

The Straits Times says ***A new normal: Working from anywhere***

The Straits Times, 30 April 2022

The coronavirus pandemic has changed employees' attitudes towards work and their workplaces. It is important for employers, in turn, to keep in step with that change so that the new normal benefits both workers and companies. This is a key takeaway from a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) which examined the work experiences, attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, aspirations and well-being of employees in the context of work and workplace arrangements amid Covid-19. Clearly, as the study argues, the pandemic has pushed both employers and employees to consider new ways of working. It accelerated the adoption of flexible work arrangements, whereby employees remain productive generally even when they are not physically on-site.

If anything, a major draw of flexible work practices has been their potential to allow for greater work-life harmony. The IPS report notes that for working parents, especially females who typically carry a heavier load of caregiving than men, flexible working arrangements have allowed them to work while taking care of their children. As for men, such practices give them the opportunity to play their proper role in domestic work because they are not confined to the office any longer. At least one good thing has come about as a result of Covid-19, despite all the disruptions caused by the socially destabilising disease: It has subverted "normal" relationships between work and home, thereby offering both employees and employers better ways of leveraging work at home when it can be done there and work in the office when it cannot but be carried out there.

If this combination sounds ideal, it is difficult to see why some employers are against flexi-work arrangements. Some firms are calling workers back to the office, reversing a two-year trend of flexible arrangements made necessary by restrictions on how many employees could return to office at the same time. While the removal of restrictions would be welcomed as proof of success in insulating workers here from the spread of Covid-19, it is not clear why arrangements that have succeeded for two years should be dispensed with now that the threat of infection at work is no longer a part of the economic calculus.

Worries about workers avoiding their fair share of labour because they are out of sight of the management would be a reason for companies to want their staff to be in full view. Surely however, such people would not have survived their workshy habits during two years of economic contraction produced by Covid-19. It is important for employers to realise that they risk losing talented employees through intransigent attitudes to hybrid work. Instead, they should embrace the potential of employment that combines work and home to produce motivated staff who will go the extra mile for the company - even from home.