

Most Singapore employees want flexi-work to be 'new norm': IPS study

Wan Ting Koh

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SINGAPORE — The majority of people surveyed in an ongoing study want to continue having flexible work arrangements.

This was revealed in a working paper presented on Monday (25 April) by the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Social Lab which showed the perceptions of Singapore employees towards workplace arrangements amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 132-page paper, Attitudes Towards Work and Workplace Arrangements Amidst COVID-19 in Singapore, was based on data from an online consumer panel of over 2,000 Singaporeans and permanent residents from 14 July last year – around the time of the second Phase 2 (Heightened Alert) – to 11 April this year. The working paper was done by Social Lab's principal research fellow and head Mathew Mathews, research assistant Fiona Phoa, associate director Mike Hou and research associate Elizabeth Lim.

The team noted that a major draw of flexible work arrangements has been its potential to allow greater work-life harmony.

For working parents, especially females who typically carry a heavier caregiving burden, flexible arrangements have allowed them to work while caring for children while giving men the opportunity to share such duties.

Addressing the media in a briefing, Mathews said that since Singapore has transitioned towards living with COVID-19, the "gains" through this new work arrangement should be ported over even when the pandemic was no longer the biggest concern.

This was especially so when workers had a better psychological well being when their workplace arrangements were what they wanted, the team noted. One example was how respondents with younger children reported lower levels of well-being if they had to return to the office on most days.

Around half of respondents want flexible work arrangements as 'new norm'

The paper showed that around half of respondents polled throughout the pandemic felt that flexible working arrangements – the choice to work from home or office – ought to be the new norm.

Of the rest, between 20 and 30 per cent of respondents preferred the pre-pandemic norm of mostly working from the office, while a similar proportion preferred mostly working from home.

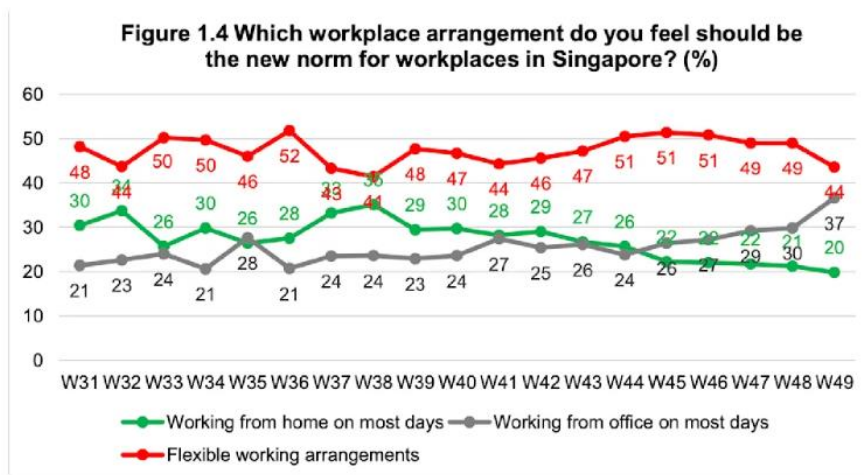


Diagram from the Institute of Policy Studies.

Of those who had elderly at home, 52 per cent preferred flexible working arrangements, signifying a preference for the flexibility to arrange work schedules around caregiving needs for the elderly. Of the remaining, 26 per cent prefer to work from office while 22 per cent rather work from home as the new norm.

Only 44 per cent of the respondents with children at home preferred flexible work arrangements to be the new norm, with the remaining equally split on working from home or office.

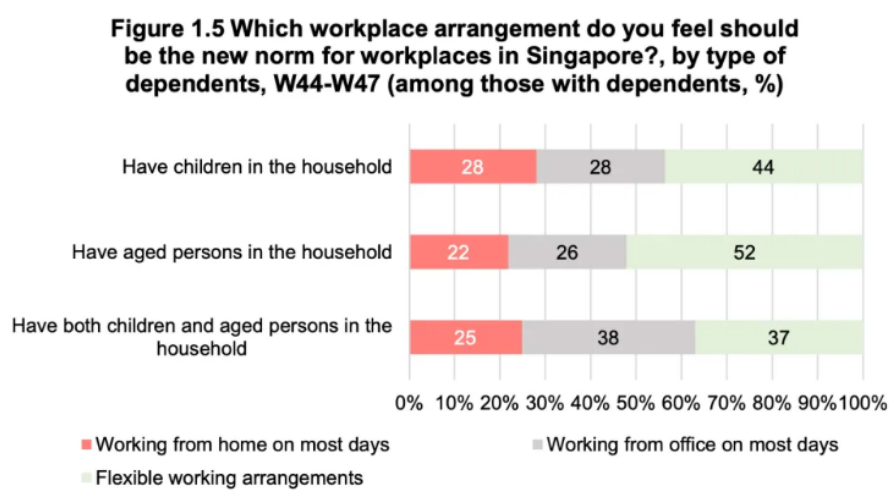


Diagram from the Institute of Policy Studies

The researchers also highlighted gender as a factor in preferences for work arrangements. A total of 94 per cent of females with dependents were more likely to prefer flexible work arrangements, as opposed to 86 per cent of males with dependents, showing that the "lion share" of domestic care still fell on females.

Those who preferred working from the office rather than home cited easy access to office networks and IT systems, ease of collaborating with colleagues on projects and conducive or dedicated working spaces

The top three reasons for those who preferred to work from home were the reduced risk of getting infected with COVID-19, the greater flexibility for work life balance, and the greater ability to attend to family needs.

Workplace should be redefined

While more may prefer flexible home arrangements however, the value of the office space is not undermined, but rather, redefined, IPS said.

Asked what this meant, Hou said that chief reasons behind workers returning to their offices is for access to workplace systems, coordination and collaboration with colleagues and this could affect the way the physical office space was set up.

“We do not think that the workplace should fully revert to pre-pandemic kind of arrangements where people mostly view the workplace as just a place where you go physically to perform work,” said Hou.

“But it should be seen as a place where coordination, collaboration thrives and as a place where it is meant for greater networking and for greater coordination and team-building activities ...so it should not be a passive kind of place, but more active in that sense.”

Challenges of working from home

Among those who currently worked from home on most days, 44 per cent cited their biggest challenge as being unable to unplug from work after working hours, while 37 per cent cited a lack of social interaction with colleagues and 35 per cent cited difficulties developing mutual trust between employer and employee.

Asked what can be done to mitigate these challenges, Mathews said that some of these boundaries could be clearly set and communicated between employer and employee.

“What is necessary at work, what is seen as commitment to your workplace and how that defined all these need to be clearer to individuals. For instance, although you’re working from home, it doesn’t mean that I expect you to answer at 9pm an email,” he said.

Workers needed to know that they can log off work at certain times without being penalised.

“In this new state, people sometimes don’t know how they end up being measured or praised because you’re at home, you don’t have the same kind of face time with your employer and supervisor so it perhaps is how quickly you respond to the emails or you communicate with them all those things are what seems to convey that you’re at work and not skiving off... some of these things have to be communicated so that people have a better sense of what is expected of them,” he added.