

Please, please don't completely get rid of WFH in S'pore even though we can all return to the office

Do we really need to be in the office five days a week?

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COMMENTARY: This is an open letter to employers — can we please not revert to pre-Covid office arrangements just for the sake of it?

It definitely doesn't have to be 100 per cent work-from-home (WFH), but please, anything but five days in the office.

An earlier version of this article was first published in April 2021, shortly after the government announced that WFH would no longer be the default and up to 75 per cent of employees would be able to return to offices.

Dear Singapore employers,

As you already know, all employees may now return to the workplace — an increase from the previous limit of 75 per cent of those who can work from home.

Perhaps you're secretly disappointed that you will have to return to the office more, or maybe you're pleased because you think that you can finally get your business back to the way it used to be.

As the Covid-19 situation stabilises further, bosses like yourselves may be thinking of asking your employees to return to the office for as many days as possible. And perhaps eventually reverting to the pre-Covid-19 "normal".

But I implore you: Can we not?

Do we really need to be in the office five days a week?

WFH has allowed many of 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 shows that staff have crafted and adapted to new routines, such as building different familial responsibilities and even exercise routines into their daily schedule.

In fact, in a recent Institute of Policy Studies paper released in 2022, around 20 to 35 per cent of those polled said that working from home on most days should be the norm, according to The Straits Times.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "But having a work-from-home arrangement means less productivity!"

To that, I say: Didn't we already survive two years of this hybrid work arrangement? Were the KPIs and deliverables not fulfilled?

"But returning to the office will boost productivity and morale even further!"

Okay sure, I don't entirely disagree with that. But hear me out.

Problems with a 100 per cent WFH model

There will be some jobs where work-from-home is simply not possible, such as for those working in the healthcare or cleaning industries.

But then there are companies where WFH arrangements are technically possible. In these instances, the fear is that bosses might be tempted to ask employees to return to the office for all five days a week, because that was just the way it used to be pre-Covid.

After all, in Jan. 2021, then-education minister Lawrence Wong said during an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) forum that 100 per cent work from home is not possible. Many experts in Singapore also told CNA that working from home will not be a sustainable and optimum long-term solution for companies.

And I get that. From a pragmatic perspective, there are many problems that come with a 100 per cent WFH model.

For one, it's sometimes a lot easier to get things done in person. Having a quick conversation to clarify things in person is much more straightforward than having a prolonged discussion over text. Not to mention, in-person interactions can also have a positive effect on morale.

Thanks to Covid-19, a growing number of people have started jobs and left them without even meeting their colleagues in person. Without the social aspect of being in an office, it's all too easy to become disengaged and disillusioned.

A 35-year-old quoted by The New York Times (NYT) said that the lack of physical meetings made him feel like "a name on a spreadsheet". Like he was "just someone you could hit delete on".

If the only mode of engagement at work involves an endless onslaught of virtual meetings, are you truly engaging with your colleagues?

And an even more philosophical question posed by NYT: If you never met your co-workers in person, did you even work there?

Finding that right balance

The office, and all the human interactions it entails, is important for nurturing a sense of belonging and purpose. But what I'm saying is: Surely we don't need this in-person thingamajig all five days a week?

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

A complete return to the office feels maddeningly unnecessary precisely because KPIs (*insert any other corporate jargon that you fancy*) were still met during the time where working arrangements involved a combination of working from home/the office.

All over the world, some workers have quit rather than give up WFH entirely, Bloomberg reported. If their company wasn't going to offer them this perk of flexibility, they would look elsewhere instead.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we should all work from home all the time for the rest of our lives (although I do know of some people who would love that).

So, here's my humble suggestion: Let those who are able to WFH do so for at least one or two days per week.

The Wall Street Journal said that an estimated of 25 per cent of work time to be WFH after the pandemic settles down, but of course it will vary from company to company.

It's entirely up to you to decide what works best for your organisation but I sincerely hope you will consider this suggestion. Simply because it no longer makes sense to return to the 100 per cent office-based model in the near future.

Hybrid work arrangements are currently the norm, but it should really be the future as well.

Sincerely,

An employee.