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Overnight heroes and thereafter

A personal story of a CIO during this 2 month lockdown

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By Sourabh Chatterjee

Overnight, is the key word to focus here. Overnight, lockdown happened. Overnight, CIO's had the spotlight focused on them. Overnight, CIO's and their teams became the brain, heart and nervous system of the company. Overnight, they had to deliver applications which were ready to work securely from home and available 24 X 7. Overnight, they had to deliver 'at-scale'. And we did. All of us delivered, delivered with acceptable levels of uptime, customer experience and in a safe and secure way.

This is the story of a CIO which is me (Chief Information Officer, clarifying because CIO, or more specifically the 'I' today means a lot of different things) whose world was turned upside down in mid-March due to lockdown. And all my skills, years of working experience, networking ability, fast and slow thinking came in handy to deliver the virtual enterprise of the present and future for our internal and external stakeholders.

It all started around 10 days prior to the nationwide lockdown, we had sort of predicted (not through any supernatural powers but plain common sensical thinking and prediction) and that there would be an extended period of remote working. Therefore, at Bajaj Allianz General Insurance we prepared and planned a comprehensive continuous 48-hour weekday drill for all employees to simultaneously work from home. We did well, of course all the preparedness and hard work came in handy but it threw some surprises as well.

Below are some of my learnings during the lockdown, which I am not sure I would have got if the lockdown didn't happen so suddenly and at a scale it happened –

- **End user** – In addition to providing end users a portable computing asset like a laptop or tab, stable and secure internet connectivity is the key. Otherwise the asset in itself is useless
- **Applications** – Not all applications are meant, designed and easily configurable for work from home (WFH) environment. Enabling the app securely, is in itself a complex task. Identifying the right applications or modules in those applications, and who gets access to what in a WFH environment was critical
- **Network and central bandwidth** – When all users come through one central pipe, it is bound to increase the load. Increasing bandwidth in a pandemic situation with mass lockdown was an eye-opening experience. Learning - not everything is software driven and things always do not happen at the click of a button
- **Call Center** – Enabling outbound and inbound for WFH environment was a different kind of challenge as the end user awareness and maturity level is different. More than

the actual enabling, supporting users during the lockdown was the challenge as many times these users were not able to articulate the actual technical issue on the phone

- **Security** – Above all, this is always a CIO's favourite nightmare. Whatever you do, all the controls you put in place, there is always something which is forgotten, did not get done and needed to be done before putting the application to be accessed over the Internet. Getting this done in the middle of remote working of team members is a learning experience

However, not everything was a challenge, there were multiple happy things along the way. For one, I realized that all my years of pushing for adoption of digital assets that were created with so much hard work over the years, suddenly got mass acceptance and their usage shot up to near 90-100% adoption.

Naysayers of digital adoption, became the biggest digital champions and the organization started realizing that all the investment done in Information Technology over the years is of use to us during a crisis. Strategic bets taken during the earlier years, like getting every user a portable computing device (like a laptop and tablet instead of a desktop) came in handy.

So was the decision to get most users to migrate to COTS (Commercial off the shelf) packages for attendance, HR software and Customer Service Management software which included their workflow, document management and dashboards for day to day tasks. The entire investment in public cloud was realized faster than I had hoped for, as we could deploy a lot of apps quickly to enable the WFH for our 10,000+ organization workforce.

Time has flown by extremely fast during the lockdown. Amidst 18 hour workdays (including weekends) and numerous collaboration meetings through various tools and higher frequency of reviews, I have realized that motivating my IT team to stay positive, ensuring their physical and emotional well-being is taken care of, timely advise and correction measures are taken when needed, was perhaps my biggest learning. A lot of connect, organizing of non-work activities like celebrating virtual birthdays, anniversaries, playing games virtually on the weekend, helped in recouping the energy in the team.

So, while work from home was always the dream for me as a CIO, when it actually happened, happened suddenly and happened for a long period of nearly 2 months now. It was a lifetime event for me, my team and our organization. There were a lot of learnings. At the end it was all about the human connect in addition to the professional expertise and ability to take decisions, both, fast and slow.

Life goes on! Lockdown in some shape or form will continue through the rest of the year. However, one thing will be the same; both, before the lockdown and now in the post lockdown world – that even IT professionals are at the end of the day human beings, who need to connect socially with one another, in person and this need will never disappear.

The author is President & Head – IT, Web Sales & Travel, Bajaj Allianz General Insurance