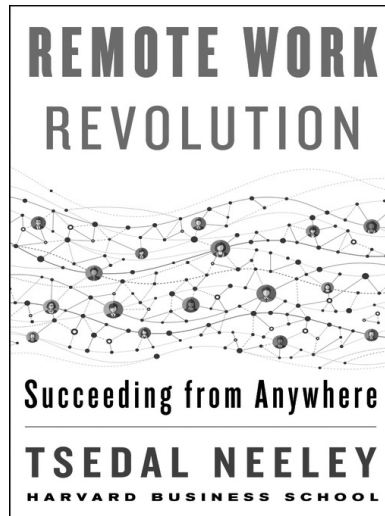# *Remote Work Revolution*
Tsedal Neeley

C.P. Ravindranathan*

The somewhat rhetorical title of this book must not lead its management student readers to missing the wood for the trees. To the credit of the author, who is a professor at the Harvard Business School, she does point out in the introduction that the remote work format is nothing new. Virtual work arrangements have been part of the cumulative practice of domestic and global companies for about thirty years and the process had clearly bid fair to expand and prosper. What was not foreseen, however, was that it would require a global pandemic to cause the "wholesale migration of nearly entire companies to remote work in a matter of weeks".

The scope that Tsedale Neeley has accorded the book - which is an in- depth consideration of the management processes and techniques on how to succeed in remote work by producing significant results, whether as employees or managers, does not include an inquiry into the larger dimensions of the theme. The fact is that remote work is very much part of Industry 4.0; for reasons of perspective, it should be deemed to come under " labour markets " in the third component of " The Great Reset" that was the theme of the 50th Annual Meeting of the world Economic Forum (WEF) in 2016. I shall come to that aspect towards the concluding part of this review.

Remote work, says the author, is here to stay. Witness the survey by the Gartner group in April 2020 revealing that 74 percent of the companies surveyed reported plans to indefinitely adopt more remote work post Covid-19: Facebook envisaging switchover to 50 % of the workforce and our own TCS announcing plans for 75 percent of its personnel working remotely by 2025. By way of benefits that remote work provides are considerable reductions in operational costs, overcoming locational constraints in recruitment and deployment, reduction of disparities in job opportunities between rural and city areas and even shrinking of gender gaps and of environmental pressures. But on the debit side of the ledger are the crucial social presence deficiencies of employment, tech exhaustion and disruption of work life balance. On the part of leaders and managers, there are not inconsiderable problems of employee motivation and productivity as well as the larger issues of competitiveness and organisational culture. While fundamental issues of teamwork are the dominant concern for both managers and

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employees in remote work, at the global level the resultant problems can be both complex and vexing.

Neeley examines the wide gamut of issues involved in remote work against this backdrop. Her approach consists of categorising the concerns and perspectives of the stakeholders into distinct themes embracing the challenges and opportunities of remote work. The organising principle is the team and the thrust of the inquiry is its dynamics in the remote work setting, both national and global. The author goes into a great deal of operational details in as much as her express objective is a workmanlike project on the operational effectiveness of remote work as the mainstay of successful business strategy.

The book is chiefly premised on the team- based horizontal structure as being pivotal to organisations, with its functional effectiveness turning on such text book postulates as clarity and sense of purpose, individual performance goals and responsibility within that framework, well designed processes for efficient accomplishment of tasks and requisite skills for execution, all of which geared to virtual teams which are the building blocks for the theme of the book.

So as the starting point for remote work the author elaborates how important it is for the work of distributed virtual teams to have a launch session in the video format to put in place a clear group plan so as to ensure that every member understands and agrees on the ways and means of working together most effectively and for leaders to reinforce their commitment to the team. The launch pads are refining the team's shared goals, establishing its communication norms as well as norms of intra-team collaboration, understanding each member's contributions and constraints and identifying the resources in terms of the budget, technology and networks. Nor is that all. Periodic relaunches according to the author are as important as they are the only "structured mechanisms" to give teams the ability to quickly pivot in a systematic way.

As well as the importance of the launch and relaunch of teams for effective remote work through digital means is the crucial need of building trust. In collocated work force deployment, with everyone in close physical proximity, the process of trust building

is straightforward enough, with use of well-tried and continually evolving methods. But in remote teams where members are separated by geography and reliance has to be placed on digital communication tools, building trust and sustaining it call for use of different methodologies. For another, trust not being binary, but rather nuanced and complex, would need to be correctly understood in order to make it viable. The author distinguishes between "passable trust" which is the minimum threshold of trust required to communicate with and to work with others, an essential feature of remote teamwork, and "swift trust", the high level of trust that must be established by members in a team for a limited period of time, such as happens with collocated teams. Trust itself is of two kinds, cognitive trust which turns on one's mental reactions to one's colleagues and based on one's experiences and interactions, and emotional trust, which relates to the heart and is akin to friendship. Now cognitive passable trust is what is common to virtual groups communicating with digital technology. On the other hand, swift trust, depending on in- person contacts and dealings, goes with collocated teams, but it also occurs in teams where members are connected through functional ties and grows over time through collaborated work and interaction. So both kinds of trust can develop in virtual teams, but for it to happen leaders must set clear goals which team members need to understand and follow; they must also proactively create a group culture for virtual interactions alongside work tasks. Transparency, effective communication, clearly identified tasks and reliability are important, but so also is the awareness of how geographic divides complicate trust. Knowledge about the personal characteristics and behavioural norms of far- off virtual colleagues would be helpful, so also insights gained through interaction in the course of work and conversational exchanges. With all this, teams can move up steadily on a trusting curve if they work consciously at it.

The productivity of remote teams and their ability to meet organisational goals is an important issue which managers tend to deal with through measures like keeping track of work habits and routines with use of various electronic deviceski. But digital surveillance should be eschewed as it patently undermines trust between employers and employees. Neeley's authoritative source on team

dynamics is J. Richard Hackman who has laid down three criteria for establishing successful outcomes for teams universally and in all contexts: delivering results, facilitating individual growth and building team cohesion. She argues that these trifectas would conclusively explain why monitoring in the name of productivity is doomed to fail. In actual fact, studies show that remote work, far from threatening productivity, increases it. And she goes on to refer to empirical evidence in support of the view that desire for autonomy at work is seen as a consistent and striking pattern and remote work fits in well with it. Studies confirm that when people have the opportunity and the flexibility to arrange the job tasks, there is an increase in their commitment to their companies. And the employees who perceived greater psychological job control had significantly lower turnover intentions, family - work conflict and depression. But the author enters the important caveat that home conditions - workspace, technology infrastructure, privacy and people - can determine whether people will thrive remotely or not.

In chapters dealing with use of digital tools in remote work, agile teams and issues relating to global teams, the book makes some important points having a bearing on the operational side of remote work. Techno exhaustion is very much an occupational disease with the pursuit of remote work; the way to avoid it is a mix of synchronous media consisting of real time communication and the asynchronous comprising email, online forums and collaborative documentation, keeping in unswerving view the real needs of the organisation. Neeley examines at length the main issues pertaining to determination of the communication culture that is sought to be created by the organisation. The importance of social presence in fostering interpersonal closeness within the team is emphasised, so also the usefulness of redundant communication through the use of social tools. Similarly, measures to ensure success for agile teams in remote work. As for the global remote teams, the task of transcending differences, so vital to their success. is analysed and ways to achieve positive outcomes spelt out. The challenges in remote work in terms of leading and preparation of teams for global crises figure in the concluding parts of the book under six different heads, with the author stressing the point that while these challenges can arise across teams of all kinds, their consequences

and ramifications can be particularly dire in the domain where remote teams have to operate and prevail. For practising managers, the book helpfully provides an " Action Guide" comprising insights and best practices from each chapter.

The book bears the sure imprint of a diligent academic whose varied experience as a researcher and consultant adds to its decidedly practical value. Where it does not venture into analysing or hypothesising on issues despite their relevance to the broader canvas of industry 4.0 of which remote work is a part includes the future of work and the progressive erosion of the value of labour in capitalistic economies. For the victors of the remote work revolution are the same as the victors of the financial revolution - those who own and deploy capital, now increasingly in the shape of technology married to financial capitalism, with the work force bearing the brunt of the "rapid and unprecedented changes" presaged by transformational forces in Industry 4.0. Historian Yuval Noah Hariri says, "In the twenty first century, the majority of both men and women might lose their military and economic value" and, working from home apart, "the most important question in twenty first century economics may well be what to do with all the superfluous people".

Can he be right?