

Beyond the 70-hour workweek: Redefining productivity

Fostering efficacy, accountability and a strong sense of ownership plays a big role in cultivating a productive and innovative workforce. Recent statements by prominent Indian business leaders advocating for extended work hours have sparked significant debate across the industries and political sphere. Infosys founder Narayana Murthy suggested a 70-hour workweek for the younger generation, while Larsen & Toubro chairperson S N Subrahmanyam pushed the idea further, proposing a 90-hour workweek, including Sundays. While their intent—to encourage competitiveness and efficiency—is commendable, the emphasis on extended work hours misses a crucial point: the number of hours worked is not the primary determinant of success. Efficacy, accountability, trust and a spirit of ownership are far more vital in creating a productive and competitive workforce. The Fallacy of “More Hours Equals More Productivity” Globally, data and research have consistently shown that longer working hours do not directly correlate with increased productivity. According to a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), countries with shorter average work hours often rank higher in productivity. For instance, Germany—known for its robust industrial base—averages 34.6 hours of work per week and boasts one of the highest productivity levels in the world. In contrast, countries like Mexico, where workweeks stretch beyond 42 hours, report significantly lower productivity rates. The human brain has a finite capacity for sustained focus and creative thinking. Prolonged hours often lead to diminishing returns, increased burnout, and higher rates of errors. Studies by the World Health Organization (WHO) have also highlighted the adverse health effects of excessive work hours, linking them to cardiovascular diseases and mental health disorders. Moreover, the concept of presenteeism—being physically present but mentally disengaged—is an often-overlooked consequence of extended work hours.

Overworked employees may appear productive but are less likely to deliver high-quality output. This underscores the importance of optimising work hours for maximum efficacy rather than simply extending them. What Truly Drives Productivity? Instead



of focusing on quantity, business leaders should shift the discourse to quality. Productivity is not about the time spent at a desk or shop floor but what is achieved during that time. Three key factors contribute to this:

- 1. Efficacy:** Efficacy emphasises doing things right rather than simply doing more. This involves leveraging technology, optimising workflows, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Organisations like Toyota have championed this principle through methodologies such as Lean and Kaizen, which focus on reducing waste and enhancing efficiency.
- 2. Accountability:** Empowering employees to take ownership of their work fosters accountability. When individuals feel responsible for outcomes, they naturally align their efforts toward achieving goals. Google’s OKR (Objectives and Key Results) framework exemplifies how clearly defined goals and transparent accountability can drive exceptional results. A sense of accountability ensures that time is used effectively and results are prioritised over mere activity.
- 3. Ownership Spirit:** A sense of ownership transforms employees from passive participants to proactive contributors. This requires building a culture where employees feel their work has a purpose and their contributions are valued. Startups often exemplify this culture, with employees going above and beyond not because of long hours but because they believe in the company’s mission. When employees feel emotionally invested, their creativity and commitment naturally increase, making the organisation more competitive.

The Role of Work-Life Balance Work-life balance is not a “luxury” but a necessity for sustained performance. The Harvard Business Review notes that employees with balanced lives demonstrate 21 per cent greater

productivity and are 57 per cent less likely to experience burnout. Moreover, a healthy work-life balance fosters creativity, problem-solving, and emotional resilience—all essential traits in today’s dynamic business environment. Countries

and companies that respect the need for work-life balance are reaping the rewards. For example, Scandinavian nations, with their strong emphasis on work-life balance, consistently outperform others on innovation and competitiveness indices. Similarly, companies like Microsoft Japan, which experimented with a four-day workweek, reported a 40 per cent increase in productivity while reducing electricity costs and boosting employee satisfaction. Flexible working arrangements are becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide. The rise of hybrid work models in the post-pandemic world has shown that flexibility and accountability coexist and thrive. This shift highlights that the hours worked and the autonomy, trust, and resources provided to employees drive results. Leaders must embrace these new paradigms rather than revert to outdated notions of success linked solely to time spent at work.

Lessons from History Historical evidence further undermines the argument for excessively long work hours. During the Industrial Revolution, labour movements fought for the eight-hour workday, recognising that overworking led to physical exhaustion and declining efficiency. The founder of Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford’s decision to implement a five-day, 40-hour workweek in the 1920s was driven not by altruism but by a realisation that well-rested employees were more productive and innovative. His approach improved productivity and set a precedent for modern labour practices. In the 21st century, technology has amplified this principle. Automation, artificial intelligence, and digital tools enable employees to accomplish in hours what once took days. Instead of relying on human endurance, organisations should not focus on integrating

these tools to enhance productivity and free up employees for strategic, high-value tasks. Reimagining Competitiveness India’s demographic dividend presents a unique opportunity to shape the future of work. With one of the world’s youngest workforces, the focus should be on enhancing skills, fostering creativity, and nurturing an entrepreneurial mindset—not on extending work hours. By investing in upskilling programs, digital tools, and robust processes, Indian businesses can boost productivity without exhausting their workforce. Additionally, introducing flexible work arrangements can help tap into employees’ diverse needs while improving engagement and output.

Addressing the Challenges While advocating for shorter or optimised work hours, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges. Industries with high operational demands, such as manufacturing and healthcare, may find it challenging to reduce work hours without compromising service delivery. In such cases, solutions like staggered shifts, better workforce planning, and investment in automation can help balance operational needs with employee well-being. Similarly, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with limited resources may perceive shorter work hours as a risk to productivity. However, even these organisations can benefit from adopting efficiency-focused strategies like process optimisation and targeted skill development. **The Way Forward** As a moderate business leader, I firmly believe that success stems from striking the right balance between ambition and sustainability. While hard work and dedication are indispensable, they must be guided by innovative strategies, supportive cultures, and a focus on outcomes. Asking employees to clock 70 or 90 hours a week may yield short-term results, but it risks long-term consequences in the form of burnout, disengagement, and declining health. Let’s redirect the conversation from “hours worked” to “value created.” By fostering efficacy, accountability, trust and an ownership spirit, Indian businesses can achieve competitiveness and efficiency while respecting the well-being of their greatest asset—their workforce. After all, it’s not the hours you put in but what you put into the hours that truly counts.

Crowdfunding can transform science research funding

By connecting directly with the public, crowdfunding offers researchers an opportunity to explore bold ideas fueled by passion. The conventional research funding model, which is primarily dependent on government grants and institutional allocations, is currently under increasing scrutiny. Scientists and innovators frequently find themselves facing competition for a diminishing pool of resources as budgets tighten and priorities shift in numerous regions of the globe. A novel paradigm is emerging, one that is influenced by the digital economy: crowdfunding

for research. Is it possible that this community-driven, decentralised approach could revolutionise the way we finance science? Government funding has been a cornerstone of scientific research across the globe, particularly in the domain of basic research. This funding plays a vital role in driving innovation, supporting the exploration of fundamental scientific principles, and fostering advancements that often serve as the foundation for applied research and technological development. Despite its critical importance, accessing government research grants pres-

ents significant challenges for scientists and institutions, making it a complex and often time-consuming endeavour. The exhaustive application process is one of the foremost difficulties in securing government funding. Researchers must navigate hectic administrative paperwork, including filling out detailed forms, providing extensive documentation, and adhering to strict procedural guidelines. This bureaucratic overhead often becomes a distraction, diverting researchers' time and energy away from their primary focus—scientific discovery. Writing and refining grant

proposals, ensuring compliance with submission requirements, and coordinating with institutional administrators consume weeks or even months. This process can be overwhelming for many scientists, particularly those involved with teaching responsibilities or other professional commitments. Another challenge is the influence of governmental policy on funding priorities. The allocation of research funds is often tied to the strategic objectives of the ruling government. This means that researchers must tailor their proposals to align with themes or areas of focus

From vision to reality: How good governance is transforming education in India

Vajpayee's vision of a 'New India,' anchored in democratic principles and citizen-centric governance is giving a new look to the education. Ten years ago, Prime Minister Narendra Modi set forth his vision of sushasan (good governance), calling it "the key to a nation's progress." He declared December 25, former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's birth anniversary, as Good Governance Day. Vajpayee had envisioned a "New India" where the government would embody the principles of democracy and development, emphasising citizen-centric decision-making, transparency, and public participation. Put simply, good governance means that the day-to-day functioning of the government is effective, transparent, and accountable, which, in the modern age naturally includes e-governance and digital empowerment. In fact, in the context of a welfare government functioning in a vastly unequal society, good governance is fundamental for ensuring sustainable development, social justice, and the protection of human rights. In 2019, India also adopted a metric called the Good Governance Index (GGI) to track and compare governance among the states and union territories across ten key sectors. The 11th Good Governance Day presents an apt moment to pause and reflect on the state of governance in one of the most critical sectors—



education. Even though Human Resource Development, composed of indicators like "quality of education" and "elementary school retention rate," is one of the ten key sectors covered by the GGI, a close look at India's education governance reveals substantial room for improvement, particularly at the school level. Vajpayee's commitment to education was evident during his tenure as Prime Minister—he pioneered the landmark Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2002, which emphasised universal school enrollment and went on to form the cornerstone of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009. Building decisively on this foundation, Prime Minister Modi's leadership has elevated education to new heights through bold reforms. The introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, along with the NIPUN Bharat

Mission, has revolutionised the approach to foundational learning. This shift is being carefully monitored through multiple assessment initiatives - states have implemented third-party evaluations, while programs like CBSE's SAFAL, the National Achievement Survey, and Gujarat's groundbreaking Vidya Samiksha Kendra (VSK) use cutting-edge technology to track progress systematically. These assessment systems have revealed both progress and persistent challenges in our education system. The data highlights critical areas that need attention, particularly in learning outcomes. Various learning surveys show that over 5 crore elementary-grade students lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Learning gaps for these children only keep widening as they progress through grades with a weak foundation. It is then unsurprising that almost 33 per cent of Grade VIII students are unable to read simple sentences or do basic arithmetic. Recognising these challenges, PM Modi's administration has taken a step through the State School Standards Authority (SSSA), recommended in the NEP 2020, which emerges as a pivotal

reform to enhance India's school governance standards. The proposed SSSA would be an independent quality regulator for all schools, both public and private. One of the key functions of the SA is to ensure public disclosure of school performance data for all schools through a digital portal. With all schools being held to clear and uniform quality standards and policymakers being informed by data-driven insights, educational resources will be used more efficiently. The SA can create a culture of transparency where parents are active participants in their children's education. With its emphasis on streamlining bureaucracy, focusing on outcomes rather than inputs, and integrating technology to reduce administrative burdens, not only does it embody Prime Minister Modi's ideal of "minimum government, maximum governance". A pertinent example is the set of eight principles of good governance recommended by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)— participation, rule of law, transparency, accountability, equity, effectiveness, consensus, and responsiveness. As the nation observes Good Governance Day, the call to action is clear: states must embrace the SA to realise the shared vision of a "New India," where quality education is a right, not a privilege.

India's New Trade paradigm with the us

India faces new challenges from the Trump's tough stance, spurring urgent talks on tariffs and trade. The year gone by saw some crucial path-altering elections in nearly 70 of the most powerful democracies in the world. Some of the most populous countries led by India and including the US, Bangladesh, Indonesia etc. voted for a leadership of their choice in 2024. While the Indian electorate chose to renew another 5-year term for Prime Minister Modi (albeit with a less-than-expected mandate), Bangladesh too renewed its faith in Sheikh Hasina (who was accused of rigging the electoral process to retain power), which ultimately led to her being thrown out in a coup. In a highly polarised election ground, in the US, the incumbent President a front runner for the top job at the white house, pulled out near the finish line, leaving his second in command the Vice President to throw her hat in the ring against a mighty opponent Donald Trump. The US electorate gave a clear mandate for Donald Trump to lead the new global order for the US. Donald Trump's clear victory in the US elections, now potentially could lead to several multilateral, bilateral rejigs, around the globe. President-elect has already nominated several friends and

allies from the past, in some of the top jobs. He has threatened high tariffs for Canada and Mexico while joking that the former is another state of the US. He has strong views on India's trade surplus with the US which is already an issue of concern for Indian officials. Several Indian ministries were in a huddle in the last week of the year 2024, trying to assess the amount of exports from their respective sectors, while looking at the tariffs imposed on US imports. New Delhi-based policy research institute Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) spent the last day of the year discussing 'Trade Tariff and Trump'. Several recommendations were made by the panel of experts regarding the future of India-US bilateral trade relations. A press release from the event highlighted in the first paragraph that "India should have comprehensive engagement with the US, as new administration led by President-elect Trump takes over. India should explore a comprehensive new institutional framework to address the multiple issues that arise from trade, investment, technology and finance linkages. India should urgently consider appointing a Task Force or create other institutional mechanisms



that bring in domestic policy coherence on these lines." In an unrelated development, India's External Affairs Minister Jaishankar spent the last week of the year in the US, meeting key presidential nominees for the incoming Trump administration and also attending the last foreign affairs ministers meeting under President Biden, even though QUAD as the framework was empowered by Trump Presidency 1.0. The policy research institute RIS has cautioned to not respond with any knee-jerk reactions, to possible volatile statements emerging from Washington, immediately after President

Trump's swearing-in, instead, it suggests "India may need to plan first, plan hard, and yet plan fast." An agile, business approach may be the best way forward to dealing with the incoming administration. It may also be worthwhile to note that the Indian government should reconsider some of the non-tariff barriers it imposes on imports in the form of regulatory compliances and compulsory testing etc. To avert losses, tie up with our US importers need to be strengthened so that they lobby for their own needs. However, low technology products have high US tariffs. We may be left with an avenue there to improve our participation in the value chains being built up in the US manufacturing sector. "A diversification of markets for Indian products may be needed, which could also have a sectoral focus. India can focus on exporting a certain bunch of products to say the Gulf Nations or the ASEAN group of countries depending on the price advantage. Some hedges need to be built to prevent any major hit of Trump tariffs.

