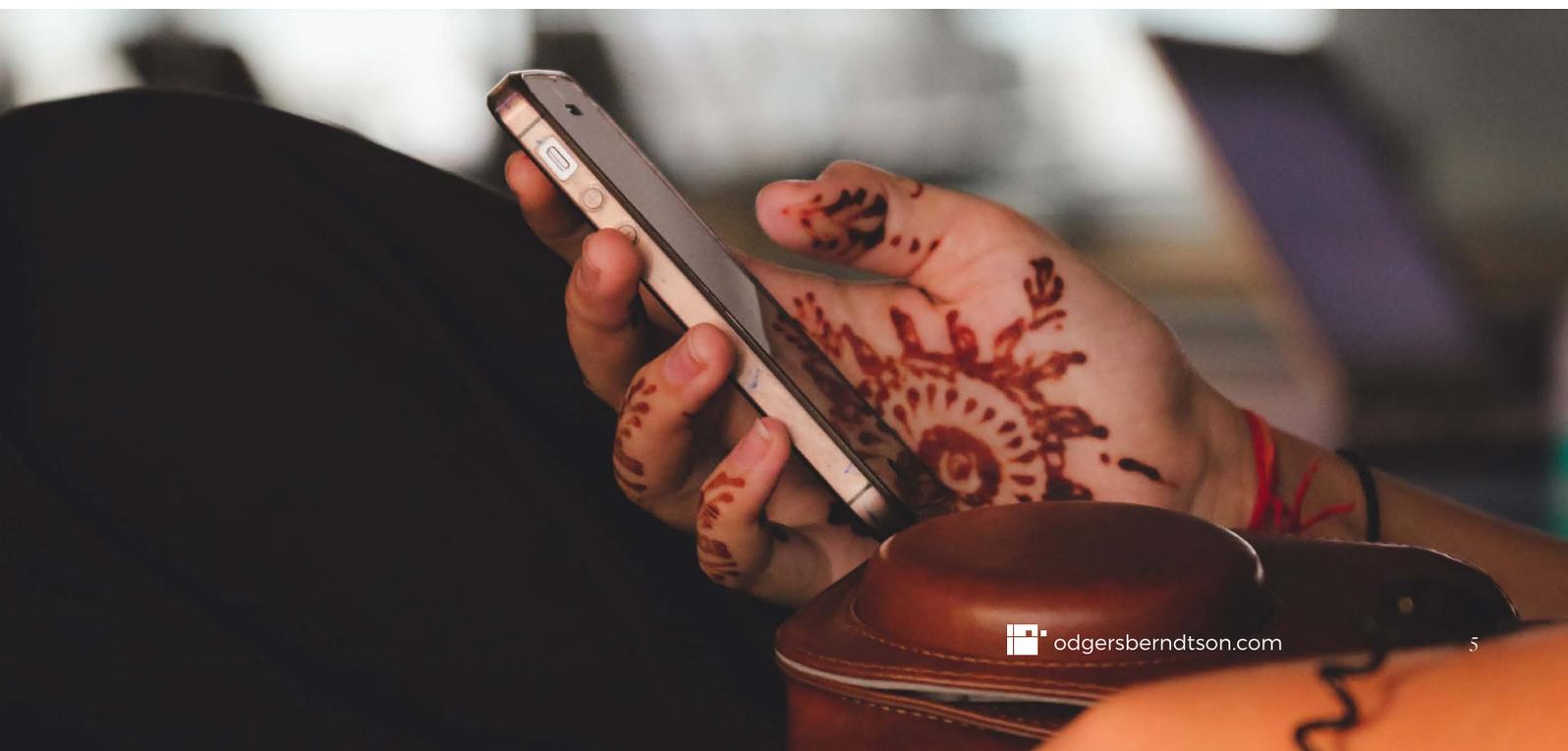
When leaders think of providing world-class service to clients, they are open to investment in technology. However, the same openness must also be present when it comes to internal technology upgradations. Leaders must ensure that all the dots are connected for the organisation to deliver consistently.

Though technology is bridging the gap, human face to face interaction is still missing. Some leaders, especially in the IT sector space, are finding it hard to remain connected with customers. Some organisations have launched applications in these times to help their customers to stay abreast of their products and services. Product development teams are working on developing apps and software for industries that are worst hit by the pandemic, such as aviation and hospitality.

While digitisation is essential, it is the convergence between both digital and

brick and mortar channels, which is vital in such times. There has been a visible shift in operational management for multinational organisations, from a global to a more local approach. The pandemic has also provided an opportunity for organisations to become more linear and efficient. It is an opportune time for Government bodies to look at regulatory changes required to support IT companies to be compliant while working from home.

In the Banking sector, a certain percentage of digital operations was always present, but the pandemic has pushed for



the digitisation of entire processes. The financial year closing of 31st March 2020 was conducted entirely online, which could never have been imagined in the past. Banking websites are seeing an increase in engagement, with some even getting 500-600 views daily, concerning vendor partner requests, which was not seen in earlier times. Innovation is at the forefront. For example, a bank has come up with an application wherein if an individual consumer in a resident society wants money, they can let the bank know, and cash will be provided to them at their doorstep. It can be likened to an ATM coming to the customer!

In the Indian media industry, the focus has shifted from global to local news coverage. Revenue through ad sales saw a dip of 35-40% in April-May period; however, this period also witnessed record online viewership. The media industry witnessed its own set of challenges in terms of service delivery in a nationwide lockdown environment. The sector saw immense creativity from journalists who devised innovative methods to deliver news from the confinements of their homes.

Most large media houses are focusing on how to re-connect with viewers across the world. BBC launched a kid's product, 'CBeebies' during the nationwide

lockdown in India and received unprecedented viewership.<sup>2</sup>

Though launching a product in a lockdown environment came with its own challenges, the BBC took a risk by innovating in these circumstances and received a very positive response. Most companies would never have thought of launching a new product during such a period, but organisations who have chosen to innovate have come out as winners. Disney Hotstar is another example of innovative collaboration in such disruptive times. As per media reports, Disney Hotstar is expected to generate US\$900 million in India alone by 2025.<sup>3</sup>

“Our experience of Covid-19 has been unique being at the front end of things. The media industry is facing immense challenges today. But there is always a silver lining in these dark times as well, by constantly exploring new ways to get closer to your viewers and clients.”

**Rahul Sood, BBC Global News, Managing Director – India & South Asia**

<sup>2</sup>Exchange4media bureau, Aug 2019, CBeebies, the pre-school channel from BBC Worldwide, enters India with popular shows, <https://www.exchange4media.com/kids-news/cbeebiesthe-pre-school-channel-from-bbc-worldwideenters-india-with-popular-shows-27965.html>

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Easton, May 2020, Disney+ Hotstar expected to generate US\$900 million in India alone by 2025, <https://www.digitaltveurope.com/2020/05/19/disney-hotstar-expected-to-generate-us900-million-in-india-alone-by-2025/>

# Changes in the way we work

Where negative stories of disruption are coming to light, there are also stories of unprecedented collaboration. Competitors are coming together for the sake of the greater good of helping humanity.

Such as pharmaceutical giants – GlaxoSmithKline and Sanofi joining forces to develop a new vaccine to prevent COVID-19.<sup>4</sup>

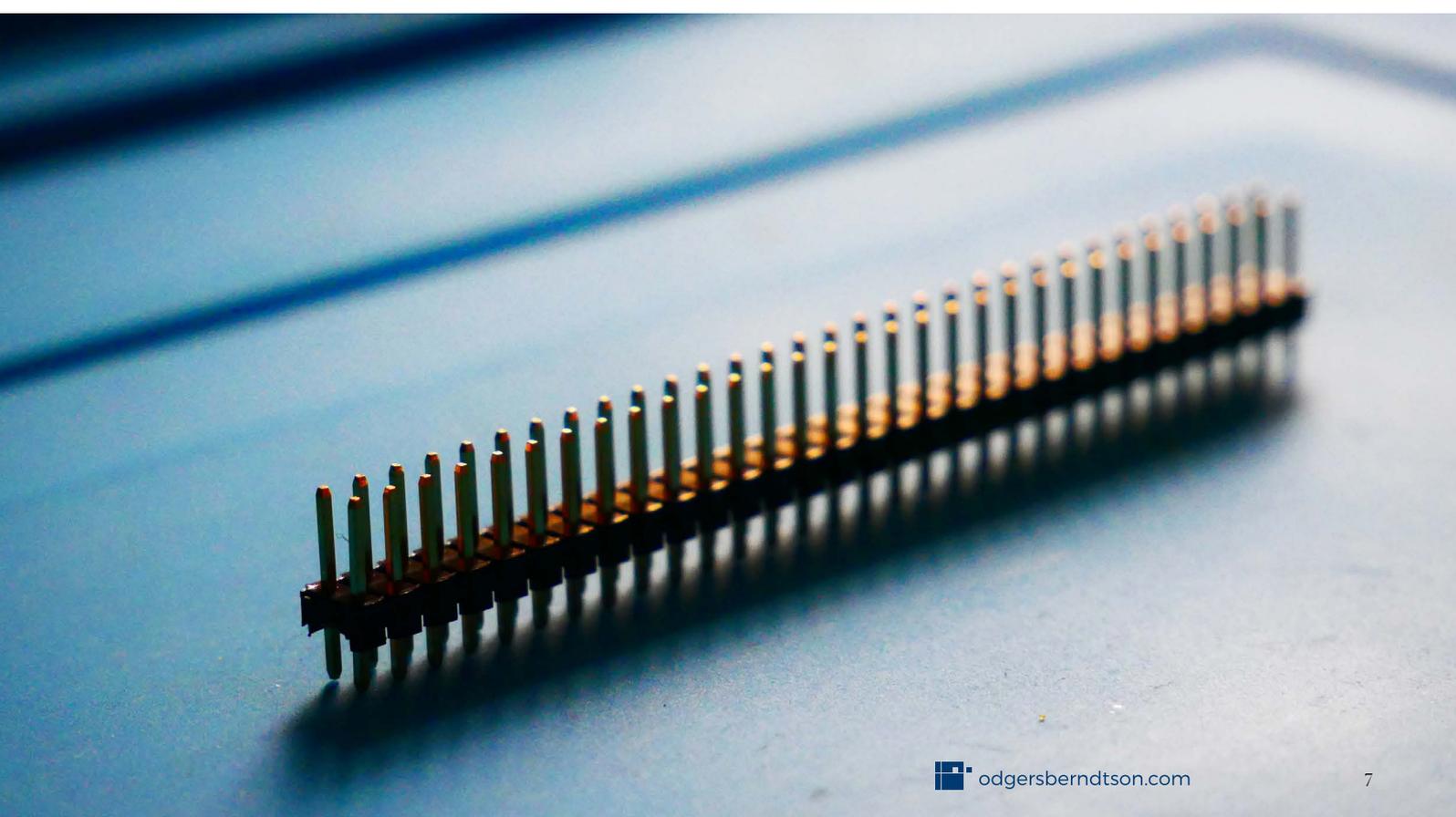
People have started appreciating simple things they may have taken for granted, such as face to face interactions, social gatherings and celebrations. Digital platforms such as Twitter are seeing a surge of

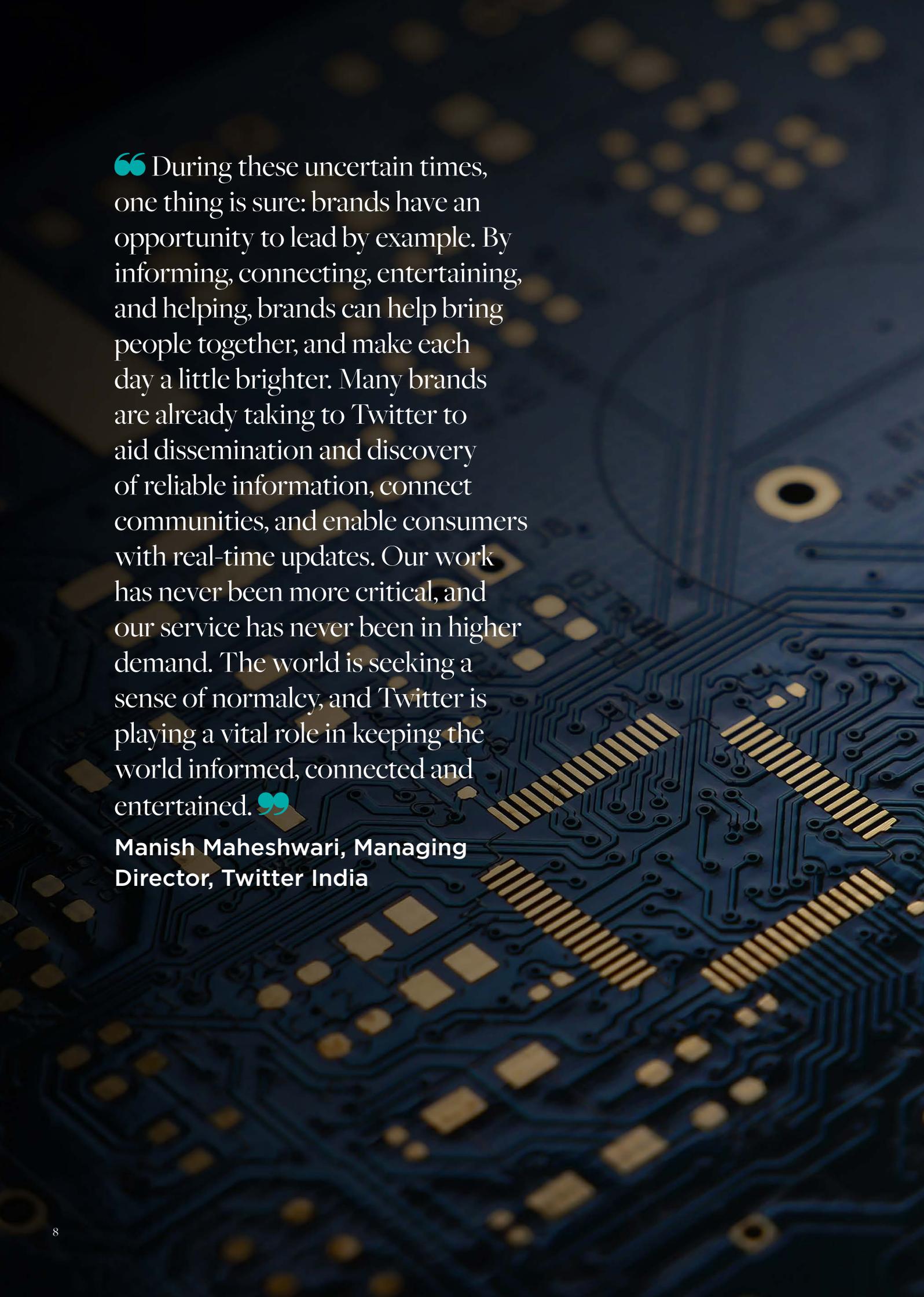
experience sharing on how people are thinking in the new post-Covid world, what changes they are witnessing in their lives and how they are overcoming challenges posed by the pandemic.

Employees have got an insight into each other's lives as they try to remain connected with each other. This aspect is also true for leaders as they can

connect better with the people they have to manage and vice versa. Industry representatives believe that it is about leveraging what has been learnt from the past and not replicating it. The industry's shared perspective is that it would be a waste to let the opportunities presented due to the pandemic simply pass by.

<sup>4</sup>Joe Palca, (14 April 2020), Coronavirus Vaccine? Two Pharmaceutical Giants Collaborating To Develop One, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/14/834160187/coronavirus-vaccine-two-pharmaceutical-giants-collaborating-to-develop-one>





“ During these uncertain times, one thing is sure: brands have an opportunity to lead by example. By informing, connecting, entertaining, and helping, brands can help bring people together, and make each day a little brighter. Many brands are already taking to Twitter to aid dissemination and discovery of reliable information, connect communities, and enable consumers with real-time updates. Our work has never been more critical, and our service has never been in higher demand. The world is seeking a sense of normalcy, and Twitter is playing a vital role in keeping the world informed, connected and entertained. ”

**Manish Maheshwari, Managing Director, Twitter India**

# The employee is king

The focus of businesses has shifted to ensure smooth operations, which leads to customer satisfaction. Organisations want to ensure the safety and security of their employees is taken care of as a priority.

The employee has become as important as the client, if not more. Leaders are using this time as an opportunity to increase communication with their employees, apart from customers.

Work from home has brought in better work efficiency with fewer commute hours. An organisation in the IT sector realised their women employees were having a hard time managing work and household duties without any house help. They gave an extra holiday every week to all women employees to support them. Though it was a tiny step, the women employees welcomed this gesture. They felt it boosted their trust and confidence in their organisation.

With the day being more packed than usual with the 'work from home' model, leaders have created specific groups to have virtual discussions over tea/coffee. HR teams within organisations are trying their best to keeping employees engaged. This includes arranging creative videos with employees and virtual gaming sessions.

Leaders are battling with the psychological impact the pandemic is having on their teams. This includes changes in the work lifestyle. Within the first two weeks of the nationwide lockdown in India, employees living on their own started seeing signs of stress. Some organisations were able to

arrange for call-in services, where individuals could schedule therapy sessions. HR teams have their hands full, encouraging people to talk, remain connected with the organisation, and have a positive frame of mind.

Leaders are looking at talent management and retention with a long-term view of the benefits to the organisation. Leaders also need to understand that problem solving need not necessarily be restricted to CXO and N-1 levels. Innovative solutions to problems can come from any level. The disruption caused due to the pandemic has brought to light the need for collaborative efforts to find unique solutions.

“Our whole catchment for employees has suddenly gone into a rejig mode. We no longer need to look for talent at certain locations only, as work can be delivered from anywhere in India.”

**V S Raj, Atos Syntel, Global Head – Banking & Financial Services**

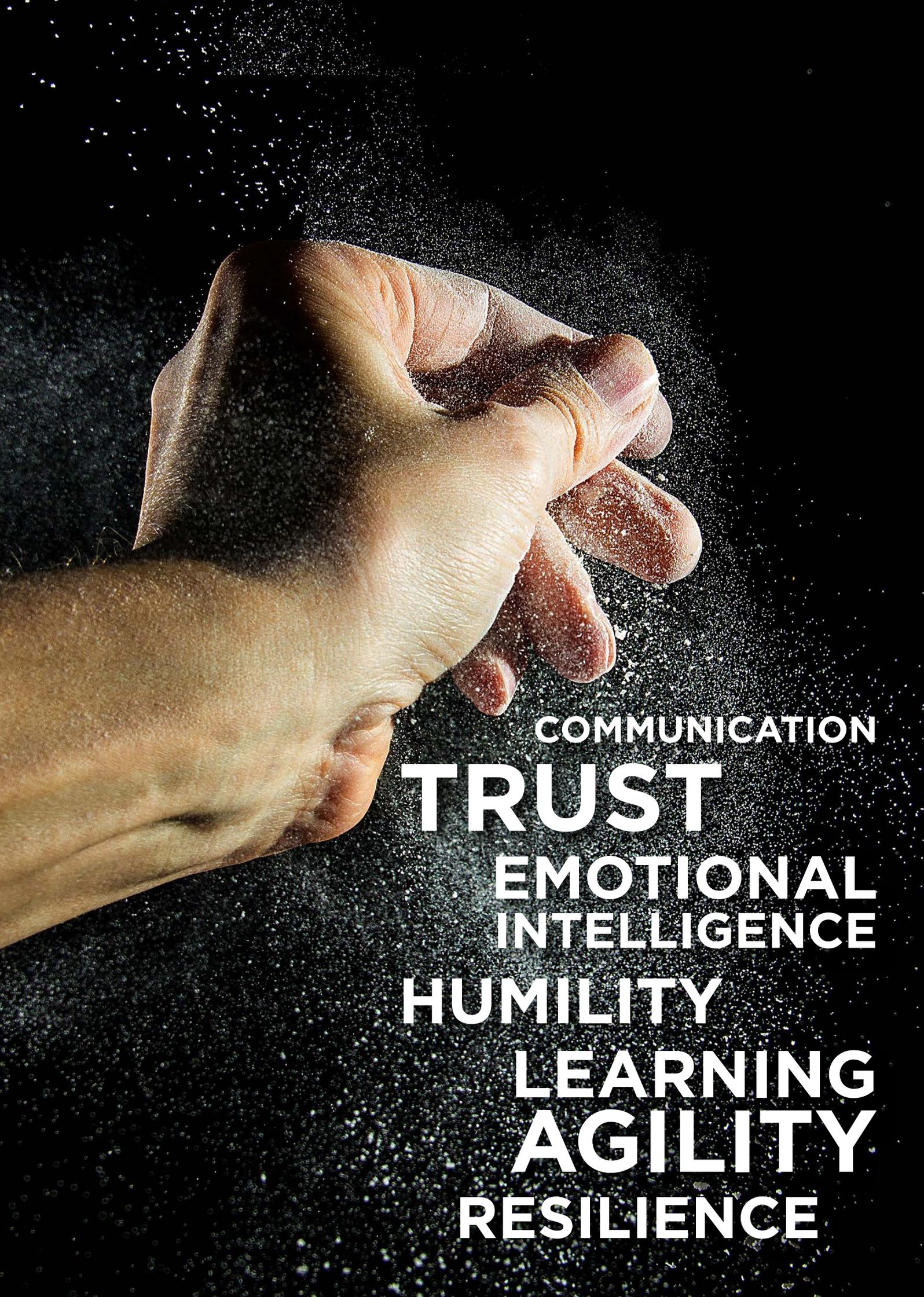


The CHRO community believes that millennials are perfectly capable of adapting and being productive in a 'work from home' environment. In the IT sector, 75% of frontline managers had never worked from home and were used to monitoring their teams physically. At present, 100% are working from home and are managing their teams virtually! Some organisations have taken up initiatives to train frontline managers on how to manage their teams remotely. For HR managers, especially in the IT/ ITES sector, the metrics to gauge effectiveness and performance while working from home have increased, compared to earlier times.

The HR fraternity has been forming virtual onboarding processes within their organisation. While onboarding virtually, they are concerned with getting new joiners oriented to the company and its legacy, as well as training them. They are working harder than before to ensure a smooth transition.

“ If you don't have superbly talented and aligned colleagues with whom you who want to learn and be on the professional journey with, client delivery will suffer at some point. ”

Deepayan Sensharma, Marsh & McLennan India, Director - HR



COMMUNICATION

**TRUST**

EMOTIONAL  
INTELLIGENCE

HUMILITY

LEARNING  
**AGILITY**

RESILIENCE

# Leadership lessons

Leaders at all levels are out of their traditional comfort zones of having their teams around physically to ensure command and control. Trust is the greatest asset a good leader can have, particularly in these times.

The ability to trust is vital for a leader to manage their team successfully.

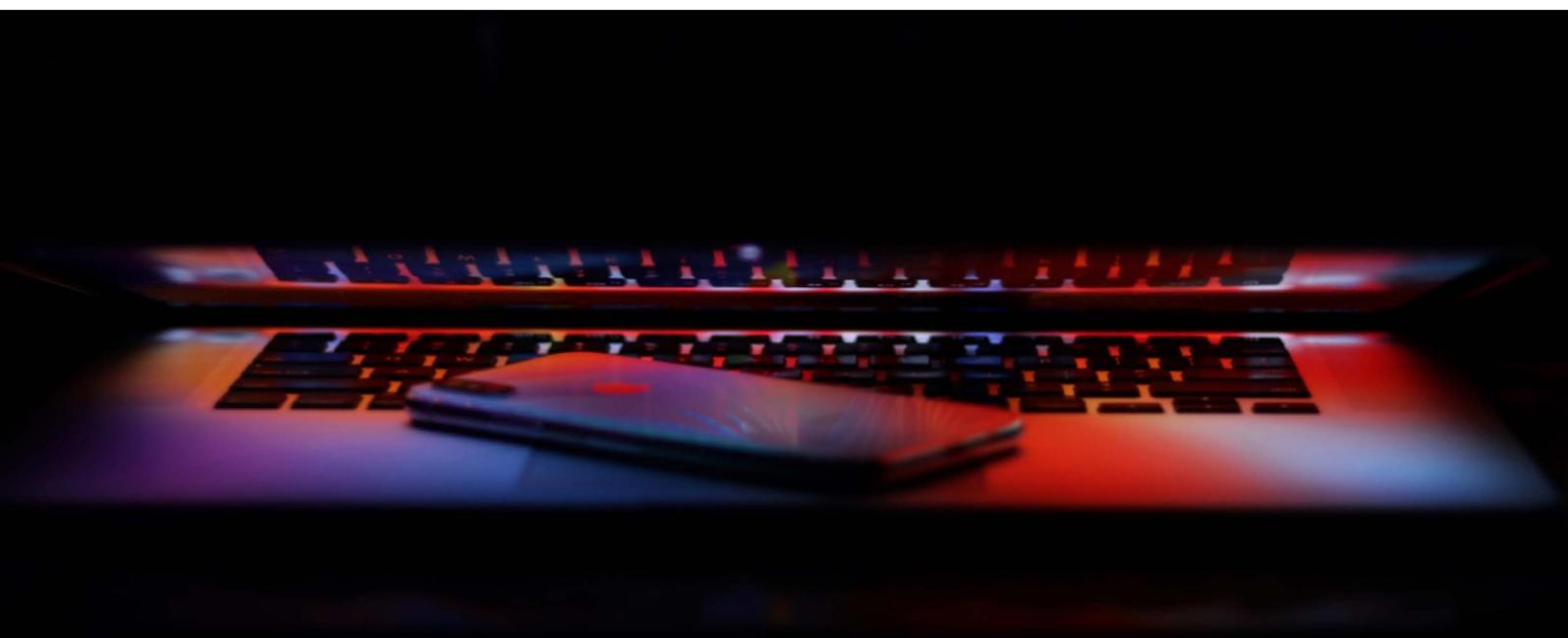
The crisis has also shown which leaders can think on their feet and are swift to respond compared to others who lacked courage. Since this is an unprecedented crisis, leaders cannot rely on past experiences, and the mindset of a leader has become critical. This includes traits such as courage, resilience, and humility. Employees have come forward by displaying extraordinary commitment, putting in extra hours for the business, and working with a sense of contributing to the economy at large.

Emotional Intelligence in a leader is critical in these times. As soon as the crisis started, the CEO of an integrated technology solution company offered a 25% discount to its customers. This gesture appealed to the customer base and helped build brand loyalty. It was a decision taken out of empathy. Leaders that were able to combine business with humanity have successfully strengthened their customer base and retention.

Learning agility is another essential quality desired by leaders of today. Technical capabilities are still available in abundance,

but fundamental traits such as courage, ability to connect with people, and drive change are the key differentiators.

HR leaders are looking at talent management from a long-term perspective, rather than just from a month on month view. Their outlook is that the organisation would require trained talent and experienced professionals to run operations when the demand curve goes back to normal. Some organisations chose to pay out bonuses before time and did not lay off their employees. Such decisions require great courage from a leader.





The role of the front-line manager has come to focus. They act as the spine of the organisation that helps bind the top (leadership vision) and bottom (workforce) together.

People are inherently scared regarding their job security. In addition, the monotony of working in a home environment is creeping in slowly. Motivating and connecting with people is a huge task for leaders. Thus, the ability of the leader to communicate is critical. Often leaders cannot envision their team's circumstances, whether they have children, if they have an elderly that needs care, etc. By empathising with individuals, leaders can connect with them and

be successful in motivating them. Organisations are taking initiatives to ensure the mental well-being of their employees is prioritised.

Though technology has been an enabler in these times of disruption, the importance of human to human interactions can never be undermined. The need of the hour is for leaders who can understand the disruption that the consumer and employee is going through and offer a solution by integrating it with a product or service provided by their organisation. People and technology can work together as long as there are leaders who can connect with their teams and carry them along the path of digitisation.

“ There are two types of leaders – one who can preserve legacy and those that are the dreamers, that shape the future. It is difficult to find leaders who can think of the consumer, think P&L and can build the bridge between preserving legacy and shaping the future. ”

**Arun Krishnamurthy, Barclays, Head of HR India**

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We would like to express gratitude to the following for their valuable insights, including:

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# Odgers Berndtson in India

Odgers Berndtson India works with Indian conglomerates, large globalising Indian companies and foreign multinationals to discover and develop leaders with the talent to capitalise on India's growing markets. With a pan-India reach through our offices in Mumbai and Delhi, we pride ourselves on a deep understanding of every aspect of our clients' needs and a focus on a quality candidate experience.

For over 50 years, Odgers Berndtson has helped some of the world's biggest and best organisations find the senior talent to drive their agendas.

We deliver executive search, assessment and development to businesses and organisations varying in size, structure and maturity.

We do that across over 50 sectors, whether commercial, public or not-for-profit, and draw on the experience of more than 250 Partners and their teams in 29 countries.

Odgers Berndtson's strength lies in the partnerships we develop to address that need.

We form strong relationships with the most talented people, with those seeking them and between our own teams globally, to bring both sides together.

It is because of our deep, non-transactional and lasting partnerships, that our clients can acquire, develop and retain their strongest leaders.

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