

Please, please don't completely get rid of WFH in S'pore even if we can go back to the office

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Come Apr. 5, many employees in Singapore will likely see an increase in the frequency of days spent in the office.

As many lament the gradual decline of their WFH days, it remains to be seen: What will happen to the future of WFH in Singapore?

The 16 floors of Spotify's headquarters in the U.S. has barely been filled in the past year or so with its employees being told that they can work from anywhere.

It might never be full again.

All over the world, the pandemic has forced companies to rethink what 'office spaces' mean. Giants like Facebook, Google and Twitter have all indicated plans to shift to remote working.

Gradual return to the office

Many experts in Singapore, however, are still in agreement that working from home is not a "sustainable and optimum long-term solution for all corporates", CNA reported.

As you already know, work-from-home (WFH) will no longer be the default work arrangement in Singapore from Apr. 5.

Starting with public servants in Singapore, the government has also encouraged those who can work from home to return to the office three out of five working days.

Perhaps you're secretly disappointed that you will have to return to the office, or maybe you're pleased because you think that you can finally get your business up and running.

As the Covid-19 situation stabilises further, it is likely that more companies will be thinking of getting their employees to return to the office more often.

Maybe even revert to the pre-Covid-19 'normal' of work arrangements that are 100 per cent office-based.

But I implore you: Can we not?

Please do not end WFH entirely

There are many benefits of WFH that have led to some urging employers not to end WFH.

The public transport system in Singapore has seen less pronounced morning and evening peaks, transport minister Ong Ye Kung said. This has made public transport operations more efficient, and in turn, financially sustainable.

For many of us, WFH has allowed us to sneak in an extra hour of rest or time with our family because we save on commuting time.

A study by Microsoft also showed that staff have crafted and adapted to new routines, as a result of forced-WFH policies. Employees have built different familial responsibilities and even exercise routines into their daily schedule, for instance.

I'm not saying we should work from home forever

Previously, in an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) forum, Singapore Perspectives, Minister for Education Lawrence Wong had said that 100 per cent work from home is not possible.

And I get that. So, to be absolutely clear: I'm not suggesting that we all just work from home forever.

There will be some jobs where work-from-home is just not possible. WFH is totally out of the equation for those working in essential services such as in the healthcare or cleaning industries, for instance.

For companies that do allow for WFH arrangements, though, it might be tempting to eventually ask all employees to return to the office when the situation allows for it.

But it may not be for the best.

If there's anything the pandemic has shown us, it's our capacity to adapt and get used to new modes of thinking and ways of living.

Problems with 100% WFH model

From a pragmatic perspective, I recognise that there are many problems that come with a complete WFH model.

The social aspect of being in an office is arguably a crucial component to feeling fulfilled at work. For those who joined a new company recently, they would have hardly had the chance to interact and build rapport with their colleagues.

With an endless onslaught of virtual meetings, the working dynamic is also significantly affected — "Zoom fatigue" is a thing, and face it, nobody likes constantly talking to screens.

Sometimes, it's a lot easier to get things done in person too. It's much more straightforward to have a quick conversation to clarify things in person, rather than to have a discussion over text that risks conveying tone wrongly.

But this doesn't mean we should revert to 100 per cent work from office just for the sake of it.

Something in-between?

Too much WFH and employees may feel a loss in a sense of ownership and belonging to the organisation that they work for.

A complete return to no-WFH also feels maddeningly unnecessary because, after all, we did survive an entire year of a hybrid work arrangement.

Perhaps what looks ideal for the future of work is likely a mix between flexible working hours/WFH and office-based arrangements.

How much is 'just right' is entirely up to you

The Wall Street Journal has suggested an estimated of 25 per cent of work time to be WFH after the pandemic blows over.

But what is the ideal ratio of WFH/office-based work, and how would it look? Might it involve two weeks of going into the office and an entire week of WFH, or a day or two of WFH per week (my personal favourite, if I had to choose)?

Different companies, with different organisational cultures and manpower needs, should decide what works best for them. And their employees.

In reconfiguring new norms, supervisors will have to rethink how they would like to run and manage their teams and certain biases will have to be taken into account.

For instance, Sam Yam, NUS assistant professor of management and organisation, told CNA that managers will have to be conscious of the notion that working from home means less productivity.

Employees will also likely have to actively demonstrate that they are still able to deliver and meet targets given such work arrangements.

But whatever the arrangement, it no longer makes sense to return to the 100 per cent office-based model..