



POSTCARDS FROM THE FUTURE



POSTCARDS FROM THE FUTURE is a series of short articles that offer a provocative view of India's future. While granting that the future is inherently unknowable, it attempts to show how the future may play out at the micro level, based on data and using the systematic and established approaches of the discipline of futures studies.



IT'S A MAN'S (DOG'S) LIFE: WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN THE NEXT DECADE

As men (and career women) grapple with the 24x7x365 nature of working life today, the seventies and eighties are filled with the glow of nostalgia as the kinder, gentler era of work life. People worked from nine to six pm, the weekends were free and four week annual summer vacations with the kids was the norm. There was no email, no cell phones, no 24x7 business news; work flowed at a gentle pace. What was not dealt with today could wait until tomorrow.



After a decade of high pressure work life, it is tempting to imagine and hope that the next decade of work life would be easier, at least at an individual level. Well, is that to be, that is the question to consider.



At a macro level, as at least the top 30% of urban households become more affluent and the top 1% grow seriously wealthy, the question that comes to mind is where will this India go – towards a leisure society like Europe, towards a still hard working society like the USA or a still frenetically working society like Japan, Korea, Taiwan et al?



The dominant force impacting the nature of work life everywhere is global capitalism as the predominant economic system. Capitalism excels at converting resources into wealth through the mechanisms of productivity and competition, especially at a global level. There are certain discernable characteristics of the capitalist system that have significant impact on work-life issues



The productivity imperative of capitalism, at an individual level places a premium on energy, vitality, health and fitness. Youth is idolized as this is the life phase of maximum vitality. Among resources, time is the scarcest commodity. There is more and more pressure to squeeze more and more productivity out of the scarce resource called time. There is relentless pressure from competitive forces resulting in the need to run hard to stay in the same place and not fall behind.



The seductiveness of the wealth creation dream and of non-stop material progress keeps people wanting to move up the ladder of upward social mobility. It leads to the ROI imperative, to monetize all personal assets, of talent, time, network and property.



Technology is the powerful supporting force for global capitalism, enabling both continuous productivity increases and individual empowerment through capability enhancement.

All of these characteristics of global capitalism are visible today in Indian business and work life. These look set to continue as high impact, high certainty driving forces behind the nature of work life in the next decade. The 24x7x365 pressure of business and work looks all poised to extend to its second decade. In fact the momentum of this force is so great that it seems unstoppable.



What would be the fallout of this? We could expect continuing growth and emphasis on looking good, being young and energetic, fitness and health. Gyms and fitness centres should have booming business. Food and nutrition as a route to health and vitality will gain more momentum, ayurveda reinvented could be big business. Finally, we could see the rise of male beauty treatments including botox and plastic surgery to continue to look and feel young.



On the work front, people would change jobs sooner to climb career ladders faster. The work smart not just work hard mantra will resonate louder and louder. Especially, amongst youth, the temptation to cut a few corners and rise faster will be very high. Entrepreneurship and smart negotiation to make money quick will be the order of the day. People will seek more and more gadgets and services which will help them squeeze more out of the 24 hours of each day.



Stress levels could reach an all time high. We could anticipate an ongoing quest for stress relievers of all kinds – from humour and laughter clubs, to tobacco and alcohol, from personal lessons in yoga and meditation to company wide classes, from the growth of weekend breaks and short-haul travel to the growth of spas and wellness centres.



Second and third careers could well become an imperative and not a choice as it is today. With companies wooing the young for the dual benefits of high energy and lower costs, the 45+ professionals who can look forward to productive capability until they are 70, will perforce need to plan for second and third careers. This compulsion will be felt for economic reasons and because the productivity ethic ensures that society values only those who are energetic and productive even in their old age.

What could stop the momentum of the demands of global capitalism on urban Indian society as a whole? Are there any trends visible on the horizon? There is one countervailing force visible and that is the galloping growth of chronic lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, cholesterol, blood pressure and resulting heart disease. It is possible that the fear of loss of life could get many men and families off the wealth treadmill.



As yet, though this seems to be a high impact but high uncertainty force. How much the incidence of chronic lifestyle diseases will grow to as well as the extent to which the attitudinal response of slowing down will prevail are big question marks at the moment. Could people afford to get off the work and wealth treadmill even if they wanted to?

What seems likely is the emergence of time and leisure as the new status symbols. In a society like ours with status orientation as a deep cultural imprint, the man who has truly 'arrived' is the man who has moved not only beyond struggling and striving, but also beyond owning and now has earned enough wealth to work by choice and not by compulsion. With the spiritual quest as the other deep cultural imprint, we may see a backlash against excessive consumerism and excessive capitalism, the pursuit of wealth as the only worthwhile social goal and *the yearning for alternative blue prints for a modern life, well lived.*

