



# Interview transcript

## Series 1: Future of the workplace

### Sachin Khisti

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#### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

people, staff, office, home, work, flexibility, remotely, organization

#### **SPEAKERS**

Karen Kirton, Sachin Khisti

#### **Karen Kirton**

Hi Sachin and thank you for joining me today. I was wondering if I could just start off with a bit of an overview of you and your organization, and I guess with the perspective of what your workplace was like before the pandemic so were people in the office, or at home. Then what you've done since.

#### **Sachin Khisti**

Absolutely! So thanks Karen first of all for having me. So look, we are a software development and consulting company. We have offices in Australia, New Zealand, and in India. So we work with the likes of IBM and Microsoft, we're their suppliers. So we sell licenses, we do implementation support work, and we have some permanent staff in our office, and we have some contractors who work at the client locations. So before COVID it was like, most of the staff would work from the office, and contact us would work from the client location. Occasionally we would have worked from home policy kind of thing, depending on the personal situation if people want to work from home. That's how they basically work.

#### **Karen Kirton**

How many staff do you have?

#### **Sachin Khisti**

So we've got around 10 to 15 people in the organization so permanent staff contractors, and then we always hire them depending on the project so the team could go to 2530, depending on the projects as well actually so there are some permanent staff and then the contractors keep fluctuating, depending on the requirements.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah, that makes sense. So you went into lockdown like the rest of us early last year. What have you decided to do since then?

**Sachin Khisti**

Right. Okay, so our office was luckily, month by month which was not a long term contract so we were damn lucky in that regard. March when the peak of COVID everyone said No, we are not going to work from the office so we kind of work from home. I kind of dismantle the office, and then we just have a board meeting so boardroom rather. The problem was like you know safety was the biggest concern for everyone so people didn't want to travel in the public transport. Driving was not an option for everyone so strictly from March onwards like everybody was working from home. June, July, kind of thing you know when things slightly eased out. Then we started having coffees and lunches and CP, and depending on the plan meetings and all that but like everyone went out to work from home. What we found out was that the productive work didn't have much of an issue because of the industry that we are in. They were happy because so in June, July my HR reached out to my staff, what do you want to do. They said, Look, we're pretty happy to continue like this because they were saving time and commuting, they were saving money. The coffees and lunches and all that, and I was saving money on the rent as well so it was like a win win situation for everyone. The client didn't matter as well. I didn't have an issue with that so we continued like that. October, November last year they said hey look, I think we're sitting at home for too far too long now. We want to have it operate now we want to work from office for a day or two at least, because people were getting bored right when a whole day you're sitting in front of a computer, whereas myself and my couple of other staff where we have a client meeting so I have a very nice day, like a hybrid thing I go out meet the customers people come back and work, but some developers are just sitting in front of laptop all the time so they wanted to upgrade. So we started, November, December last year at a client location in North Sydney so about two days from office now. The staff is really happy they get the best of both now. So today's they're working with the other staff member and then three days they work from home.

**Karen Kirton**

I guess you've decided to build that hybrid working model basically because your staff have said, we want to do this, right?

**Sachin Khisti**

Yes, after but I was planning to do it in January this year. I think it's a good idea but then they said look, can we have probably a month before so I was constantly talking to my staff, what they like and what they don't like so if you see the same middle personalities. Some people like to be left alone. Let me do my job. Some people like to have a mingling and it's just funny that some of the staff members who were insistent to work from home, prior to COVID now they're insisting to work from office. So that's how the change happened, and some of them said like you know we have small kids. So sometimes it could be disturbing some of them are single, so they are pretty okay with that. Some members would have the flexibility like I want to go to the gym, you know, so I can go and during lunchtime or I want to

go for a walk kind of thing. So we kind of maintain that flexibility, but so it was like a win win for us in a hybrid mode.

**Karen Kirton**

Were there any concerns that you had about moving to a hybrid model?

**Sachin Khisti**

Yes or no again like some people are very self driven kind of thing. In the industry that we are in, it is like a daily task that we have so we have a weekly catch up every Monday. We catch up again on Friday, what's been the plan, have we done that and all that. So most of the people I would say 80 to 90% are self driven, they do what's been told to them, or what they have planned. There are a couple of stuff that we had to readjust because they were new. So they were new to this environment of working from home, because they're fresh graduates and all that. So we had to just kind of push them, what we expect them and all that so they also had the flexibility that they can work anytime if they have some personal work to be done in the afternoon, that's completely fine but they have to deliver. So we had those sessions in between. We also got one of our HR persons to talk to them as well. We just found a way to work from there onwards.

**Karen Kirton**

You said that you had, I think two days in the office. So is everyone working crossover days like do you have teams that are working on the same days per week or is it up to the individual which days they work at the office?

**Sachin Khisti**

At the moment we have a fixed day that we work with, but again they have flexibility so for example last week a couple of people had some issues. So they didn't want to be all day like so they have the flexibility but they prefer actually to be in the same room on the same day, and luckily where we have the location now that allows us to do that so that's sort of open that we see. But we see that some other clients that we work with, they have this ultimate week team by team. If the size of the company, the staff is bigger than that, the issue will have.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah. Some people have to do things like rotating rosters.

**Sachin Khisti**

Correct. Rotating rosters that is!

**Karen Kirton**

Yes, it's the administration that is pretty mind blowing with some of these larger organizations. And you touched on it before is that a common concern about working from home and this is to come up before the pandemic where employees want to work from home and you know benefits with the job definitely can't be done at home. It was all around productivity. So, you touched on that a bit with new staff how you have to coach them and set the objectives. So, is there anything that you've had to do differently in

terms of processes, or how you meet with each other or set KPIs or objectives in terms of getting productivity to the level that you need it?

**Sachin Khisti**

There was a little bit because when we have delivery dates confirmed with the customers you know so we have to work backward kind of thing so when you are in office we know like you know you can just go over and have a chat with your colleagues, but then now this has not been done. So they're in calls and zoom calls and all that kind of thing was happening daily, but where we found that you know there were a couple of staff members who had issues in terms of the following dates of commitment like, then we went back and talked to them about the issues, actually. So as you can imagine some time if you're just by yourself at home and there are so many distractions, right, and in some not listener everybody's self motivated kind of thing actually but we make sure that you know those people had issues or if they have some concern. For example a simple thing, the internet wasn't working. They didn't tell us for a couple of weeks and then I said okay that's fine. So we'll find some alternate solution for that. So that's how we manage their expectations and what we wanted to do so at the same time they were pretty happy, in terms of they know they could get an extra one hour sleep because they don't have to travel so they will say this is fantastic but at the same time they were sure that, you know, every freedom comes with the responsibility as well. Then we didn't have any problems after two months or so.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah. Excellent. Another common concern is around team culture so what do you try and keep that sense of team?

**Sachin Khisti**

Yeah, like I said, like March suddenly we made our own shell, and then people were pretty happy because for two reasons basically safety, and also like normally for family members so for example if you take the risk of going out, then you're gonna spread that to your family members as well. So, March to June kind of thing that one, but people were going into depression kind of thing a little bit, you know, so we made sure that you know the staff is safe, in terms of their job security and all that kind of thing. So, they know that they have a job for the next six months and 12 months kind of thing right. Second thing that what we made sure is that, you know, we have a more calls daily basis kind of thing not only just Mondays and Friday kind of thing just to make sure that you know even if you don't have a face to face, but we are interacting and from June onwards what we did, although we didn't have office but we started meeting in city every Wednesday for coffee or lunch kind of thing. But there is no agenda: just catch up for one hour so they enjoy coming into the city, and then have that one hour break kind of thing. It doesn't have to be a work related kind of thing, but then it could be just scheduled so that's what we did actually get everybody in a cafe and have a chat and then just talk about life, apart from your work as well.

**Karen Kirton**

Social connection is really easy to lose when you're working from home.

**Sachin Khisti**

Absolutely and I think there are a few people who are also worried about their respective families in different countries and all that sometimes you know if you're in office you just tend to talk about that. But when you are completely remote even if you're with your family without your family. It's sometimes not an ideal situation so you want to have a human causal interaction. Talking about, luckily my staff is very friendly and open and they tell me what the problems are. So that really helps actually in everyone not only to me but to all my colleagues as well.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah, absolutely! Hiring new staff into a remote environment or hybrid environment is quite different to when they're all in office five days away. So do you have any tips on how you've been able to recruit and onboard people, effectively either when you are fully remote or now in the office for 2 days?

**Sachin Khisti**

Yeah that's it so again like pre COVID as well as, like I mentioned, it's like, every individual is different. Some people like people around that, some people like this to work remotely, and the second thing is what we found that if you're an experienced person like you're a full five years of experience that you'll work on different models. So where you work from office or you work from the plan location and then you work remotely as well so you're pretty comfortable with different situation but if you hire a fresh graduate or even person is only one year of experience, then the problem is if there's only work he or she only in office environment, when there is a team member is going to push you or mentor you, then that's some model they have been kind of, you know, used to it. But suddenly like working remotely, then that's what the problem is. A - they are not comfortable there, they want to talk to somebody and B - is like we want to tell them as well what to expect. Sometimes that takes a lot of time as well actually, if you do it over the phone or through zoom going and all that. So that's how probably you know we always check with the individual personality and again like some people like to start early and finish early, and in some are late starters kind of thing so that's what we do actually look at the individual personality, what sort of comfort they are some people just want to be handled and definitely you know you have to have a different thought process. But now that we're allowed to work from the office, I think it will be a lot easier. Even if we have a day or two, you know, phase to get them trained on the process and metrologist, and they know what to expect as well.

**Karen Kirton**

Have you had to use any different technology or if you have with the same tools that you had pre COVID?

**Sachin Khisti**

They are pretty much the same tools actually. Yes!

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah, I guess veganised should probably do this to you so companies suddenly get across right.

**Sachin Khisti**

Exactly that's right. Yeah. We also had a bit of micromanagement to start with, with some stuff, and then we made sure that we understand why we are doing this and why, it's not that we don't trust you, but it just that they know some staff have been there for few years so they know, and some menu so basically why we're doing it so it's not like micromanagement or we are monitoring you constantly but just to make sure that you are comfortable. We deliver the job on time, and if you have any issues at any time, feel free to come back to us.

**Karen Kirton**

So what do you say is the future of your workplace? Do you think you'd go back to a full time office working at some point?

**Sachin Khisti**

I think given the size of a company and then the kind of work we do, I think it's entirely up to staff and also what we want to do. I don't see any problem. You know we take care of security and privacy when we work with the customers' data and all that, and where I see is that you know, you don't have to be in the office all the time. At the same time you don't want to be completely working from home as well because now of course the client meetings have started, and nothing. So what I see going forward, we will have a hybrid model, where over three days, at least we will work from office and in the restaurant home and but for some reason some staff said look, we want to have more days in office or work that we will leave it to them actually as long as we don't have any major issues or said because people usually leave part that the commuting time is high and all that. They say two to three hours every day kind of day right. So if they can put that towards their learning and things like that so we need for the free certification so the new areas because only the staff had extra time. So the utilization was pretty high. So for us, it's going to be hybrid, at least two to three days we'll work from home, or sorry rather office.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah, because you had people in New Zealand and India. Previously, do you think this type of working is going to enable you to be more global and to get more staff overseas?

**Sachin Khisti**

Time Zone is the thing like New Zealand's close ahead of us, and India is what was behind us kind of thing so those guys need to talk to them. So I think it gives them flexibility, like for example this morning we usually have a morning call, but it's tough and has some other things so like you know they give that flexibility to work late night and you don't have to start early in the morning. So I think in this environment that really helps you wherever you are, that sort of office kind of thing. So I think probably has been proven now actually they can work in remote locations.

**Karen Kirton**

Yeah, very interesting to say our organization starts to actually employ people from interstate or overseas now that you know those barriers are gone because they can actually work remotely.

**Sachin Khisti**

Exactly so we, in fact, in the month of May, so we were talking to one customer and listener and we got to have, sorry in January this year, we want to have resources on the ground in North Sydney office. Went over the head desk now, that's fine. We can work remotely so we have three people working from India, and the client was really happy we delivered the project and it could be done from anywhere. So in some areas has been forced to do it and then after some time we realized that look it can be done right, so whatever the mental blocks you have there all you have to have everybody on in office premises kind of thing or it has to be built in a certain way now okay I don't have any options I've been forced to do it and it works better to continue like that happen with everybody.

**Karen Kirton**

Okay, so my last question is just do you have any top tips if there's something that you think has worked really well for your organization, that you think anyone else that is considering how to move away from fully remote working, do we go back to full time office or do we do a hybrid? Is there one thing that you've sort of experienced in the last year that is one thing you can do, it's this?

**Sachin Khisti**

I think it is probably constant communication, I would say. Staff all the time make sure that they're comfortable because the two things one is the work related issues, and then you have some personal issues. We don't expect them to tell everything towards us but if it is some major issue like you know the staff is going through, make sure that they understand. Now, we understand that and may not necessarily have an answer for everything, but you know, at least listen to that if it will add any value to that it's fantastic. So that's probably why I would say that you know that really helping us is talking to your staff, because they are the force ambassadors right, they work with the clients and things like that. While we talk to our customers all the time it's very important to understand your staff as well, whether they go back to the client location or they work from your office or wherever they are. So that definitely helped us

**Karen Kirton**

Now love that and I think the key to communication is to communicate, communicate, communicate right? Because just having one conversation with someone or just telling someone one thing. It doesn't always work.

**Sachin Khisti**

Exactly., I think it's super like you know if I trust you trust me you know whatever we discuss will remain with us only, whether it's a personal thing and whatever the client issues as well, like you know, and I think you must understand that, you know, this COVID no one was prepared for it right it just happens suddenly right. So you might be a customer and if you have your own issues work related or personal that might be reflected in a heated conversation, then I'm, you know, the company vendor then I have my own staff and all that so I think we must understand, like you know this is like not no one was prepared for it actually. So how do we address that. Then we make sure that it's a win win situation. A lot of times, and we had to even make a couple of staff, go on for four days and then we brought them back to five days, so they were issues but I think what really helped us is to make sure that they understand why you're doing it. Okay, and then I think transparency really helps. The key is the communication and transparency and they're not the same thing with the customer as well. So, they

have some issues like okay, you're working on my data remotely How does make sure that it is secure and so that we made sure that the customer is comfortable with that. We follow all the protocols and everything, and working with the staff also makes sure that they do as they will actually remove it.

**Karen Kirton**

That's great advice. Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it. All the best for the rest of this year and whatever 2021 is gonna throw at us really!

**Sachin Khisti**

Absolutely! Thanks for having me. Really nice talking to you.

**Karen Kirton**

Thanks, Sachin.