

Why S'pore firms should not force workers to return to office and continue adopting flexi-work

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Last week, Singapore's Ministry of Health announced that [there would be no limit to workplace capacities](#) from April 26.

What this means is that employers may now begin to demand that employees return to offices instead of working from home, which has become the norm over the past two years.

But just because returning to offices is now possible, it does not mean that all companies should enforce this.

While the pandemic has certainly affected a number of businesses, working from home has benefitted many employees with greater control over their time and better work-life balance.

Moreover, it seems that employees are not very keen to return to the office either. A [study by the Institute of Policy Studies](#) revealed that those who feel strongly about having flexibility in work arrangements are inclined to find a new job if employers insist on having employees in the office on most days.

According to the study, 42 per cent of workers who prefer flexible working arrangements would consider resigning if made to go to the office on most days, compared to only 24 per cent who would not.

Given this reality, would it be worthwhile for employers to insist on employees to return to the office? Probably not.

Flexibility is important for workers, among other reasons

The core argument for many employees is that flexible work arrangements enable them to make the most use of their time — attending to family needs, less time spent commuting, and the ability to fit personal life needs into busy work schedules.

This in itself is a benefit and should not be overlooked. Singaporeans consistently bemoan that they are already stressed, caused by a combination of [work-life imbalance](#), [lack of understanding from colleagues](#), or [unempathetic management](#). Flexible working schedules can help alleviate this, resulting in [better productivity](#) if managed properly.

Other reasons for the inclination to work from home include greater comfort and less pressure to socialise, and less friction with colleagues due to frequent interaction in the office. As they say, familiarity breeds contempt.

Is it truly productive if employees spend their time in the office dealing with people they do not necessarily like, instead of focusing on their work from the comfort of their own home?

Alternatively, some employees might not appreciate having to deal with micromanagement — a close friend of mine confided that she was unwilling to go back to the office because she was unsure if the purpose of having employees in the office was to micromanage them.

Regardless, the office also has its benefits

At the same time, working in the office does have its own perks, and this should not be overlooked. Employers have the assurance of easy access to employees, and face-to-face communication can be important for some jobs.

These benefits do not only apply to just the employers. The aforementioned IPS paper also finds that [employees find benefits to working in the office](#). They cited easy access to office network and IT systems, and a dedicated working space as reasons to why they would head back to the office to work.

Clearly, employees also see a need to return to the office, which mean that they are not turning obsolete anytime soon.

So are there two differing camps on whether working from home, or working from the office is better or preferred? Perhaps. But it's also difficult to argue that people are unidimensional when their preferences are forever static and unchanging.

What is more likely the case is that employees, depending on what they need at different points in time, find it better to work in the office or work from home.

Situational necessity

Given that the desire to either work in the office or from home can be influenced by situational factors, the preferences of employers and employees may not necessarily be at odds with each other.

On the contrary, there might be significant common ground to be found between the two.

It is in employers' and businesses' interests to cut costs and have highly productive employees. By allowing employees to work from home, the office no longer needs to be able to accommodate every single employee. Instead, it will be enough if the office can host all employees who wish to work in the office, with perhaps a bit of extra space to account for those who may occasionally need or want to be in the office.

Some businesses already employ a similar concept — even the government's Economic Development Board adopts the model. These companies have an office, where the leadership team is often based. Meeting rooms, research labs, and other company-specific functions are held at the office.

For the rest of the employees, the company rents co-working spaces for them, should they wish to use it.

For employees, this arrangement provides them with the benefit of choice — those who wish to work from home are free to do so. If there is a meeting, they might choose to head to the office. If there is an urgent project that needs to be completed, a co-working space might be the ideal spot for the team to meet and get things done.

While it may be true that some employees may abuse this freedom and use their time unproductively, the past two years have also demonstrated that many are able to work independently, without supervision, and still deliver results.

It is, however, an unfortunate truth that employees may abuse this freedom and use their time unproductively. But rather than assuming that every employee will definitely abuse this freedom, would it not be better to allow employees to prove to employers that they do not abuse this trust?

Employees who do not require micromanagement to be productive can be allowed the privilege to have flexible work schedules, and those who are unable to remain productive can then be required to go to the office.

To argue that just because some employees are unproductive when working from home, hence all employees should return to the office would be akin to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Working from home has provided many employees with much-needed breathing room, and this is a benefit that can be sustainably provided for employees. In fact, it might actually be financially beneficial for employers to do so.

To force all workers to return to the office simply because it is possible might mean retraining new workers to replace those who chose to quit, and continuing to pay high rental costs for a large office when it has already been proven unnecessary.

A smaller office means lower rental costs, and remote workers means that utilities can be lowered as well. While smaller offices still do have such costs, insisting that all employees come into the office means that these companies cannot afford to reduce these costs.

The better solution would be for employers to learn to trust employees, especially those who have proven themselves capable of delivering results independently, and to do away with requiring them to always be in the office. Hybrid working is definitely the future of work, and while it is not mainstream yet, the pandemic has proven that it is indeed possible.