

Workplace flexibility: A win-win situation for employees and employers

The Bauhinia Foundation Research Centre (the Centre) released a study on 'Work-life Balance: Getting started with flexible work arrangements' today. The report explores how flexible work arrangements could help employees achieve work-life balance and strengthen companies' human capital, and demonstrates how workplace flexibility might be able to tackle the challenges arising from a shrinking local workforce.

The Centre's Chairman Dr Donald Li said, 'Human capital is one of the most important resources to any society. People-oriented policy is the key to creating a stable and prosperous city. In the past few years, the Centre released three study reports emphasising the city's future manpower needs, youth upward mobility and child care support services. This report is a continuation of our previous studies. Apart from suggesting employers to introduce family-friendly employment practices to unleash the potential of the female labour force, this time, we examine ways to extend the scope of flexible work arrangements to the entire workforce, hoping to provide a basis for creating a friendly working environment.'

Addressing the needs of different individuals

The study reveals that Hong Kong employees, in general, play multiple roles at the same time. The needs of looking after their families and pursuing personal development may result in work-life imbalance, affecting not only their health, but also family relationships and work performance. To effectively fulfil needs of different employees, the Centre suggests extending the scope of workplace flexibility from 'family' to 'individual'.

More difficult for ever-married working women and younger employees to achieve work-life balance

The report unveils that the labour force participation rate of ever-married working women is 44.1%, notably lower than ever-married working men's 69.5%. In Hong Kong, women most often are the ones who take care of their family members and carry out household chores, this may explain why the labour force participation rate of ever-married working women is lower. If they cannot manage their work and family responsibilities, they may seek part-time employment or quit their jobs.

Another finding is younger workers tend to change jobs more frequently – employees aged 15-29 account for 31.1%, whereas those aged 30-39 and 40-49 account for 25.8% and 21.1% respectively. Through job hopping, younger employees hope to get better salary and career prospects. Besides, they will also pursue further education in exchange for stronger bargaining power. The report indicates that respondents who are keenest to further their study are those aged 15-24, accounting for 30.5%; while for those aged 25-34 and 35-44 who are less motivated, with only 22.9% and 22%

respectively. However, studying while working could also be challenging, which may affect their physical and mental health.

Creating a flexible workplace that supports work-life balance

The Centre believes that the city has to go one step further to implement flexible workplace arrangements. The Centre's Director and Convenor of the study Lawrence Lee said, 'People may presume flexible work arrangements are favourable to employees only, but this is not true. "Flexibility", in this context, means employers' efforts in implementing enlightened human resource management practices, enabling employees to enjoy higher "flexibility" between work and life, thereby achieve work-life balance, given that these flexible arrangements will not affect employees' work efficiency. The practices will be mutually beneficial to both employees and employers because they not only could help reduce employees' turnover and absence rates, but could also help companies' development.'

Despite the many noticeable benefits of flexible work arrangements, the report discloses that these practices remain relatively uncommon in Hong Kong workplaces. The challenges come from both sides: employers worried that the practices would be abused, and found it difficult to monitor the arrangements and treat everyone equally; interviewed employees indicated that employers expected that 'work comes first', and feared losing out on a promotion and job opportunities if they use these practices.

The Centre proposes refining the framework of flexible work arrangements and improving the working environment, and puts forward the following four major recommendations:

1. Establishing a 'Special Committee on Promoting Friendly Employment Culture'

The Centre proposes establishing a 'Special Committee on Promoting Friendly Employment Culture' (the Special Committee) under the Labour and Welfare Bureau. As an integrated policy platform, it promotes a three-pronged approach that involves the Government, the business sector and the labour sector, to formulate the direction of policy promotion, vet funding applications, regularly review the penetration of flexible work arrangements and the outcome of policy promotion.

2. Extending the scope of flexible work arrangements from 'family' to 'individual'

The Government has been putting the emphasis on 'family' when promoting flexible work arrangements, however, not every worker could be benefited from the practices. The Centre believes providing that employers can ensure smooth operation of companies, more focus should be placed on 'individual' needs, enabling employees to fulfil their work and other obligations. For instance, employers could implement flexible working hours, study leave and subsidies to support employees who are pursuing further study. For industries that are facing high turnover rates, these arrangements are particularly effective in retaining talent.

3. Promoting ‘prevention is better than cure’ and enhancing occupational safety and health for better protection

The report points out that industries such as catering, security, elderly care services and retailing are more prone to lower limbs disorders (LLD). In general, LLD are not considered as one of the occupational diseases. When the pain persists and subsequent illness occurs, employees may have to retire early. Overlooking occupational safety and health leads to a lose-lose situation: 1. Human capital cannot be fully utilised as more employees may have to retire earlier owing to physical illness; 2. Long-term medical conditions could incur high expenses that may be ultimately shouldered by the Government or taxpayers, thus may generate massive social costs.

The Centre suggests the Government conducting studies of occupational diseases based on industries and occupations, kicking off the discussion of the definition of occupational diseases to enhance the protection for employees. Dr Li said, ‘Healthy living is essential to the development of citizens and society. Excessive work pressure, if not handled properly, may have negative effects on employees’ physical and mental health. Therefore, we must protect workers from occupational health risks at earlier stage.’ The Centre suggests the Government integrating the emotional and mental health services by adopting a community-based approach to involve social welfare organisations and family doctors in establishing a checklist of ‘one-stop occupational health support services’. This would allow needy people to receive early intervention services and timely treatment.

4. Using technology creatively to make flexible work arrangements feasible

The advancement of technology allows employees to work remotely, making new ways of working such as home office possible. The Centre suggests the Special Committee setting up a ‘Friendly Employment Culture Fund’ for small and medium enterprises to apply for subsidy to facilitate the implementation of flexible work arrangements. In the long run, this will improve social impacts and reduce the pressure arising from a shrinking local workforce.

Mr Lee concluded, ‘Employees and employers are partners, not enemies. To promote flexible employment practices effectively, mutual trust is the key. We are living in a technologically savvy world with a rapidly changing global economic environment. We must overcome the challenges with a more open and flexible attitude, fulfilling the expectations of both employers and employees. Besides, the Government should make continuous efforts in areas of manpower supply, talent training and childcare support services. They are crucial to enhance the city’s long-term competitiveness, and create a win-win situation for employers, employees and society.’

For more information, please visit the [mini-site](#) on work-life balance.

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