

Making work-life harmony work through the Citizens' Panel and Alliance for Action



Workplace culture and social norms are powerful influences on people's choices at work and in their personal lives, including their decisions on dating, marriage, having children and caring for family members. While there have already been efforts by the government, employers, workers and the community to support more family-friendly workplace practices, Singaporeans continue to cite difficulties in managing work and family commitments.¹ The challenge of juggling work and personal commitments was also accentuated by COVID-19, with the increase in hybrid work further blurring work-life boundaries. To better enable Singaporeans to reconcile their work-life needs effectively, greater work-life harmony (WLH) support was needed.

However, what constitutes WLH would differ significantly across organisations and workers. Hence, prescribing and enforcing specific rules on WLH (e.g. through legislation) could be counterproductive and erode trust between employers and employees. Building consensus and sustaining more progressive WLH practices would require a whole-of-society effort involving employers, employees and society at large, to catalyse change in work-life norms and encourage a more supportive societal and workplace culture.

This case study was written by Jean Chia, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, based on interviews with Singapore's Ministry of Manpower and National Population and Talent Division. The case is sponsored by Singapore's Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth. The case does not reflect the views of the sponsoring organisation nor is it intended to suggest correct or incorrect handling of the situation depicted. The case is not intended to serve as a primary source of data and is meant solely for class discussion.

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The National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) in the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) took two different but complementary approaches to engage citizens and stakeholders on this issue – the Citizens' Panel (CP) and Singapore Together Alliance for Action (AfA).



Quick look at Citizens' Panel and Alliance for Action

The CP is a deliberative engagement approach where participants are provided with resources and information to examine a complex issue in depth and work together on recommendations, often through a series of meetings.

The AfA is an action-oriented cross-sector collaboration that focuses on areas significant to Singapore's future. It typically involves citizens, the private sector, and the government to co-create ideas and pilot solutions from the ground up.



In-depth consultation through the Citizens' Panel

NPTD and its partner ministries – MOM and the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) – convened a CP to engage citizens and stakeholders in generating ideas to create conditions in the workplace and community that would be conducive for WLH. The intention was to build broader consensus on WLH among citizens by discussing the policy trade-offs involved, and make new recommendations.

Over 6 weeks between September and November 2019, a diverse panel of 55 citizens came together in 4 full-day sessions. They formed 9 workgroups to examine various aspects in depth, from workplace norms and stigma to the future of work, and brainstorm potential solutions. The CP members eventually produced 17 recommendations focused on areas such as shifting societal norms, empowering individuals at the workplace and building organisational human resource (HR) capability (see Annex 1).



The tripartite partners went on to take up several of the CP's recommendations. For instance, the Tripartite Alliance for Fair & Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) developed a one-stop website with resources on WLH and started growing a community of Work-Life Ambassadors. MOM's Workplace Safety and Health Institute developed an online self-assessment tool to identify workplace stressors. MOM, National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), and Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) launched a new Tripartite Standard on WLH which set out employment practices supportive of WLH.

Co-creating pilots through the Alliance for Action

Having been involved in the CP in 2019 and the implementation of some of its recommendations, MOM took a step further to launch an AfA on WLH together with NTUC, SNEF and TAFEP in February 2021. One observation from the CP was that many of its recommendations were dependent on the government and employers to lead or implement these initiatives, instead of mobilising communities and citizens in ground-up efforts to solve the issue. Thus, the AfA served as a ground-up ideas accelerator to empower citizens and stakeholders to directly take meaningful action to co-create and co-implement initiatives on WLH.



1 Goh Chin Lian, "Work-life balance? Know trade-offs too, PM Lee says", The Straits Times, 25 Sep 2013; Jennifer Rahman, "Work-life balance: Solution or curse?", Singapore Business Review, 14 Mar 2016; Human Resources Director (HRD), "Employees find work-life balance 'awful': Survey", HRD Asia, 29 Nov 2016; Joanna Seow, "Singapore ranks 32 out of 40 in new index on work-life balance", The Straits Times, August 7, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/business/singapore-ranks-32-out-of-40-in-new-index-on-work-life-balance>; Louisa Tang, "The Big Read: Breaking Singapore's workaholic culture", Today, 22 Dec 2018.

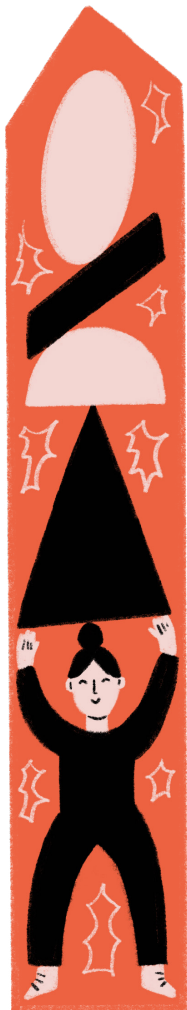
Lau Yuan Zhi, MOM’s Senior Assistant Director in the Workplace Policy and Strategy Division (WPSD) explained:

We wanted to do it differently from the citizens panel... we wanted ground ownership... because we felt that a top-down approach would not be very significant in moving mindsets and changing perceptions on work-life harmony... The citizens themselves, be it employers, HR, employees, had to be the ones to actually recognise and understand the trade-offs and then to be the ones driving these ground solutions.”²



Structured as a Community of Practice (CoP), the AfA gathered nearly 1,000 participants drawn from employers, employees, HR practitioners and other key community stakeholder groups. In the first CoP session, about 50 AfA members formed project groups around different ideas that had been generated. Each group also interacted frequently outside of the scheduled sessions to develop and refine their ideas into pilots. Some of the interactions were held online due to pandemic restrictions.

The AfA culminated in a showcase of 5 projects to the tripartite partners and other stakeholders in September 2021. These included a self-assessment tool for employers to review their work-life support practices, an employees’ state of WLH survey, a multi-stakeholder modular guide on implementing work-life practices, an after-hours work communications policy template, as well as a series of articles and infographics promoting WLH (see Annex 2). Over 140 of the AfA members also became Work-Life Ambassadors, a recommendation made by the earlier CP.



AfA members sharing about their projects during a virtual session with Minister for Manpower Tan See Leng and Minister of State for Manpower Gan Siow Huang. Photo courtesy of MOM

² Lau Yuan Zhi (Ministry of Manpower), interview by Jean Chia, August 3, 2023.

While both the CP and AfA engaged a broad spectrum of citizens and stakeholders, NPTD and MOM needed to take the right engagement approach to achieve their desired outcomes. The CP was better suited for building shared understanding of the trade-offs at stake, shaping consensus with various stakeholders, and brainstorming recommendations. On the other hand, the AfA members not only proposed ideas, but also directly took action to solve the problems, such as by developing practical guides or toolkits, to help sustain change.

Getting the right mix of participants

Having the right mix of participants was crucial for both the CP and AfA. While the organising secretariats of the CP and AfA were careful to balance diversity and representation across key stakeholder groups, the recruitment processes and compositions differed.

For the AfA, in addition to an open call for participation, MOM approached the tripartite partners to nominate people who were passionate about WLH issues and took care to have a balanced representation of employers, employees and HR professionals. The CP secretariat held an open call for volunteers. Out of more than 300 who responded, a representative sample was selected based on diversity of demographical backgrounds, their reasons for wanting to participate in the CP, their views on improving WLH, and set quotas for three groups (employers, employees, and a secondary circle of influence such as students).

Fidelia Chen, a Senior Assistant Director at NPTD said, “(The CP members) were all very passionate about this topic and our recruitment process helped to identify that because we did ask one or two open-ended questions on their views.”³



Empowering the CP and AfA members

Members of the CP and AfA were empowered to take collective ownership of the deliberation process, decision-making and outcomes, with the secretariats providing scaffolds to support them in the process. For example, while the AfA secretariat suggested some aspects that the members could focus on, it was up to the members themselves to vote on specific ideas to work on, form their own project groups and organise meetings outside of the scheduled sessions. The project groups also worked directly with industry partners like NTUC and Singapore Business Federation to refine and implement their pilots.



³ Fidelia Chen (National Population and Talent Division), interview by Jean Chia, August 17, 2023.

The CP members were given autonomy to shape the process, including the rules of engagement with one another and decision-making norms such as a voting threshold for the top 50% of ideas to be included in the main report. While the CP secretariat had a suggested report writing framework, each group nominated a representative to form a report writing committee and CP members voted for the report's editors. The groups also had to pitch their ideas to the report writing committee. Nominated members were the ones presenting the CP's ideas to policymakers, stakeholder representatives and the media, and speaking directly with the media.



Pitching of proposals at the CP. Photo courtesy of NPTD

Tailoring support to the CP and AfA members

Government officers worked closely with the groups in both the CP and AfA, but to different ends.

Facilitators in the CP who came from various government agencies played a key role in fostering fairness and providing structure to the discussions. Two facilitators were paired up to work with each group. The CP members were also informed upfront that the facilitators were not the policy owners for work-life issues. This helped to reinforce perceptions of the facilitators' neutrality in the deliberative process of the CP.

On the other hand, 2 MOM secretariat officers were attached to each AfA project group to provide information on existing government policies and initiatives related to work-life issues and avoid duplication with existing efforts. If additional resources or funding were needed to implement pilots, the MOM officers helped the groups navigate government processes. The MOM officers also nudged the groups to consider alternatives ideas if what was proposed had already been done, or if they veered too far from the main issue.

Bernice Phoon, a manager in MOM's WPSD, recalled how MOM worked with the AfA groups:

There were members who initially recommended top-down approaches from the Government, and were not fully sold on the co-creation and ownership of solutions... It was a very consultative process where we listened to their views to understand where they were coming from...shared on existing efforts by tripartite partners, and explained the intent of the AfA to generate ground-up efforts to plug remaining gaps... it took time and effort ... building mutual understanding, trust, and rapport to see how we can move forward collectively and take concrete actions.⁴



Cultivating partnerships for pilots in the AfA

One critical component of the AfA was implementing ground-up pilots. MOM leveraged its longstanding relationships with tripartite partners to garner additional support for the AfA, roping in NTUC and SNEF as organising partners and resource persons.

At the same time, the partners had sufficient autonomy to take ownership of their respective areas and work closely with the AfA members. This approach also encouraged the tripartite partners to continue publicising and promoting the use of the co-created resources after the AfA ended.

For instance, one AfA group worked closely with SNEF, other senior management representatives and HR professionals to create a template on how companies can develop after-hours work communication policy and set clearer boundaries. SNEF then made the policy template available on its website and regularly publicised it to its members, including through workshops. Another AfA group developed a self-assessment tool for employers to review and enhance their work-life practices, and provided a range of practical steps for companies to consider. This tool was disseminated by NTUC to their network of unionised companies.

More resourceful members mobilised their own networks. One AfA group connected with EngageRocket, a manpower analytics firm, and initiated a collaboration to survey employees' awareness, work-life practices, satisfaction and needs related to WLH. The group worked with EngageRocket to design the questions for the survey which was hosted on the firm's website. The survey reached over 3,000 employees in Singapore.



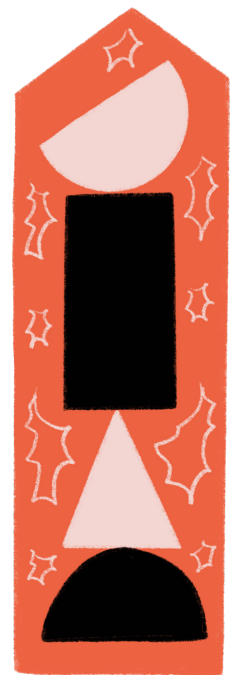
⁴ Bernice Phoon (Ministry of Manpower), interview by Jean Chia, August 3, 2023.

Complementary engagement approaches to shape active citizenry

As the experience of NPTD and MOM has shown, public sector agencies need to apply the right engagement approach to achieve the appropriate outcomes. The CP focused on in-depth consultation with citizens on policy trade-offs and brainstorming ideas. The AfA required citizens to move beyond contributing ideas to mobilising action among themselves, so that the outcomes could be better sustained. The CP and AfA can be effective as complementary engagement approaches to address complex issues, or those of major public interest. In this case, the CP on WLH led to further engagement through the AfA.

As such engagements can be resource-intensive to implement, it is important to line up the appropriate resources and capabilities. From the start, the CP and AfA secretariats sought various forms of support within their organisations and from partners.

In both the CP and AfA, the engagement process was as important as the end-product. The response of citizens to the CP and AfA engagements was encouraging. Among the CP members, 96% felt that their involvement gave them a better appreciation of the challenges of solving community issues. Most in the AfA were willing to work with MOM again. Citizens and stakeholders going through the deliberative process had to step outside their personal perspectives to understand the complexities of policymaking. The government agencies were able to beef up their policymaking toolkit and engagement capabilities by working more closely with citizens to effect change on the ground. This helps to shape a better informed and more active citizenry and builds public trust.



Annex 1: Recommendations of the WLH CP

Category	Recommendation	Description
Shifting Societal Norms	1. The Purposeful Life @ SG	Construct, disseminate, promote, and perpetuate a new narrative concerning Singapore's community and culture.
Empowering Individuals At The Workplace	<p>2. Front Line Day and Frequent Dialogues between the employees, senior management and HR</p> <p>3. Appointment of WLH Champions, outside of senior management and HR</p> <p>4. Protected work-time (i.e. white space time)</p> <p>5. Employee Mental Wellbeing: Surveys & Mindfulness Programmes</p>	<p>Front Line Day allows senior management and HR personnel undertake customer-facing jobs for a day to develop a firsthand perspective of challenges faced by frontline employees. Frequent Dialogues between the employees, senior management and HR (e.g., employee surveys, anonymous feedback) to address improper job sizing.</p> <p>WLH Champions would be employees outside of senior management and HR, having the autonomy to speak on behalf of fellow employees, who would remain anonymous. Function of WLH Champion would be to suggest measures that would improve WLH.</p> <p>Nudge and equip employees with the means to initiate a dialogue with their colleagues and immediate supervisors, so that they may set aside time to work, free of interruptions.</p> <p>Proposes that mindfulness programmes at work be promoted by SNEF, MOM, and NTUC.</p>
Supporting Shifts in Workplace Culture	<p>6. Split existing grants into easy-to-apply "modular and bite-sized" grants to subsidise and mandate the inclusion of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) in the Employment Contract</p> <p>7. Application (app) Push Notifications for FWA Grants</p>	<p>Raise number of companies accessing and benefiting from such grants by reducing the funding available for each SME and creating "micro-grants".</p> <p>Push notifications can be widely employed to provide relevant and timely information to targeted users.</p>

Annex 1: Recommendations of the WLH CP

Category	Recommendation	Description
Supporting Shifts in Workplace Culture	<p>8. W+LIFE (Work-Life Industry-specific Framework for Everyone)</p> <p>9. WorkLife + Harmony for U & Business (W+HUB!)</p>	<p>Independent mixed method (i.e. integrating qualitative and quantitative methods) research approach to inform and guide how best to make FWAs pervasive.</p> <p>Online community led by TAFEP to create and sustain a one-stop FWA and WLH portal.</p>
Building Organisational Capability	<p>10. Develop a structured and more widespread corporate mentorship and exchange programme, “Success Begets Success.”</p> <p>11. Enhance sharing of WLH best practices by HR professionals and senior managers through multiple mediums and avenues.</p> <p>12. Mandatory Institute for Human Resource Professionals (IHRP) Certification for HR Practitioners</p> <p>13. IHRP Continuing Professional Development (CPD) framework should be revised to place a greater emphasis on implementing WLH initiatives such as FWAs.</p> <p>14. Human Resource Audits (Job Analysis)</p>	<p>Bring companies in the same industry together so they can collaborate or enter into a mentor-mentee relationship, especially on sharing solutions and strategies to tackle management and HR barriers to the adoption of WLH initiatives.</p> <p>Facilitate the exchange of perspectives and experiences on how to tackle barriers to the adoption and implementation of WLH initiatives.</p> <p>IHRP’s framework encompasses work experience and competency assessments, and requires continued professional development through recertification, which can help to ensure that HR professionals keep abreast of changing HR practices.</p> <p>CPD hours should be weighted to ensure a greater emphasis on skills and competencies pivotal to strategic rather than transactional HR activities.</p> <p>Free consultancy service which can be offered by MOM to provide job-specific data and analysis critical to the provision of a whole host of HR management services.</p>

Annex 1: Recommendations of the WLH CP

Category

Capability
Recognition

Recommendation

15. TAFEP FWA Road Map

16. Work-Life Harmony (WLH) Grading for Employers using the Tripartite Standard on FWAs

17. Work-Life Accreditation for Harmony - W+LAH!

Description

Expand this award to provide incremental milestone-based recognition to incentivise and reward the efforts of organisations who implement FWAs.

This capability recognition would have real implications, potentially paving the way for companies to have more opportunities or restricting their ability to take on Government contracts.

Nationally recognised accreditation issued to companies in Singapore who have demonstrated a commitment to helping their employees integrate their personal lives with their busy work lives.

Annex 2: Projects of the WLH AfA members

<p>1. An employer self-assessment tool to review companies' provision of work-life support</p>	<p>Generates a scoring and proficiency level (i.e., Needs Improvement, Basic, Intermediate and Advanced) based on companies' work-life practices implemented.</p>
<p>2. An employee survey to review employees' state of work-life harmony</p>	<p>Aims to measure employees' awareness, practices, satisfaction and needs pertaining to work-life harmony. (Run in partnership with EngageRocket that specialises in providing software to measure and analyse employee sentiments to improve employee performance.)</p>
<p>3. A multi-stakeholder modular guide on implementing work-life practices at workplaces</p>	<p>Comprises 4 sections on how different stakeholders (senior management, HR, managers, employees) can support and achieve WLH at workplaces.</p>
<p>4. An after-hours work communication policy template</p>	<p>Guides companies on how to establish clearer expectations and boundaries on work-related communication after stipulated working hours</p>
<p>5. A series of articles and infographics to promote work-life harmony, targeted at employers and employees respectively</p>	<p>AfA members are encouraged to share their content pieces on either their personal or corporate social media platforms. These content pieces will be reshared by TAFEP as well as other group members on their respective social media accounts for greater reach. They will also be housed on TAFEP's website.</p>