

Public service in Singapore embraces flexi-work

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SINGAPORE - Private enterprises are usually seen as leaving the public sector trailing in workplace processes and procedures, but civil servants now find themselves as pace-setters in an employment scene turned on its head by the pandemic.

Staff at the Government Technology Agency (GovTech), for example, can work from home up to three times a week and even enjoy exercise breaks during office hours as long as they make up the time during the same day.

The Auditor-General's Office (AGO) has a slightly different approach - staff can work from home up to twice a week, but each team has a designated collaboration day a week where all officers must be present on site.

Hybrid working arrangements like these have become the norm in the public sector, which is taking the lead in Singapore's endeavour to retain flexible work despite Covid-19 becoming endemic.

Flexible work has also caught on globally, with around 3,000 private sector workers in Britain trialling a four-day work week.

Banking giants such as UBS, HSBC and Citi have flexible work plans, while vacation rental company Airbnb said its employees can live and work almost anywhere in the world.

But on the opposite end of the spectrum, Tesla chief executive Elon Musk declared [an end to remote working in the firm in June](#).

So where does Singapore stand?

The Minister-in-charge of the Public Service, Mr Chan Chun Sing, said in a parliamentary reply on July 4 that about half of the jobs in the public service are suitable for telecommuting arrangements.

Mr Chan said: "With the recent... announcement that 100 per cent of employees can return to the workplace from April 26, the public service has taken the lead and transited to a new working arrangement.

"For officers whose work allows for telecommuting, officers can do so for an average of two out of five days per work week. Public service agencies can decide how best to implement this, in line with their operational considerations."

He added that other than telecommuting, the public service also allows staff to stagger their work hours, such as starting work earlier or later than the usual start time.

"Such flexibility would be useful for those with caregiving duties at home. Staggered work hours, if implemented more widely, can also help to reduce peak-hour traffic congestion and time spent travelling to and from work," he said.

Mr Chan added that the Public Service Division also issued guidelines to reinforce the expectations of work standards and to promote good supervisory practices.

"Telecommuting has helped to enhance productivity, such as by removing the need for officers to travel for meetings, and can support those with caregiving responsibilities to achieve a better balance between work and their caregiving duties.

"However, there were also downsides. Working virtually for prolonged periods of time could weaken team cohesion and make the inculcation of public service values more difficult."

With this in mind, each audit department in the AGO has its own collaboration day when all officers have to be on site.

Staff can also choose a start time ranging from 7.30am to 9am, subject to approval.

AGO corporate development director Lim Ming Foong said: "The hybrid arrangements have allowed AGO to be more responsive to the needs of our staff. Our officers are better able to juggle their work and family commitments.

"Hybrid arrangements also make us more competitive as an employer, and help in attracting young people to join us."

Ms Lim said a large part of audit work can be done remotely, apart from times when auditors have to be physically present for fieldwork or for sighting assets and inventories.

GovTech has devised a similar approach with some tweaks.

Its officers are encouraged to work from home up to three times a week but staff should meet face to face for certain activities such as development chats, negotiations, or training that requires in-person participation.

"While many of our staff can work effectively from outside the office, having a certain amount of in-person interaction helps to improve relationships and trust among colleagues, and encourages spontaneous interactions that spark ideation and innovation," a GovTech spokesman said.

Changing work arrangements also means that workspaces have to evolve to suit new needs.

GovTech has converted some permanent spaces to facilitate hotdesking while providing every worker with a locker space, as well as more informal meeting areas and quiet rooms.

It is also trialling smart lockers for staff to borrow tech accessories or to deposit and collect items using their work passes.

The hybrid work arrangements have benefited AGO senior assistant director Amanda Wong, 35, who has two children aged two and four.

Pre-pandemic, she spent little time with the children on work days because she had to travel early to the office and reached home late.

But flexible work arrangements mean she can have breakfast with the children before sending them to school, as well as spend time with them before bedtime.

Moving to digital systems has also helped her find a better work-life balance. She said: "As auditors, working overtime is common during the audit peak period.

"The introduction of the electronic working paper system has afforded me a lot of flexibility in terms of where I work on days when I need to work late.

"Instead of staying in the office to work off hard-copy documents, I can now end work on time to have dinner with my family and put my kids to bed before continuing with work."