

Flexible work arrangements can temper Singapore's workaholicism

Giving employees the opportunity to define work on their terms can help people draw healthy boundaries without compromising on productivity.

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Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) were the stuff of dreams a mere five years ago. No one imagined they would be the norm.

But when Covid-19 hit, offices leapt into work-from-home overnight. The demand for remote work technologies including video conferencing and platforms to facilitate asynchronous work boomed. Zoom, Slack and Microsoft Teams became household names.

All these laid the foundations for permanent FWAs. They spurred a realisation that people do not have to maintain a fixed or physical presence in the same office to be productive. They prompted companies to reassess traditional work structures and embrace flexibility to adapt to evolving circumstances driven by a deadly virus.

Large tech giants provided hybrid work options. Employees at Google, one of Singapore's top employers, physically commute to their office for only three working days, set their own work hours, and work remotely on other days.

A driving force was also generational change: Gen Z employees who valued work-life balance, autonomy and control over their work schedules voiced preferences.

The past four years have seen a paradigm shift in the nature of work.

In the United Kingdom, since April 2024, employees can request FWA options like job-sharing, flexi-time, compressed hours,

annualised hours and remote work from the very beginning of their employment contract.

Belgium has already implemented the four-day work week, and countries like Portugal, France and Italy have started enforcing the "right to disconnect" from work.

THE CULTURE OF OVERWORK

In Singapore, employers must consider FWA requests from December 2024 onwards.

FWAs are coming at an inflection point in labour relations, when burnout and exhaustion have plagued the country. We may boast of Singapore's global reputation as a bustling economic hub, but ask anyone and few will disagree – workers face immense challenges like long work hours, high stress levels and limited work-life balance.

In 2022, Singapore was named the most overworked place in the Asia-Pacific by workspace solutions company The Instant Group, ranking higher than Hong Kong and South Korea. The same index found that Google searches in Singapore increased by 74 per cent since pre-Covid-19, with 62 per cent of employees in the country experiencing burnout.

The reasons? The cultural emphasis on excellence, the pressure to continually boost productivity and societal expectations to excel amid competition.

This unhappiness persisted even when we got richer. Only 30 per cent of Singapore millionaires are happy with their work-life balance, according to a study by Swiss bank Banque Lombard



Workers in Singapore face immense challenges like long work hours, high stress levels and limited work-life balance, say the writers. In 2022, Singapore was named the most overworked place in the Asia-Pacific by workspace solutions company The Instant Group. ST FILE PHOTO

Odier & Cie. We have idolised work, our careers and achievement. We have made it the centrepiece of life at the expense of relationships and values essential for a healthy and functioning existence, and it's making us unhappy.

THE FEVER IS BREAKING

This fever is starting to break. While we still work some of the longest hours in the world, this number has come down since Covid-19. Overtime work hours ticked up in 2021 and 2022 but have dropped below pre-pandemic levels.

The proliferation of remote work during Covid-19 may have enabled people to set boundaries between work and life. A US study

salaries adjusted accordingly but will retain full medical benefits and insurance coverage.

Radha Exports, the company behind the Valu\$ and ABC Bargain Centre chain of stores, which employs 250 people, has given employees options like staggered working hours and flexible shifts. Such FWAs have resulted in a "happier team" that returns to work with higher productivity, CEO Deepak Partab Anandani told reporters in April.

We might be tempted to think giving employees more flexibility leads to distractions at the expense of work. However, researchers have found that employees with a flexible workspace experience more productivity, a higher state of well-being, and overall work-life balance.

By prioritising employee well-being and promoting work-life harmony, FWAs can potentially help Singapore employees manage their workload and stressful work environments and mitigate a pervasive workaholic culture in the country.

The increased flexibility can also be leveraged for upskilling and professional development, ultimately leading to a more engaged and productive workforce.

HOW TO GET THERE

FWAs sound like a promising way forward in fostering a healthier work culture. But employers remain hesitant to adopt them, and with good reason.

A lack of a robust performance management system and processes is one. Without a clear way to measure employee productivity beyond physical attendance, progression can depend on presenteeism, which favours in-office workers.

But that is not to say that FWAs cannot succeed. Enterprises that have successfully implemented FWAs have typically done so in a gradual and measured manner, starting small and slowly scaling

up the initiative, rather than rolling it out company-wide from the onset.

Given that every organisation has unique needs and cultures, conducting pilots allows companies to gain valuable insights into what approaches work best before implementing a comprehensive flexible work policy across the entire organisation.

Ms Pauline Loo, senior vice-president of human resources at Nippon Sanso Holdings Singapore, also told me that her multinational company sees the Singapore office as a "test bed" for new human resource initiatives which have included part-time work, job-sharing, compressed work weeks and remote work.

Strong support from the C-suite is essential to drive the cultural shift needed for FWA adoption. Employers can seek help from the Job Redesign Centre of Excellence by Workforce Singapore, which is managed by the Institute for Human Resource Professionals.

There, companies aiming to transform their operations and workforce can find sector-specific playbooks or participate in capability development workshops designed to enhance enterprise-level restructuring efforts.

To catalyse support and prod employers forward, an expert panel composed of distinguished academics, human resources and legal professionals, government representatives, union members and business leaders has been formed, and it will share successful case studies of job redesign and offer guidance on leveraging existing capability development programmes.

Singapore's manpower is ageing and shrinking, but FWAs can encourage more to stay employed while juggling family duties and other priorities in life, and pave the way for a more sustainable and resilient future workforce.

By making way for each individual's preferred working style and external commitments, FWAs promote a healthier work dynamic that not only boosts productivity but also fosters inclusivity.

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