

100% work from home not doable: Lawrence Wong on S'pore's Covid-19 future

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Is 2021 going to be a rerun of 2020, or a sequel?

This was one of the questions discussed on Monday (Jan. 25) at the 2021 edition of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) annual forum, Singapore Perspectives.

Editor-in-chief of The Straits Times, Warren Fernandez, had posed the question to Minister for Education Lawrence Wong, asking how the Covid-19 pandemic will affect Singapore in 2021.

Will things remain the same?

Differences between 2021 and 2020

In response, Wong admitted that with the recent rise of Covid-19 cases in the community, the current situation in Singapore may seem similar to what was experienced last year.

However, there are "important differences" that should be recognised, said Wong.

Some of these differences include higher testing capabilities and better contact tracing abilities.

Most importantly, vaccines are on their way, which Wong stated is a "game changer" for Singapore this year.

He added: "There may be some sacrifices that are still needed from time to time, we still will need restrictions. But let's get through this stretch, get everyone vaccinated, and we should be in a much better situation after that."

Covid-19 accelerated existing trends

Fernandez subsequently asked a follow-up question related to the idea of 'reset', which has been the main focus of this year's IPS conference.

Reset can entail many different things, said Fernandez. What kind of reset does the Singapore society need? And will there be major changes in paradigms?

In response, Wong said: "Covid-19 doesn't so much introduce new disruptions, as it does accelerate existing trends."

One example of a trend that was pushed by the pandemic is Singaporeans' use of technology.

Hybrid arrangements in workplaces, such as working from home and conducting virtual meetings, has been talked about for a long time.

But when the pandemic started, it quickly became a new normal.

So this begs the question: Will fully working from home still be possible even after the pandemic?

100 per cent work from home is not doable

According to Wong, 100 per cent work from home is not doable.

He explained: "You cannot function effectively without that human collaboration and that social interaction. So you do need a chance for people to come together."

However, Wong also said that things do not have to go back to the way they exactly were before the pandemic, and there is room for a paradigm shift in this area.

An opportunity that this pandemic presents is for companies and employers to embrace flexible or hybrid working arrangements in the future, Wong suggested.

"Do you really need to go back to where things were, where... sometimes you don't need to be in the office and yet you still insist on being in the office?"

Singapore's status as global hub still relevant

There are still some concerns though, which Fernandez raised during the discussion.

If people can work from home, then they can essentially work from anywhere, said Fernandez.

Would this then have major implications for Singapore as a global hub, because international corporations could then work remotely with anyone elsewhere. Why would they need to be in Singapore?

In response to this, Wong said:

"I can appreciate those concerns, but I will also put the point the other way, which is that I see and even in this new normal, you will still need some physical presence. You're not going into a world where it's all just machines and we stop having face-to-face interaction. That's not going to happen.

It has not happened across human history and it's unlikely to happen going forward, because, as I said, humans are fundamentally social animals. So physical presence will still be relevant.

And if you ask the broader international community, 'If you have to have some presence in Asia, where would you like to be?'

Well, I would like Singapore to be first on that list. And I think, if we are able to respond well through Covid positions, this will take Singapore in a stronger position. Then indeed, we can be more relevant as a hub, not less relevant."