

Majority of workers prefer to continue flexible work arrangements: IPS working paper

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SINGAPORE: A sizeable proportion of employees here prefer to retain flexible work arrangements rather than work from the office or from home on most days, a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found.

The study, which polled more than 2,000 workers over nine months, found that preferred work arrangements have shifted considerably throughout the pandemic.

From mid-July last year to April this year, between 41 and 52 per cent felt that flexible work arrangements should be the new norm for workplaces in Singapore.

In the same period, around 20 to 35 per cent felt that working from home on most days should be the new norm for workplaces.

These findings were published on Monday (Apr 25) in a working paper on Attitudes towards Work and Workplace Arrangements Amidst COVID-19 in Singapore. It was authored by four researchers: Dr Mathew Mathews, principal research fellow at IPS and head of the IPS Social Lab, and three others from the Social Lab - research assistant Fiona Phoa, associate director Mike Hou and research associate Elizabeth Lim.

The researchers said in the working paper that a preference to work from home on most days increased when cases of COVID-19 in Singapore rose, while there was an increase in the preference to work from the office with the easing of pandemic restrictions.

"This suggests that there has been a shift in attitudes towards living with COVID-19 as more employees return to the office, and as COVID-19 case numbers come under control," said the paper.

In more recent waves, around four in 10 (37 to 43 per cent) felt that employees should be allowed to work from home three days a week.

In fact, more respondents have been going back to the workplace on most days. At least half of the study respondents have been doing so during the course of the pandemic, and the proportion has been increasing in 2022.

As many as 74 per cent said they were returning to workplaces on most days when polled between Apr 1 and Apr 11.

"Some have, however, felt cajoled to return," said the researchers.

Between 37 and 42 per cent of respondents who currently worked from home most or all of the time felt pressured to return to the office on most days, but this proportion has been steadily decreasing.

The COVID-19 multi-ministry task force announced last Friday that all employees can return to the workplace from Tuesday, along with further relaxation of safe management measures, such as the removal of group size restrictions.

Women, caregivers prefer flexible work

The surveys also found that women, in particular caregivers, were more likely to prefer flexible work and working from home.

Around 73 per cent of female respondents felt that working from home on most days or flexible work arrangements should be the new norm for workplaces in Singapore, as compared to around 66 per cent of male respondents.

"The gendered preferences for work arrangements in the new norm possibly reflects how females continue to be burdened with the lion's share of domestic care work," said the researchers.

Among respondents with children at home, 44 per cent felt that flexible work arrangements should be the new norm for workplaces.

Respondents with aged persons at home were more likely to feel that flexible work arrangements should be the new norm for workplaces in Singapore (52 per cent) as compared to those with children or those with both children and aged persons at home.

The study also found that around 94 per cent of female respondents with dependants preferred working from home on most days or having flexible working arrangements as compared to 86 per cent of male respondents with dependants.

Link to psychological well-being

The researchers noted that workers have better psychological well-being when their current workplace arrangements matched their preferred work arrangements.

For example, working parents, especially those with young children, expressed the poorest levels of well-being when their workplace arrangement required them to return to their workplaces, according to the paper.

"It's important for employers to try to find out the preferences that their workers have based on where they are in their work cycle, life cycle - whether they have children or not ... not everybody wants to work exclusively from home, some people just would prefer just to be in the office," said Dr Mathews.

On how employers can help workers transition back to working in the office or a hybrid working model, more than four in 10 respondents felt that employers should allow employees to choose which days they would prefer to return to the office.

When asked why some prefer to work from the office, respondents cited easy access to the office network or IT systems, the ease of collaborating with colleagues on projects and conducive working space.

On the other hand, more than eight in 10 respondents felt that reduced chances of getting COVID-19, greater flexibility in incorporating personal life needs with work schedules and the ability to attend to family needs were important reasons for preferring to work from home.

Among respondents who were currently working from home and felt that working from home on most days or flexible working arrangements should be the new norm for workplaces, around 42 per cent of the respondents indicated that they would consider looking for another job if their employer required them to return to the office on most days.

Dr Mathews said that workers and employers also need to be "active" in adjusting to hybrid work arrangements and to be "cognisant" of the issues.

The working paper noted that not all have benefitted from the shift towards flexible work. For example, there are cases of workers who experienced burnout as the lines between work and their private lives blurred.

"What does it mean (that) flexible work arrangements become the norm? How do they operate that system, how they draw the lines ... to preserve their mental well-being?" he said.

"What kind of ways (are there to) motivate them to continue to work at high levels of productivity? Many of those considerations need to be put in place ... as we embark on further shifts in our work culture."