TJ: Hi, I am TJ. In this episode, we are going to talk about how enterprises all around the world are taking steps to make their offices and workplaces safe and secure for the return of their essential workforce.

To help us identify and understand the important building blocks of an enterprise strategy to ensure the health and safety of returning employees, our guest is Saurabh Sharma, who heads the Product Management Group of Digital Workplace services at HCL technologies.

Saurabh is a true technology enthusiast who loves to push the limits of the value delivered to customers by leveraging the absolute cutting-edge advancements in automation, mobilization, digitalization and other imminent trends bound to propel the speed of transformation towards the future of work.

Welcome, Saurabh.

Saurabh Sharma: Hi TJ

TJ: Thank you, for joining us again.

Saurabh Sharma: Thank you very much for having me here again.

TJ: The last time you were here, in your discussion with Aman, you helped us gauge the importance of putting the employee experience at the absolute center of any and all digital workplace transformation blueprints. I believe the shift to this approach must have accelerated as the events unfolded over the last few months.

Saurabh Sharma: First and foremost, I wish all the listeners and their families are safe, healthy and doing well.
Yes, the recent events did put the organizations around the world in a bit of a tricky situation. The technology was of course there. Remote work could have been enabled and in most cases, was enabled as quickly as possible. At the onset, decision makers thought this would be the biggest hurdle, which is technology to retain productivity as the workforce shifted from offices to being confined to working from their homes. Everyone thought let's just put the technology and solutions into the hands of the workforce. A lot of enterprises went ahead and deduced new platforms for this purpose.

But make no mistake about it, the percentage of the workforce that was digitally aligned or digitally dexterous, was able to take advantage of these tools and in some cases, be more productive than they usually were.

But the issue, however, is today's workforce is composed of multiple generations with vast differences in terms of preferences. So, organizations ended up creating clusters of people who knew how to use these tools and platforms, and at the other end of the spectrum were those who were not comfortable with such tools. This led to certain parts of workforce feeling greater isolation, and it was because of both being not native to the technology and the working environment, which they were not used to because they were being confined to their homes. So, their heath was, in a way, at risk and their motivation was at risk.

I'd say that most companies were able to identify that this situation needed correction and they brought 'Compassionate Change Management' right to the top of their priority list. This involved focusing on not just what you give to the workforce, but mostly on how you made the workforce feel – can you create a workforce of trust. And that made all the difference between the companies that might still be struggling to extract productivity from a remote workforce and the companies who are positioned to come out stronger once the pandemic ends.

TJ: So, having established that most of the companies were able to adjust to the new normal, what's next? How do we get the essential workforce back to offices and moreover, do we even need to?

Saurabh Sharma: So, let me start by answering the second part of the question first. From a very high level, we can categorize the workforce into three blocks:

- People who were working remotely even before the pandemic hit.

- People who are working from home now and can perform 90% of their assigned functions remotely, and they'll keep doing that. They might have to visit offices only occasionally for very specific tasks.
- There is also a workforce whose functions cannot and will never be performed remotely. Think of the people who work in factories, manufacturing plants; people who are manning retail stores, some of which have to open; people who are first responders; or any other function that requires the physical presence at a designated physical space.

Now, I know it may seem simple to conclude that the third category is the only group of people who will need to be brought back to the offices. That is only partly true. We do not necessarily go to office just to perform a task or a function because it can be done only from there. It is actually more than that. Physical presence and interaction work wonders for collaboration, motivation, engagement, and innovation. This is despite the fact that remote working has great merits in work-life balance.

All of this can be avoided till the time it is not safe but eventually, economies, governments, businesses will open. In fact, you will see they have started opening up. So, going ahead, businesses will actually prefer a mixed model where certain people can work remotely, people are allowed to come back to offices. It will also give a flip to automation or AI. So, it'll be a mixed working model.

Now, for the first part of the question, as we keep facing newer challenges posed by the pandemic, re-opening the workplace and bringing employees back to designated physical work areas is not an easy task and it won't seem too for most enterprises. Enterprises need a new kind of a vision, they need new infrastructure, which is not traditional workplace infrastructure that they are used to handling – it's not the same technology. It should consist of multiple levels of safeguards, to ensure the health and safety of the people going back to offices.

TJ: So, when you say a new infrastructure, is it something in addition to what the companies have already done to cope with the challenges of remote working?

Saurabh Sharma: See, the enterprises had to take certain steps to enable remote working – relooking at your workplace technology stack, relooking at your change management initiatives, relooking at your workplace business model essentially. But when we talk about ensuring a safe and healthy return of the workforce to office, it's a whole new ball game all together. Because we are up against certain risks that we haven't faced before, the solutions are also completely new – they're not really re-purposed. We now not only have to focus on the data and privacy safeguards via a software client, but also put the physical safeguards to protect our employees and customers.

And again, as mentioned before, it is important to focus on how you make the users feel – what is the technology you're giving them and the onus of ensuring the safety and privacy should not lie on the users; it shouldn't be very complicated, it shouldn't give them stress and if it does, no good can come out of it.

TJ: I agree. So, could you highlight some of the solutions that your team is working on to ensure the safe return of the workforce to physical offices? And it would be great if you could take us through the thought process that led to you narrowing it down to certain tools.

Saurabh Sharma: We have just launched a solutions pack that enables our customers to create safe physical spaces for the returning employees by using contactless products that leverage computer vision, smart sensors, Bluetooth beacons and an integrated dashboard with AI powered real-time insights. We call it SafeSense and it is powered by our Fluid Workplace framework that I think most of our listeners would be aware of by now.

The process of shortlisting the solutions was two pronged. We first identified the most effective ways of reducing the probability of risk of infection in confined physical spaces. This was based on ways to quickly scan for symptoms – as much automation as possible – and then making sure the social distancing norms are adhered to inside the office or commercial spaces.

Then we tried out various permutations and combinations of these solutions to ensure that the solution set does not overlap; rather, it comes together as one integrated solution set that is automated to the maximum extent possible that technology around the world now allows. And the second part that I can't stress enough is that we wanted to take away the responsibility, which was out on the users to ensure that their safety and health were their concern.

All the modules were first and foremost tested for precision because it's a person's health we're talking about; accuracy and dependability because along with an airtight strategy to protect the health of the users, the solutions should also be able to contain any critical incident that happens anyplace in the premises.

TJ: That sounds very interesting. As it became imminent that these kinds of solutions would be eventually needed to open up workspaces, the market was flooded with products that try to cater to the most important use cases such as social distancing and scanning for symptoms. What are the products that you decided on to take to your customers?

Saurabh Sharma: As is with other IT solutions, we focused on creating a holistic ecosystem rather than a siloed environment. It was very important for these solutions to come together and present themselves as a reassuring experience, a safe experience to the returning workforce. But the parameters on which these solutions were selected differ compared to traditional IT technology.

Here, user adoption is absolutely paramount. The chain of safety is always as strong as its weakest link. So, we had to make sure the solutions were easy to use and preferably required minimal or very little changes in the user behavior. They could still go to office, work the way they used to.

As mentioned earlier, the precision and accuracy of the solutions is the priority. The peace of mind that the management has is directly proportional to these parameters – the workforce peace of mind is also directly proportional to these parameters. And any miss would actually result in loss of revenue and office had to be shut, people can be quarantined, a retail store can be contained – so all that could happen.

So when it comes to selecting the solution, we are always trying to improve the offering as this is a rather new technology area and it's evolving the more we get to know about the situation of the world.

So, SafeSense basically looks at the employee journey from the time he wakes up in the morning to the time he safely exits the office complex.

The journey begins with the employee first taking a self-evaluation survey on a mobile application and declaring whether he has symptoms of any sort. If not, the employee can go ahead and book a slot in the queue for the health scan so that when he goes there, he can directly join the queue and not lose productive time. The employee can start from home based on the allocated slot or wait safely at a distance.

Based on the queue slot, the employee is also given an option to book a desk which is properly sanitized and is socially distant from other occupants. On reaching the office entrance, the employee gets scanned for body temperature in an automated contactless manner and then, assuming the body temperature is ok, the employee is allowed to proceed inside the building.

We have other certain modules also that can check the users for face masks and advise corrective action.

Once inside the building, the users are asked to put on their smart ID badge holders or any other wearable that can enable social distancing and contact tracing with real-time monitoring and quick visual alerts. Visual alerts are very important because they give users a cue in real time that they are not maintaining social distancing and they should move away.

The users then proceed to the specific rooms where the allocated desk is. Each room has a digital signage informing the user if it is safe to enter based on the occupancy level or the disinfection status of that particular area.

Then we have made the entire experience of consuming IT services as contactless as possible. This includes IT vending machines, digital lockers, kiosks, QR codes everywhere, automated sense-and-heal solutions and immersive remote support for guidance and issue fixes.

To overlook the entire operation, we have customized a dashboard that leverages analytics and AI to highlight chinks in the strategy, to give out real-time insights to the enterprise that this is how your entire enterprise is behaving – this area, this zone or this employee is at risk and you need to take corrective action now

So, these are several factors that we considered when we designed SafeSense blueprint for every unique environment. The listeners can reach out to us for further details and we would love to help them with a control solution specific to their requirements.

TJ: That is a comprehensive portfolio and has all the ingredients of ensuring a safe work environment or even a commercial complex for customers. I feel this is too short a time to get into the details of each of these products. So, what we will do is, do an episode on each of the categories of products that you mentioned and host the experts that you work with for each of them. When we come back after the break, Saurabh will face the rapid-fire round.

Welcome back everyone. Saurabh, Are you ready?

Saurabh Sharma: Absolutely

TJ: When offices open up, given a choice, out of 10 working days, how many days would you prefer to work from home?

Saurabh Sharma: I'd say every alternate day. So, five days in office and five days at home.

TJ: Which is your fitness regimen of choice? Strength training or cardio?

Saurabh Sharma: This is a tough one because I don't have any but if I ever do, I'll go for cardio.

TJ: Are you looking forward to the Apple iPhone 12 launch?

Saurabh Sharma: Not really, the changes have been mostly incremental over the last many years. So no, not really.

TJ: Which is the video conferencing tool of choice – Zoom or MS Teams?

Saurabh Sharma: I think Microsoft Teams works like a charm for me. So, it's Teams.

TJ: Do you miss travelling?

Saurabh Sharma: I never thought I'll answer this question with a yes, but I really do miss travelling.

TJ: Name a place where you would like to travel with your family when it is safe to do so?

Saurabh Sharma: I'd like to travel to remote parts of Italy.

Thank you very much, Saurabh. It was an absolute pleasure talking to you. I believe we will be reaching out to you soon for a more detailed conversation on this topic. I look forward to that and I thank you on behalf of our listeners.

Saurabh Sharma: Thanks again for having me. Looking forward to your next invite. Stay safe everyone.

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. See you all in the next one.