

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Working from everywhere: The future of work and inclusive organizational behavior (IOB)

Reimagining our futures together: An early bird's-eye view of inclusive organizational behavior

Amandeep Dhir^{1,2}  | Puneet Kaur^{2,3,4} | Sharfa Hassan⁵ | Demetris Vrontis^{6,7}

¹Department of Management, School of Business & Law, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway

²Optentia Research Focus Area, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa

³Department of Psychosocial Science, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

⁴Jaipuria Institute of Management, Lucknow, India

⁵Department of Management Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India

⁶Department of Management, School of Business, University of Nicosia, Nicosia, Cyprus

⁷S P Jain School of Global Management - Dubai Campus, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Correspondence

Amandeep Dhir, Department of Management, School of Business & Law, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway.
 Email: amandeep.dhir@uia.no

Sharfa Hassan, Department of Management Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India.
 Email: sharfahassan3@gmail.com

Summary

The world has witnessed high-intensity and low-occurrence crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic that have radically changed not only the discourses of health and safety but also permanently changed the realities of the workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic-related new normal has resulted in the exponential increase in the acceptance of “homeplace” or “work from home” in work-related domains. With this sudden dramatic shift in the way the present and future work is being conceptualized, there is every reason to believe that employees struggle with a plethora of intertwined thoughts and emotions, particularly a heightened sense of social isolation and exclusion from their work environment. The present study is an attempt to address this concern in the broader ambit of inclusive organizational behavior. Using an interpretivist research approach, we dwell on the genesis of organizational behavior in changing times, particularly digitalization and social isolation. We employ inductive analysis of the employee data generated over two waves and use grounded theory to explain how inclusive behavior could be fostered within organizations. Our study provides an early conceptualization of inclusive organizational behavior by identifying four factors, namely, inclusive support, inclusive work design, inclusive culture, and inclusive mindset. Furthermore, based on the findings of the study, a three-tier model of inclusive organizational behavior is proposed that links individual, group, and system-level dynamics in the organizations.

KEYWORDS

digitalization, inclusive culture, inclusive mindset, inclusive organizational behavior, inclusive support, inclusive work design, organizational levels

1 | INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic magnanimously influenced the everyday discourses of individuals, organizations, societies, and nations, majorly reflected in the changing patterns of living and working (Caligiuri et al., 2020). With social distancing measures capturing much of the policy and organizational debates during the pandemic,

digital technology permeated into the realities of the workplace in a very short span of time (De Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021). For instance, in the United Kingdom alone, the total remote workforce grew ninefold in the span of a few months, with a major spike recorded in the second week of lockdown in 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2020). This resulted in the increasing acceptance of concepts like “work from anywhere” (Özkazanc-Pan, 2021; Özkazanc-Pan & Pullen, 2020),

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giving organizational leaders and managers the biggest nightmare of their lives. It is argued here that although remote work has long been embraced by organizations, with a growing number of organizations providing remote work options (Chatterjee et al., 2022), COVID-19 pandemic-instigated remote work presented them with new challenges. A point which is important to mention here is that before the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work was a choice-based phenomenon primarily meant to enhance both productivity and the mental well-being of employees (de Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). However, during the pandemic, the reality of remote work changed, and many organizations were seen scrambling to provide employees with the proper infrastructure to enable them to perform in an online context (Hung et al., 2021). For example, managers had a hard time deciding how to make a successful digital shift, which was no longer a choice but a necessity, resulting in resource reconfigurations as well as problems related to managing people (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Not only this, setting work priorities, collaborating in an online context, and continuous communication with employees were a constant battle, particularly for those organizations that were compelled to work in a remote environment (Newman & Ford, 2021). Therefore, decisions pertaining to the streamlining of work ranging from employee selection and training to online work-related conversations and assignment of tasks were no longer an obvious organizational discourse (Branicki, 2020).

With such a radical shift in the way work is being conceptualized, there is every reason to believe that employees, too, struggled with a plethora of intertwined thoughts and emotions, particularly a heightened sense of exclusion from the work environment (Caligiuri et al., 2020). It is argued that the exclusion from the “workplace” was not merely being away, as would normally happen in any remote work situation before COVID-19 pandemic. The adjustments and transformations operated at a higher level where people had to rethink how work–life is being reconfigured. This happened because employees, apart from working in isolation, had to showcase and learn new skills, effectively use technology, manage the blurring boundaries between work and life, and most importantly, derive meaning from work, which resulted in anxiety and fear. While various crisis situations stifled the economies of the world before the emergence of COVID-19, the heightened level of solitude that this pandemic brought with itself resulted in more humanistic perspectives being incorporated in corporate practices (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021). As a matter of fact, during the pandemic, various forms of inequalities sprouted, which aggravated the sense of isolation witnessed by employees. For instance, it has been seen that working at home was disadvantageous, particularly for employees with a low socio-economic profile who have small accommodations and fewer resources (Reuschke & Felstead, 2020). Hence, it is believed that the management of COVID-19-related consequences placed an emphasis on care-based and human-centered leadership within organizations (Branicki, 2020).

From the above discussion, it could be inferred that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic could be gauged at various levels, including organizational and individual levels. It was also seen that the impact and response strategies at every level were distinct yet intertwined. For example, organizations had to consider options like remote work,

which in turn profoundly influenced the experiences of employees in terms of requirements of new skill sets and work design. Not only this, most employees also developed feelings of isolation and fear (Zacher & Rudolph, 2021), which undoubtedly influenced their productivity and sense of belonging to their organization (Andel et al., 2021). To that end, organizations struggled to devise mechanisms to make employees develop a sense of inclusion while working remotely through technology options, particularly digital technology (Camevale & Hatak, 2020). It is hereby also inferred that these developments have changed the realities of workplace and meaning people derive from their work (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021), which not only influenced their productivity (Narayanamurthy & Tortorella, 2021) per se but also the dynamics of organizational behavior.

Organizational behavior is a complex multilevel phenomenon where individuals, groups, structures, cultures, and strategies continuously interact in reciprocity to bring the desired organizational outcomes. In the COVID-19 pandemic scenario, one of the most important challenges that organizations faced pertained to the exclusion of people from the work environment (Hennekam & Shymko, 2020). This is believed because the digital shift during the pandemic was a sudden affair for most of organizations, which brought loneliness for employees (Henkel et al., 2020) and most importantly a paradigm shift regarding the concept of workplace. It is believed that the workplace is associated with interconnectivity, and the social construction of work is historically embedded in satisfaction and the realization of various needs, including livelihood, social recognition, and the development of interpersonal relationships (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). The outbreak of COVID-19 drastically changed how these needs are met, where the use of technology (e.g., virtual teams and companion robots) became exacerbated more than ever (Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2020). Needless to say, this resulted in isolation from the work environment influencing employee mental health, physical health, and productivity, which in turn meant devising innovative human resource management systems that could address multiple problems facing organizations (Azizi et al., 2021). With this major reshuffle in how work is conducted and how employees interact and develop a sense of meaning and attachment with their organization (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021), it is imperative to explore how organizational behavior is informed and influenced when employees are working literally from anywhere. It is important to mention here that this transition from place to space is accompanied by various factors, including skill adjustments, resource shortages, redesign of work, sudden technology intrusions, social isolation, mental breakdowns, personal losses, safety concerns, and new work–life stressors that make it different from prior work-from-home options offered by organizations.

The academic literature on organizational behavior in the context of crisis situations has by and large discretely dwelled on leadership dynamics (Matthews et al., 2022) and catered to some aspects of human resource management, including redesigning work, effective management of the workforce, and discussions pertaining to work–life balance (Azizi et al., 2021; Caligiuri et al., 2020). Despite these academic inquiries capturing the consequential interfaces of organizational

behavior, we contend that these studies neglect how organizational behavior itself changes in the context of crisis situations. Since organizational behavior is a multilevel and dynamic phenomenon, we believe that addressing leadership and human resource-related discourses will not only serve the purpose of theorizing organizational behavior in the context of crises and any future change in the work environment. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, inclusive leadership (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021) and inclusive human resource practices (Caligiuri et al., 2020) surfaced as the major theoretical backgrounds on the basis of which scholars have attempted to unravel the consequences of COVID-19 and corresponding response strategies of organizations to address them. However, we believe that these discussions do not capture the genesis of organizational behavior as a whole since major discourses about the various actors in the organization, including employees and leaders and their interactions and linkages, are by and large missing. To that end, our study seeks to address the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1. How is inclusive organizational behavior formed when people have a tendency to develop a sense of exclusion from work culture?
- RQ2. How does inclusive organizational behavior operate at various levels in organizations?

In order to address the first RQ, we adopted an inductive research design (Creswell, 2014) to capture the early conceptualization of the field of inclusive organizational behavior. Since inclusive organizational behavior is at the evolutionary stage of its development, an exploratory research design was employed. We used a two-wave open-ended survey with employees of different organizations who had witnessed a transition in work during the pandemic. In the first wave, 54 employees participated in the survey. These responses were analyzed, and 49 respondents were selected from these 54 for the second wave since these respondents represented our target population. Out of these 49 respondents, we were finally left with 28 respondents in the second wave of longitudinal qualitative data collection. We employed the content analysis method to derive meaning from the critical mess of data that were generated, which resulted in the identification of four broader dimensions of inclusive organizational behavior. In order to answer RQ2, we developed a multilevel model based on the findings of our study that reflects the inter-linkages among the major constructs of inclusive organizational behavior.

Our study has the following contributions. First and foremost, by empirically validating the formation of inclusive organizational behavior, the current study opens up both research and practice-oriented horizons in this novel area. By examining how inclusive behavior is formed, organizations could find the results of our study worth pursuing vis-à-vis the redesigning of future work. Similarly, researchers of organizational behavior would find the present study consequential in developing the academic literature on inclusiveness and organizational behavior in crisis situations. Second, our study offers four broader areas that are consequential to the formation of inclusive behavior. By documenting both organizational and individual-level factors, a

robust understanding of the phenomenon could be facilitated, which otherwise faces a lack of theorization. Third, since digitalization is increasingly becoming an obvious phenomenon, we believe that the theorization of inclusive behavior is not specific to crisis situations only. We contend that our findings and theorization are equally relevant in normal situations where digital technology has become an important aspect of organizational routines and workflow.

The current study is organized as follows. In the first section, an introductory discussion and the objectives of the current study are delineated. In the second section, an overview of the literary developments on inclusiveness is presented, followed by an elaborate discussion on methodology in the third section. We also discuss the data analysis procedure used in the study to arrive at the major themes in the third section. The fourth section is devoted to a detailed explanation of the aggregate dimensions/themes identified in the preceding section. In the fifth section, we present a model of inclusive organizational behavior duly informed by the results of the study. We conclude the study by highlighting the implications, limitations, and directions for future research in the last section.

2 | THE CONCEPT OF INCLUSIVENESS IN ORGANIZATIONS

The historical conception of inclusiveness pertained to combating discriminatory practices arising out of income disparity and social exclusion at the higher levels of society (Barak, 2005). The entire lineage of discrimination could be witnessed in the discriminatory practices that were intentionally directed towards specific religious groups, specially abled people, women, ethnic groups, older populations, people of color, and even immigrants (Shore et al., 2018). This manifested in the form of exclusion that these vulnerable communities would face in the wake of opportunities, particularly in the workplace. For example, there is a full ledged historical genesis of the exclusion that women and black people faced incorporating promotions, organizational decision-making, and access to resources, including information and networks (Caver & Livers, 2021). In an attempt to address and eradicate these exclusionary practices, the concept of inclusiveness surfaced, which heralded the renaissance of “cherishing and utilizing the differences that all bring” (Caver & Livers, 2021). This meant that the corporate ladder could be equally ascended by individuals with varying backgrounds and that access and inclusion in corporate decision-making were not restricted to groups historically entitled to the same (Nishii, 2013).

Differentiating between exclusionary and inclusionary workplaces, Barak (2014) stated that “an exclusionary workplace is based on the perception that all workers need to conform to pre-established organizational values and norms (determined by its ‘mainstream’); the inclusive workplace is based on a pluralistic value frame that respects all cultural perspectives represented among its employees.” This suggests that the early conceptualization of inclusiveness pertained to equal participation of socially marginalized groups and dismissing the grounds of injustice and the corresponding restructuring of organizational processes and systems for such intervention. This resulted in

the surfacing of concepts like inclusive work environment (Nishii & Rich, 2013), inclusive leadership (Caver & Livers, 2021), and inclusive human resource practices (Cross & Swart, 2022) in contemporary literature.

While the concept of inclusiveness initially started with a societal justice perspective wherein giving equal access to minority groups in decision-making was the focal area, the concept evolved over a period of time into a more rigorous and extended one. For example, today, the concept of inclusive work environments encapsulates workgroup inclusion, leader inclusion, and perceptions of employees towards the inclusion practices adopted by the organizations (Shore et al., 2018). In fact, the startling growth of this concept has led to the emergence of inclusive HRM, where sustainable employability has become the focal point of human resource practices. This suggests that apart from celebrating diversity within organizations, which undoubtedly is a fundamental pillar of the concept, inclusiveness has grown into an extended concept where investing in employees' skills and their lifetime sustenance is taken care of (Groenendaal et al., 2023). To that end, scholars have also ventured into inclusive leadership, where fostering the uniqueness of employees, developing strong intra-team relationships, appreciating the efforts of employees towards organizational goals, and promoting an organizational mission on inclusion are given top priority (Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). This has further led to the emergence of concepts like inclusive ecosystem and cultural transformation on account of fostering such an ecosystem where inclusive employability could thrive. The execution of such concepts needs organizational, institutional, and individual mechanisms (Guillaume & Loufrani-Fedida, 2022), where both "seed," that is, employees, and "soil," that is, organizational leadership, are indispensable (Caver & Livers, 2021).

Given the above major discourses on the concept of inclusiveness, scholars have also attempted to apply this dynamic concept in the context of crisis situations, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Antonacopoulou and Georgiadou (2021) contend that social distancing served as a platform for people to develop an inter-connectedness where inclusive leadership is all-pervasive. They position inclusive leadership at the intersection of social solidarity, mutual respect, and a shared spirit of humanity without any bias and equal access to all. An important point of reflection in their conceptualization of inclusive leadership pertains to the type of discrimination that ensued in the concept. While the early genesis of discrimination pertained to equal opportunity of work and promotions, Antonacopoulou and Georgiadou (2021) included social isolation, a lack of meaning people attribute to their work while working in isolation, an overwhelming connectedness void to fill, and a desire to be a part of the caring community as the moral conduits of inclusive leadership. This signals a more humanitarian and care-based approach to inclusiveness, given the changing nature of work and the workplace. These humanitarian grounds for leading the organization have also been reflected in the study of Caligiuri et al. (2020), who contend that management of global uncertainty not only requires effective talent management but also training employees to cope with stress and developing adequate measures for health and safety. They further contend that in times of global crisis and uncertainty, organizational

performance requires a redefinition where leaders are required to promote the shared spirit of humanity in order to foster an inclusive work environment.

3 | RESEARCH METHOD

Given the novelty of the topic explored in the present paper, a qualitative research approach was employed to address the RQs identified. The present study aims to discover the concept of inclusive behavior, which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been explored in the prior academic literature. On the basis of the premise of the present research that the concept of inclusive behavior is a novel field of study, it was deemed that the best suitable research approach to follow is unquestionably qualitative (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This approach to research enables a thorough understanding of the phenomenon, which is, per se, novel and where a myriad of contextual factors operating at various levels influences its operation (Zahra et al., 2014).

This approach also makes it possible to get closer to informants and, as a result, discover any latent variables that might contribute to a better understanding of how participants see the world around them (Henn et al., 2006; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2009). Consequently, a qualitative perspective offers an opportunity to develop the extant theory further.

We employed an open-ended qualitative essay where the idea was to encourage participants to dwell in-depth on the questions posed. We developed some semi-structured questions that offered participants with stimuli and enabled them to bring to light the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and what interventions, at both the organizational and individual levels, were used to combat them. Since the concept of inclusive behavior is very novel, we offered respondents broader latitude to think and reflect on what possibly acted as a deterrent and/or enabled them to feel connected to their organization during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our questions covered the respondents' personal experiences of remote work, their individual perspectives of solitude, and perceptions of organizational initiatives.

We conducted a two-wave qualitative essay-based survey in order to achieve the aforementioned objectives. In the first wave, 54 employees working in different industries were invited to participate in the survey. In this wave, we figured out new emergent themes that were deemed fit to explore further. Out of these 54 respondents, five respondents were dropped on account of their irrelevant responses. The remaining 49 were contacted again, and responses on new, broader dimensions were solicited, out of which 28 valid responses were received (refer to Table 1 for the demographic profile of these respondents).

3.1 | Data analysis

Given the exploratory nature of the current study, we followed the ideology of an inductive research approach built on the tenets of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following the prior authority

TABLE 1 Profiles of the study respondents.

Gender	Age	Work experience	Industry
Female	41–45	22	Finance
Male	46–50	28	Healthcare
Female	51–55	32	Information technology/processing
Female	30–35	20	Healthcare
Female	36–40	20	Public health
Female	30–35	4	Healthcare
Female	46–50	15	Real estate/finance
Male	51–55	30	Manufacturing
Female	25–29	9	Finance
Female	25–29	2	Healthcare
Female	25–29	7	Business
Female	41–45	25	IT/tech
Male	30–35	5	Education
Female	25–29	2	Finance
Female	41–45	25	Insurance
Male	30–35	12	Education
Male	30–35	11	Healthcare
Female	30–35	16	Technology
Female	56–60	34	Education
Male	51–55	25	Software
Male	56–60	30	Software
Female	46–50	21	Sales
Male	36–40	13	Healthcare
Male	36–40	11	Utilities
Male	30–35	8	Automotive
Male	25–29	4	Education
Female	30–35	18	Professional services (telecommunications)
Male	30–35	13	Consulting
Female	36–40	22	Solar
Female	30–35	15	Education
Male	25–29	6	Banking
Male	30–35	8	Research and IT
Male	41–45	27	Digital marketing
Male	25–29	6	Financial services
Female	56–60	23	Online retail
Male	36–40	22	Legal
Female	25–29	7	CHD
Male	30–35	6	Financial services
Female	46–50	32	Hospitality/tourism
Male	30–35	15	Non-profit industry
Female	36–40	20	Music entertainment
Male	25–29	6	Manufacturing
Female	46–50	31	Higher education
Female	25–29	3	Information technology
Male	25–29	6	Healthcare
Female	30–35	14	Biotech
Male	56–60	34	Business services

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Gender	Age	Work experience	Industry
Male	25–29	10	Information technology/software
Male	36–40	15	Legal sales

on qualitative data analysis, we used a three-step protocol to discover trends and interactions in a “critical mess” of data that were generated (Gartner, 2010). We implemented the coding procedure of Strauss and Corbin (1998), where open, axial, and selective coding of the data was done. In the first step, an open coding procedure was followed, which enabled the identification of first-order concepts. At this stage, the entire set of data was coded, which yielded over 100 discrete codes. These codes were then merged into first-order categories so that this huge number of codes was condensed into similar underlying themes. For example, in the phase of our coding procedure, we created two different codes for “they had a lot of patience with the learning curve of working from home” and “my direct manager was very patient with me.” However, we combined them into the same first-order code, “empathetic behavior towards employee skill deficiency,” given the common line of understanding between the above two statements. In order to establish the veracity of these initial codes, every single interview was read in detail many times by the two authors of the current study. Following Boeije (2016), we also linked various text fragments of the respondents to the codes that were finally developed. It is important to mention here that we incorporated these first-order codes in the findings section so as to provide an evidence-informed conceptualization of the phenomenon.

In the second stage of the coding procedure, we used axial coding to systematically carve out links between the first-order codes (Boeije, 2016). This involved clustering and splitting of the first-order codes so that meaningful themes are generated from a discrete and wide range of thought processes and actions. At this step, we again focused on the text fragments that were selected for each code in the first step so that the underlying connections among the various codes could be established.

In the last stage of our data analysis, we performed selective coding wherein the second-order themes were refined and again compared so that we arrived at higher-order aggregate dimensions (Boeije, 2016). At this stage, we tried to look into the implications of the responses to the challenges faced by employees at work from home and corresponding organizational initiatives to address them. We referred back to our participants' responses to ensure that our more theoretical insights were in sync with our participants' experiences (refer to Figure 1a–c for data structure). When finishing the coding process, the interpretation of the data was thoroughly discussed with all researchers involved.

4 | FINDINGS

In consonance with our interpretivist, qualitative research method, the findings of the study are discussed conjointly, as recommended by

(Yin, 2009). We discuss the aggregate theoretical dimension in greater detail and support the explanations with representational or “power” quotes duly informed by our data (Pratt, 2009).

4.1 | Inclusive support

Organizational support has been considered a pivotal factor in enhancing employee adjustment in uncertain environments (Takeuchi et al., 2009), the importance of which exponentially increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The centrality of support provided by organizations is also captured in the genesis of inclusiveness within organizations, where “supporting employees as individuals” is considered a cardinal element in its execution (Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). Coupled with the fact that during the pandemic, humanistic empathy, care, and support perspectives dominated most of the academic and industry-specific discourses (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021), the organizational support perspective remains critical in these scenarios. The general sentiment among our participants regarding the problems they encountered and the level of organizational interventions aimed to address them revealed that organizations used a multi-faceted approach to ensure employee inclusion amidst remote work. We conceptualize inclusive support to include infrastructural support, employee learning and development, individualized attention, and health-related assistance.

The most dominant and frequently cited narratives in our data reveal that technology-specific support was not only desired by employees but also the first initiative taken by organizations to address work from home-related challenges. Examples of this response include providing IT-related hardware and software, timely IT help, financial aid for IT, and cognizance of IT support on the part of the organization. For example, an HR manager reported that,

There were a number of platforms that were provided by IT and the organization. The full use of the Google suite was used more efficiently, so calls were on Google Meet versus Zoom. There was also access to Slack as a messaging platform. I received double screens versus a laptop, although a laptop was also provided. There is also access given to Microsoft office.

There were instances where organizations didn't provide direct IT support but provided financial assistance instead. In this connection, a data scientist said, “I received technology support where we were given \$1100 stipend to spend on monitors, laptops, keyboards, mouse, and/or anything we need in order to work from home



FIGURE 1 (a–c) Data structure for the qualitative data.

effectively.” This technology-related support also included timely IT services and dedicated staff who provided one-to-one help to employees facing IT-related problems. For instance, a payroll manager narrated,

I received technical support to connect my personal computer at home to a VPN to work from home during the pandemic. I also received access to an online service desk to process tickets if I needed further technical assistance.

Providing IT-related support is the first primary driver of facilitating employee inclusion, particularly during situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. These support activities pertaining to access to necessary resources to accomplish work-related tasks enable the first ground for including employees in the organizational context. We believe this sort of onboarding (Groenendaal et al., 2023) is an inherent part of facilitating inclusive behavior of employees by way of enabling them to perform their work-related assignments.

The second component of inclusive support pertains to skills enhancement, which is undoubtedly the cornerstone of understanding inclusiveness in organizational domains (Caron et al., 2019; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). In this vein, the dominant narratives in our data pertained to the perceptions of skill deficiency that employees had while working from home and the organizational-level initiatives taken to address them. This included training to upgrade employee digital skills, including the use of IT devices, software installation and use, and employee access to online training and learning platforms. For example, a teaching assistant reported,

Yes, as I said before, the employer arranged meetings and seminars where we normally go over the usefulness and the how-to-use guide of the applications. We introduced a new application, namely canvas, which we have not used before, and there we could store material, create assignments, and many other things that basically facilitate our work-from-home effort. To learn all these, we had seminars.

While providing skill-specific training to employees fosters their growth and performance, we found that such efforts could be consequential for developing positive employee-employer relationships, which could, in turn, impact inclusive behavior among employees. For example, an accountant wrote,

We received access to multiple training platforms on more popular apps like Excel, Adobe, etc. as well as our own training programs. These were offered as an optional benefit. My employer also offers to send us to specialized training if our position warrants it. I now think highly of my employer. I am feeling close to him despite being at home.

While providing domain-specific training helped employees manage offline to online transition, an equal level of empathic and considerate attitude towards this transition magnified the impact of such initiatives. It has been seen in the organizational contexts that whenever employees experience any job-related stress, the support of top management and constant communication can act as important buffers (Kraimer et al., 2016). In the present COVID-19 scenario, where employees across industries have become apprehensive about their effective use of technology (Caligiuri et al., 2020), organizations are expected to accommodate diversity in terms of empathetically adjusting to employees' pace of work. For example, in our data, a senior composition analyst revealed,

They had a lot of patience with the learning curve of working from home. They suspended quantity requirement for the first six months of being at home due to server slowness.

Another respondent narrated, “My supervisor has honestly found it funny—we initially took almost twenty minutes trying to get me set up on videoconferencing software.”

We believe that this type of support works at another level, where the values of respect and social solidarity enable equal treatment within organizations and create a pathway for inclusive behavior in them.

Given the magnitude of health impacts of COVID-19, the management of health and safety has been taken to a new level within organizations, where they are increasingly becoming the spotlight of human resource practices (Caligiuri et al., 2020). We got a scattered presence of health-related narratives where organizations have been seen to consciously invest in employee awareness about health, safety measures, and protocols, and access to online platforms teaching health and safety mechanisms. For example, a clinical data manager reported, “We had to watch digital recordings pertaining to health and safety. Some of this did not apply to me as it was about laboratory safety, but after COVID, we received more training on infectious diseases and about how to be safe doing remote work.”

We contend here that providing health-related resources and offering practical support to employees' cohorts with the idea of inclusion is inspired by an interest in other people and an honest concern for them. For instance, a teaching assistant reported, “We had a continuous stream of updates for the health and safety protocols, and that happened from day one. Our employer really cares for us. It is important to maintain our health in order to be productive.”

The final component of inclusive support provided to employees pertains to mental health, which has undisputedly been considered the most important topic both in academia and industry during the pandemic (Zacher & Rudolph, 2021). As COVID-19 has brought with it a heightened level of social isolation and solitude, the importance of social solidarity and mental well-being is increasing more than ever (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021). Our data, too, had a dense representation of narratives that pertained to mental health-related

problems and corresponding measures taken by organizations to address them. The responses include memberships to mental health platforms, reminders from organizations, and meditation lessons. For example, one of the respondents said,

There has been a continued focus. The org. provided memberships to CALM and reminds employees of already approved benefits to leveraging.

Another respondent said, "They have established and reminded us we have a mental health hotline that is global within the company. Also reminding us to do health share activities and emailed tips on self-care and wellness."

4.2 | Inclusive work design

The next dominant line of thought that sprouted from our data pertains to the organizational interventions that facilitated effective work from home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of effective management of remote work has risen exponentially, given the exclusion of employees from the work environment. To that end, it has been seen that facilitating work while being at home could be a strategic sweet spot that could enhance employee performance in uncertain situations (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Our data revealed five important concerns that employees highlighted with respect to the nature of work, its proper execution, and, at the same time, the security of current and future employment.

First and foremost, the respondents of the current study expressed their work-related challenges in terms of their current and future employment status, which got exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tu et al., 2021). The dominant discourse in our data regarding this theme pertained to the proper communication to employees about their employment status. We believe providing security about current and future job status is an important ingredient in facilitating inclusive behavior. This was done either by constantly informing them about their job status, an appropriate policy in this regard, and informally settling their fear of losing jobs. Below, we provide respondent narratives for these.

For example, a loan officer said, "During the pandemic and WFH situation, my employer informed us, employees, during one of our monthly staff meetings that there would not be any layoffs due to the pandemic and everyone's job would be safe in regards to that. In my opinion, it was nice to work for a company that was fully transparent and gave me comfort knowing my job was safe."

Similarly, a pharmaceutical manager reported, "My employer quickly developed a pandemic response policy and provided validity about my future employment status. I was told my employment would be continued and my position was not at risk."

Lastly, with respect to providing informal psychological security about their jobs, a solar manager narrated, "I didn't fear that I would lose my job. It was easy enough for us to all work from home while we figured out the pandemic situation. My work promised that we

would be fine and continue to be able to work. I wasn't worried about losing my job."

The second dominant theme pertaining to work-related discourses was the lack of specific role requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, which created confusion and blurred the boundaries of work. It has been seen that during a crisis situation, role clarity could be a significant challenge that may influence employee work engagement (O'Rourke, 2021). We got evidence of this blur that employees experienced on account of the transition to work from home. For example, an accountant said,

I didn't lose sight of my core role and tasks, but the additional tasks added in general did make me lose sight a bit. When we added general tasks, it got confusing to know who was responsible since there was overlap. The role of the organization was to clear things up at team or department meetings to specify which team or people was responsible for what. So if two teams thought that the other was responsible for a quarterly report, it was cleared up, which I thought was good.

In consonance with the above quote, we infer that organizational intervention, including official communication and daily follow-up on tasks and roles, was cardinal in facilitating employee inclusion. For instance, a loan officer said, "My department would hold a daily morning meeting where we would discuss deals from the previous day as well as any news that we should need to know. This helped me stay focused on what I needed to do to succeed."

Similarly, a development manager reported, "Because of the regular communication from my employer, I did not lose sight of my responsibilities; the company had a clear plan to succeed through the pandemic and come out better."

Third, our data revealed that flexible scheduling of work enabled employees to better connect with their organizations when reasons for exclusion were numerous. Given the fact that flexible work arrangements enable work-family balance during crisis situations (Caligiuri et al., 2020), such provisions created a sense of belongingness and goodwill among employees. For example, an engineer said, "We were given a lot of flexibility in how we do our work. The rigid scheduling was less and less used, and we were able to take time off in the middle of the day to deal with situations. The policy allowed us to work when we could due to pandemic related issues."

Likewise, as a composition specialist, "I work my normal schedule. I am required to do so. When overtime is offered for the day, we can work the overtime hours at our convenience, which is a good thing if I have an afternoon or evening appointment. Saturday work is at my convenience. But Monday through Friday, I am required to work the hours I was hired."

Fourth, an interesting line of thought that was revealed in our data pertained to the work-life juggle that employees struggled with during remote work. Given the fact that during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees struggled more than ever to demarcate work and

life and create a distraction-free workspace (Vaziri et al., 2020), we believe organizations that helped them sail through the same enabled employee inclusion. In this regard, we found employees mentioning how organizations provided extra support to draw a line between work and family responsibilities. This included providing financial help. For example, a data engineer stated, “My employer gave us a \$500 bonus to update tech at home.” Similarly, a team supervisor said, “My organization held a zoom meeting with most managers and gave us an allowance to set up a room with office furniture. It was a small allowance, and I had to fill in more of it myself.” Apart from financial assistance, infrastructural support was also extended. For instance, a sales manager reported, “They helped provide equipment for an office at home. Also, I have a good amount of paid time off to use for circumstances as they arise. My boss is pretty cool and flexible as well.”

Finally, an important aspect of inclusive work designs pertained to the increased use of gadgets that particularly emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in much-discussed digital fatigue (Sharma et al., 2021). It has been witnessed that employees need sustained attention during online meetings, webinars, and so on, which are not only physically distressing but also tax employee emotions and well-being. But organizational interventions are all-pervasive here, where counseling employees to develop healthy lifestyles and habits and providing technical support as well as training on sustainable use of technology products could help mitigate such effects. For example, a loan officer said,

We were told to wear blue light blocker glasses to reduce strain on my eyes. I also practice the 20-20-20 rule where every 20 minutes I spend looking at a screen; I look 20 feet away from me for 20 seconds. This is the biggest thing that reduces eye strain and helps me avoid digital fatigue.

Similarly, for developing a healthy lifestyle, a team supervisor said, “I take hourly breaks and do 250 steps around my house for breaks. I take breaks to meditate, and I always give myself an hour before bed to just unplug everything and relax to make sure I sleep well and am ready for the next day of work. I also take breaks during the day and just have some tea to help clear my mind and make sure I am ready to work again.”

Likewise, an accountant stated, “The interim boss said he was horrified to see how many hours I worked. He told me to take walks through nature every day. And I did; those nature walks really helped my mind to reset and to connect me with my body.”

4.3 | Inclusive culture

While organizational culture has captured much of the academic debate on organizational behavior, in our context, a culture that facilitates teamwork, collaboration, a sense of care, and relationship

building throughout the organization depicts an inclusive culture. We found some related evidence of the use of virtual collaboration that enabled joint success during the COVID-19 pandemic (Caligiuri et al., 2020). This has been further associated with clarity in terms of tasks, roles, norms, and the spirit of knowledge sharing (Fulk et al., 2005). In our data, we found a general sentiment of joint work that improved performance as well as employee satisfaction. For example, a development manager reported, “My employer expanded the use of remote access capabilities as well as encouraged teams to interact more often and also start to create a culture of the camera on in order to facilitate teambuilding.” Apart from this, in order to facilitate collaboration, IT support was also provided; he further said, “We use Microsoft Teams primarily for team collaboration. The company expanded quite a few IT resources to ensure all people could be able to work from home. The company has continued to be supportive of a remote team working environment.”

This shared learning was further reported by an accountant, “The company was understanding in our ability to adapt to everything online. It took some of us longer to learn the skills, but our team and department offered lots of support. During meetings, we share tips and tricks and also short presentations on how to perform tasks on applications, like uploading large amounts of data into a program and having it run correctly. It was nice to know that we had this support and teamwork in learning new features due to being remote.”

Similar evidence on shared learning was narrated by a solar manager, “We did have to collaborate on some projects. We would talk through instant chat, or we would do a zoom call if we felt like it was easier to explain something. It all worked out pretty well. We used Slack to communicate, and constant communication via chat did help me feel closer.”

Second, our data revealed that building and maintaining relationships is crucial to developing an inclusive culture. Prior literature is also evident in this relationship building, where strengthening belongingness among team members is crucial for an inclusive organizational climate (Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). We got numerous instances of the same in our data, with employees mostly talking about technology tools that enable such relationship building. For example, an operations director stated,

I really appreciated the community building that we did over Zoom. It helped to see everyone's faces each day and be able to check-in with how they were doing.

Likewise, a credit counselor narrated, “We have a chat system where I work that's used to keep us in touch with each other. We use it on a daily basis multiple times a day.”

In the same vein, an accountant said, “We had a company messaging system which let us call, video call, or chat with team members. This helped us be connected to our team and to the manager. So, we were just a click away from being in contact with each other. There is also a message board where announcements would be made so the whole team could see it and everyone would be in the loop.”

4.4 | Inclusive mindset

The above-discussed factors delineate organizational-level factors that were consequential in fostering inclusive behavior among employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we also found various individual-level factors that were highly relevant in the remote work context. Our data revealed that people develop a sense of inclusion not only under the influence of extrinsic motivators but also through intrinsic factors and most importantly, their own general inclinations. It has been seen in organizational contexts that employees experience a heightened level of stress when they are exposed to uncertain environments (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). In such contexts, the first strategy expended by employees includes the traits and coping responses that signal their respective mindsets (Shaffer et al., 2006). To that end, an open-minded outlook, a high level of ambiguity tolerance, and resilience have been documented to circumvent the potential downsides of stress experienced by employees (Hagtvedt et al., 2019). In the present context, our data revealed that employees who were mindful of the COVID-19 situation had cognitive flexibility, a balanced view of life, and a better understanding of the present and future work scenarios.

As far as mindfulness is concerned, it signals the level of receptive attention and conscious awareness of the present moments. It has been found that mindfulness could be a significant deterrent to perceptions of fear that employees develop during crisis situations, particularly job insecurity (Chen & Eyoum, 2021). Therefore, there is no surprise in witnessing mindful employees navigating stress through resilience without any resort to negative thought processes. We contend that by virtue of keeping individuals in a positive state of mind, mindfulness enables them to feel part of the organization without developing any sense of exclusion. For example, our data revealed that employees who were mindful of the COVID-19 pandemic were the ones who developed the least fear of losing jobs. As anecdotal evidence, a team supervisor said,

I always make sure to pay a lot of attention to what I am doing. I try to take notes, ask follow-up questions, and make sure to follow up by talking to my colleagues if they tell me something important or something that is affecting them to ensure my team is strong mentally and works ability-wise. I will always try to find an answer for them if I do not know the answer. I used to not do that and just not answer the questions, but now I am more meticulous about figuring things out.

Corroborating the above statement with job security, he said, "I was not worried about losing my job, and that was clarified to me by upper management. I was able to ensure my position was not going to be in jeopardy. I was worried about having to work more hours per week, but that was the extent of my worries."

Similar evidence was provided by a sales manager: "I feel like this pandemic was an awakening for me. I was kind of lost and going through the motions, but this got me out of that mindset and back to

work on the things that were important to me." He also narrated how he sailed through the highs and lows without developing a fear or group thinking: "My performance dipped at first, but then I figured it out and got promoted towards the end of 2020. Then that project failed; I was demoted, applied for a management job, and failed again. Then I changed my attitude and started writing every day, and my performance increased massively. Then I got promoted to that management role at the end of last year anyway."

Second, we found that employees who had cognitive flexibility reported the most positive comments and associated positively with their organizations. Cognitive flexibility has often been associated with the adaptation of behavior and thinking to the context in question (Cañas et al., 2003). People with high cognitive flexibility work out multiple solutions to the current problem and curate their thinking as per the task-specific contingencies (Laureiro-Martínez & Brusoni, 2018). Our data revealed various instances when employees managed work-family conflict while trying hard to improve their skill set and work to the best of their potential.

For example, a research analyst reported,

I did learn how to do some new projects related to work, but this was the case before the pandemic as well. I did learn something unrelated to my job, however, which is trying to hone my skills in writing business plans as a potential future side job or full-time job, which I briefly learned in college. I enjoyed this skill back then and decided maybe I should branch out to receive different sources of income. There is always a challenge of not wanting to work at home, and I have developed a strong will to need and have to work for a solid 8–9 hours per weekday so I can afford to live my life.

The same respondent revealed, "There were no new problems related to the pandemic, but in general, because I can choose when to work, it sometimes presented challenges of being available for other nonwork related things. This is because, at any time of the day, the work can be posted for us to work on, and sometimes important work is posted at night or the end of a day where it might be harder to start working than normal."

Likewise, a development manager said, "I have learned to garden, and designed a piece of equipment that I plan to patent and try a Kickstarter campaign. I completed my MBA and recently started a children's book. I have been able to really focus on supporting my spouse and work to make sure we are staying connected. So overall, it is going well. I had found that I personally feel more productive and focused on work because the work-life balance is easier to manage, and I am able to blend it together better after/during the pandemic versus before when there was a harder line between the two." He also revealed, "Work challenges were about ensuring communication and collaboration were occurring between teammates- we addressed this with many video meetings and established a culture of being acted on in conversations including a camera on. At home, the issues

were finding a suitable workspace; both my spouse and I work from home, and we ended up creating a permanent area in which to work and not just wherever in the house.”

5 | DISCUSSION

Unsurprisingly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has instigated a renaissance in the way work is being conceptualized. This has resulted in a major shift in organizational dynamics, including leadership, human resource practices, and employee behaviors. In particular, organizational behavior has been greatly impacted by the emergence of concepts like work from home. One of the greatest challenges organizations face in this scenario is to enable a sense of work culture, deriving meaning from working alone and remaining connected to the organizations (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021). As a corollary, it then follows that understanding how to manage people at a distance, developing new HR policies, and gearing up new leadership styles is more important than ever (Caligiuri et al., 2020). To that end, based on the findings of our study, we developed a model of inclusive organizational behavior that considers three levels of analysis in the organization (see Figure 2). While studying organizational behavior, scholars usually refer to specific units, including individuals (micro-level), groups (meso-level), and systems (macro-level), whenever a phenomenon of particular interest is to be explored (Barbour, 2017).

First and foremost, at the micro-level of analysis, individual processes and outcomes are studied, which pertain to the unique characteristics that people bring along with themselves to the organization (Harmon et al., 2019). This includes their biological characteristics, demographic profile, psychographic details, and their professional competence and abilities, as well as their mindset. In the light of external contingencies, which in the present context pertain to the COVID-19 pandemic, the nature and requirements of

individual-level variables change substantially. It can be seen in Figure 2 that apart from obvious biographical and personality factors, any crisis situation demands career adaptability, which would emanate from a flexible mindset and mindfulness. Apart from these factors, which were inductively arrived at in the current study, we contend that a learning attitude and ambiguity tolerance enable organizational members to positively evaluate the crisis situation in question. For example, in our study, we found that employees who were mindful of the COVID-19 situation were continuously evolving opportunities for personal development. Therefore, at the micro-level, an inclusive mindset is an essential ingredient in fostering inclusive organizational behavior.

The second level of analysis pertains to groups and dyads, which elucidates how the behavior of people in groups is formed and influenced. Since the behavior of people tends to differ significantly in groups in comparison to their individual behavior, it is pertinent to understand how groups are formed and what factors influence their effective functioning. In our context, relationship building, teamwork, and collaboration for knowledge sharing were the cardinal elements in developing an inclusive group culture. Given the heightened importance of developing interpersonal trust, social solidarity, and mental well-being in the contemporary academic literature on organizational behavior, particularly in COVID-19-related research, we contend these factors are important in fostering an inclusive culture. It is important to mention here that digitalization has changed the medium of communication and work patterns, where isolation, solitude, and mental trauma are the most important accompanying consequences. This makes trust-building and mobilizing social solidarity imperative in the present context. However, we believe that because all this happens at the ground level, leadership is important. To that end, inclusive leadership, which stresses the importance of humanity, solidarity, respect, connectedness, empowerment, and inspiration, is the future of inclusive work environments.

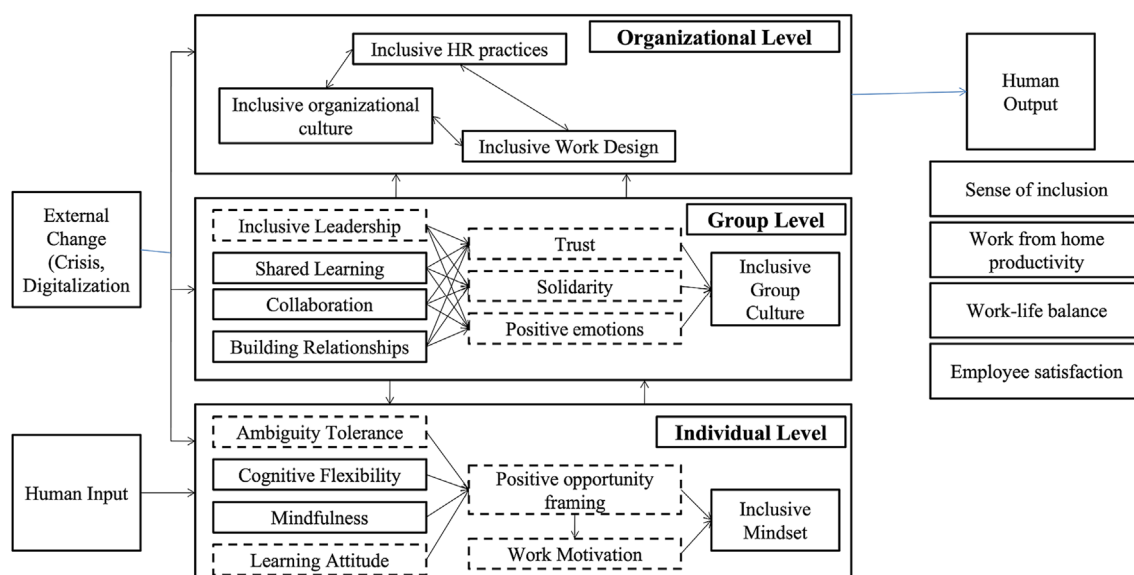


FIGURE 2 Proposed model of inclusive organizational behavior (IOB).

The last level of analysis pertains to the organization's system-level variables, including the work design, human resource practices, and broader organizational culture, which are the building blocks of the organization (Markham, 2010). In our context, where the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the functioning of even the largest organizations in the world, a change is inflicted and mandatory at the systems level. Work designs need to be inclusive as well, which emphasizes the importance of role clarity, office aura while working from home, flexible work arrangements, and digital breaks more than ever. Furthermore, organizations need to devise their HR practices to incorporate the inclusive development of employees, including their future employability and health.

Summing up, our three-tier model of inclusive organizational behavior consists of a large number of variables that could operate at various levels in the organization. The major driving force in our model is an external contingency, which could be a crisis situation and the digitalization of organizations. Under these conditions, we expect that human input at the individual level not only delineates the importance of an inclusive mindset of people within organizations but also influences and is influenced by group and system-level dynamics. Similarly, we expect group-level factors to foster an inclusive group culture and, at the same time, influence leadership and human resource dynamics. We also expect these factors to collectively result in the achievement of some desired organizational objectives, including employees developing a sense of inclusion within the organization amidst working from home.

6 | STUDY IMPLICATIONS

First of all, our study has dwelled in the uncharted territory of inclusive organizational behavior, which is not only new but also an important organizational phenomenon in the contemporary world. Given the unexpected and turbulent consequences that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for organizations, it is more than important to explore and understand how organizational behavior is influenced. By documenting the formation of inclusive organizational behavior, our study is a pioneer in advancing the knowledge frontiers of organizational behavior in changing times. Second, while the concept of inclusiveness has been discussed in the prior literature, our study provides empirical evidence of how the concept of inclusiveness has moved beyond racial and gender discrimination and evolved into a more extensive concept. Our study reveals that inclusiveness captures the broader values of connectedness, trust, and, most importantly, humanity-inspired management of work and people. We believe that organizational behavior researchers would find our study consequential in developing the academic literature on inclusiveness and organizational behavior in crisis situations. Third, by empirically validating the construct of inclusive organizational behavior, our study opens up industry-specific interventions in this novel area. For example, by discussing how inclusive behavior is formed, organizations would find our study significant with respect to designing future work and human resource practices. Fourth, we identify major areas that

are consequential in the formation of inclusive behavior. Moreover, we categorized these factors at various levels in the organization, which could bring further clarity to this novel area that otherwise faces a lack of theorization. In fact, we developed a model of inclusive organizational behavior based on the findings of the study, which is an important development in the theoretical advancement of the field. Our model documents how changing times need substantial changes in the inputs, the processing of these inputs, and the type of outputs that are desired. For example, it is evident in our model that individual-level requirements change in a crisis situation. We emphasize the importance of cognitive flexibility, mindfulness, and opportunity farming that dictate how people will behave in turbulent times. Accordingly, organizations could foster HR practices that target these areas and develop training modules that are geared towards developing an inclusive mindset. Likewise, building trust-based relationships is particularly important when times are challenging, and people have a tendency to feel dejected and left out. In these situations, the importance of inclusive leadership, inclusive work design, and inclusive support cannot be emphasized enough. Similarly, the parameters of performance also change in these situations. As discussed already, in the COVID-19 pandemic, people had to assume their work responsibilities in the absence of an appropriate work environment, which meant an increased blur between work and life apart from feeling isolated. Therefore, one of the important objectives of organizations in this situation is to make employees feel connected and included in the work culture. Lastly, since digitalization is increasingly becoming an obvious phenomenon, we believe that the theorization of inclusive behavior is not specific to crisis situations only. We contend that our findings and theorization are equally relevant in normal situations where digital technology has become an important aspect of organizational routines and workflow.

7 | CONCLUSION

In this study, we offer an early genesis of the concept of inclusive organizational behavior, which demands a radical shift in the future of work, leadership, and organizations as a whole. By documenting the formation of inclusive behavior, our study corroborates the fact that change is an important externality in the working of an organization. Since our study is the first of its kind, we adopted an interpretivist research approach to unravel this phenomenon. Our inductive analysis revealed that organizational dynamics are increasingly geared towards humanitarian perspectives. This requires a radical rethinking of how work is carried out as people are driven toward organizational ends only when their own ends are safeguarded. Although we open up the frontiers of this evolving concept, our study's qualitative design makes it less generalizable. We suggest future researchers take up more rigorous quantitative surveys and validate the results generated here.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors do not have any competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Amandeep Dhir  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6006-6058>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Amandeep Dhir (DSc, PhD) is a professor of Research Methods at the University of Agder, Norway. His research appears in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Travel Research*, *Tourism Management*, *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *International Marketing Review*, *Psychology and Marketing*, *Technology Forecasting and Social Change*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Technovation*, *Business Strategy and Environment*, *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, *Computers in Industry*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, and *Information Technology & People*, among others.

Puneet Kaur (DSc) is an associate professor in Work and Organization Psychology at the University of Bergen, Norway. Her research appears in the *Human Relations*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Business*

Strategy and Environment, IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management, and Computers in Human Behaviour, among others.

Sharfa Hassan is a faculty at the University of Kashmir, Srinagar. She holds a PhD in Digital Entrepreneurship and a recipient of Gold medal. Her research has appeared in the Journal of Business Ethics and Technological Forecasting and Social Change, among others.

Demetris Vrontis is the vice rector for Faculty and Research and a professor of Strategic Marketing Management at the University of Nicosia, Cyprus. He is the president of the EuroMed Academy of Business and the Managing Director of Gnosis Mediterranean Institute for Management Science, which serve as important and influential regional hubs in the area of Business and Management. He is the founding editor and editor in chief of the EuroMed Journal of Business, an associate editor of the International Marketing Review, a consulting editor of the Journal of International Management, an associate editor of the Journal of Strategic

Marketing, a senior advisor of the International Studies of Management & Organization, a senior associate editor of the FIIB Business Review, and an editorial advisory board member in numerous academic and scientific marketing, management, and business-related journals. He has published widely in over 450 refereed journal articles, 60 books, and 80 chapters in books, and he has presented papers at over 100 conferences around the globe. He is a certified chartered marketer and a chartered business consultant.

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