

# Employees want flexible working needs to be met: Survey

Workers in S'pore would like bosses to listen, adjust work arrangements to suit their needs

**Krist Boo**  
Senior Correspondent

Whether it is work from home or return to the office – and for how many or on which days – Singapore workers would like employers to listen, communicate and adjust new work arrangements to suit their preferences.

If employers insist that they trot into the office on most days, those who feel strongly about having flexibility in how they work are inclined to find a new job.

The findings, released yesterday by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), reveal how workers' feelings about their work routines have shifted towards autonomy amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The study was done over nine months, tracking respondents from July last year.

The results reinforced calls from the tripartite grouping of the Government, unions and employers, which last week urged employers to make flexi-work arrangements permanent. From today, companies can recall 100 per cent of their staff back to the office, up from the current 75 per cent, as Singapore further relaxes its Covid-19 safe management measures.

Dr Mathew Mathews, IPS' principal research fellow and head of its social lab and who led the study, said: "The big story that we want to tell is really that Singapore has made some kind of transition towards living with Covid-19... Some of the gains that we have got through learning to work from home in a productive manner need to be kept in mind as we think about how to get back to work."

The pandemic showed that workers not only remain productive off-site by working from home, but they also get more out of their personal lives, said the research team, which also includes research assistant Fiona Phoa, associate director Mike Hou and research associate Elizabeth Lim from IPS' social lab.

The survey tracked more than 2,000 respondents drawn from an online panel from technology company Toluna. About 500 respondents were polled every two weeks over 19 fortnights to track shifts in attitudes.

A follow-up report may be released next year, Dr Mathew said.

The number of workers going into the office surged from more than half during the earlier phase of the survey to 74 per cent in the

first 10 days of this month, as the Government gradually lifted caps on workers on-site.

Not that all of them wanted to, though. Around one-third of those who worked from home said they felt pressured to return to the office, the report said.

More women (73 per cent) than men (66 per cent) felt that working from home or flexi-work should remain the norm. More women (94 per cent) with children or caring for aged dependants at home also felt so compared with their male counterparts (86 per cent), mirroring global studies that show women tended to shoulder more of the domestic burdens during pandemic lockdowns.

Ms Sher-li Torrey, who started social enterprise Mums@Work to support working mothers, said firms are calling workers back to the office, reversing a two-year trend of FWAs, or flexible work arrangements.

"This is very punishing for mothers, who really thrive on FWAs to help them manage work and family. I have been seeing firms cancel their FWAs quite quickly – so we saw more mums coming forward to say they are looking for new jobs with more flexibility again," she said.

Dr Mathew said: "We found that different groups had different kinds of situations that need to be taken into account. Employers should take feedback, really understand their workers."

Workstyle consultant Hardeep Matharu said about one-third of his C-suite clients are asking their staff to return to the office unilaterally.

"For the most part, the senior leadership is seeking to maintain the longstanding status quo of the organisations they manage; working in the office was a norm for the very large majority of their tenure."

A number of senior leaders also remain unconvinced about the viability of hybrid working, feeling that the model hinders productivity, forces an increase in unproductive virtual meetings and prompts a lack of visibility on what their teams are doing.

"As such, an easy solution is to force employees back to the office regardless of what workers want."

When his clients do so, he reminds them of the consequences. "There are very real risks of not just losing top talent, but also reducing their ability to attract talent."

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## Companies prepared to offer flexi-work option to their staff

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Business Correspondent

It is not surprising that people want flexible working arrangements to continue, and companies are prepared to offer that option as the new normal.

Flexible arrangements are the preferred way of working as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to a paper released by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) yesterday. Some people will even consider looking for new jobs if employers require them to return to the office on most days.

This is not an unexpected state of affairs, said executive coach Hardeep Matharu.

"As we add in the effects of Covid-19, where we all learnt that we can effectively work in a hy-

brid way (mixing remote and in-office operations), workers feel more entitled to demand flexibility which, therefore, should match their preferences," he said.

"We won't find employees accepting a full return to the office unless the nature of their role requires it."

Certain demographic groups, such as women, are more inclined towards flexible work arrangements, especially those with dependants, the study showed.

Mothers have always wanted flexible work arrangements, said Ms Sher-li Torrey, founder of Mums@Work.

"The only difference is that employees realise now that it can be done. This means if an employer chooses not to allow it, (it) would be more of mindset stubbornness or a lack of strong managerial skills to manage employees on

flexible work arrangements."

The public service will take the lead with flexible working arrangements, a tripartite statement had said. "Eligible public officers in job roles which are conducive to hybrid work will be allowed to telecommute for an average of two days a week," it said.

Boutique law firm That Legal said none of its staff is required to go to the office, except for monthly "roll calls". It plans to have staff gather once a month for discussions and team bonding. Some 90 per cent of its staff prefer to get their work done from home, said executive director Mark Teng.

Mr Chan Chee Kong, chief operating officer of GlobalTix, said the travel industry firm is taking a wait-and-see approach for now. Currently, employees have the flexibility to return two to three times a week.

Coinhako co-founder Gerry Eng said his crypto trading firm intends to retain a hybrid structure, to allow staff freedom and control over their time.

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• Additional reporting by Krist Boo, Jessie Lim and Tay Hong Yi

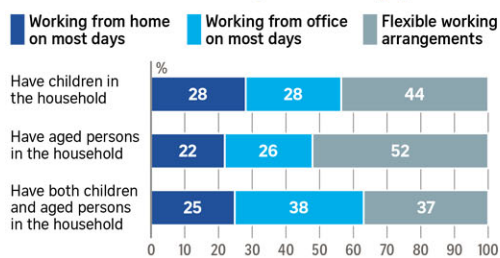


The pandemic showed that workers not only remain productive off-site by working from home, but they also get more out of their personal lives, says the research team. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

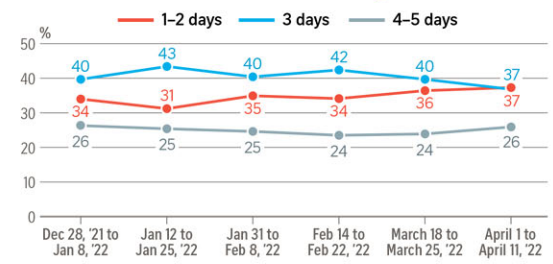
## Survey snapshot of workers' attitudes on work arrangements

Researchers hope the study will support workers to live more meaningfully, with a better match of how they would like to work, against how they now work.

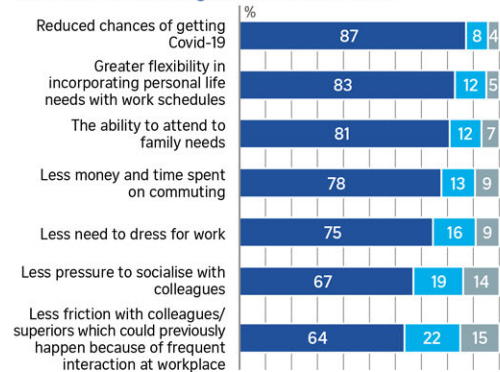
Which workplace arrangement do you feel should be the new norm for workplaces in Singapore?\*



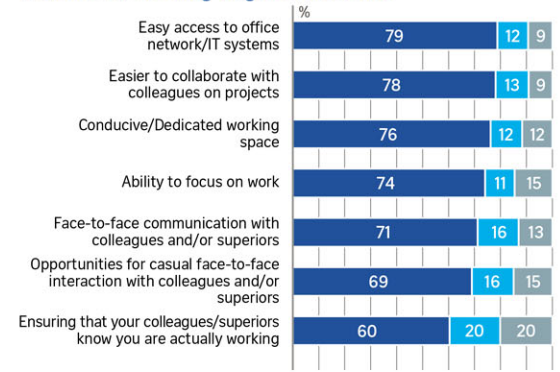
Most respondents now feel that workers should be allowed to work from home for 1-3 days a week



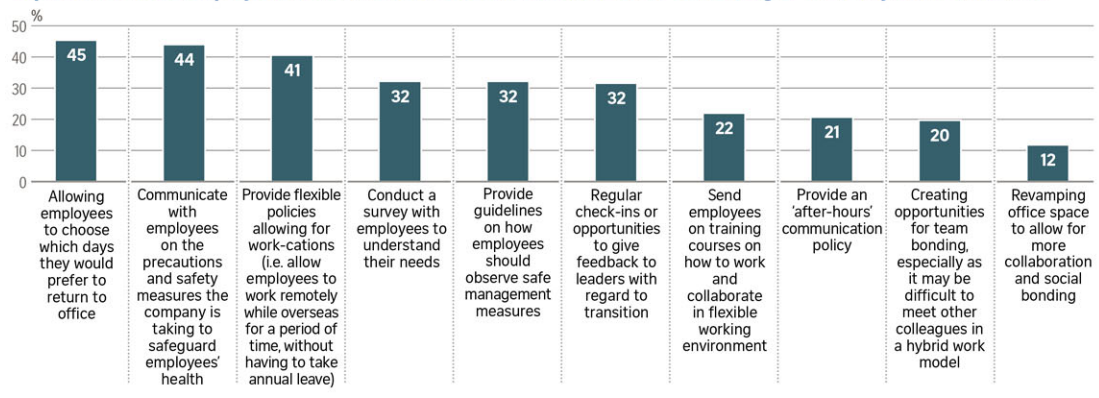
Reasons for wanting to work from home\*



Reasons for wanting to go to the office\*



Top three actions employers should take to ease the transition back to working in office/hybrid work model\*



More workers who do, or prefer, WFH or flexible working arrangements would consider resigning if made to go to the office on most days



NOTE: \*Data taken from the period of Dec 28, 2021, to Feb 22, 2022. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

## Workers gained new skills, changed their work aspirations amid Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic may have put the brakes on many social activities, but Singapore's workers continued to gain new skills throughout the period, as shown in a new report released yesterday.

Nearly half of the respondents also said the pandemic had changed their work aspirations, with some even considering a career switch.

These were the results of a paper by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) that examined attitudes towards work and workplace arrangements amid the coronavirus outbreak.

It showed that 51 per cent of respondents felt they had learnt new skills in the past two years that would help in their career.

This was especially the case among younger workers aged 30 to 39, and those who had higher educational qualifications, such as a degree and above.

Besides skills, the pandemic also made people re-evaluate their

work aspirations.

Some 47 per cent of those polled felt that the pandemic had changed their work goals, with 69 per cent of these people saying that they have considered a career switch.

Again, this was especially so among younger respondents.

The survey tracked more than 2,000 respondents from July 14 last year to April 11 this year.

The report also said the pandemic might have highlighted the need to prioritise family relationships. "Working parents with younger children would hence gravitate towards wanting work arrangements which allow greater flexibility to manage their work and family commitments."

But there are also those who have relooked their work aspirations because of the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

IPS social lab associate director Mike Hou said: "They are those who have job losses, are forced to consider a different industry be-

cause of economic demands, or (experienced) changes in their salary or remuneration."

Moving farther afield is also a possibility. The report showed that 53 per cent of those polled would prefer to work remotely in companies based overseas, if given the opportunity.

Overall, people feel the job market outlook is more hopeful now than in July last year.

Last July, around 45 per cent of respondents felt that the job market outlook for the next six months was bad. This proportion decreased in August, but then rose again in September. From then, the number of those who feel the job market outlook is bad steadily declined till February this year.

But there was an unexpected dip in confidence in the job market in March, which may have stemmed from the war in Ukraine and concerns of it affecting the global economy and jobs, said the report.

Sue-Ann Tan