

# Managing the lessons from 2020: A case study on E-commerce product development and project management

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## Abstract

The COVID scenario generated significant transformation in the means and mechanism for developing and managing digital products. With authorities implementing complete lockdown, the office work environment changed overnight. However, e-commerce companies immediately sensed the gravity of the situation and resorted to *capitalising* this opportunity by using the power of digital technology.

This case study is developed on the basis of the industry experience of the author. In particular, the case study clearly details the process of how a particular company went about implementing business continuity plan by taking into consideration the various issues and challenges that faced the project manager on account of cataclysmic situation across the world, arising out of COVID syndrome.

In particular the case study tries to highlight the lessons learnt in terms of detailed planning needed and the strategy adopted to meet the balancing requirements of cost cutting measures, meeting organizational issues, project level issues and infrastructural issues when WFH (work from home) becomes the new normal.

For the sake of maintaining confidentiality, the name of the organization is not disclosed.

**Keywords:** Client, COVID, Product, Project manager, Work From home (WFH)

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## Introduction

VarSoftPro, is an E-commerce, digital product development company based in Chennai. The company has a workforce strength of 800 out of which 600 members are involved in the Product development activities. The company has satellite offices in Noida, Chandigarh and at Pune. Presently, the company is into expansion and diversification spree and has recently ventured into another vertical Fintech.

Sumit, is a Chief Technological Officer (CTO) of Product development. He is responsible for all the Project execution and product management operations including satellite offices. Ramit is a Chief Human Resource Office and is responsible for Human Resource Operations across all the offices. In addition to this Ramit is also responsible for all the administrative work operations in Chennai. He is assisted by Amit, who is a senior administrative officer. Amit, is also responsible for handling logistics operations in Chennai. For satellite offices, each of the units have a HR resource Manager, an Admin manager as well as Senior Product and Product Manager. Each of the senior managers directly report to their Officer based in Chennai.

Before the pandemic struck, the VarsoftProwas doing good and managing the product development process was relatively cool as the company had well developed processes based on ISO 27001 and ISO 31000.

The executive management was aware of cataclysmic affect of CORONA virus across the world though in India only 1 case reported in the month of January, 2020. With the increase in the number of affected persons, the executive management concern was easily visible. However, on March 23, 2020 complete lockdown for 21 days was announced sending the executive management into tizzy as some of the projects were on the verge of closure and some projects needed technical support round the clock. In addition to this, some of the team members are stuck up at the client site who too were to return within a week. To contain the spread of CORONA, the lockdown increased and ultimately it was released that COVID is here to stay for a longer time than was anticipated.

This necessitated the need and urgency to redraft a strategy so that business can go on by utilizing the power of digital technology. In other words, let the staff members work from home (WFH).

### **The context**

The context of the case pertains to redrafting the strategy of meeting objectives while managing business operations with staff members stationed at distributed locations.

### **Issues and Challenges**

The following are some of the specific issues and challenges which were identified and which were needed to be addressed by Sumit, Ramit and Amit

- The most important task was to set up the workstation of team members quickly at their home and to ensure that the basics are in place in shortest time period. This was not an easy task as it involved co-ordination with Human Resource Department, Administration Department and other interfacing units *who too were operating with* limited manpower and the workstations were required to be transported to team member's residence.
- The product development process *works* on in an incessant brain storming

process amongst the developers. With workstations moving to home and work from home becoming the norm, communications management emerged as a challenge which needed to be addressed and resolved. The main issue was in establishing the linkage between the team members, project managers and other stakeholders who would work from home within the context of low bandwidth, connectivity issues and other common technical problems.

- On the other hand, WFH will generate a sense of loss of grip on project team members. The result, project managers will be unable to judge the team spirit, the motivation level and other team management related issues and challenges
- End to end customers, who earlier were docile buyers, will adopt an aggressive approach by becoming capricious and dictating their terms and conditions such as buying in bulk due to fear psychosis of CORONA. This change in consumer behaviour will pose technical challenges such as server busy, network issues and other forms and all these are needed to be addressed
- With emergence of new payment gateways and apps clients will begin to change the requirement *which must be inducted* in the product. This will force the team members to work in an agile environment while meeting the necessary compliance requirements of ISO 27001 and ISO 31000
- The supply chain management will be impacted due to migrant labour issues resulting time delays, cancellation of orders forms practicalities and all these will be needed to be incorporation in the product
- With lockdown in place, the business will be slow, cost cutting measures will soon come into the picture. This will result in *de-motivation and insecurity of team members*
- As the staff are working from home, HR policies will be redrafted in terms of various allowances and the like

## **The Dilemma**

Though there were talks of COVID prevailing across the world, the mere fact that drastic action would be swift, immediate and with no time for assessing and evaluating the consequences of the measures imposed by authorities. But, the business must go on or sustainability issues would come into question. The only alternative was to utilize the power of Digital technology to the fullest.

Hence the dilemma in the form of the following:

- a. Top priority is to be accorded to the core function team members in providing WFH facilities and the necessary infrastructure for carrying out work. This includes transshipment of Workstation, RFID devices and other hardware components. However, what needs to be done for non-core team who have a crucial role to play in making arrangement for transportation of work station, documents and other

necessary paraphernalia pertaining to projects

b. Since the setting up of work environment at home, the dilemma that arises is in seeking answer to the question as to how this will take place considering that some of the projects are in implementation stage, some of the projects have just commenced while some of the project need 24 hours technical support. In other words, should this operation be carried out in phased manner, project priority or on the priority of the client?

c. Team members working the projects, which are in implementation stage or in the final stage, have top priority for quick setting up work environment at home. It is evident that some of the team members are constrained to work in an improper work environment at home such as no separate room or low bandwidth connectivity problems. This will hamper the product delivery. The dilemma that Sumit and his team faces is taking the decision of providing leased line or high bandwidth to the team members who face such issues.

d. It is evident that COVID will stay for a long time and this will impact the business in terms of delayed payments from the client and reduced number of new product developments. As, team members are required to work with no fixed timings, how will HR policies function keeping in the cost cutting measures? In particular, policies which pertain to earned leave, casual leaves and overtime allowances be done away with for the time period WFH is applicable. In such a case, this action may generate dissatisfaction unless it is compensated for monetary loss.

e. While team members work from home, it is evident that network support system must be capable enough to provide support to the team members. For example, workstation is working in an inappropriate manner or the lap top fails to switch on. In other words, genuine technical problems which cannot be resolved remotely how will they be addressed. With lockdown resulting in travel restrictions, dedicated support is a constraining factor.

f. As WFH gains momentum, what will be the role of supporting staff members such as administration and personal department in the context of cost cutting measures?

g. Due to reduced business opportunities, Sumit, is required to evaluate the means and mechanisms as to how to capitalize on the digital technology so as to improve productivity as well as generation of new business opportunities. What tools and techniques are needed to ensure that this done as quickly as possible.

*In other words, how the entire organization which worked in a unified manner is to be managed when the geographies are changed as the work force will be working in distributed silos.*

## Methodology Adopted

Thus, to address the dilemma the approach adopted included the classification into the following components and sub components

- Issues at the organizational level
- Issues at Project level
- Issues at Infrastructure level

### Organizational Level issues

The organizational level issues are to be applicable across the distributed centres as well as at the centre in Chennai.

The core issue discussed amongst Sumit, Ramit and Amit included the aspects of provision of value to the client as well keeping the motivation of the work intact in the face of the pandemic which will stay for a longer period.

Another issue that was discussed including the aspects of changed consumer behaviour in terms of frequent change of requirements, delays in making payments, demand for decreasing turnaround time for product delivery. In other words, subjecting to more work pressure on the product team members without compromise on quality issues. All these measures will ensure that trust of the client is maintained.

**Exhibit 1** depicts the organizational level issues which were **discussed** amongst the members, Sumit, Ramit and Amit for smooth transitioning to WFH culture.

#### Exhibit 1

<b>Organizational Level Issues</b>
<b><i>Ensuring continued Value Addition to Client</i></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By striving to deliver the product within the agreed timelines by maintaining complete transparency and communicating to the client any issues such as network connectivity, call drop during conferences call and the like</li></ul>
<b><i>Changed consumer behaviour</i></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By keeping a record of the proposed changes demanded by the customer and co-ordinating with marketing department for cost implications, constrained timelines and communicating to the client about the implications of the changes</li></ul>
<b><i>Smooth transition to WFH culture</i></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By identifying the scope of the work needed to ensure that VarSoftPro is able to quickly ramp up to the need and requirements of the project and the product. Close interaction with Human Resource, Administration and Network Personals is needed to work out the strategy and a pan of action for achieving the transition</li></ul>

***Compliance to data security issues based on ISO 27001 and ISO 31000***

- By involving the network administrator and Chief Information Security officer for work out a strategy and plan of action for ensuring that compliance is maintained throughout the WFH culture
- Other issue which was discussed pertained to data backup of various projects and how these would be made available to all the project stakeholders. It was agreed to work out a plan of action and strategy to ensure the strict compliance on issues pertaining to data security. It was also agreed to communicate the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders with respect to data security issues

***Operational issues***

- By ensuring that project and product level documentation such as contractual requirement documents, product specifications documents, test data and other paraphernalia is made available to the project team members by exercising appropriate control measures.

***Maintenance of Physical office premises***

- Physical office premises must be secured and guided by essential support staff members such as administration staff members, Reception staff and adopting social distancing norms as prescribed by government authorities

***Source: Authors own creation based on Industry Experience***

**Project level Issues**

The project and product level issues are handled by core team members who are directly involved in the value addition processes to the client.

The core issues at the project level were discussed amongst Sumit, and other project managers by means of scheduled meetings by using licensed version of Microsoft teams.

The major issues discussed amongst the various project managers included the aspects pertaining to team interactions, management of team members.

***Exhibit 2*** depicts the various issues which were discussed amongst the Project managers, CTO and Chief information security officer and network administrator

**Exhibit 2**

**Project Level Issues**

***Determining the status of the project so that priority can be set for quick setup of WFH culture***

- This was the major issue that discussed. As some of the projects were in critical stages of implementation, they were to ramped up in shortest amount of time. It was discussed to determine the criticality of the each of the projects and ensure that those in crucial phase are ramped up at the earliest for WFH environment

<p><b><i>Ensuring that project team works as a close unit as if the team is working in the physical premises</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This issue was discussed as the core issue. As the team members are to work in distributed manner, managing teams becomes difficult due to connectivity issues, low bandwidth and other operational issues.</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Engaging the work force during the team meetings with the client and amongst team members</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This issue was discussed as the core issue and the means and mechanisms were discussed to overcome this issue. From the experience, it is noted that team members as well as client representatives are busy in their cell phones and other distraction during meetings resulting in missing out on vital aspects of the meetings</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Managing inter conflicting issues and grievances of team members</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This was discussed in the meeting as to how to resolve the on conflicting issue of the team members such as ego problems, difference of opinion amongst team members and the client. Other aspects which was discussed pertained to grievance handling and de-motivation amongst team members due to continuously work from home</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Managing team members due to conflicting issues at home work environment</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This was discussed as one of the issue which could pose problem where small kids are present. It was agreed to brief the team members to work out the strategy to ensure that work goes on smoothly without any disturbance</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Client Level issues</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These issues were discussed at length. Client level issues pertains to team members posted at client site and their inability to return to home as their assignment is complete. How to ensure that they continue to work in different projects of different clients or the same client and how will the modalities work out in times of crisis.</li> <li>• Other issue that pertain to client level issue is the fact that managing resource at client site will be difficult as the client may truncate or may ask for enhanced work without compromising on payment terms and conditions. Also, client may go back on some of the contractual requirements due to reduced cash flow and the like</li> </ul>

***Source: Authors own creation based on Industry Experience***

### **Infrastructure level Issues**

Infrastructure level issues were discussed amongst the Sumit, Ramit, Amit and network administrator. Infrastructure level issues are the core issues as the entire functioning of the business is dependent on sound infrastructural requirements.

***Exhibit 3*** depicts the issues which were discussed and which needed urgent measures.

## Exhibit 3

<b>Infrastructural Level Issues</b>
<p><b><i>Infrastructural issues pertaining to provision of high speed connectivity to project team members</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This issue was discussed at great length during the meeting with Sumit, Ramit and network administrator. As the competitors too have resorted to WFH culture, connectivity issues, low bandwidth and other issues will hamper the work. The possible solutions to this was discussed as switching to cloud but this will involve cost implications and in times of pandemic cost consideration assume significance. It was agreed to work out the best strategy to combat this technical problem.</li><li>• Also in project where 24 hours offsite support is needed bandwidth issues cannot be compromised</li></ul>
<p><b><i>Infrastructural issues pertaining to communications equipment such as RFID, devices, bar code scanner and the like to the team members.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Most of the projects who have high element of security in their products need these devices to test their products with respect to client requirements. How these devices will be made available to the team members in these times of constrained environment. It was discussed to make them available by delivering them to home premises by following strict protocol of the government</li></ul>
<p><b><i>Maintenance of infrastructure</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Most of the infrastructural components need routine maintenance how will these maintenance activities be performed. It was discussed to work out the common strategy which can be implemented in this pandemic times.</li></ul>

***Source: Authors own creation based on Industry Experience***

### **The solution**

Based on the identification of the above issues, a feasible solution was worked out followed by an action plan. Some of the key administration team members were given e-pass to so as to ensure that infrastructure such as desktops, RFID devices and the like can be delivered to the project team members. On the other hand, a complete list of the projects was prepared along with their criticality score so as to determine the minimum amount of time needed for the project to be up and running. On the other hand, the crucial HR policies were re-looked at and appropriately modified so as to benefit the employee, the organization in the context of cost cutting measures.

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