

## Some workers say they will not take masks off in office despite easing of COVID-19 measures

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**Channel NewsAsia**, 26 April 2022

SINGAPORE: While some workers were looking forward to taking their masks off in the office on Tuesday (Apr 26), others said that they will continue to wear masks as an additional precaution to protect their family members.

On Tuesday morning, the first day that most COVID-19 safe management measures are relaxed in Singapore, a steady stream of workers flowed out of Raffles Place MRT station.

With SafeEntry gantries removed, the central business district seemed more like its old self, although the crowd was still a little thinner than before the pandemic.

Most workers kept their masks on as they walked to work, even though it is no longer mandatory to wear a mask outdoors.

Last week, the COVID-19 multi-ministry task force announced that from Tuesday, all workers can return to the workplace. They can also take their mask off in the office when they are not interacting physically with others and when not in customer-facing areas.

Nearly all of the workers interviewed by CNA said that they have been coming back to work in the office on certain days or full-time for quite a while.

Mr Sid Kapur, who has been working two days a week from the office, said that he is looking forward to being able to take his mask off in the office.

"We're quite spaced out in the office, so it hasn't been too much of a problem for us," he said. "I'm looking forward to the changes, I think over the last week or so, you see more people taking off their masks outdoors, that's quite pleasant to see."

But some people told CNA that they will continue to wear a mask, as their jobs involve interacting with clients or as an additional precaution to protect vulnerable family members, such as elderly parents or young children.

Ms Cindy Ng, a purchaser, has been back in the office five days a week for two weeks. She said she does not mind working from the office or from home, except for the time spent commuting.

As her office is not very spacious, she said she will still wear a mask. She added: "I think I still prefer to put on a mask. There are a lot of people talking in my office."

Mr Goh, who was returning to the office full-time after two years of mostly working from home, was shielded by a hood that he said was a "power-assisted personal respirator". Under that, he wore three masks - an N95 mask sandwiched by two surgical masks.

The IT security executive, who did not give his full name, said that it is to protect his two-year-old daughter, who is not eligible for any vaccines. Turning off the respirator to speak, his glasses quickly fogged up and his answers were muffled.

He added that he will not eat or drink at work so as not to remove his protective gear.

A few other workers said that they are still awaiting guidelines from their managers on safe management measures in the office.

Mr Ryan Phua, who is in private banking, said he would like to be able to take his mask off but his company may have "stricter rules".

"I'm waiting for my boss to ... give the mandate on whether we can (take our masks off) in the office," he said.

### **Most receptive to removing masks**

An Institute of Policy Studies study of attitudes towards work and workplaces found that more respondents were receptive to the prospect of colleagues unmasking at workplaces. The surveys were conducted in April this year before the latest easing of measures was announced.

The proportion of respondents who said people should continue to be masked at the workplace was 34 per cent, while 43 per cent felt that masks can be removed if they are at the workplace with their regular colleagues.

Companies that CNA contacted, as well as the Public Service Division, said that they will adhere to safe management restrictions from the authorities.

The advisory from the COVID-19 multi-ministry task force last Friday said that while workers can remove masks while not interacting with others, they are advised to "exercise social responsibility and maintain an appropriate safe distance from others while unmasked".

The task force also encouraged employers to retain and promote flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting and staggered work hours, as a permanent feature of the workplace.

Beyond the benefits of flexible work, this will also help workers avoid peak period crowds as more people return to the workplace, said the Ministry of Health (MOH).

A statement from the tripartite partners - the Manpower Ministry, National Trades Union Congress and Singapore National Employers Federation - also encouraged firms to permanently offer flexible work arrangements.

Ms Lee Yan Hong, head of group human resources at DBS Bank said that the company will continue its permanent hybrid working model that gives employees the flexibility to work remotely up to 40 per cent of the time.

"We will also keep up with our workplace hygiene practices and the cleanliness of common spaces in our offices, and continue engaging our employees on the need to remain vigilant and exercise social responsibility to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 at the workplace," she said.

KPMG's head of people in Singapore Janice Foo said that SafeEntry check-ins are no longer required when coming into the office.

But masks can be taken off only when employees are seated at their desks and not interacting with others, and they remain mandatory during meetings in meeting rooms.

"Employees have been advised to exercise social responsibility while unmasked and to continue to monitor their health," she said.

The firm will also maintain flexible work arrangements, and employees are able to arrange their work days and hours according to the needs of their clients, their teams and themselves, she said. In addition, unvaccinated employees can return to the office from Tuesday.

At workplace consultancy Paperspace Asia, workers have been able to choose when they want to return to the office, and the company will also let them decide whether or not to wear their masks at their workstations.

Ms Angelina Dass, workplace change consultant at Paperspace, cited a survey by the company last year that found that wearing a mask for long hours in the office was one of the top concerns of workers who were used to working from home.

She thinks that more people may be more willing to return to the workplace if they do not have to wear a mask for long hours.

"It's about giving people a personal choice, and not hindering the larger objectives such as encouraging interaction and fostering collaboration," said Ms Dass.

She advised that companies not just set days for employees to return to the office, but also set clear plans on when they can meet team members and have cross-department interactions to build camaraderie.