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More people working from home

Option enables bosses to retain staff, who enjoy better work life balance

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HEADING to the office is not a big deal for Mr Edwin Lam. For him, and for many others like him who work from home, going to work basically involves moving from one bedroom to another.

Mr Lam, a segment manager for InfoPrint Solutions Company, begins his day at 7am with a call to colleagues in the United States before taking his four kids to school.

He then returns home to attend to e-mail, teleconferences and other tasks before rounding off the day with a final call to his US colleagues.

The details might differ but his basic routine would be familiar to thousands of people in Singapore who call home the office.

The practice has become increasingly popular as firms start to explore alternative work arrangements beyond the typical 9-to-5 office day, according to human resource experts.

"We have seen more companies starting to show an interest in work-from-home arrangements. Employers are becoming more open to this concept, together with other initiatives such as 'flexitime'," said Mr Mark Ellwood, regional managing director for recruitment consultancy Robert Walters.

Mr Josh Goh, senior manager of corporate services with The GMP Group, agreed: "More firms are jumping on the bandwagon as they aim to be employers of choice by adopting human resource initiatives that improve work-life balance - including work-from-home initiatives."

The increased interest has meant more business for firms selling work-from-home technologies. Cisco told The Straits Times that there has been "very strong interest" in its telecommuting solutions over the past year. Telecommuting tools, such as routers and business phones, enable employees to work remotely.

Employees who work from home tend to be more satisfied with their work-life balance, particularly those who want more time for their kids or to care for elderly parents.

Ms Rachel Ler, a sales manager with NetApp Singapore, had insisted on a flexible work system that allowed her to spend more time with her children.

“It is difficult being a working mother as it is, but being able to work from home is helpful for us with young children,” said the mother of two, who works from home twice a week.

With employees going to the office less often, face-to-face contact time becomes increasingly valuable. Mr Lam makes it a point to have physical meetings with his colleagues at least once a week to keep up with his team.

“Teamwork can become a challenge as employees lack sufficient face-time with their peers to build a strong sense of camaraderie,” said Mr Colin Chong, InfoPrint’s regional director of human resources.

Given the reduced contact time when working from home, experts - and bosses - fear that productivity and accountability might drop.

Experts recommend that firms refine productivity measurement and reporting structures to make the best of such initiatives. “Proper key performance indicators are crucial in ensuring work efficiency, so that such initiatives are not abused,” said Mr Goh from The GMP Group.

Aside from boosting worker welfare, having the option of working from home can also help retain staff, said Robert Walters’ Mr Ellwood.

Companies like UBS agree. “We see work-life harmony as a business strategy,” said Ms Teo Lay-Sie, chief operating officer of UBS Singapore. The firm offers the option of working from home to retain talent in the light of keen competition in the financial sector, she said.

Having home-based mobile workers has also become a policy as companies reduce operational costs. InfoPrint, for instance, saves from having fewer workstations and storage facilities. Four in ten of its staff are home-based mobile workers.

The benefits of such initiatives have hit closer to home after the Influenza A (H1N1) outbreak prompted firms to evaluate and refine business continuity plans.

Working from home also means being able to attend to quarantined family members.

But having staff working from home may not be every company’s cup of tea. The practice tends to be more popular among larger companies and multinationals, according to human resource consultants.

“Many companies... are from the United States. And if the corporate headquarters have such practices, other branch offices are likely to follow suit,” said Mr Paul Heng, founder of NeXT Career Consulting Group. “Small and medium-sized enterprises may not be ready to do this as they need all hands on deck.”

Not every function in a company can be carried out at home. Activities like financial trading are not available to home-based mobile workers due to banking and compliance purposes. UBS’ trading staff can access relevant trading systems only from the office.



Said NetApp's senior human resource director of Asia-Pacific, Mr C.Y. Yao: "While a flexible work schedule serves many purposes, it will work only for those whose work scope entails measurable results."

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