

23. Rethinking a Crippled Society

Soumita Basu

Abstract

Productivity is directly associated with time: how much is produced in a given time period. It's much later that the quality of that product is examined. Efficiency and productivity are celebrated as core values today, particularly at work. And it is through our work, at our workplaces, that we have learnt to recognize our value—and more importantly, to find our identity. Should something as fundamental as identity be left to the narrow gauges of productivity? And how should we look at productivity in today's workplaces?

Keywords: productivity, inclusion, disability, workspaces

“Now, I'm neither productive nor reproductive,” she said with a wry smile, skilfully turning it into a giggle. We were soaking in the warmth of the rare pre-spring sun beside the canals of Den Haag, a city in The Netherlands. It was a spontaneous meeting. We had a lot of respect for each other. What we lacked in chemistry, we made up for in our common quest to find our place in a world we had suddenly become alienated from. Words moved effortlessly as we sat beside each other on the wooden bench, munching on a bag of mixed nuts.

When she suddenly remarked on her productivity, I was staring at the tall, almost barren purple tree across the canal. I missed how the words looked on her. I turned to meet her eyes and found tiredness wrapped in smiles and giggles. A few months ago, she was diagnosed with stomach cancer. She wasn't thinking of death. She was looking for life as she had known it for over four and a half decades. While I had fifteen fewer years to boost, my relationship with life was changing rapidly too. My (then) undiagnosed autoimmune disorder had started ruling much of any conversation.

Unless these conversations were with friends.

Friends bring out the deeper value of our existence. Something we all need to cherish from time to time. Our value in the lives of our loved ones isn't defined. It is sacred territory. This is the single most important thing that brings life to our days. But what about livelihoods? And the distinct identity we draw from our productive avatars? One's "usefulness" is often judged by how productive one is. Finding the space that allows you to be productive becomes imperative for your existence. Yet, for most of us, it is also about existence itself. About the means to survival.

The Value of My Every Hour

Countries with strong social protection programmes for the chronically ill or those with disabilities are very few. While social protection programmes ensure survival, they don't give meaning to it. That can come only when we co-exist and co-create. Having chronic illnesses or disabilities systematically excludes us from having this feeling of contributing. It deprives us of a sense of belonging. Slowly, the spiral of questioning our self-worth begins to grow. At every turn, we ask if we are a "burden."

I had to restart my career in my mid-thirties when I acquired an autoimmune disorder and started to gradually lose my mobility. The more mobility I lost, the less work I got. And finally, I stopped working completely. I had no income, while the medical bills kept piling. I leaned on my family. Anxiety started surfacing. I wasn't worried about the constant chronic bulldozing pain that I experienced every second of every day. I wasn't worried about death either. I was worried about living, about being able to buy my medicines, and putting food in my mouth. I was worried about survival. I was worried and I was guilty. There are not enough words to suggest how guilt can engulf you without any trigger when you feel like a burden, when you cannot financially support your ageing parents. In fact, your illness demands every penny ever saved as a family. Everyone told me I wasn't being rational, especially since my family was so supportive. But it wasn't about my family. It was about me.

My financial independence, my social and professional well-being. It was about me finding space in this world which once seemed my very own. I wanted to contribute as a professional as I was known to, only now I was asked "what *can* you do?" instead of "what do you *want* to do?" And now, the struggle was to not just find a role in an organization, but also physical space. I remember being offered a job, only for the offer to be retracted because they didn't know how to engage with me. They worked on the fourth floor of a

building without any lifts. During my interview process, I was candid about my disability. They were impressed by my experience and the organization's main work was on plurality, diversity, and inclusion. I learnt, working on something didn't necessarily have to mean engaging with it, to live by it.

The world around me was not rational either. It only spoke the language of productivity. It rated people based on a hazy relationship between input and output, where the output is very vaguely defined and the input is usually just reduced to the movement of the hour hand on our clocks. It's completely irrational. Or at least very overpowering because most people usually cheat (often, themselves). In most white-collar jobs, people work unrecorded, unpaid "overtime." News of burnouts have become common stories in any sector. We don't just burn the midnight oil, but often ourselves in the name of passion and dedication. However, when we work a few hours less, our compensation packages get adjusted accordingly. The relationship with our organizations and their employees is guided by mistrust, rather than faith. This mistrust becomes even more pronounced in case of persons with disabilities as there are often ill-founded doubts on their work-related abilities (Bonaccio et al. 2020). The organization-staff relationship is driven by ambition, instead of empathy. Completing the task gains importance over how it is achieved. Often, this alienates people from their organization. It colours the people in monochrome, instead of as multidimensional beings.

The monochromatic lens prefers people who are ambitious, and are willing to do whatever it takes. Accountability is stifled when no one asks, "at what cost?" Ambition itself should be relieved from the narrow clutches of productivity. Ambition is seen through the lens of how much one is willing to work, for how long, and the numbers it brings. These are low bars to set for drivers of ambition. Is your organization ambitious about the mental and emotional well-being of its staff? Does its monthly and annual reviews regularly look at the social well-being of the people it engages? Does it create a safe space? Does it proactively create an ecosystem that helps people be themselves? Is it a space, as Rabindranath Tagore's poem says, "where the mind is without fear and the head is held high"?

Organizations often overlook their responsibility of being a safe space. The place where someone is expected to spend at least a third of their day, should feel safe. Often, we talk about safe spaces from a legal point of harassment. Surely, that is the minimum requirement. Yet, even for this minimum requirement to be fulfilled, workers within the organizations should feel assured that they will be heard without prejudice, and that the organization will act to protect them. This assurance cannot come in a compartmentalized way. It is the result of everyday interactions where

power dynamics are not centrestage but are led by the inclusive values of the organization.

Organizational values are in the written framework, in the policies, the actions, the thoughts of people, and guide the board meetings as well as coffee conversations. A safe place is where the mind can be nourished for better quality work, and the person can be stress-free at work for a better quality life.

Dignity of the employee rests on this assurance of being in a safe space, one which is cooperative, not competitive, and which operates on trust. Often, it is most compromised when the focus remains on achieving organizational goals. Goals that don't include the well-being of people.

This doesn't mean we should be without ambition. We need ambition to grow. It is important even for individuals within the organization. However, we need to be driven by empathy at the core, with ambitions at the periphery, instead of the other way around. A paradigm shift towards redefining our relationship with our organizations and redefining the identity of the organization is imperative to be inclusive. Instead of focusing on linear one-on-one relationships with each individual staff member and the organization, we need to build on organizations as one unit with geometric-networked relationships between individual members. Here, tasks are not assigned to individuals but to teams. So, while the team completes the task, individual members may contribute with ease. There could be a young parent needing to be back home early in the afternoon every day or someone who can work late evenings but needs a three-week break every quarter. The design thinker with spurts of creativity and the focused repetitive organized worker can find this space equally comfortable. Workspaces need to be designed to encourage collaboration, instead of fanning the notion of survival of the fittest.

Disability as a Culture, a Way of Life for All

Being disability-friendly demands a healthy environment. The culture of a place needs to be healthy and friendly for everyone, *before* it can become disability-friendly. In other words, being disability-friendly and inclusive ensures a healthy environment for everyone (Stein 2020). Not physically, but mentally and emotionally too. It is an impossible feat to be disability-friendly for just one person or a few select people. It's a culture, a way of life, not something that can be practised in silos. We need to rethink not only hiring practices, but also our work integration. Organizations truly invested in

inclusion have started to re-engineer their work processes to ensure more talent can participate.

The function of society is to ensure its members operate at their full potential, creating a harmony that would otherwise be unknown. However, when society choreographs its moves to only allow for a chosen few, it is not a healthy society. There are many people who have disabilities. Probably, if we look across the spectrum, we will find more people with disabilities than otherwise. Often, they might not even identify as a person with disabilities. Yet, social structures favour the chosen few, and label others as marginalized. If we look deeply, even if there are people with disabilities, it is the society that's disabled.

Reassessing Worth for an Inclusive Workplace

Our self-worth is silently driven by how useful we feel. I realized I needed to fulfil this existential need of mine. There was one year when I was completely without work; my sense of worth was shaken. I thought of home-makers. But they work at their homes, I thought. It was unpaid labour, but at least there was tangible labour. I couldn't do that either. I felt "neither productive, nor reproductive." I took rescue in the locks of my hair. I cut them to donate to patients of cancer and alopecia. I needed to feel useful. I needed to be part of some story.

Our need to be part of something larger, something more than ourselves, is what drives us. We work best as part of a much bigger whole—be it our families, communities, or workplaces. However, we are not just a simple building block of the whole. It's a many-one relationship that creates this whole. Unfortunately, often in our workspaces, we try to form relationships lined up together to produce the whole, that is, the organization. It's actually a network where the dynamics of one-many and many-many relationships evolve to make an organization, instead of just being a stack of many smaller units. Only the richness of a network can create the ecosystem needed for individuals of all kinds of requirements to thrive.

An inclusive organization can only be possible if we weave all our stories together; where characters don't come in only to push the story of the whole, the organization, forward, but where everyone who is a part of this story also gets their own narratives heard, their own storylines finding ways to move ahead. People not only work and contribute to feel "useful" in an inclusive organization, but they also thrive because the organization also works for them. The business plan and year-on-year plan needs to reflect the growth plan of every individual. How can we periodically evaluate the

fulfilment the organization brings to its people much like how individual contribution towards the growth of the organization is appraised? It's not adequate for organizations to seek a growth plan from its employees but to also support and invest in the individual to achieve this growth.

It is then imperative to see employees as people first, as humans in the most holistic sense: people with families and hobbies, medical issues and natural odd tendencies, special interests and multiple talents. The natural odd tendencies are interesting to note because we all really have them: how prepared is our organization to make an equitable space for introverts and self-paced workers, as well as extroverts and team integrators? Should everyone be equally comfortable working in open spaces or open cubicles under the din of busy voices? What can we do for people who function better in quiet spaces? How can our infrastructure help those with tinnitus, which affects more than twenty per cent of the global population? Are these infrastructures supportive of people with ADHD?¹ Do we all need to function as morning people? Do the night owls end with the raw end of the bargain where their best is either never seen because of the office timings or they are overworked by attending office hours and then working during their naturally preferred time to bring their best on the table? They end up burning both sides and are pushed towards burnout.

It's important that the organization is not just strategizing with the "skills" and "abilities" of its employees but also their natural tendencies, characteristics, disabilities, and specific needs. This becomes even more important for those with certain disabilities or chronic illnesses. There is an unfair burden on them to prove "their worth" in the organization. A friend,² chiselled by her experience of working in the disability sector, sums it up:

I had to prove over and over again as a woman that I'm as good as the men, but only by being better than them. I see the people with disabilities walking the same path—they have to prove they are as good as the non-disabled people by doing the same work, in the same environment, but better and faster. And may the force be with you if you are a woman with disabilities (Personal communication).

Even after proving it all, they are still not paid equally, or more commonly, there are no job offers. The difference starts during the hiring process itself.

1 Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a very common condition with ten million cases per year in India.

2 Name has been withheld to protect identity.

While all others are asked, “What do you *want* to do and where do you see yourself in the future?” people with disabilities are asked, “What *can* you do?” Ever so silently, their desires are buried. For good. A paradigm shift is needed to gradually displace a crippled society by an empowered one. This shift would be from a position of power where we want to hire from a diverse population to enhance their quality of life to a position of collaboration and symbiosis, because it will enrich us. It is a shift from a space of giving as charity to a space where the giving is derived from cooperation and oneness. These spaces are not just about finding our value through our contribution, but being valuable for who we are.

The dreams, abilities, and specific needs of every individual need to be understood and mapped in the organization. Individuals of an inclusive organization are not pieces of a puzzle coming together to complete the bigger picture. They are pieces of a Lego set—of varied sizes, colours, shapes, and a world of possibilities.

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About the Author

Soumita Basu (soumita@zyenika.com) is a solution finder who finds joy in improving quality of life at scale. This led her to start Zyenika Inclusive Fashion, a company that designs clothes for all body types and physical abilities. Her work at Zyenika has been recognized with UNDP-supported Global Honeybee Creative and Innovative Ideas Award 2020. Inclusion, gender, and equality has been at the core of her career as a journalist, or social development practitioner and researcher. Soumita holds a Master’s in Development Studies from ISS, The Hague, Erasmus University Rotterdam, and was awarded a fellow position at the Netherlands Fellowship Programme.

