

Moving Forward with a Hybrid Work Model

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Hybrid working is not a new concept for companies around the world. The adoption of hybrid working began in the early 2000s with the availability of reliable broadband connections at home. There were still physical barriers to implementing hybrid work until Blackberry and iPhone made “working from anywhere at anytime”. These arrangements were not made to increase flexibility per se rather, it was about increasing productivity by being able to work from anywhere, at any time.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced companies to rethink the workplace and the implementation of flexible work arrangements. Many companies struggled to change their mindset about what it meant to ‘work from anywhere’ - instead of managing via the punch clock.

Now that the pandemic is largely over, companies in the Asia-Pacific region do not

want to return to fully office based. A survey by Telstra¹ found that **85% of companies in APAC are promoting hybrid work arrangements. Companies find that productivity increases when they offer flexible work arrangements.** The employees surveyed also agree. The same survey found that 74% of employees in the region believe they are more productive with flexible work arrangements.

Governments are also taken with the idea. Malaysia, for example, has included flexible work arrangements in recent amendments to its Employment Act.² This type of legislation is not intended to force companies to offer flexible/hybrid work arrangements. Rather, they are aimed at encouraging companies to consider a more effective arrangement that benefits both the company and the well-being of employees.

Why do Employees Want Hybrid Work?

Employees see a variety of benefits in hybrid work. These benefits are not limited to how they perform their work, but also improve the well-being of employees as a whole.

The recent **Cisco Global Hybrid Work Study 2022³** found that from a work perspective in ASEAN, **65%** of employees believed that their quality of work has improved as a result of hybrid work, and **64%** said that productivity has also improved. **66%** also indicated that their professional knowledge and skills have improved.

Under the aspect of social well-being, **86%** of ASEAN respondents indicated that their relationships with family have improved, and **55%** indicated that their relationships with friends have improved. Other aspects include

physical, emotional, financial, and mental well-being. Overall, **87%** of respondents said they were happier, and **82%** noted a better work-life balance.

The pandemic made employees realise that the concept of ‘work-life balance’ is not just corporate jargon, but something that can be achieved. The flexibility of hybrid work allowed them to work hard and still have a fulfilling personal life. Employees do not want to give that up. Employee surveys and exit interviews conducted by various companies found that employees would like to work for a company that offers hybrid work arrangements. Employees are starting to add hybrid work as a “must-have” when considering a new job offer.



One Hybrid Work Model for all?

Although the majority of employees note an improvement in work quality and productivity, **there is no one size fits all for the hybrid model. The operational needs of the business should guide the formulation of a model or policy.** A hasty adoption or a push to offer hybrid work policies to retain or attract talent without fully understanding their impact can lead to problems in the business and frustrate teams that cannot get their work done.

Operational needs aside, **not everyone wants to work remotely.** Statistics⁴ show that **74%** of Generation Z wants more face-to-face collaboration, compared to **66%** of Generation X and baby boomers. These differences in how each generation prefers to work would mean that companies need to understand the makeup of the generations in their organisation and what

their employees actually want from their work organisation. No two companies are the same. **The key is to find the sweet spot between a rigid 5-day work week and a 100% remote work model.**

It's especially important for HR managers to have a conversation with their employees and understand what they need. Some employees need remote work because they have young children, and childcare can be a challenge. Some employees already suffer from 'Zoom fatigue' and desperately need face-to-face contact. Training should be held face-to-face as often as possible to increase engagement and effectiveness. These and myriad of other reasons should be explored when designing a hybrid work policy.



Are your People Managers ready for remote work?

When the pandemic broke out and companies were forced to send their employees home, most relied on technology to tide them over. These technologies allowed work to continue, sometimes simulating the collaborative environment that existed in the office. However, emotions such as frustration and boredom cannot be conveyed through an email or instant message, no matter how many emojis are used. Companies are not training their HR managers to

deal with remote teams, and soft skills are being replaced by technology.

Employees who are managed remotely may find that they are 'stuck' with routine tasks without the opportunity to grow personally or professionally. This lack of engagement can lead them to leave the company in hopes of a more engaging environment.

The Buffer 2022 State of Remote Work Survey⁵ has found that employees are struggling with remote work. Some areas are:

- **25%** found it hard to unplug from work.
- **24%** reported loneliness as their top challenge.
- **17%** of respondents reported difficulties in communication and collaboration.
- **52%** felt less connected to work.
- **21%** found it difficult to focus on work.
- **15%** worried about their career growth.

It is important that hiring managers understand that remote work is not just about getting tasks done or meeting KPIs, but about continuously engaging their teams. Understand what the team needs from different aspects:

Where do we start?

Companies need to realise that the hybrid work model will last. They cannot return to the situation that prevailed before the pandemic. HR leaders must lead the change and work with business leaders to find a solution that benefits the business and keeps or attracts talent to the company. The new policy should be part of the overall compensation strategy.

Engagement sessions with your employees are a good place to start. Industry-standard norms may not be appropriate for your company. Do not assume that everyone wants to “work from home”. Surveys are good, but focus groups with different functions within the company can uncover unique needs.

Make sure your HR leaders are ready. The pandemic has changed the structures in many companies. This has created many First-Time-Managers. Their ability to manage people, in general, may not be sufficient, let alone manage remote teams. Your HR managers are key to a successful hybrid work policy. Run a solid manager development programme that includes managing remote teams as one of the focus areas.

- How much time would the team need to work remotely to have that work-life balance?
- How much face-to-face time would the team need to collaborate?
- What days or times are convenient for all team members? – for scheduling meetings, etc.
- What type of tasks are being assigned to different team members? – i.e. routine vs empowering

It is very important that organisations realise that employees are still people, no matter how much tech you put in between. No amount of tech can replace a manager with an adequate amount of emotional intelligence.

Finally, **be flexible enough to change your hybrid work strategy as things change within the company.** As your business grows and its products and services increase, you may find that your policy is not providing the productivity, efficiency, or employee satisfaction you need. A review every two years or after a major structural change would be recommended.

Have fun working wherever and whenever that may be!

Reference:

- 1 <https://www.telstra.com.sg/en/news-research/research/the-apac-transformation-vision-optimising-for-hybrid>
- 2 Malaysia Employment Act 1955 (Amendment) 2022
- 3 https://www.cisco.com/c/m/en_us/solutions/global-hybrid-work-study.html
- 4 <https://www.intuition.com/hybrid-working-stats-every-professional-should-know-in-2023/>
- 5 <https://buffer.com/state-of-remote-work/2022>



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