TJ: Hi, I'm TJ and I hope all our listeners are safe and healthy. In this episode, we wanted to talk about a topic that is immensely important in the current scenario. As businesses are taking rapid steps to enable collaboration amongst their remote workforce in order to retain productivity, we are going to talk about an alternative approach towards remote collaboration.

To help us understand and decipher the world of possibilities around this alternative imagined order, we have with us today Ram Ojha, the Global Practice Head for Unified Communication and Collaboration for the Digital Workplace business at the HCL Technologies.

With more than fifteen years of experience, Ram has helped customers transform their operating model, end-user experience and customer journeys using cloud architecture, artificial intelligence, robotic process automation, machine learning and data management. He is responsible for delivering the continuous incubation, solutioning and implementation of innovative, robust and secure unified communications and contact center solutions to global customers.

Prior to HCL, Ram worked for a leading financial bank, Microsoft, and a niche consulting firm in roles focused on unified communications. He's also the recipient of the prestigious Microsoft Most Valuable Professional Award for four consecutive years from 2016 to tell 2019. I have a feeling this episode is going to be very informative. Welcome, Ram!

Ram Ojha: Hi TJ.

TJ: Thank you for joining us today. These are very busy days for you. We really appreciate you taking out time to talk to us.

Ram Ojha: Thank you very much for having me, TJ. I'm always open to having such discussions.

TJ: So, Ram, the world is united in fighting against a common enemy, and this pandemic has resulted in very sudden and severe shifts in the way business is conducted. It is safe to assume that the implications of the same will not be short term and enabling remote collaboration has become a very prominent focus area for enterprises. What are your views on this?

Ram Ojha: As the outbreak of the deadly virus continues in several countries, only an alternative strategy of collaboration can accelerate the rapid productivity and efficiency of the global workforce. Existing order of collaboration where face-to-face mode still dominates and remains a favorite needs to be reimaged. Companies must adopt an alternative imagined platform during such unprecedented times to keep teams connected while they work apart.

Within days of the outbreak, global companies started proactively allowing their employees to work from home to protect them and their customers from the disease. The work from home model is not new to the industry, nor is the virtual collaboration. However, hardly an

enterprise had planned for this magnitude of remote access. This is certainly new. In my opinion, this is going to be a new normal now even after the crisis is over.

TJ: I am very curious about what you mentioned. What is that alternative imagined order of collaboration that you mentioned?

Ram Ojha: Glad that you asked. An enterprise should factor in many important points to formulate an effective strategy of virtual collaboration in the current times, and this approach is what I call an alternative to the conventional. The factors which one needs to consider are:

- Onboarding and adoption of a digital engagement hub like Microsoft teams, Slack or WebEx teams to enable virtual collaboration.
- Changing the adoption strategy to focus more on remote workers. For example, adoption materials prepared for the canteens and the boardrooms would be less useful now.
- Then implementing relevant ethical and information barriers for remote workers to ensure security and compliance at the virtual workplace.
- Applications integrations such as norms and planners into Microsoft teams to assign and track tasks effectively is another factor.
- Then ensuring access to only certified headsets and cameras - nothing discourages employees for virtual collaboration as much as choppy voice or a lack of video.
- Investment on bots armed with artificial intelligence and NLP which significantly improves the user experience during watchful collaboration is another important factor.
- Finally, we need to understand that one all-inclusive collaboration software may not be the best fit to enable remote workers. In many cases, opting for the best of the breed collaboration software instead of an all-inclusive suite, is more effective to empower remote users with the best of the virtual collaboration experience.

TJ: Very interesting. I am sure this approach is effective but needs an equal level of buy-in from the technology and platform partners. Are they on board?

Ram Ojha: Major OEMs providing unified communications services have demonstrated quite an empathetic approach by providing their cloud-based services free of cost to individuals and enterprises. It's a delight to see their commitment to support customers during this challenging time. This, of course, needed an agile and scalable platform to meet such a search at such a time.

Fortunately, it's feasible due to the current state of cloud infrastructure, maturity and its adoption, which continues to support the increased demand for collaboration services. This ensures streamlined and reliable access to services through this period. That's one more reason why an enterprise should adopt cloud-first collaboration strategy at the earliest.

TJ: You are helping customers overcome the challenges of the current scenario. Can you share some of the most prevalent or frequently presented concerns and obstacles that customers might encounter on their path to this approach of unified remote collaboration?

Ram Ojha: Enterprise Voice is usually one of the last modalities to be migrated to our cloud platform. It's dependencies over local gateways, analog lines and regulatory laws make the process a difficult one. Replacing physical meeting rooms is the next big thing. It's about ensuring as good a meeting experience virtually for remote workers as they experience in the office. Tools strategy for the cloud platform is another aspect. Absence of tools strategy for monitoring, discovery and automation is another challenge that an enterprise has to deal with in this process.

TJ: What are the factors that need to be looked after as customers try to define the response to this pandemic in the short term, and then also making lasting changes for the long term?

Ram Ojha: Outcome of the collaboration strategy of an enterprise must be a platform or combination of platforms which are scalable, agile, interop-driven and secure and cost effective. As far as these factors are considered, an enterprise has a solution for the period of crisis and beyond.

TJ: Is virtual collaboration going to replace face-to-face conversations, post-COVID?

Ram Ojha: I like the way Microsoft CEO, Mr. Nadella, structured impact cycle of COVID into three phases - respond, recover and reimagine. What we are witnessing today is the first phase, respond. In this phase, virtual collaboration is at its peak with almost no face-to-face collaboration due to restrictions and lockdowns. The science of face-to-face conversation is in its potential to gradually unfold opportunities with a human touch. This is why face-to-face is going to recover its lost ground to an extent during the recover phase. It's only during the third phase that, reimagine, that an enterprise would actually find its right balance between virtual and face-to-face collaboration.

To answer your question, TJ, face-to-face is not going to get disappeared from the landscape of business or virtual collaboration won't replace it completely, but significantly for sure.

TJ: Thank you very much Ram for sharing your views and enlightening our listeners. And when we come back after a short break, we will ask Ram for his takes on some exciting consumer tech. Stay tuned.

Welcome back. In this segment, we ask our guests to summarize their opinions about some exciting consumer tech. So, are you ready, Ram?

Ram Ojha: Sure TJ.

TJ: Virtual reality meeting rooms using VR headsets.

Ram Ojha: A virtual reality-driven meeting room is one such cool thing. Adoption of the solution would increase as the solution matures. As far as the requirement is concerned, there can't be any better time than this. There is an appetite by organizations to save money by doing away with physical meeting rooms. As work from home becomes new normal, it would be anyway difficult to leverage physical meeting rooms. These are some of the reasons why I see a lot of potential in virtual reality-based meeting rooms.

TJ: Your favorite gadget?

Ram Ojha: It has to be a VR headset. It gives an individual or a group the ability to go beyond video conferencing and place participants together in a virtual space. It's potential to transform industries is huge.

TJ: Android or iOS?

Ram Ojha: An interesting question. I use both. iOS keeps me secure while I like Android for its rich features and functionalities.

TJ: It was an absolute pleasure having you on this episode. This was an absolute eye opener and I am sure this information will help many stakeholders make swift, well-informed decisions. Thank you again for your time and we hope for an opportunity to host you again.

Ram Ojha: Thank you, TJ. The pleasure is all mine. It was wonderful talking to you.

TJ: I thank our listeners for joining in. We want to hear from you. We need your feedback and suggestions for future topics. The contact information is available in the description. Comment, share, recommend and subscribe. I'll see you all in the next one.

This episode of the HCL Digital Workplace Podcast has ended but be sure to subscribe for more insights on how to identify, understand and prepare for a world of possibilities around the new and upcoming digital workplace technologies and trends. Don't forget to rate and review this episode so that we can keep bringing you the most relevant content. Thank you for listening.