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FLEXIBILITY MATTERS

MOVING TOWARDS A FLEX-ABLE WORKPLACE

I started my career as a school teacher, encouraged by my late mum who strongly believed that teaching is the most suitable profession for women, as it allows one to spend more time with family. Ironically, I spent most of my teaching days working long hours. Fuelled by curiosity, I ventured out of the school grounds into the corporate world and more than 10 years later, I found myself opting for flexible work arrangements (FWA) in a professional services firm, going into the office three days per week.

I appreciated the flexibility when my daughter was born and the flexible arrangements made it possible for me to manage my career while learning to cope with being a new mother, so I continued working on FWA for five years. As a beneficiary of FWA, I am absolutely sure that it's a win-win arrangement, hence I have spent considerable amount of time and effort while on secondment at TalentCorp advocating FWA to human resources (HR) and business leaders.

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS (FWA) DEFINED

FWA provides alternative working schedules which differ from the traditional working day and week. The Life at Work Awards 2015 highlights employers such as Maybank, IBM and Shell which provide various options of FWA for their workforce, such as part-time reduced work schedule, fixed flexible schedule, telecommuting, leave of absence, compressed work week and job sharing.

Case studies and research show that employees are healthier, experience less stress and are more productive when they can make choices about how, when and where they work. Although this seems rather obvious, there are many perceived barriers to implementing FWA, which is still a new concept in corporate Malaysia.

At TalentCorp, one of our areas of focus is to share best practices and explain why FWA doesn't have to be complicated or costly to implement. I will discuss some of the common problems posed to us.

PROBLEM STATEMENT #1: We don't know if employees on FWA are working

Allowing flexibility at work requires a shift of mindset from thinking that presence at work is a reflection of productivity.

With clear performance goals, managers should pay more attention to the quality of work outcomes rather than the number of hours spent in the office.

Ultimately, trust is a vital ingredient for FWA. Just like medical leave, which may be subject to abuse, some employees may take advantage of the flexibility given to them.

Needless to say, these employees should be counselled and they are likely to be your average or poor performers. To mitigate the risk, some organisations decide to introduce FWA as a privilege to reward and retain good performers, rather than an entitlement for all staff.

The Attorney-General Chambers, for

example, implemented the phase one of their work from home option to selected employees based on criteria such as excellent annual performance appraisal, high level of discipline, integrity and independence.

Another example is PwC Malaysia, which introduced FWA policy more than a decade ago as a retention strategy for working mothers with strong performance ratings. The policy has evolved over the years to a "Work Life Plus Programme" which is made available to all staff.

PROBLEM STATEMENT #2: How do we explain to employees who are not on FWA

Ravin Jesuthasan of Towers Watson, in his book *Transformative HR* puts across an interesting point that "HR traditionally has taken a 'peanut butter' approach to talent, by which, HR investments are similar – spread like peanut butter – across different roles and employee groups".

He explains that like marketing, HR leaders should start thinking about segmenting their employees and considering how employment features such as working hours, pay and development might affect individual behaviours differently.

Whilst business leaders are accustomed to segmenting our customers based on product offerings, we should also consider providing our employees a customer-like experience, catering for their different and diverse needs. By the same token, FWA isn't a "one size fits all" option.

The FWA eligibility can be made available for specific roles. IHS, one of the winners of the Life at Work Awards 2015 is embarking on a new resourcing model with a group of recruiters who are women returnees. They can work from anywhere, anytime, and will be paid based on short-listed candidates and successful hires.

FWA options can be made available for specific circumstances. The newly appointed IBM managing director (MD), Chong Chye Neo, went on a Leave of Absence (LOA) twice in her career to attend to family matters.

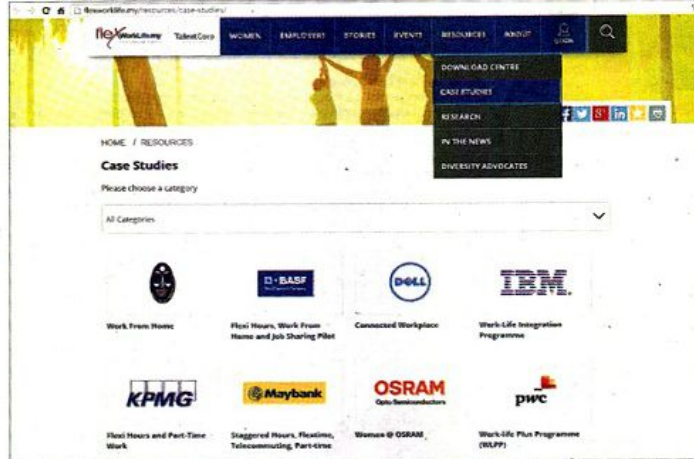
In the IBM article on Life at Work Awards, the first female MD explains that she's appreciative of the LOA policy, which provided her with opportunities to continue growing her career with IBM after returning from her career breaks.

PROBLEM STATEMENT #3: our workforce is not ready for FWA

Rather than defer the implementation to a time when the organisation is deemed ready, some Malaysian employers have started with small steps and a trial period.

Eco World, for example, piloted staggered starting hours for a specific period during the school holidays in November 2014, to gauge the readiness of the organisation and their staff. The pilot phase was well received, and there are now plans to enhance the scope of the FWA options.

Large organisations like Maybank and KPMG have taken the bold step to formalise their FWA which have been practised over the years on a case-by-case basis. By formalising their FWA and incorporating it as part of their HR policies, these organisations have moved to the next stage of the flex-



Source: Leveraging Workplace Flexibility for Engagement and Productivity, SHRM (pg. 8, 2014)



ibility at work spectrum, progressing from individual accommodations to having policies and programmes in place (see Figure 1).

Formalising FWA will ensure consistency of its eligibility and the way in which it is being managed, rather than leaving it to the discretion of line managers.

Besides enhancing employer branding, an FWA policy will encourage employees who need to have some flexibility to have a conversation with their managers before they decide to tender their resignation, by which time it is often too late.

FLEXIBILITY AT WORK AS THE WAY FORWARD

The decision to pilot or formalise FWA may not pose too much of a risk,

considering that approximately 98% of organisations have not terminated any flexibility programmes, based on the World at Work survey in 2013.

Globally, organisations which participated in this survey with established workplace flexibility reflect that it has a positive or extremely positive impact on engagement, motivation and satisfaction.

Despite the success stories and international best practices, only a small percentage of companies in Malaysia has FWA policies, and only 10% of listed companies plan to enhance or implement their FWA within a year (see Figure 2).

Evidently, a lot more needs to be done to change mindsets in corporate Malaysia to be more receptive to flexibility at work.

Providing FWA can help create a supportive work environment in which both employers and employees will thrive. This will eventually become the "new normal" for conducting business, in response to what our workforce is asking for.

HR and business leaders in Malaysia have to either move with the times, or get left behind in retaining their high performers or positioning their organisation as a preferred employer.

Salika Sukuwan of PwC Malaysia has just completed a two-and-a-half year secondment at TalentCorp. She invites employers to approach TalentCorp, or visit the flexWorkLife.my portal to learn from best practices to enhance their work-life policies and provide a parent-friendly environment to the Malaysian workforce.