

Bosses make flexi-work possible for deskless staff

Pick your shift and workload? Sectors such as healthcare, cleaning and F&B make flexibility a win-win option

Sharon Salim
Business Correspondent

The deskless workforce – such as those in healthcare, construction, and cleaning and food services, among others – do not have the luxury of working from home.

But such workers can still have flexible work arrangements (FWAs).

With the new Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests – in effect since Dec 1 – both office and non-office staff can formally submit flexi-work requests.

Under the guidelines, companies must set up an internal process for workers to create requests for FWAs, comprising flexi-time, flexi-load and flexi-place. And employers must fairly consider these requests.

Global recruitment firm Randstad said 42 per cent of blue-collar workers consider job flexibility to be as important as their remuneration package, or even more so, according to 2023 data studying more than 7,500 workers in five markets.

Close to two in five non-office workers also said that while their jobs can be flexible, their bosses were not “trying hard enough to accommodate their needs”.

The Straits Times looks at how some local workers and bosses in deskless fields are making flexibility a win-win situation.

HEALTHCARE

When senior physiotherapist Yee Zhi Rong started working at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) a decade ago, it was the norm to work six to seven consecutive days in a week.

In addition to working from Monday to Friday and alternate Saturdays, she was also occasionally rostered on Sundays and public holidays, too.

“Working on alternate Saturdays was very taxing, and it was easy to experience burnout due to the lack of time for rest,” she said.

When she started a family, she wanted to spend more time with her two young children and have family outings.

In 2018, flexi-time was introduced to the team’s work schedule, allowing her to take more or fewer weekend duties as she preferred.

By November 2023, weekend and public holiday duties were reduced from 30 times to six times a year.

Multiple internal surveys studying more than 100 physiotherapists at TTSH showed a 100 per cent uptake rate of those schedule options in 2023, with a 27 per cent increase in satisfaction with work schedules.

In July 2024, flexi-load was introduced in the physiotherapy department, restricting overnight duties, such as for intensive care unit patients or emergency cases, to only a team of experienced physiotherapists.

This freed up most other staff from night on-call duties, reducing their overall workload.

The new tripartite guidelines have provided more clarity on the possibility and processes for making such requests, said Ms Yee, 35. She may consider requesting part-time or flexi-time work when her children, aged four and two, go to school.

“Working fewer weekends also means I do not have to worry about making special care arrangements within the family, providing me with better emotional and mental capacity to be more productive at work and give my best to my patients,” she added.

In October 2023, TTSH’s nursing department also piloted an initiative that expanded shift options – from three fixed shifts to nine flexible shifts, each ranging from four to 13 hours.

The hospital saw a “significant level of interest” in the flexible work options in the pilot ward, leading to the programme’s expansion across 35 other inpatient ward areas.

While flexi-time allows nurses to select shifts to suit their personal schedules, flexi-load allows the work to be segmented in order of priority, enabling them to focus on



Senior physiotherapist Yee Zhi Rong with her children, aged four and two. She said the new tripartite guidelines have provided more clarity on making flexible work arrangement requests, and she may consider requesting part-time or flexi-time work when her children go to school. PHOTO: TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

more urgent tasks during peak periods. Nurses can indicate their schedule preferences through a self-service application or directly with their nurse manager.

To have more call-time with their children in the Philippines, husband-and-wife nurses Raymond and Clauvina Ramirez opted for 12-hour shifts with three consecutive days off.

They used to struggle to communicate with their two children, aged six and four, when they were rostered for evening shifts, often missing out on conversations after bedtime.

“Flexi-hours give us more time to rest. Before, we could talk to our children only every other day for one to two hours, due to our hectic schedules. But now, we can connect for three to four hours every day. That’s why I can feel they are closer to me,” said Mrs Ramirez.

The National University Health System (NUHS) cluster allows its staff to opt for flexi-place by facilitating job rotations from acute to less acute care settings. Acute care settings include the intensive care and emergency departments.

An NUHS spokesperson said this not only opens the doors for staff to diversify their roles and develop professionally, but it can also help them achieve better work-life balance.

The NUHS cluster includes National University Hospital (NUH), Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, Alexandra Hospital and National University Polyclinics (NUP).

NUP, for example, works with NUHS hospitals to offer NUHS nurses the opportunity to transfer to non-shift work at a location closer to their homes.

When asked whether the upcoming robot nurses at NUH will enable nurses to have more options to work flexibly, the NUHS spokesperson said that while technology supports the nurses’ work, it does not replace front-line care.

“Caring for patients remains a high-touch discipline that requires human interaction and presence,” the spokesperson added.

CLEANING AND RETAIL

While flexi-work had always been offered to staff at cleaning and environmental services company Chye Thiam Maintenance, it was often available only on an ad-hoc basis.

In September, the company offered flexi-time and flexi-load options to its 3,000-strong workforce through a formal process. The company said it responds to staff’s FWA requests within two weeks.

Workers can opt for flexi-hours, working for only two to six hours a day. They can also opt to work for two to three days a week, or only on weekends and/or public holidays.

About 8.3 per cent of its staff



In 2023, Tan Tock Seng Hospital’s nursing department piloted an initiative that widened shift options. Nurses can indicate their schedule preferences via a self-service application or directly with their nurse manager. PHOTO: TTSH



McDonald’s Singapore employees can opt for flexi-load and flexi-time work – so they can ask for shift work and shift-swapping, select their days off, and work full-time or part-time – other than a flexi-place option. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

have asked for such arrangements.

It has also been able to hire more locals who prefer flexible timings to meet their needs, such as caring for their grandchildren or elderly parents, boosting the company’s manpower needs.

Having permanent part-timers in some industries helps, too.

“Jobs in these sectors are often seen by locals as dead-end, tough and not as popular as (other) full-time jobs,” said Mr James Chia, co-founder and chief executive of Arc-Lab Singapore, which provides a mobile training and learning plat-

form to train deskless employees in sectors such as construction, logistics and retail.

In addition to ensuring every work shift is filled, having enough permanent part-timers helps companies with meeting foreign worker quotas, he told ST.

And, with advancements in tech and artificial intelligence, the deskless workforce can possibly accommodate more FWAs.

For instance, more robotics adoption suggests cleaners can possibly remotely pilot a machine to clean areas with low human traf-

fic, such as a warehouse, Mr Chia said.

Similarly, logistics workers can remotely operate packing machines.

“Then, flexi-place may become a reality for blue-collar workers,” Mr Chia said.

Another employer that has FWAs in place through flexi-load and flexi-time is wholesale and retail company Radha Exports, which is behind the Valu\$ and ABC Bargain Centre chain of stores.

To manage their work and personal commitments, employees can request to work full-time or part-time, ask for staggered working hours, and select their days off – as long as they meet their total work hours and workload.

Radha Exports chief executive Deepak Anandani said the employees feel empowered because they have control over their time and schedule, boosting morale and overall mood within the company.

FOOD SERVICE

Fast-food chain McDonald’s Singapore has adopted FWAs through flexi-place for its restaurant employees, allowing them to work at a location most convenient for them.

They can also opt for flexi-load and flexi-time – so they can ask for shift work and shift-swapping, and select their days off, as well as decide to work full-time or part-time.

Thanks to the company’s flexi-time arrangements, Ms Rumiya Razali, a guest experience leader at the McDonald’s Bukit Batok West outlet, has been able to complete a 10-month SkillsFuture diploma in retail and spend more time with her six-year-old daughter while working full-time.

“This makes me happier, and I am more motivated to contribute to the company,” she said.

HOTEL

Royal Plaza on Scotts has benefited from implementing FWAs for more than a decade.

Ms Juliana Ong, its director of culture and human capital, said at a recent round-table discussion hosted by ST and the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices that the hotel wanted to grant more flexibility in hours to certain groups of workers, such as stay-at-home mothers hoping to return to work.

Its 240 employees can choose to work 22 hours a week according to a roster that suits their needs, such as five half-days or three full days in a week, she said. There are even staff who work two weeks and then take the next two weeks off.

Other arrangements include working staggered hours, which means starting and ending a shift earlier or later.

To measure the success of FWAs, the hotel looks at its customer service scores, among other metrics such as employee engagement scores and staff retention figures.

“For us, employee engagement levels have gone up a lot since we started implementing FWAs.

“Right now, we’re consistently at 90 per cent. As we’re in hospitality, happy employees translate to happy guests as well,” said Ms Ong.

FLEXIBLE AND FEASIBLE

Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach... we are open to considering different forms of flexible work arrangements that are operationally feasible and aligned with the unique demands of the healthcare industry, so that patient care remains uncompromised as we address our staff’s work-life needs.



MRS LILLIAN YEO, chief human resources officer at Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

MORE PRODUCTIVE

Working fewer weekends also means I do not have to worry about making special care arrangements within the family, providing me with better emotional and mental capacity to be more productive at work and give my best to my patients.



MS YEE ZHI RONG, a senior physiotherapist at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. In 2018, flexi-time was introduced to her team’s work schedule, allowing her to take more or fewer weekend duties as she preferred.

MORE MOTIVATED

This makes me happier, and I am more motivated to contribute to the company.



MS RUMIYATI RAZALI, a guest experience leader at the McDonald’s Bukit Batok West outlet. The fast-food chain’s flexi-time arrangements allowed her to complete a 10-month SkillsFuture diploma in retail and spend more time with her six-year-old daughter while working full-time.

CHALLENGES REMAIN

While employers agree that open communication with employees is paramount to making flexi-work arrangements viable, implementing them is not a straightforward affair.

Challenges include supervisors who may not know how to implement FWAs and customers who may not be receptive towards the adoption of flexi-time and flexi-load at workplaces.

Some of Chye Thiam Maintenance’s clients prefer full-time staff, rather than part-time ones, even if the total number of hours worked is the same, said a spokesman.

“In the grand scheme of things, they want to have consistency of the same person throughout the day,” said the spokesman. There needs to be a mindset shift to look at an outcome-based model, instead of headcount, he added.

Mrs Lillian Yeo, chief human resources officer at TTSH, said that despite distinct challenges in implementing FWAs in the healthcare industry, the new tripartite guidelines provide an opportunity to build on these efforts.

It is often a combination of ground-up proposals and leadership-supported initiatives that will make this work, she added.

“Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach... we are open to considering different forms of flexible work arrangements that are operationally feasible and aligned with the unique demands of the healthcare industry, so that patient care remains uncompromised as we address our staff’s work-life needs.”

ssharon@sph.com.sg