

Flexible work arrangements

Industry leaders share how they improved employee engagement with flexibility at work

The Agilent experience

Agilent Technologies (formerly Hewlett-Packard) has been practising flexible working arrangements (FWA) for so long now that Jenny Ooi can hardly remember when it started. "I asked around and nobody seems to remember. This has been our culture in HP/Agilent for a long time," says Ooi, Agilent's senior human resources director for Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

It was a simple matter of efficacy and convenience. "A flexible work arrangement has worked well for the company as well as our employees. Our focus is on results, not on when or where the work is done. If you need to work from home, just work out the arrangement with your manager. HR doesn't manage this, your manager does," she says.

At Agilent, the FWA policy happened naturally. It evolved from a combination of the company's core values of trust and respect for the individual, and the need to attract and retain diverse talent. In recent years, the employees' collaboration with colleagues and customers across different regions and time zones has meant that the "standard" nine-to-five work hours may no longer be practical for many people involved in teleconferences or web conferences at odd hours.

Ooi is a passionate advocate of the flexible work arrangement. She feels that local companies should stop resisting and embrace the reality of the workforce today. If you don't provide flexibility, your pool of talent shrinks as you cannot get staff that prefer such arrangements.

And she says Agilent goes out of its way to win HR awards to give clout to its stand. "I really am an advocate of this path because it is only when we trust our people that they can grow. In the last 12 months, Agilent has won the Aon Hewitt Best Employer for Women Award, the Top 3 Most Women-Friendly Employer in Asia by Women in Leadership Asia, the MIHRM Best Employer Grand Gold Award and the Human Resources Minister's award for excellence in Human Resources Development.

Many local companies are reluctant to introduce FWA because they believe the privilege will be abused by employees. "Our employees have flexible work hours. Yet, when I get in at 8.30am, 80% of our car park is already full. Yes, not everyone is perfect but we tackle the bad hats and HR steps in to partner with managers to handle it. Agilent's HR department has only seven people for 3,000 employees in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. It is very lean, so you can see the focus is not on disciplinary action," says Ooi.

She adds companies that are still holding out against FWA will need to consider it as the new norm. "Businesses must realise it is no longer an option. You have to engage with the young generation who want a balanced work-life. We live at a time when both husbands and wives work. If you insist on being so rigid, people are just going to leave."

Ooi points out that with FWA, there have been very positive developments within the company. "We have been able to retain solid women talent. In fact, some 57% of our vice-presidents and 50% of our senior directors are women. Some companies find it tough to have even 10%."

In addition, Agilent's revenue has doubled in the past seven years. Other numbers also bear out Ooi's support of this policy. "Our attrition rate has averaged about 5%. That's very, very low."

She adds that although Agilent invests on



Having a more flexible work regime is a good strategy as it allows employees to more effectively balance their work performance and personal life quality.

— Datuk Gooi Soon Chai,
president of Agilent Global Order Fulfillment

technology to make everything work, it doesn't have to be an expensive exercise. "If you can't run VOIP (voice over Internet Protocol) over Cisco phones, you can start off with Skype. Basically, technology should not be a barrier. You can have everything set up for a relatively low cost. Even if it's a bit of an investment, in the long run, it's pretty worthwhile."

If companies do not want to introduce flexible work hours all at once, they can start small. "You can introduce it in blocks, such as having staggered starting times from 7.30am to 9.30am. So, if you come in at 7.30am, you go home at 4.30pm and so on. Alternatively, you could say that flexible work arrangements are only allowed on Monday and Friday when



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traffic is bad. Another option is to initially offer FWA to a certain group/department with the company to test its feasibility and impact."

Although these moves may seem insignificant, they can be very important in terms of morale. "They give employees the signal that the company trusts and cares for them and that it may be a good idea to stick around." Based on the business and employee engagement results we are seeing, we believe that the flexible work hours have not been a hindrance to work but instead, empowers employees to deliver, she says.

The PwC experience

PwC Malaysia first considered implementing the flexible work arrangement (FWA) in the early 2000s when a designer in its Business Development Centre announced her decision to leave due to family commitments. In an attempt to keep her from leaving, her director offered her the then novel option of working a few days a week instead of a full week. She agreed and actually stayed on at the firm for seven more years.

This got the ball rolling. PwC Malaysia managing partner Sridharan Nair says it led to more women taking up FWA over the next few years. With FWA being a new thing in the firm, and in Malaysia for that matter, there were plenty who had doubts that it would work.

"People worried that the quality of work would suffer, so we set some very stringent criteria to qualify for FWA," he says.

For starters, PwC only allowed FWA for a period of 12 months. And it was strictly for new mothers who had children aged five and below.

day), a three-day week or a four-day week at a prorated salary. Alternatively, staff could apply for the Time Out programme, which allows employees to plan in advance for additional time off beyond the annual leave entitlement for up to a maximum of one month.

And then there's the career break, which gives employees the flexibility to apply for one continuous month off (up to a maximum of three months) in a year for personal and professional development. "With the changing dynamics of the workforce, and the increasing demands for mobility and flexibility, we decided to extend the FWA to all staff two years ago," says Sri.

Not that it was all smooth sailing. Sri is candid about the problems PwC faced when it first implemented flexible working hours. "In a professional services firm like ours where we're constantly facing deadlines and ensuring timely deliverables to our clients, it's sometimes difficult to manage work and calls from the clients while on FWA.

"Initially, most people who were on FWA held internal client facing roles. But we're now seeing more take-up from our external client facing people because of the changing demands of the workforce, and the advent of technology."

Sri says with technology, employees can access their emails from their devices while on-the-go. "Our managers are also given a flex mobile allowance (covering calls, data and broadband subscriptions). In addition, we regularly reinforce values like trust, empowerment and personal responsibility through leader sharing sessions, town halls and e-newsletters. The tone from the top is vital for the successful implementation of FWA."

At PwC, flexibility extends to more than just work hours. "We have introduced Flex-Space where those at the manager level and onwards can choose where to work from, be it at a client site, at home or in a café when the situation calls for it."

And it has extended its maternity leave from two to three months, and paternity and adoption leave from two to three days. In addition, it has introduced a Back2Work programme, aimed at helping professional women rejoin the working world on a FWA arrangement as part of the Assurance or Tax practice group.

The experiment has paid off. Sri says PwC has seen an increase in staff engagement over the past year from 65% to 70%. "And we're happy to say that those on FWA do very well and there is no drop in quality, innovation or responsiveness to client's needs."

Although people popularly associate a flexible working life with women or the Gen Y, Sri says in PwC, the people who are on FWA reflect the demographics of its multigenerational workforce. "We have mothers, people who need to care for a family member, Gen Y and people who are pursuing personal interests.

"Start small and think of this as a journey. Trust and clear expectations on KPIs and outcomes need to be in place for such programmes to succeed.

"Also, I believe that a strong tone from the top is important to show that it's more than just rhetoric."



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managing partner, PwC Malaysia

Applicants had to be an assistant manager at the very least. They had to meet expectations in terms of performance ratings, with no disciplinary problems.

With all these restrictions, it was no wonder that there was only a small pool of people who opted for it. As the interest in flexibility at work increased, PwC launched an enhanced version, with less stringent requirements attached to it, in 2009 — the Work Life Plus Programme (WLPP) was based on feedback from its employees during the firm's annual global people survey.

WLPP offers the staff three options. First, the FWA itself where employees from all levels may opt to apply for a 2.5-day week (half day, every

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