

CRAFTING THE FUTURE

In conversation with Sheikh Shabab Ahmed of BAT Bangladesh

Our world is getting increasingly competitive by the day. To excel in this ever-shifting competitive world, the next generation of young leaders need to be on top of their game. We talk to Sheikh Shabab Ahmed, Head of External Affairs of BAT Bangladesh about how to build a future-fit next-generation and how his own experiences shaped him to be a successful leader.

Can you share the childhood experiences that shaped you up as a leader and individual?

In this modern age, transformation is happening at a lightning rate and we need to gear up to welcome this change to ensure the upcoming generation is future-fit. There are two ways to achieve that, firstly we must ensure a good education system and secondly, we have to provide effective interventions that will inspire and transform young aspirants into thoughtful leaders.

If I reflect on my life experiences and divide my life into two halves, my first 20 years were spent building myself as an individual through a structured educational process and in the second half, I gradually built my career path step by step.

At school, I was very fortunate to be a part of a curriculum where extracurricular activities were given equal priority as textbook education. I have been a part of clubs that involved sports, debate, science and more, all of which boosted my critical thinking capabilities along with developing my problem-solving skills and tried me in leadership role in a small scale. This balance is a vital part of growing up and should be one of the key focus areas for youth development.

Leadership skills need to be embedded in schools; we need to start from the basics and make sure that extracurricular activities become an essential part of our education system. To my view, 'extracurricular' should be termed as 'co-curricular activities'. We need to create opportunities and be a part of the solution, so the next generation leaders can thrive from within.

What are the key qualities one needs to develop to be a successful leader?

Nurturing your passion and practicing discipline are the key aspects to becoming a successful leader in my opinion. While you are in that path, consistency should be the focal point.

From an early age, I have been passionate about cricket and other co-curricular activities which have taught me to face various practical situations in life, develop my leadership skills and it has also implanted the "go-getter" trait in me.

Over the years I have realised that when you do what you love, everything else falls into place in life. I always aim high and thus always reach somewhere that is far above from the average. One of my favourite quotes is 'if you shoot for the moon, you will reach among the stars'. I believe I am a successful and a content individual today, closer to my goals because I always built on my passions and did not let them slide, while also chasing stretching dreams.

As I am a parent now, I would like to request all the parents to support their children if they are into sports, performing arts, or any other co-curricular activities they are passionate about. They are the future of our country and we must encourage them to follow their passions and dreams along with structured education so that they build their confidence and create growth in society. **You have just completed your 16th year in this industry. What were the key factors and experiences that helped to map out your career path?**

My journey at BAT Bangladesh began in 2006 as a territory officer in marketing department and as I completed my 16th year, I now stand as the Head of External Affairs, looking after Government related affairs and corporate affairs along with ensuring sustainability of the business. It has truly been an honour to have worked for such a prestigious organisation



that has been the grooming ground for industry leading talents for over 111 years now. If I must reflect back, three factors helped me to map out my road to success.

Choosing the right organisation matters

The transition from a university student to the corporate world is a tricky one and often young people get attracted to the salary being offered rather than the bigger picture. It is important to understand your choices and go for the organisation that will add value to your career path and will also help you to start with a stronger foothold.

Your mentor is your biggest support system

Choosing the right people for growth is equally important. When you join a high-performing organisation, you might not have the liberty to choose your boss, but you can always choose your mentor.

Mentors guide you through situations and develop your soft skills. They say a good boss is essential for a good career; I would say a good mentor is much more

important in this journey because they will be your support system, sounding board for your thoughts and would bring out your best version in all situations without prejudice.

Understanding the bigger picture

Constant learning and upskilling are essential if you want to be successful in the fast-evolving corporate world. The job you are doing today might be gone or evolved tomorrow so it's important to stay grounded and be adaptable. A good skillset, unparalleled experiences and a humble attitude will take you places in your career.

Over the past 16 years, I have pushed my limits and served various managerial roles within marketing and eventually secured my place in the ever-challenging External Affairs function. I took a leap of faith because I could relate to my personal goals in this current function. I believe, I was true to my dreams and thus made the

can stop you from reaching the peak.

It's the small things that create life and no matter how intense my work can get at the end of the day, when I go back home and see my family smiling and waiting for me, it makes my day complete and worth it.

As one of the youngest corporate leaders, how would you like to contribute and ensure future-fit young leaders?

We need to capitalise on our youth population and prepare them for a transformational journey that's sweeping through Bangladesh. Considering the population dividend, we have, we need to drive them in the right path now.

Our current generation leaders are all leading most multi-national corporations now. We see more Bangladeshi CEOs than ever before. It is time we make this a norm, prepare and inspire the next generation trailblazers to carry the torch forward.

Our youth needs to be inquisitive about their future and build on their skill sets so that when their time arrives, they are ready to take on the responsibility.

For example, startups are exciting. But these days, there is a tendency among the younger generation to jump to start-up businesses right after graduation, without any structured work experience.

In my opinion, right after graduation, you lack the experience to run an organisation that can only be gained by working in the structured system where you are mentored by others and supported by proven structured system.

On-the-job learning will shape up your business sense and will support you to make informed decisions. So, in my opinion, it's important to get a job, get some first-hand experiences and then go for startups. Only this can lead to a sustainable business model.

I have completed 16 years of my journey and I have another 20 years till my retirement, if all goes well. In this tenure, I want to contribute by creating mentorship programs and advocate for agile working culture that will inspire and motivate young minds to express their thoughts and ideas. I will invest my personal time to design and implement purpose-driven leadership programs applicable for Bangladeshi environment that will prepare them to own up to challenging roles and drive innovation and take this country towards the dream of becoming a developed country by 2041.

"The time is always right to do what is right," said Martin Luther King Jr. Keeping that analogy in mind, I believe the time is right to create the future for Bangladesh now.

Hybrid workplaces are the future

ARE WE READY?

ZAKIA SAMEEN NOOR

Almost two years into the pandemic, the world is rethinking a lot of concepts that it took for granted in the pre-pandemic era. Perhaps the most divisive of it all is the future of work. While global trends indicate that Gen Zs and Millennials are less likely to give up the incredible benefits of remote working, it's true that from an employer's perspective, there are certain things that require hands-on interaction.

And so, where do we draw the line? Can hybrid workplaces—meaning a combination of physical and remote working systems—can be the solution? And most importantly, is Bangladesh ready to make this shift?

We try to find out.

What challenges can an organisation face in a hybrid environment?

According to Mohammad Aiyaz, Operations Manager of a digital customer service startup, challenges depend on the type of the organisation and industry. "Not every company can go into a hybrid nature. For example, a tech-based company will find it more convenient than a traditional bank to go into online collaborative work. Engineers and business-people can easily shift between online and offline work."

It is difficult to enforce honest communication which leads to sudden drops in work performance. "Issues which can be easily resolved off-line now require much more time in cooperation when tackling on-line. At the same time, coffee breaks - a good time to bond with colleagues - are not possible in a virtual environment. Brainstorming is much smoother in an office setting," says Tasfia Tasbin, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a digital marketing startup.

In the case of solutions, Ashrafur Shabab, a Management Trainee (MT) at the Human Resources (HR) department of a reputed global Multinational Corporation (MNC), says, "The first part is accessibility and safety. Not everyone has the same homogeneity of an office work environment at home. Hence, providing people with the right tools, ergonomic chairs and tips for ensuring minimal burnout was the first challenge that the organisation faced. In our MNC structure, partnering with our global counterparts and moulding proper strategies on a holistic level allowed all countries to crack hybrids together."

How to evaluate employee performance in a hybrid work culture?

From Ashrafur's perspective on HR, performance on a general scale does not get affected much based on the overall working modality. He said that irrespective of the modality, everyone has to overcome certain challenges, show their grit and get the real results. He also emphasised on the importance of proper company evaluation: "The ones who can be deemed as proper performers and the ones who don't are provided avenues to be groomed and moulded properly."

Companies need to introduce different metrics, assign tasks properly, and monitor whether employees are meeting their targets or not. For example, Tasfia maintains a board system where there is weekly task distribution. The manager should care whether the deliverables are executed properly on time and done well - by each employee. Setting accountability is important otherwise tracking becomes difficult.

However, the point to be noted is that this method of evaluation is relatively easier for job roles like engineering. Such metrics may fail to properly evaluate secondary help i.e. employees who are pivotal to the work environment, but who may not meet their own deadlines.

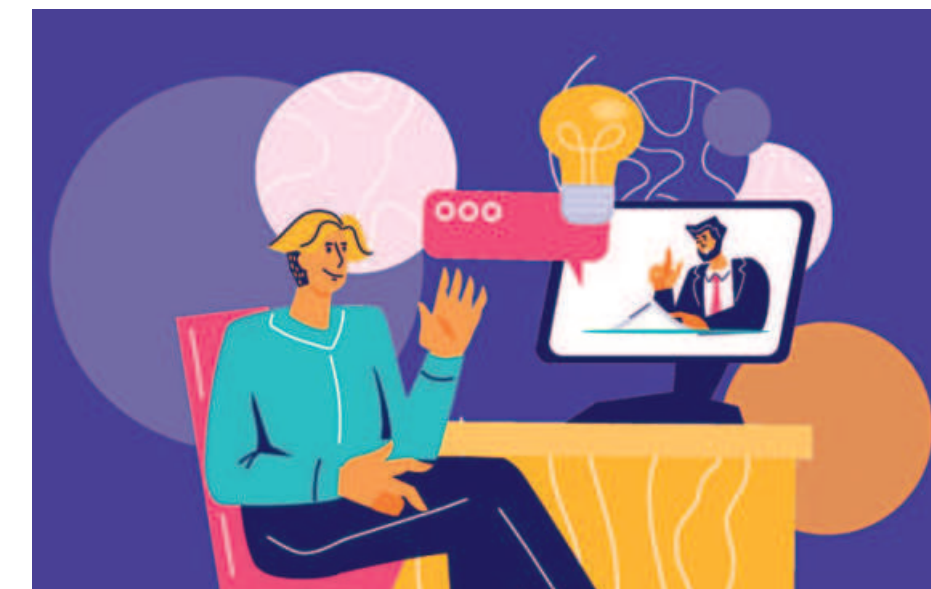


ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

Is a hybrid work culture more effective than an office-only work culture?

It depends on the role and the company itself.

"For some roles like Supply Chain and Customer Development (Sales), a touchpoint at the factory or the markets is simply necessary - to have a proper connection with our customers and consumers," says Ashrafur. "However, for roles which are more strategic and data-driven, a hybrid position has proved to be extremely effective as employees have the option of coming to the office for collaborative projects and staying at home to concentrate on work that needs to be done alone."

Younger people are more responsive to hybrid workplaces since they have

understood the advantages of autonomy here and are more habituated to text-based communication. Older generations and conglomerates who are used to a pre-pandemic mode of work may find it difficult to adapt.

What kind of benefits have institutions found from implementing a hybrid office?

In his organisation, Ashrafur has found a boost in performance and overall employee wellbeing since a hybrid workplace provides employees with the ability to control the balance between their professional and personal hours. This ownership allows a much more satisfying employee experience.

Tasfia has praised how time is saved in attending meetings online, otherwise lost to the incessant traffic jams. "This has also meant that our expenses are reduced in-office maintenance. Plus, the increased time means we get to spend more time with our loved ones and have space, which is very important. As the pandemic has shown, work is not the only important thing in life."

The winners in a hybrid setting will be the winners who can navigate both on-site and virtual worlds well. They are agile in communication, have strong personal relationships with co-workers and managers, have flexibility and

control.

In such cases, if the organisation provides counselling services and a peer community to their employees, it can help ease the mind of their employees who can find a better headspace to focus on both work and wellbeing.

What to keep in mind before implementing a hybrid office?

A company is built by its people. Therefore, it is integral to ask their opinion if they're ready to embrace this change. Much weight has to be given to HR too. Surveys, polls, and honest communication are necessary before implementing any strategy.

A lot of employee experience digitisation needs to be present for a complete hybrid experience. Including proper accessibility and safety metrics. Also, making way for more hybrid collaboration is key. Not a lot of employees might even need to come to the office; thus, specific seats for each employee may not be necessary."

It is also imperative to find the sweet spot of online and offline work for each role before the hybrid work mode rollout.

Moreover, based on key employee insights on experience and regular performance appraisal in the new modality, the tweaks need to be done for the system to be perfect for all.

As Ashrafur says, "The key thing to remember is that this modality needs to be beneficial for the people. So keeping them at the centre and working around it will always provide the best result."

Another critical thing to learn is to appreciate the value of time. Tasfia observed that in online meetings, some people tend not to value the time of the other party. If a meeting is supposed to be for 30 minutes, it should end exactly in 30 minutes.

What is the future of the hybrid workplace in Bangladesh?

Despite the ongoing popularity, a hybrid workplace is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach to solving the pandemic work crisis. Reality shows that not all industries and office cultures are suited to it.

But, that does not mean the hybrid workplace is going away any time soon.

Students, part-timers, and freelancers have been greatly benefited. Traffic jams, distances, and time constraints are no longer obstacles to finding work and enhancing their skill sets, which is what companies desire. Even in her organisation, Tasfia has found a considerable amount of talent outside Dhaka who operates completely online.

Also, given the fact that management will be filled by the younger generation who have adapted to the pandemic, perhaps one-day traditional industries too may see themselves adopting a hybrid approach.

The hybrid workplace model is here to stay. When Bangladesh may adapt it, remains the biggest question.