

Flexible Work Arrangements for Personal Work-Life Effectiveness

"A marriage made in heaven." This was what Tom said to me when he evaluates my flexible work arrangement proposal. Tom Watson is the President of Kodak Polychrome Graphics in the Asia Pacific Region and I provide HR leadership and functional support to the company. My schedule is fully flexible. From the company's perspective, there is no need for me to be at the office all the time to meet the needs of the business and its people. For me, it gives me full control over my work and personal commitments. It is indeed a blissful arrangement.

All of us want to be effective, to have a sense of control and balance over our lives and to be able to make informed decisions. But achieving harmony in work and personal/family life is a very personal thing. It varies for different people and also at different times of their lives, depending on their lifecycle stage and circumstances.

Telecommuting works for me but it is by no means the only flexible work option for effective work-life balance. In this article, seven individuals from different backgrounds will share their experiences with you. You will see there is no single formula or "one-size-fits-all" solution to achieving personal work-life effectiveness.

Benefits of Flexibility

The biggest benefit of flexibility is having control over your schedules, work, time, etc. The company is effectively leaving the work planning to you and focusing more on your results than on how much time you spend at work. This kind of trust and empowerment give a sense of freedom and great satisfaction. Ms Gee Su Myn, Senior Sales and Marketing Manager, Park N Brand, has been telecommuting for the last two years. She agreed to take on the challenge to revitalize the business selling advertising space in car parks and was given free rein to juggle her schedule between this and her Administration Manager role of an associate company. Gratified by the trust, she went on to turn the business around within the first year.

For those with elderly parents and/or younger children, flexibility helps them keep a closer eye on things at home. Mr Abdul Rahman Bin Asaat is a Field Technician with UMW Equipment and Engineering Pte Ltd. The father of five has been working on flexi-time since last year. Wanting to lend his homemaker wife a helping hand with daily household chores and to spend more time with the kids, he reports to office mainly for regular team meetings. Each day he proceeds directly from home to and from customers' site, thus saving him lots of travelling time. According to Ms Shirley Chew, UMW's HR Executive, the arrangement empowers Rahman to manage his work and family life more effectively without an adverse impact on his income stability. The flexible work arrangement is in harmony with the company's mission to provide excellent customer service. There is also improvement in employee well-being and management of business costs.

For others, it offers the opportunity to stay professionally engaged and to pursue other things that are important and meaningful to them. Most people want to be mentally stimulated through work and still have personal time for other activities. Ms Jean Yap, Vice President Internal Communications, Credit Suisse First Boston, for example finds that working a shorter workweek allows her not only to spend more time with her two children, but also to be more involved in church and community work. Similarly for Ms Elsie Tan, Regional Business Unit Controller for IT, UBS Investment Bank, telecommuting partially enables her to spend more time with her children than otherwise on traditional work schedules. Mr Gurchan Singh, Managing Director of Cherie Hearts Child Development Pte Ltd works almost a split-shift arrangement most days. Usually, he will be at the office in the first half of the mornings and later half of the afternoons. He enjoys this work arrangement as it does not tie him down to a routine and is less constrained.

Trade Offs

Some flexible work arrangements like part-time work may mean reduced income. After 22 years with UMW as a full time employee, coffee lady Mdm Rahimah Daud now works part-time and receives half the salary. She likes this arrangement as she is nearing retirement. It also suits the company's changing needs over the years. Mdm Rahimah thinks, however,

that those with commitments like housing loans should think carefully about the financial implications of working part-time.

Another trade off is the difficulty of separating work and personal time. It takes conscious effort not to get too distracted with one or the other to keep the balance. As Ms Elsie Tan, Regional Business Unit Controller for IT, UBS Investment Bank, who telecommutes partially shares, on days when she works from home, she makes sure she takes lunch breaks like she would in the office so as to get a breather from work. Isolation and loneliness are also commonly cited as disadvantages of working away from the traditional workplace. It is important to constantly stay in touch and communicate regularly with the main workgroup via phones, email and chats to keep abreast with happenings in the organization and up-to-date with developments.

Considerations

Job nature

Although flexible work arrangements are more widely practised for back office support roles requiring little or no contact with customers, it is not inconceivable for more jobs to be supported through flexible work arrangements in time to come, especially with the rapid developments in technology and innovation. Finding the right balance between what works for you and what works for your employer is the key. Employers are naturally wary of impacts on workflows and service delivery. A good strategy is to try the arrangement on a pilot basis. This is exactly what Ms Soh Kim Khuan, Control Group Analyst with UBS Investment Bank, did for a period of time before securing her corporate boss's approval for her to telecommute three days a week. Senior management was initially concern about service delivery as her role involves daily reconciliation and interactions with global system users. Fortunately for Ms Soh, the pilot was successful and she has been on this arrangement for a year.

Personal attributes

It is important to have a clear understanding of what flexible work arrangement entails and whether this arrangement is suitable for you. You need to have full control over your work and to deliver the required outcomes within the timelines with little supervision. Ms Jean Yap plans her schedule around her four-day workweek to accommodate global calls, team meetings ensuring no bottlenecks and no compromise on service delivery.

Physical environment

Checking the environment for any major distraction, e.g. children or other obstacles to working from home, is needed too. Noisy environment can be a nuisance when you are discussing an important matter with your client. It is always a good idea to have a dedicated space or room as your home-office and equip it with a proper work desk, computers and/or laptop, printers, proper filing and storage space etc.

There is a misperception that those opting for flexible work arrangements are not fully committed to their careers. Many feel there is a risk being sidelined for promotions and job opportunities for working flexible schedules. Fortunately for Ms Elsie Tan, she was pleasantly surprised and encouraged when one year after starting on her flexible work arrangement, she was promoted.

Conclusion

In today's fast paced economy, we seem to have so much more to achieve. We want to be successful at work, we want to spend more time with our family and at the same time pursue personal interests. It is very easy to get caught up with trying to accomplish as much as possible, packing our days with back-to-back activities, and we end up more exhausted, distressed and ineffective. Time is a finite resource. While some inspiring individuals have managed to do it all and do it well, it may not always work for the majority of us. Ultimately it is up to us to decide what our priorities are and take the necessary steps towards making it work best for ourselves and for those around us.

Mr Gurchran J Singh
Managing Director
Cherie Hearts Child Development Pte Ltd

Flexi-schedule works wonders for his family and business

Mr Singh is in his 30s, married but has no kids yet. His wife works full-time. The couple lives with their elderly mum. He and his business partner had to put in long hours to get their business off the ground when they first started. But now Mr Singh, a firm believer of work-life harmony is on flexi-schedule. He works only a few hours during the centre's peak time in the early mornings and late afternoons. In between, he works from home to clear paperwork and only stays in the office for



meetings when necessary. He lives close by and is contactable by mobile at all times which allow him to respond quickly to emergencies. His flexi-schedule allows him to spend more time with his mum. He also offers flexible work options to his 46 staff. He is proud of his company's good track record with low staff turnover. He attributes this to the flexible work arrangements and other work-life options his centre has faithfully implemented.

Ms Elsie Tan
Director with Financial Control, Regional Business Unit Controller for Info Technology
UBS Investment Bank

FWA Pioneer @ UBS

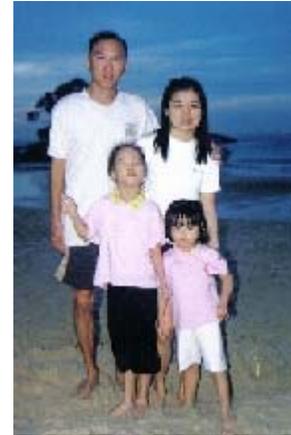
Elsie is married with an eight-year-old son. For the past two years, her regular work schedule comprised two days at the office and three days working from home. When Elsie moved to a new house far from her office, she requested to be on partial telecommuting to reduce commuting time. At the same time, she wanted more time with her son who was starting primary school. She was among the first people in UBS Singapore office to be on flexible work arrangement and the first to pilot a "Hybrid work arrangement" with partial telecommuting. She is happy with this arrangement which gives her more time to coach and bond with her son. Although she misses the interaction with her colleagues, she enjoys working from home as it allows her to stay focused and be more productive.

Ms Soh Kim Khuan
Control Group Analyst, Financial Control Department
UBS Investment Bank

Kim Khuan is married with two daughters, aged 5 and 8. She normally works two days at the office and three days from home. Prior to this arrangement, she faced difficulties managing work and childcare responsibilities, so did her husband. The couple had tried various



childcare options but none of them cater to the needs of their dual-career family. Kim Khuan wanted more work flexibility to manage the home front while continuing to work. Her current work arrangement has



allowed her to do so and helped her bond with her daughters.

The girls are also much happier now having mum in the house more often than before.

Ms Gee Su Myn
Senior Sales and Marketing Manager
Park N' Brand Pte Ltd

Empowered to achieve extraordinary results

Su Myn is married. She has no kids but keeps a pet dog, Milo. She has been telecommuting for two years shortly after she started working for her present employer, a distributor for wood-making factories in Europe. At first, she would dutifully report for work daily regardless of whether there is work or otherwise. Now, she has an agreement with her boss that she will manage her work schedule according to her workload. She works from home most of the time and only goes to the office to attend to administrative follow ups and sales meetings when needed. The arrangement allows her to take on another role as senior sales and marketing manager in an associate company. Within a year, Su Myn succeeded in revitalising the advertising business of the associate company. Su Myn enjoys telecommuting. It allows her to be more productive at work and also gives her more family time.

Ms Jean Yap
Vice President, Internal Communications
Credit Suisse First Boston



Discovering personal fulfilment

Married with two kids, Andrew 13 and Sandra 10, Jean has been working on a three-day workweek initially and then four-day workweek for more than two years now. Jean expressed her interest in flexible work arrangement to her management informally and succeeded in securing her manager's support. Her husband travels frequently for business and so she needed more time to be with her children, particularly Andrew who was then preparing for PSLE. Now she finds it fulfilling with the extra time she has for her family and also her community and spiritual pursuits. She is appreciative of the arrangement as it keeps her mentally stimulated and continues to give her financial freedom, while allowing her time to pursue other activities that are important to her.

Mr Abdul Rahman Bin Asaat
Field Technician
UMW Equipment & Engineering Pte Ltd

Meeting the needs of customers and family

Mr Abdul Rahman is married with 5 children, aged 5 to 16. His wife is a homemaker. He is on flexi-time with no fixed starting and ending time daily. He plans his work day to suit his customers' needs and timing.

The arrangement has grown out of both customers' needs and his personal request. With the flexibility, he saves on travelling time and he is always around to



get the children to school or help out in household chores. This is a big relief to his wife. The children are also happy to have their father around more often, playing their favourite computer games.

Mdm Rahimah Bte Daud
Coffee Lady
UMW Equipment & Engineering Pte Ltd



Part-time Retirement

Mdm Rahimah is married with seven children and 10 grandchildren. Her husband has retired. At 60, Rahimah is still active and keen to continue working. After 22 years with UMW as a full-time worker, Rahimah was glad to be given the opportunity to work part-time. She works half-day except for three days in a month where she needs to be on full-day to support her company's in-house training. With the extra time, she can now devote time for her family and household chores. She enjoys going out with her son - shopping or eating out, and visiting her married daughters and their children, and pampering them by cooking their favourite dishes.

Sincere thanks to all who have shared their personal experiences in this feature.

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