

Covid-19 is reshaping the job market in a big way. Are employees equipped for the new environment?

Synopsis

As digital transformations happened and the bottom of the pyramid workforce reduced, the number of people managing this workforce has reduced over the years. If you are a middle manager in an industry that is radically changing the way it delivers products or services, you have a reason to worry.



"We have never hired butchers, but the pandemic changed that," says Rituparna Chakraborty, co-founder and executive vice-president, Teamlease Services, India's leading staffing company.

As consumers shifted to apps to order fish and meat instead of visiting the

unorganised wet markets during the pandemic, these online service providers sought to hire skilled butchers for their growing business. This created demand for butchers as a category of employees. For a good 10 days in June, recruiters from Teamlease were clueless about how to find this new category of employees to meet the urgent demand. In the midst of the pandemic, these recruiters visited shops in wet markets, mainly in metros, to find talent. Gradually, as butchers came on board, Teamlease got skilling companies to train them.

The demand that started with a shift in consumer behaviour during the lockdown has managed to stick even in the "unlockdowns". The staffing company placed 400-500 butchers in the lockdown. Now, it places about 100 a month on a salary of Rs 15,000-22,000 — more than what a last-mile delivery agent makes (Rs 13,000-18,000).

"The process of mobilisation of butchers, who were employed informally, with training in hygiene and slicing techniques, paves the path for the formalisation of a profile that for the longest time was mostly informal," says Chakraborty.

This formalisation is a small indicator of how distinctive and nuanced the impact of digital transformation is on the talent market. From last-mile agents to campuses, from freelancers to the middle- and senior-level leadership, the accelerated digital transformation in the post-Covid world has begun to change the complexion of the Indian workforce. The pandemic is emerging as the biggest inflexion point for the talent market as India adapts to a post-Covid world. The changes that began in 2020 will accelerate further in 2021 and beyond, say talent watchers and job market experts.



There is no going back to the pre-Covid world in its entirety. While campuses have adapted to blended learning and **virtual placements**, companies are finding their feet in the hybrid workplace model that will constitute work-from-home, work-from-office and work-from-anywhere. Companies are being forced to digitise and look for agile solutions.

Corporate India's hiring plans continue to feel the impact of the pandemic, though there has been a small pick-up in sentiment. The corporate job market is seeing an upward, albeit slow, movement, and the trend is expected to continue in 2021.

Teamlease's employment outlook report for October-December states the "Intent to Hire" metric (the percentage of employers likely to hire employees during the quarter) seems to have turned the corner and is set to witness a noticeable 3% increase in October-December 2020. Metro and tier-1 cities are likely to benefit significantly from the unlock initiatives, reveals the survey that covers 137 small, medium and large companies across 21 sectors.

The latest research from ManpowerGroup shows nearly 65% of companies intend to reach pre-Covid hiring levels within six months. "That, coupled with the government's focus on simplifying labour laws and investing in infrastructure projects, may help the recovery to a great extent," says Sandeep Gulati, group managing director of ManpowerGroup India.

"There is definitely optimism in the job market as corporates are gearing up to stabilise operations and attain business-as usual in the new year. The news of the vaccine has created positive vibes and everyone hopes the situation will get back to normalcy in the immediate future."



Unlike their tier-2 and tier-3 counterparts, India's top business and technology schools have beaten the Covid blues in their summer and final placements, respectively.

Indian Institutes of Technology have had a strong final placement season that began in December. "Compared to last year, companies have participated with large profiles," says Abhishek Kumar, head-Center for Career Development, IIT-Guwahati.

There is hope of more. "We are optimistic of more recruitment in phase-2 that starts in the second half of January," says CS Shankar Ram, advisor, training & placement, IIT-Madras.

As Amit Karna, chairperson of placements, Indian Institute of Management-Ahmedabad, says: "There is no long-drawn impact on placements as of now. We just closed our first virtual summer placements successfully. Pre-placement offers are comparable to the last 2-3 years. Some top firms have hired more now than in previous years."

In the backdrop of a recovering job market, the focus now is on what job profiles are relevant in the new workplace. Every role is now getting evaluated using a three-layered lens — will the job be relevant for the future; can this job be automated in the future; can a smaller number of people do it?

This scrutiny has become important as roles are becoming obsolete faster than anyone anticipated. Pankaj Bansal, co-founder and CEO, PeopleStrong, says: "We expected 25% of roles to become obsolete or undergo a significant transformation in the coming decade, but the disruptions caused by the pandemic, along with rapid tech evolution, has accelerated the change by five years."

The situation has prompted many organisations to begin strategic discussions around emerging roles. What will the future hold, everyone wants to know.

"The world has changed in the last 10 months. The impact of this disruption will continue to be felt in the near future," says Shantanu Jha, senior vice-president, human resources, Cognizant.

If you are an engineer, pay close attention to what Jha is saying. Cognizant expects to hire approximately 23,000 from campuses in 2021. In the pandemic-hit year, Cognizant hired 17,000 from campuses.

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THE NEW-AGE GIG WORKERS

The category of professionals changing the make-up of the talent pool

Management consultants

- They go solo after solid apprenticeship experience in top firms
- Have a higher degree of work experience (three quarters have 10+ years)

Corporate freelancers

- They go independent after 10-15 years in large corporate houses
- 50% are from 3 areas – strategy & business development, general management, and marketing & sales

Young parents

- Need flexibility for a few years
- Majority have 5-10 years of work experience



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Entrepreneurs

- Take on projects for add-on income or to use extra capacity
- To build networks and explore collaborations

Tech/product analytics experts

- Look to build a strong work portfolio
- See freelancing as lucrative aids in achieving career goals

Moonlighters

- Aim to learn and earn with extra capacity
- Want to leverage skills or learn new ones

Semi or retired professionals

- To continue to stay productive and leverage experience
- Have an extra source of income

Source: Flexing It




So what should young engineers expect from workplaces in terms of careers as automation and digitalisation accelerate?

The rapid pace of change in technologies requires those working in this field to be constantly learning. Deep domain knowledge will continue to be a critical aspect of a technologist's career. Mobile, cloud, data, artificial intelligence and automation are the pillars on which these careers will be built, Jha says, adding that "young engineers need to take control of their careers by internalising these fundamentals."

Jha's prescription for young engineers applies to the larger workforce also. With remote work and work-from-anywhere gaining acceptance, the globally integrated world of work will bet big on behavioural skills. "Companies are increasingly looking for skills that can help them lead in uncertain times, manage ambiguity much more than before," says IIMA's Karna, who is at the forefront of preparing newly minted managers for their jobs.

Besides actively learning, engineers will be required to collaborate, understand

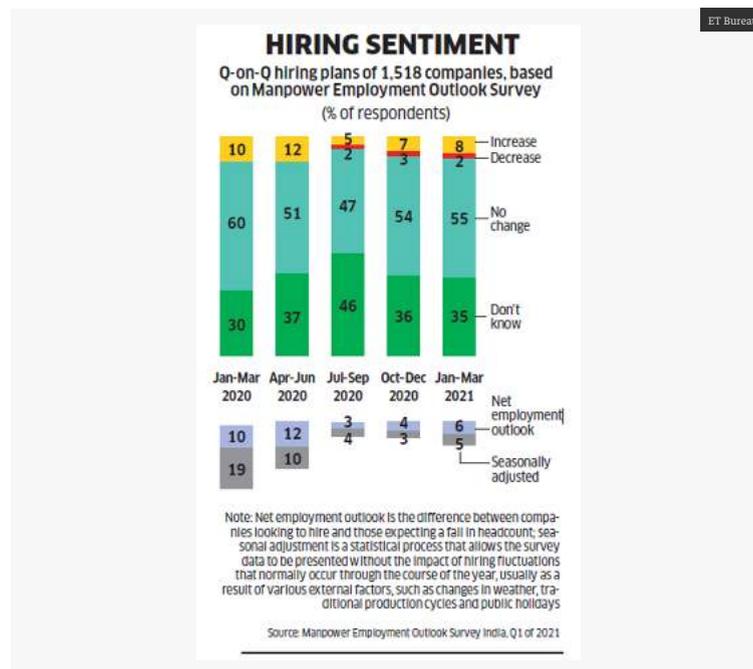
cultures and be sensitive to the nuances of being inclusive and equitable, according to HR heads.

All these changes are being discussed at the levels of business leadership.

Taggd, the recruitment arm of PeopleStrong, recently had a closed-door discussion with talent leaders from over 70 companies. One major point that stood out in all conversations was that there was a change in mindset that reflected in three big areas — talent leaders now had little inhibitions over location-based roles; there was a newfound acceptance of gig-based hiring across industries and digitised hiring was being truly accepted for the first time, according to Devashish Sharma, president of Taggd.

There was a spike in freelancer registrations during the Covid-19 pandemic, says Flexing It, a platform for business consultants and highly skilled flexible talent on demand. The number of professionals registering as consultants has increased by 60% against the pre-Covid period. “This is a trend we expect to continue,” says founder Chandrika Pasricha.

She lists out the top trends in the white-collar gig market. There is a mindset shift among professionals who are seeing freelancing as a smart career choice in an uncertain job market. With an increase in quality freelance roles — as companies shift to more agile talent models — there is a greater comfort among professionals and companies alike on remote and distributed work, and how it can offer greater flexibility while still getting solid work done.



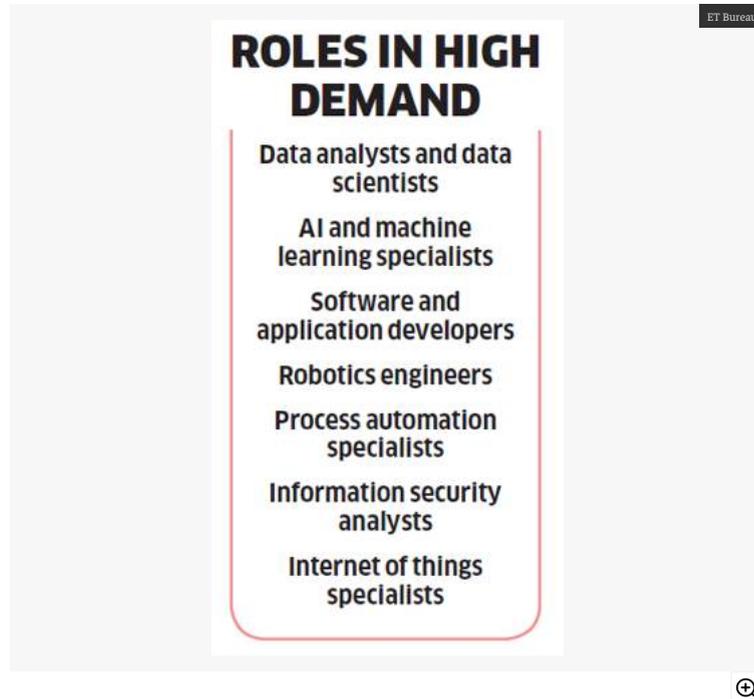
“Lastly, as a result of widespread job losses, we’re seeing quality talent doing projects either as a stopgap or as a way to experiment with a new way of working,” Pasricha says. HR experts see new roles emerging as more companies focus on location-agnostic hybrid teams — a mix of full-time, freelance and flexible and remote talent.

A case in point has been India Inc’s middle managers.

As digital transformations happened and the bottom of the pyramid workforce reduced, the number of people managing this workforce has reduced over the years. If you are a middle manager in an industry that is radically changing the way it delivers products or services, you have a reason to worry. The jury is still out, but the pandemic may have unexpectedly changed some aspects of this

role.

New roles are coming up for middle managers in technology and BFSI, according to Bimal Rath, founder and MD, Think Talent Services. "Middle managers who have tech-led skills are in demand due to digital transformation."



In fact, experts like Padmaja Alaganandan, chief people officer of PwC India, insist that the role of the middle manager has become even more critical now, especially in professional services firms. "The new remote working environment has brought in a culture change in most organisations. Middle managers are becoming key to that transition. They can help assimilate, be a bridge of sorts in keeping the culture in place."

In a tough year for companies, the experience of middle managers can come in handy in dealing with tough clients and difficult projects, she adds. Maybe it pays to get caught in the middle this time.