

# Flexibility that can sustain your career

Having greater work-life balance is a plus point, say those who opt for flexible work arrangements

**T**AARIQ Murad is an executive director at PricewaterhouseCoopers' (PwC) Tax practice in the country. Some four years ago, Taariq's father asked him to help with a new project his company was venturing into.

With family commitments and the birth of his second child, he knew juggling multiple responsibilities would not be sustainable. Besides, it would also be unfair to the people and organisations that depended on him.

After sharing his dilemma with a career coach, Taariq explored ways to manage his family expectations while continuing to develop his career at PwC through a flexible work arrangement (FWA).

"I was on a FWA for about a year, as I was on a specific project related to the family business.

"I worked three days a week, but made adjustments depending on requirements from both PwC and the family business," he says.

Another person to opt for FWA is Shoba Ananthanarayan. Two-and-a-half years ago, this assurance manager at PwC, moved to Kuala Lumpur with her family due to her husband's secondment to the country.

She was working in India and wanted continuity in her profession. Having two sons, and being in a new country with a different support system than in India, required her to be more organised.

"The FWA seemed a great opportunity to get back to work in an area that I really enjoy while still being able to spend adequate time with my family.

"So when I had this opportunity to opt for FWA, I jumped at it," she recalls.

Like Taariq and Shoba, today's talent at some of the more progressive organisations can take advantage of FWA.

It allows them to juggle personal commitments and keep the careers they have painstakingly built, rather than choosing one at the expense of the other.

PwC is one such organisation with an active FWA that lets employees opt for shorter work weeks.

At Carlsberg Asia, FWA comes in the form of flexible work hours, provided the core and weekly hours are fulfilled.

It covers working from home for either half-a-day or a full day twice a month and getting two hours' time-off to attend to personal commitments.

Carlsberg Group regional human resources director Felicia Teh helped implement FWA at the company in early 2014.

Her goal was to promote the importance of work-life balance and create more conducive working conditions that emphasise empowerment, accountability and performance.

"I strongly advocate work-life balance and believe productivity is a key component of high-performing organisations," says



by Lim Siew May

Taariq says adjustment to the remuneration package is a key trade-off that reflects the reduced reporting hours

Teh, who is from a business consulting background.

"FWA is highly relevant to a fast-moving consumer group (FMCG) like Carlsberg Malaysia, where some of our business takes place after working hours.

"It is even more important these days as female representation in our workforce has increased, with some 43% of our senior management team comprising women," she says.

Teh says Carlsberg Malaysia provides



## Can FWA hurt your career?

**WHILE** there are benefits to being in a flexible work arrangement (FWA), a key concern is whether opting for it will hinder one's career progression.

Some argue that FWA, which includes strolling into your workplace after the traditional office hours, can lead superiors to doubt your work ethics even though you may be performing just as well as the early birds.

In a study in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, researchers at the University of Washington write that "supervisors exhibit a pervasive morning bias and stereotype employees with late start times as less conscientious than those with early start times.

"These perceptions, in turn, lead to lower performance ratings for employees with late start times."

A report last year, entitled *Work Conditions, Balance and Gender Equity* prepared by Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand also found that there was scepticism towards FWA, with over 60% of female respondents saying it can lead to slow or stalled promotions.

Almost half of the male and female respondents also said it can lead to a lower salary.

The report reveals that "there is a perceived penalty for taking up the FWA. Owing to a fear of possible negative impact, there is a general sense of reluctance by chartered accountants to take advantage of the flexible

work conditions, even if firm policies allow [for it]."

Being a non-breadwinner of the family, Shoba Ananthanarayan, an assurance manager at PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), does not feel the financial pressure of opting for FWA.

She acknowledges that the salary of someone opting for FWA will be lower than that of a full-time employee, and therefore, she is uncertain how feasible the arrangement will be for the main family breadwinner.

However, Shoba does not think that being on such an arrangement will affect one's career progression, or the amount of one's bonus or salary increments.

"I believe that if one is able to effectively deliver and demonstrate the qualities required for progression, then growth will continue," she says.

In the experience of Taariq Murad, an executive director at the PwC's Tax practice who specialises in the consumer, industrial products and services industries, one of the key trade-offs of FWA is the adjustment to the remuneration package to reflect the reduced reporting hours.

On the bright side, Taariq feels he is "compensated" by having additional time with his family.

Meanwhile, Carlsberg Group regional human resources director Felicia Teh sees more positives than negatives in the arrangement, especially if effective planning and communication are in place.

"FWA should be implemented without compromising the organisation's goals and operational requirements.

"There is a negative financial impact, but it's minimal. We do not penalise our employees as long as they deliver on their committed work responsibilities," she says.

eligible employees with the option of flexible working hours, working from home and time-off from work.

"We recognise that FWA enables our employees, especially our female colleagues who are working mothers, to balance work and personal commitments.

"It allows them to contribute to the organisation with greater engagement and improved productivity. It is also one of our unique propositions that enables us to attract, motivate and retain valued employees," she says.

### Better work-life balance

Under PwC's FWA, Shoba works three days a week from the office. "The only time I work from home is when I need to catch up on some deliverables.

"I am thankful that I have colleagues and bosses who respect my time and this arrangement. As a result, the need to work from home on my non-working days seldom arises," she says.

The amount of work assigned to Shoba also enables her to manage it well during her shorter work week, making work-life balance a reality.

"The fact that I have time to accompany my children for their after school activities, learn dancing, and go on short family getaways on top of managing regular household chores clearly shows that FWA makes that balance possible," she says.

Having a school-going daughter who is very active in extra-curricular activities, Teh also benefits from her company's FWA.

She takes time off for important appointments such as attending parent-teacher discussions at her daughter's school, or if she needs to pick her child after extra-curricular activities.

"I opt for flexi working hours on a daily basis as I live in Ampang, which is a long commute to the brewery in Shah Alam.

"Leaving home at non-peak hours reduces my travelling time, and lets me arrive at the office in a positive, upbeat mood.

"Similarly, I leave the office much later in the evenings to avoid peak hours. I am much more productive and a lot more motivated at the workplace," she says.

However, FWA does orbit around a certain set of principles to be successful.

Teh says self-discipline and good time management are keys to having FWA work to her advantage. And she makes it a point to be accessible to her colleagues during work hours.

“My colleagues know that I am fully contactable when I am working from home. Laptop, home internet connection and mobile phone are essential to staying connected and easily accessible,” she says.

Taariq concurs. Thanks to FWA, he was able to juggle between managing his family’s business, spending quality time with his wife and kids, and meeting his key performance indicators and responsibilities at work.

But he stresses that it was absolutely critical for him to manage and monitor his schedule to ensure all client meetings were arranged on office days, and the family business was seen to only on non-working days.

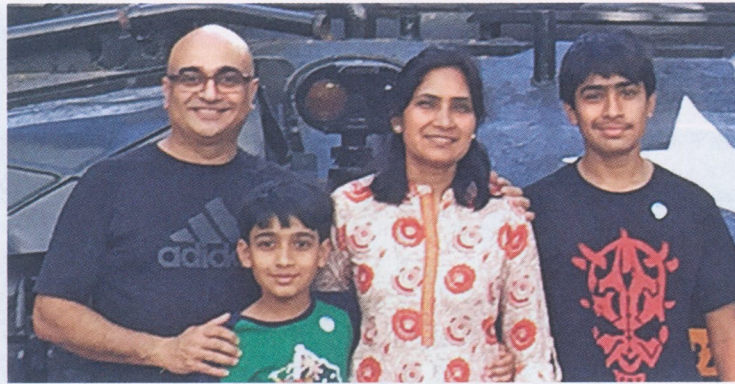
“Once this was managed and organised appropriately, I had to be disciplined and keep to the schedule.

“I also needed to be flexible and agile enough to manoeuvre around at times, when work unexpectedly required my immediate attention,” he says.

He recalls being urgently required to attend a conference call on a non-reporting day. “I rearranged my day and took the call while I was commuting in between appointments.

“Typically, I would allocate an extra two to three hours to tidy paperwork or review reports after spending time with my family, and once the kids were asleep,” he says.

Ultimately, Taariq believes it is all about focusing on the outcomes. This, he says, calls for adopting the right mindset to ensure



Shoba recommends FWA as a stepping stone for women who want to get back to work after a career break or having kids

deliverables are achieved, regardless of where one is working from.

“Before opting for FWA, it is important to first appreciate that there will be trade-offs. It is equally important to assess our ability to be flexible, and build trust with the people who will be affected by you going on FWA,” he says.

Essentially, the arrangement has to work well for all three parties – you, your family and employer. “Keep engaging the people who will be impacted, and be agile to make necessary adjustments that make FWA work,” Taariq says.

Shoba is a strong proponent of FWA and recommends it to everyone keen to explore the option. “I suggest this option to working mothers and professionals who desire a greater work-life balance,” she says.

“One can opt for FWA on a short or a long term. It is a great option and stepping stone for women who wish to get back to work after a career break or having children.

“FWA can help them test the waters before



Teh says Carlsberg Malaysia does not penalise employees under the FWA as long as they deliver on their commitments

considering working full time again,” she says.

Shoba suggests that professionals who feel overwhelmed at the office should explore FWA as it can help one regain a sense of balance between work and personal commitments.

Teh feels FWA should not disrupt the workplace, and acknowledges that the arrangement is subject to business and operational requirements, and the nature of work responsibilities.

She says jobs that require meeting customers in person, or accessing IT systems or machines at the company’s premises, may not be suitable for this arrangement.

“If you are eligible for FWA and would like to opt for it, you should discuss the matter with your line manager and family members.

“Having such discussions will help align your workload on a sustainable manner that works best for you and the organisation, without compromising on your personal responsibilities and deliverables,” she says.