



Telecommuting Guide

Produced by:



Tripartite Alliance for
Fair & Progressive Employment Practices

tafep.sg

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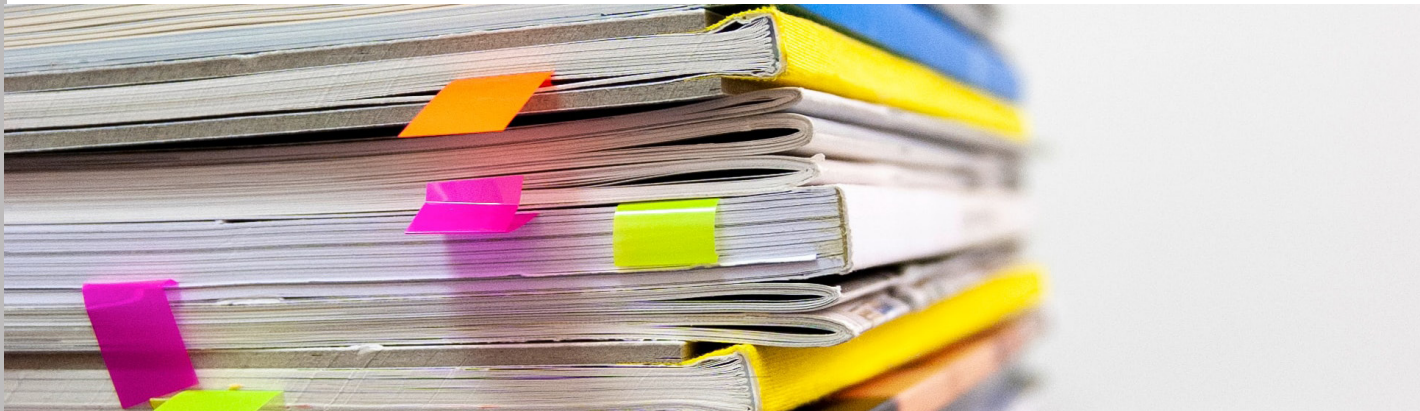
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● Introduction

WHY THIS TELECOMMUTING GUIDE?



This Telecommuting Guide was developed to encourage and support Singapore employers in the implementation of a sustainable telecommuting arrangement as an option that meets both the organisational and operational needs of the employer, as well as the personal, professional, and lifestyle needs of employees. The Guide is developed for Human Resources (HR) Leaders or individuals responsible for the HR function of the organisation.

In this Guide, we aim to share important considerations and best practices, combined with learnings and examples from Singapore-based employers who have had success with telecommuting as a part of their overall people strategy and/or in their response to the Covid-19 crisis. It is intended for Singapore-based employers and assumes that employees are physically located in Singapore. It does not address certain

remote working issues, for example, those related to managing time zone differences or geographically dispersed teams.

This Guide focuses on employers who provide 'hybrid' or 'blended' work arrangements where employees have the option to work virtually or at an office/shared workplace. Recent projections of future employer practices indicate that many employers will continue to offer their employees the flexibility to telecommute during the work week, in an arrangement that works best for the employee and team. This means that, at any given time, a team could have colleagues who are co-located as well as others who are working virtually, requiring teams to adopt practices that best ensure that all team members – regardless of their work location – feel included and can contribute fully.

We recognise that many employers may have a proportion of their employees who are in positions that require them to spend much or all their work time on-site (e.g., manufacturing) or in the field (e.g., product installation and service). While telecommuting may not be a workable option for certain roles, we hope that employers will continue to explore flexible work options with the goal of enabling employees to effectively manage their work and life responsibilities, through decisions based on a more thorough understanding of the evolving options, trade-offs, and best practices including those found in this Guide.



HOW THE GUIDE IS STRUCTURED

The structure of this Guide is based on five stages of the employee lifecycle reflected in the Singapore Institute for Human Resource Professionals (IHRP) Body of Competencies. The five stages are: Plan, Attract, Develop, Engage, and Separate (PADES). A 'Perform' section was also added under 'Develop' that focuses on performance management.

TERMINOLOGY

There are many different terms used to describe work arrangements that take place outside of a traditional office/workplace including telecommuting, working virtually or remotely, flexi-place, and working-from-home.

For this Guide, we will use the following terms:

- **Telecommuting/Working virtually**
A work arrangement in which an employee performs his/her work via the internet from outside of an office setting, whether from home or another location.
- **Hybrid workplace**
A workplace that combines virtual and office work. Some employees may work in the office and others telecommute/work virtually at any given time. Employees have access to a shared office/workspace and may be able to telecommute on a regular schedule (e.g., 2-3 days/week), or as needed.
- **Working remotely**
A work arrangement in which an employee's default work location is outside of a shared office space, whether at home or another location. Remote employees are typically managed entirely over the internet, with opportunities to meet in-person being an exception. If the organisation has an office/shared workspace, the employee may still go to the office as needed.

THE ORGANISATION CASE FOR TELECOMMUTING – MAXIMISING THE BENEFITS AND REDUCING THE RISKS

Several notable employment trends support the increase in telecommuting arrangements in Singapore.

- There has been a significant increase both in employer and employee exposure to telecommuting as a result of work-from-home requirements in response to Covid-19, and telecommuting arrangements have been successful for both employers and employees. According to a recent report by RGF International Recruiting, *Talent in Asia 2020 Singapore*, 61% of Singapore employers surveyed were planning to maintain flexible work arrangements beyond the pandemic.ⁱ In a recent study by The Straits Times based on a survey of 1,800 people in Singapore, eight out of 10 employees say they prefer to work from home or have flexible working arrangements.ⁱⁱ
- With the push for digital transformation, options for telecommuting have expanded significantly as improvements in technology, cloud computing and virtual communication applications allow more organisations to digitise entire segments of their service offerings and operations, and to have access to convenient, dependable, secure applications and internet access.
- The Singapore workforce is becoming increasingly tech-savvy and are placing greater value on enhancing work-life harmony through flexible work arrangements.
- Workplace studies done prior to Covid-19 found that a lack of workplace flexibility negatively impacts employee productivity, health and wellness, and retention.ⁱⁱⁱ Employee surveys report a positive relationship between telecommuting/ remote working and overall employee health:
 - 86% of employees think remote working would reduce their stress. [Work-Life-Relationship survey]
 - 90% of employees say allowing more flexible work arrangements and schedules would increase employee morale. [Flexjobs]
 - 50% of remote employees reduced their sick days, and 56% said it reduced their absences. [Indeed]
- Singapore employers are increasingly adapting to new business realities and exploring more digital ways of working. This includes moving elements of their business from what had been in-person and on-site to on-line and virtual, as well as restructuring jobs to enable work to be performed from anywhere.

Telecommuting and remote working are not new practices and there is meaningful research and significant experience to guide employers and employees on how best to maximise the benefits of telecommuting while reducing the risks. A review of current telecommuting literature and virtual working practices found that the most frequently noted advantages and challenges include:

For the EMPLOYER

Benefits/Advantages

- Increases the employer's ability to attract and retain talent by providing employees with greater flexibility, autonomy, and independence.
- Increases employee control of their work environment while removing many office distractions.
- Reduces employee commuting cost, time, and stress which can lead to increased employee satisfaction and productivity, improved employee health, and reduced sick leave and absenteeism.
- Reduces overhead costs including renting physical office space, utilities, and supplies.
- Supports disaster recovery and business continuity planning by enabling telecommuting employees to work under unusual circumstances like natural disasters or health emergencies (e.g., Covid-19).
- Promotes corporate social responsibility by reducing traffic and infrastructure demands, rush-hour congestion on public transportation, and related environmental costs.

Risks/Challenges

- Decreases feelings of employee connection with the organisation/team, workplace culture, and leadership visibility/contact.
- Increases distractions and reduces productivity if employees do not have access to a dedicated, quiet work area and/or have significant personal distractions in their work area (e.g., children, pets, roommates).
- Increases the chance that employees may miss out on important business context, connections, and project information.
- Requires access to appropriate technology, secure systems access, reliable internet service, and timely technical support.
- Reduces interactions with colleagues outside of their team/function which can increase silos between functions and reduce collaboration and cross-functional connections.
- Increases risk of systems and information security breaches if proper procedures/ protections are not in place or employees do not use/follow them fully.



For the EMPLOYEE

Benefits/Advantages

- Provides greater scheduling flexibility to meet both work and personal obligations.
- Improves health through reduced stress, improved diet, and exercise.
- Allows saved commuting time to be used for other personal activities (e.g., family, exercise, and community activities).
- Reduces costs of commute and eating out.
- Increases employee productivity due to fewer office distractions.
- Increases employee pride and sense of social responsibility due to the community and environmental benefits related to a reduced commute.

Risks/Challenges

- Increases risk of employee burnout if employees find it difficult to set clear boundaries between work and personal time commitments or practice regular self-care.
- Causes fatigue and eye strain if periodic breaks are not taken from the constant viewing of screens and recurring virtual meetings.
- Decreases personal, informal interactions with managers and co-employees. Lessens opportunities for spontaneous, organic work/social connections with colleagues that can help to strengthen relationships and shared experiences/learning.
- Requires demonstrating personal motivation and discipline when working virtually.
- Increases risk of feelings of isolation and lower morale as opportunities for bonding and social interaction are curtailed.
- Increases risk of physical health issues over time (e.g., chronic pain, repetitive motion injuries) if not able to create an ergonomic workspace and have access to appropriate equipment.

● Plan

What are the factors that employers should plan for as they consider the extent to which they will offer telecommuting in their organisation?

ORGANISATION-LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

Active and vocal support by an organisation's senior leadership is critical for its telecommuting programme to be effective. In planning for telecommuting, there is a range of questions that organisations should consider.

Workforce Strategy and Employer Branding

- How does working virtually positively impact our organisation, customers and employees? What are the potential challenges?
- How might we change the way we work and/or adapt the roles within our organisation to enable/expand telecommuting arrangements?
- How might an increase in telecommuting enable other organisational strategies/initiatives (e.g., digital transformation and moving to a paperless work environment)?
- In light of these considerations, to what degree do we want to offer telecommuting options to some or all our employees?



Organisation Culture

The Society for Human Resources Management defines organisation culture as *"the shared beliefs and values established by the Organisation that shape employee perceptions, behaviours, and understanding. The culture should set the same standards and expectations for all employees, regardless of where or how they work"*.^{iv}

Many organisations have been very intentional about articulating their cultures, from their mission and values to their expected behaviours and ways of working. In situations where all employees are co-located in an office, workplace culture can be shared and reinforced in many ways from senior leaders modelling desired behaviours during in-person interactions to placing posters in the lobby and meeting rooms that reinforce company values.

Creating a shared workplace culture for all employees, including those working virtually, is not simply a straightforward translation of office-based work processes to virtual ones.



While policies and systems can be updated to support telecommuting, there also needs to be a clear and deliberate articulation of the desired work culture that can include and align all employees, regardless of organisation level, role, or work location. A McKinsey report on the post-pandemic workforce highlights the risk in a hybrid workplace where two cultures may emerge between those who work remotely and those who work on-site. *"The sense of belonging, common purpose, and shared identity that inspires all of us to do our best work gets lost. Organisational performance deteriorates accordingly."*^{iv}

- How does our workplace culture need to evolve to support hybrid work arrangements?
- What deliberate steps can managers and staff take to sustain our workplace culture, or adapt it, so that it continues to be experienced by and reinforced for all employees regardless of their work location?



Information Technology, Procurement, and Business Operations Support

The organisation needs to consider the impact of telecommuting on its support functions, including business operations, IT, and procurement.

- How can we ensure that telecommuters have the IT infrastructure, hardware, security, and technical support needed to work remotely as productively as they would in the office?

Successful telecommuting requires employees to be provided with access to appropriate tools, technology, and information, as well as ways to stay connected with the company and their colleagues.

These include providing virtual employees with access to:

- Technology/equipment (e.g., laptop/workstation, monitor, headset).
- Reliable, secure internet access and high-speed connectivity.
- Dependable on-line technical support.
- Secure document storage and sharing (e.g., using cloud-based, dedicated servers).
- A remote desktop environment, including access to all standard work applications.
- Access to team communication and collaboration tools including instant messaging, videoconferencing and project management platforms.

On-line resource guides, training modules, and virtual technical support should also be provided to ensure that the tools provided are used effectively and that issues can be reported and resolved quickly.

MANAGER CONSIDERATIONS

Generally, employees who telecommute should be managed the same way as on-site employees. Telecommuters are not doing different work; they are doing the same work in a different location.

Good management practices remain the same regardless of where someone is working. Yet there are some important differences as well, for both managers and employees,

and these can depend on the frequency and extent of the telecommuting arrangements. In planning for telecommuting, a manager should consider the potential impact based on the role, employee, and team:

- What job activities can be done with telecommuting? Are there activities that cannot be carried out remotely or in a virtual environment?
- Has the employee demonstrated the self-motivation and discipline to work effectively virtually?
- Are there necessary constraints (e.g., peak times, specific hours/days) that may limit the options for when an employee can telecommute?
- What impact might telecommuting have on team practices/performance?

Company Examples - PLAN

Funding Societies, a FinTech start-up with 130 employees headquartered in Singapore, permitted employees to work from home as needed, but few (~5%) were doing it regularly. As a smaller company that had a culture of trust and camaraderie that measures performance based on results and outcomes, they did not see a critical need to have formal telecommuting policies in place. With an increased interest in continuing telecommuting based on the success of their experience during circuit breaker, Funding Societies plans to approach telecommuting in a more structured manner, while still providing flexibility.

Singtel, a telecommunications company with approximately 25,000 employees in Singapore, wanted to ensure that all employees could access company communications when working virtually. Many of their employees provide technical support at client sites and may not be able to access the internet given firewall restrictions. In response, Singtel developed software that enabled employees to access Singtel's intranet through their mobile devices, in addition to laptops/desktops.

Foo Kon Tan, a Singapore-based auditing, tax, and business advisory accounting firm with over 200 employees, had only a few employees who had practiced telecommuting on a one-off basis. With the onset of circuit breaker, 95% of Foo Kon Tan staff suddenly switched to working from home. In preparation, the company held a '*Telecommute Day*' to have employees test their IT systems and access and training sessions to familiarise staff with the use of communication platforms and other telecommuting software. IT support was increased to provide timely resolution of technical issues. Leaders communicated with staff about the objectives and expectations of the telecommuting process.

TELECOMMUTING POLICY/GUIDELINES

Successful telecommuting and remote work arrangements require building trust in your organisations. This also includes setting clear standards and expectations of employees through a telecommuting policy and engaging in an open discussion on expected behaviours and work outcomes. An effective telecommuting policy lays out consistent and shared expectations and accountabilities of employees and supervisors, and outlines communication tools and security measures. These telecommuting policies/guidelines should be reviewed by both the supervisor and employee before starting telecommuting to confirm expectations and address any questions.

Following are five areas to consider in your telecommuting policy:

Eligibility

- Will our approach to telecommuting be consistent across the organisation or can it vary by team/function? If it may vary, who decides on specific arrangements?

- Will we allow employees or teams to work fully remotely? Is it optional? Who decides? What criteria should drive any differences?
- Will telecommuting agreements be voluntary or are there cases where telecommuting/remote working may be required for certain positions? If so, what are the criteria?
- Are there job roles or requirements that cannot be performed virtually? For example, some jobs require physical access to on-site equipment, whereas other roles are more location-flexible. Other jobs have elements of both – they require on-site availability on some days, but they also include duties that can be conducted virtually, such as report writing or on-line training.

Expectations for communication, core work hours and accessibility

- What are the expectations on the frequency, mode and timing of communication? This includes establishing core work hours when all employees must be accessible, as well as expected response times.



Equipment and cybersecurity

- What hardware, applications, and system access will the employee require?
- What guidance is needed to ensure data and systems security/protection?
- What policies and guidance will be put in place to ensure that a telecommuting employee maintains a safe work environment, agrees to provide a secure location for company-owned equipment and information, and will not use, or allow others to use, such equipment for purposes other than work-related business?
- Will training be needed to familiarise the employee with needed hardware, security/access, and application(s)? How will it be provided?
- What actions will be taken if the equipment is misused, or security protocols are not followed?

- What equipment needs to be returned if and when the telecommuting arrangement ends?
- If the telecommuting arrangement is for an extended period, what steps should the employee take and/or resources are available to ensure that the employee has a comfortable, ergonomic workspace?



Right to modify or end the telecommuting agreement to meet changing organisational needs

- Is documentation needed to affirm management's right to modify or terminate the telecommuting arrangement on a temporary or on-going basis as a result of changing organisation needs?

Policy violations

Managers need to engage employees actively to address instances of non-performance or abuse in a telecommuting work arrangement. The same expectations, process, and policies should govern policy violations and performance improvement whether an employee is working in the office or virtually.

TAFEP provides a draft Policy for Telecommuting on their website, along with other resources for the successful implementation of telecommuting.^{vi}

● Attract



VIRTUAL HIRING

Providing workplace flexibility by offering telecommuting and remote work options can make an employer more competitive and attractive in the competition for talent. It not only increases the number and diversity of job candidates who are attracted to flexible work opportunities but helps in retaining existing staff by providing greater job flexibility and autonomy to allow better management of work and life responsibilities.

Whether a hiring process is conducted virtually or in-person, employers and employment agencies recruiting on behalf of organisations should always ensure that their recruitment and selection processes

are based on merit in adherence with the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TGFEPP).^{vii}

If the job position is **required** to be primarily or fully remote, a virtual job interview can provide an important opportunity to assess a candidate's virtual communication skills and comfort and gives the candidate a better sense of what it is like to be part of a team that works virtually, in a hybrid work arrangement. If a position **does not require** one to work virtually, employers should ensure not to disadvantage job candidates if using virtual interviews.^{viii}

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL HIRING

Job Description

The job description should indicate whether the position requires or provides options for employees to telecommute and the frequency of telecommuting.



Job Interview Preparation

How should employers prepare differently for a virtual interview?

- Determine whether all job interviews will be done virtually, or some will be held in-person. Holding at least one interview in the office can provide candidates with a better sense of the physical work environment and allow them to meet their prospective manager and co-workers in person where possible.
- Ensure that those who will be conducting the virtual interviews are prepared/trained to conduct them effectively, for example being comfortable with the use of your virtual meeting platform functionality.
- If a position is required to be primarily or fully remote, ensure that the interview process assesses the interest and ability of the candidate to be successful working virtually. Use targeted interview questions to determine whether and how effectively the candidate has worked in a virtual or remote situation previously; or if they demonstrate essential traits for successful remote employees (e.g., self-motivation, skilled communication).

ASSESSING SKILLS AND ABILITIES CONDUCIVE TO SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL WORKING

If the new hire is required to telecommute, what are the skills employers should look out for, or consider building for remote working employees?

- Comfort in **learning and using new applications/technology** and presenting effectively in a virtual environment.
- Demonstrating **strong written and verbal communication skills**. You may want to have candidates demonstrate their writing abilities early in the process by asking them to 1) write an ad-hoc response to a work-related question or situation and/or 2) have them prepare and make a virtual presentation using your virtual meeting platform to demonstrate their comfort and effectiveness.



- A high degree of **self-motivation, organisation, and independence**. Invite the candidates to share examples where they have demonstrated initiative and been successful (or not) working independently. Ask them how they structure their time and organise their work to meet deadlines.
- The ability to **demonstrate healthy work practices** when working virtually. Are they able to set clear boundaries between work and personal time commitments? What self-care actions might they take if they find themselves feeling out of balance?
- Expressed interest in **adapting to virtual working** for candidates who have not had extensive experience working virtually. What type of support and training might the candidate need to build the skills required to enable successful telecommuting?

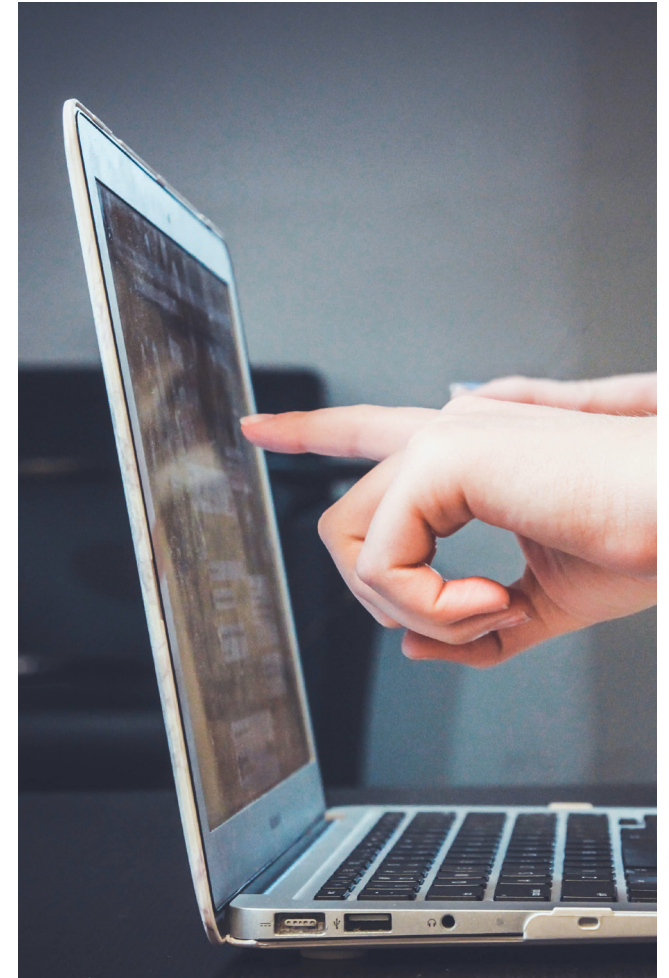
VIRTUAL ONBOARDING

The benefits of an effective, virtual onboarding programme can be critical to reinforce that a new hire feels welcome and has made a good decision to join the employer, as well as accelerate their engagement and productivity. This is particularly important when onboarding a new hire who will be primarily telecommuting, as their opportunities to experience their new workplace and make connections may be more limited than in a traditional office setting. The goals of a virtual onboarding process are much the same as those for in-office with the added technology and interpersonal challenges of creating on-line connections.

What are some notable differences in the virtual onboarding process for employers/Human Resources?

Preparing to Onboard a New Hire Virtually

- If the new hire will be working virtually, arrange for hardware, software, systems, internet access, and IT support so that they have the necessary computer and mobile connections. Many employers arrange to have hardware (e.g., laptops, headsets) delivered in advance, including pre-loaded software and programmes to facilitate easy network access and communication. Provide the new hire with the ability to electronically sign and complete onboarding documents in a secure folder designed for sensitive data and HR material, instead of e-mailing and handling printed documents in-person.





On the First Day

A new hire's first day is an exciting time and often the start of a steep learning curve. While you want to be careful not to overwhelm your new hire, several key connections should take place on the first day, especially if they are being onboarded virtually:

- Ensure that the new hire has the necessary technology, information, and access they will need. This includes connecting them with IT support or a knowledgeable team member who can assist the new hire in setting up and using new technology/ applications and help resolve any issues.

- The new manager should contact the new hire to welcome them in-person, if possible, and provide them with an overview of the onboarding process and focus for Day 1 and Week 1. Ideally, this includes a visual roadmap/checklist that details onboarding steps/actions and provides a schedule of events to include upcoming meetings/ programmes that they will be attending. If the onboarding will include a mix of virtual and on-site activities, then the roadmap should indicate where the activities will take place.
- If the employer has the option, conduct the first few days of onboarding at the office/workplace, to provide in-person opportunities to interact with their manager, team members and key contacts; as well as set up and provide access to the necessary hardware, applications and systems, and address any issues before working virtually. In this situation, the manager should plan to be at the workplace and arrange to have the buddy, other team members, and key contacts do the same, if possible.

Activities for the First Week/ Month

- **Provide an orientation** to the organisation's vision, mission, and values, and its products and services, and consider including a welcome video from senior leaders. If the orientation is virtual, provide resources that can be easily accessed by the new hire. To provide greater flexibility, the employer may want to make part or all of the orientation available on a just-in-time/ as-needed basis.
- **Have the manager meet with the new hire** to begin setting expectations and reviewing the organisation's telecommuting policy and any related expectations.



- **Have the new hire meet with the designated buddy** who can begin orienting them to how things work at the organisation, introducing important team practices, helping the new hire to access key information, and familiarising them with important technology/tools/platforms that are used. In a hybrid work model, this may require additional efforts in coordination and planning.
- **Introduce the new hire to members of the team** via a virtual team meeting so that team members can welcome the new hire and introduce themselves. To help align team expectations, have team members orient the new hire to team norms and practices for working virtually. To build camaraderie, hold an informal, virtual team get-together where team members can connect over lunch or tea and talk about non-work-related topics. Individual team members may also want to schedule virtual meetings with the new hire to talk about their work and learn more about each other.
- **Arrange for the new hire to attend meetings virtually with other teams** that they will be working with to learn about their work and expand their connections/network.
- **Connect the new hire with other new hires** to create broader connections across the organisation and build an informal, virtual support network. Whether part of a new hire orientation programme or independent, Human Resources can coordinate a virtual session for new hires to introduce themselves, learn about the organisation and share their learnings. Some companies create new hire groups on team chat applications to facilitate connections. Others include activities such as virtual scavenger hunts as part of their orientation, where new hire teams work together to complete on-boarding activities and find specific information about the company, its products, and customers.

Company Examples - VIRTUAL ONBOARDING

Even during circuit breaker, **Foo Kon Tan** continued hiring and adapted its onboarding process to virtually onboard new hires. Laptops and other equipment were sent to new employees' homes and virtual IT support provided to guide them through the set-up process. Managers connected virtually to provide an orientation to the firm and their work, and to discuss the plan for the new hires' on-boarding. With the end of circuit breaker, Foo Kon Tan arranged to have new employees visit the office to provide a sense of the workplace and opportunities for in-person interactions with their managers and team members.

In the months following the circuit breaker, **Singtel** switched to virtual interviewing, hiring, and onboarding processes. Paperwork was sent to new hires and employment agreements signed via DocuSign. While the process was digitally enabled, as employees are able to return to the workplace, Singtel plans to have all new hires work at the office/work site for their first three months (coinciding with the length of their probationary period). This will provide them with opportunities for in-person interaction with their new supervisor, team members and colleagues to facilitate engagement and accelerate their success. At the end of three months, employees can explore telecommuting options with their supervisors.



ASSESSING PROGRESS AND GETTING FEEDBACK ON THE ONBOARDING PROCESS

- The manager and/or HR representative should check-in at regular intervals to assess how the new hire is settling in.
- Be intentional about seeking feedback from the new hire at fixed times during the virtual onboarding process (e.g., after Week 1, 30, 60, and 90 days) to identify what is working and what can be improved. This information can be used to address any gaps for the new hire and provide input to improve the virtual onboarding experience for future new hires. Ask for specific feedback about the new hire's experience with telecommuting/working virtually, for example:
 - Did the new hire have access to technology and systems to work virtually when/as needed?
 - If technical support was needed, was it available/helpful?
 - Was there any information about working virtually that was missing or would have been helpful sooner?
 - What could have been done better to make their transition to working virtually easier?

● Engage



Engaging employees who work virtually is a shared responsibility with important considerations for the organisation, manager, team, and individual employee. In-office, in-person work provides many formal and informal opportunities to engage employees, reinforce your workplace culture, and build personal and professional relationships and trust. As more employees and teams work virtually, they must continue to be engaged in their work, feel connected to the organisation, and build strong, trusting relationships with their manager and team members. What are some ways to create and reinforce a sense of a workplace community for colleagues as hybrid work arrangements become the norm?

KEYS TO KEEP A HYBRID WORKFORCE ENGAGED

Organisations can keep remote employees and teams engaged in their work and with each other by focusing on these five C's:

Care

Employees want to feel that their leaders, managers, and team members authentically care about them as individuals – not simply employees. **In a hybrid work environment, there is an even greater need for leaders to recognise and support the variety of roles and identities of their team members as they seek greater flexibility in work arrangements in order to find the harmony between work and personal commitments.**

Connection

Employees need to feel connected to their organisation, take pride in its mission and purpose, and see the direct connection of their work to meaningful organisation outcomes. They want to feel like a valued and contributing member of the team. As the use of digital communication tools and collaboration increases, there can be a corresponding decrease in feelings of connection and an increase in feelings of social and professional isolation – a concept referred to as '*virtual distance*'.^{ix} As virtual distance increases, employees, teams and organisations can experience declines in trust, engagement, and performance. **With more employees working virtually, creating intentional and spontaneous opportunities for team and organisation connections become more important.**

Camaraderie

Employees value having formal and informal opportunities to interact with their peers. In a **hybrid work environment, deliberate effort must be made to provide opportunities for employees to continue building meaningful relationships with their colleagues, share and celebrate personal and professional events/accomplishments, and have fun together.**

Collaboration

The ability to work with others to generate ideas, provide feedback, share experiences, find solutions and complete projects is critical to building effective teams and successful organisations. Work that requires high levels of collaboration can be more challenging when done virtually, as the limitations of digital communication tools can make it harder for employees to be spontaneous, informally share information, ask questions, and build on each other's ideas. **Teams that work together virtually should align their expectations for virtual collaboration,**

including identifying situations where it may be best to meet in-person.

Collaboration can also be enhanced by understanding team members' work styles and strengthening relationships and trust through structured and informal team-building activities. This includes creating opportunities for casual connections and spending unstructured time together.^x Teams should explore the use of different digital platforms that support collaboration and be on the lookout for new tools and product upgrades in this growing and evolving space.

Communication

Whether in-person or virtual, ongoing and meaningful communication is key to establishing an environment of trust and accountability. This requires an approach that enables collaboration between colleagues, provides access to information, and enables teams to meet business goals jointly. **To sustain effective communication between virtual teams:**

- Be intentional about creating opportunities for more organic interpersonal connections

and communications that happen spontaneously in the office. This could include scheduling video coffee breaks for colleagues to talk about a topic of interest or share a recent fun/meaningful experience.

- Use videoconferencing platforms and ask all participants to have their video turned on to avoid losing real-time, non-verbal cues that can be such an important part of effective communication in building relationships and trust.
- Promote equitable conditions between employees working in the office and those working virtually. For example, information should be shared in a way that all colleagues have prompt and easy access. All colleagues may want to attend meetings via a video link, even if in the same room, to create a shared dynamic.

Engaging employees who work virtually is a shared responsibility with important considerations for the organisation, manager, team, and individual employee.

ORGANISATION CONSIDERATIONS

The organisation has a clear interest in keeping telecommuting employees connected to the workplace and making virtual work as seamless as it is for those working in the office. This includes:

- **Providing easy access to appropriate technology, applications, and information** (Refer to *PLAN: Information Technology, Procurement, and Business Operations Support*.)
- **Providing guidelines and practices for effective telecommuting:** Ensure that telecommuters and their managers get off to a good start with guides, documentation, and/or training so that they understand the applicable policies, best practices, and potential issues.
- **Reinforcing connections to the organisation:** Find virtual ways to reinforce connections to the workplace and culture, from highlighting the organisation's mission and values to promoting product

launches and change campaigns. To this end, organisations can provide regular two-way communications in a variety of modalities, from intranet features to virtual town halls, to provide updates on organisational goals and accomplishments and share success stories that reflect the organisation's culture.

- **Creating regular opportunities for senior leaders to be visible, share information and hear from employees:** Make sure that senior leaders remain visible and that their communications are available to all employees and can be accessed virtually.

For example, senior leaders can utilise recorded videos and virtual townhalls that allow those working virtually to see facial expressions and hear voice tones – whether real-time or recorded. Make a point to build in opportunities to get real-time input from employees via on-line survey tools and chat boxes.



- **Preparing managers to support their virtual employees and teams:** Managers need to understand how they can lead virtual teams and support telecommuting employees. Managers who are not adept at building connections with employees in a physical work environment will require even more support and encouragement to reach out and connect with their team members in a virtual work setting. Organisations should orient their managers to understand the important differences that can enhance the impact of telecommuting and prepare managers with resources and skills to build trust, enhance working relationships, improve communication and collaboration, and overcome some of the difficulties involved in managing a virtual workforce. *(Refer to Manager and Team Considerations sections)*
- **Preparing employees for success while telecommuting:** Like managers, telecommuting employees also need to re-think how they work to enable their success. Organisations should provide

resources and support employees who will telecommute so that they understand best practices and know how to prevent/address potential difficulties in managing their work and relationships with their manager and team members. *(Refer to Employee/ Individual Considerations section)*

- **Providing programmes and policies to support the emotional health and mental well-being of those working virtually:** Remote working comes with its challenges including building and maintaining work relationships and support networks, separating one's work and home responsibilities, and addressing feelings of disconnection and isolation. Organisations need to think about how best to support employee health and well-being regardless of where an employee is working, for example by appointing in-house mental wellness champions who are trained and committed to supporting the well-being of fellow colleagues or providing access to online counsellors, mental health professionals and resources through Employee Assistance Programmes.

- **Connecting employees with virtual support networks:** In addition to an employee's direct manager and team members, virtual employees can benefit from access to more targeted support based on their demographics and lifestyle. Many organisations utilise Employee Resource Groups and other professional networks to enhance this connection, for example through virtual groups focused on 'Telecommuting' or 'Working Parents'.
- **Using pulse surveys to get feedback from telecommuters and improve your programme:** Provide easy ways for employees to share timely feedback about their virtual work arrangements via a digital feedback form. Structure feedback questions to provide information that can be used both to measure programme success and offer suggestions for improvement.

Company Examples - ENGAGING A HYBRID WORKFORCE

Dell utilised a variety of approaches to help maintain connection and build camaraderie in their virtual workplace. Regular townhalls were held to share business updates, answer questions, and keep staff connected with company leaders. Weekly update emails were disseminated by the Corporate Communications Team while leaders were reminded to connect with their team members virtually on a regular basis. Employees were encouraged to make use of Dell's wellness programs consisting of a good mix of webinars, digital platforms, one on one sessions, trainings and online resources to support them in managing work and personal changes. Dell's Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) stepped up to provide supportive, on-line communities for their members as they faced specific challenges. For example, their Young Parents ERG provided a forum to share resources and experiences in managing their work and family demands.

The **SAP** leadership team views well-being as a strategic priority and a core business enabler, and this emphasis on mental, physical, and emotional wellness took on greater urgency in response to Covid-19. Throughout the organisation, there was awareness that employees were handling multiple responsibilities at home that could cause unplanned interruptions of their work. In addition to SAP's people survey which runs three times a year, additional remote work pulse surveys were conducted to listen to employees – to understand how they were coping and how telecommuting was working for them. In response to employee feedback, the organisation adjusted its policies in real-time, addressed emerging themes at townhall sessions, and organised talks by internal and external experts to provide employees with knowledge and resources to better cope with their challenges.

Foo Kon Tan's workplace culture is built on people-focused leadership that encourages two-way communication and dialogue. Leaders trust employees to do what is best to ensure that both their personal and professional needs are met. Employees have flexibility in their work hours and the firm does not expect employees to respond to e-mails between 7PM and 7AM, or on weekends, unless there is an urgent exception.

This foundation enabled Foo Kon Tan's successful transition as 95% of their employees switched to work from home during circuit breaker. In line with its leadership philosophy of a focus on its people, senior leaders were intentional in communicating more frequently as the firm transitioned to widespread telecommuting. They were transparent and open in their communications, acknowledging that working from home was a new arrangement for everyone, honestly sharing what they knew and did not, but committed to regularly adjusting and refining their approach as they learned more. Leaders reinforced that employees would be treated fairly and expressed trust that each would do the right thing for the benefit of everyone.

MANAGER CONSIDERATIONS

Direct managers/supervisors play the most important role in keeping their team members feeling engaged and supported. Important practices for managers who have employees working virtually include:

- Providing independence and showing trust that an employee will perform responsibly and effectively while working virtually.
- Ensuring that direct reports have the equipment, resources, and information they need to be successful.
- Managing individual and team performance including setting clear performance expectations that focus on outcomes and deliverables (outputs), not daily activities/actions (inputs).
- Serving as a primary link for communicating and reinforcing organisation updates and changes.



- Creating effective team dynamics, including establishing team norms/agreements for how team members want to work together and support each other.
- Holding regular one-on-one check-ins and team meetings.
- Showing interest in every employee as an individual and respecting their life demands.
- Recognising and celebrating personal/professional milestones and accomplishments.
- Connecting employee performance with team and organisational success.
- Supporting employee mental health and wellness. This includes encouraging positive behaviours like regular breaks, in-person interactions, and taking time off, as well as checking-in with direct reports for signs of burnout, isolation, and potential retention risks.
- Modelling and reinforcing effective work-life behaviours, for example avoiding sending/replying to work e-mails and instant messages during non-work hours and taking regular breaks to recharge.

TEAM CONSIDERATIONS

Depending on the organisation and function, some teams may be in situations where part or all the team may be working virtually part- or full-time. A team may not be able to rely on the same degree of spontaneous, organic, and informal connections that happen when employees/team members are all co-located. This means that one-on-one and team communications and interactions must be well-planned and intentional to create a virtual workplace that engages the contributions of all employees and delivers desired results.

Team effectiveness is based on the strength of relationships and trust. Relationships are built not only on the work the team does together but also on informal and personal moments that they share. Whether launching a newly formed virtual team or bringing new members onto an existing team, people need the time and opportunities to develop relationships and to create norms and

agreements that enable effective teamwork, including:

- **Aligning expectations**

Ensure aligned expectations on the frequency, mode and timing of communication across the team. This includes:

- Creating team agreements on when and why to use specific communication tools (e.g., e-mail, instant messaging, and video conferencing apps) to effectively manage the priority, type and number of communications.
- Greater use of and access to online calendars to indicate availability during core hours.
- Fixed times for team meetings/check-ins.

- Agreement on the type of work situations that requires some or all team members to come together in-person.

- **Building camaraderie**

Be intentional about creating opportunities to celebrate professional and personal accomplishments, milestones, and experiences, and just have fun. This may include starting weekly team check-ins with everyone sharing a highlight from their weekend, regular team-building calls involving icebreaker or team building activities, and monthly birthday celebrations. Team members also look out for each other's well-being by checking-in and being attuned to changes in mood or behaviour that may indicate a colleague needs additional support.





EMPLOYEE/INDIVIDUAL CONSIDERATIONS

In order to maintain a high level of productivity and realise the full benefits – both personal and professional – effective telecommuting requires changing individual habits and routines from what employees may have developed while working in the office. While the work may not change, where, when, and how to do the work will. So, what actions can telecommuting employees take to create conditions for greater productivity and success? Consider sharing these tips with your employees.

- **Set up an effective workspace**

- Create an ergonomic workspace, including a workstation and lighting that reduces physical or mental strain and helps you be most productive.
- Use equipment that will help you work better, for example, a larger monitor and keyboard or a noise-cancelling headset with a microphone and mute button.
- If available, find a work area that minimises distractions.

- **Define boundaries**

- Set clear parameters between working hours and personal time.
- Maintain regular hours and dedicated start/end times.
- Create routines in your workday and week, including regular breaks, time for exercise, etc.
- Set ground rules with those who share or have access to your virtual workspace, from the use of work-related materials/ equipment to unplanned interruptions.

- **Plan your work**

- Set clear goals and deadlines and translate those into daily activities.
- Use a shared calendar to schedule work activities and to block out focus and break time.
- Provide calendar access to colleagues and use notifications to make others aware when you are on-line and available or not.
- Avoid back-to-back meetings. At a minimum, schedule at least 5-10 minutes between meetings to allow yourself to reset and take a short break.

- **Practise self-care**

- Take regular breaks to boost your productivity. To prevent eye strain caused by continuously looking at screens, the 20/20/20 rule recommends that every 20 minutes you take 20 seconds to look at something at least 20 feet away (about 6m). Research also recommends that people are most productive when they take regular breaks, and step away from their work area – perhaps combined with some stretching or a short walk.
- Eat healthy foods and at regular times and avoid eating at your work area.
- Go outside to get some sun, take a walk and get some fresh air.
- Take your vacation days at regular intervals to recharge – even if that means a staycation.
- Utilise available wellness resources provided by your organisation or through your Employee Assistance Programme, as well as digital resources available to support mental/emotional wellbeing.

- **Stay connected**

- Make regular, in-person connections with your manager and co-workers.
- Create opportunities to socialise with colleagues on non-work-related interests/topics.

- **Break the routine**

If you have the option, go into the office periodically and arrange for in-person time with co-workers. Arrange to meet with your manager and other colleagues in-person at the office or another location. A big challenge for telecommuting employees is realising that the onus is on them to stay connected, requiring increased efforts to send emails, make use of instant messaging or pick up the telephone more frequently.

- **Ask for help if needed**

Employees need to know who they can turn to if they need work and personal support – including their manager, Human Resources, and Employee Assistance Programme, if available. Depending on the length and frequency of virtual work, examples of support that employees might need include addressing challenges related to setting boundaries between work and personal time (overworking) or feeling lonely or disconnected from one's colleagues (isolation).



● Perform

Making recognition a priority, including celebrating personal/professional milestones and team accomplishments. A desired outcome of telecommuting is that it enhances an employee's overall job performance and satisfaction. Strong job performance requires motivation, alignment, and reinforcement by the organisation, manager, and team. Enabling sustained strong performance includes:

- Setting clear expectations.
- Providing the tools, resources, and training needed to perform one's job well.
- Trusting employees to do a good job without micromanaging.
- Maintaining open, two-way communication.
- Recognising and rewarding contributions.

While the principles remain the same regardless of the work arrangement, these practices become even more important

as telecommuting employees have more independence and less in-person connection/visibility with their managers and team members.



Which areas of your organisation's performance management process need to be reviewed to ensure fair and effective evaluation of your virtual employees' performance?

At the **organisation level**, job performance is driven by the creation of broader policies and practices that motivate, align, reinforce and reward employee contributions and results. For those who telecommute, this includes:

- Preparing and providing managers with training/coaching to support the performance of employees who work virtually. Telecommuting may feel unsettling and require adjustments for managers who are used to being co-located with their team members and accustomed to seeing and interacting with them throughout the day.



- Designing performance goals and KPIs, as well as performance assessment and reward systems to focus on results as opposed to factors such as tasks, hours worked, or facetime in the office. They should also incorporate an assessment of those behaviours that enable team success – whether exhibited in-person or virtually.
- Collecting feedback from all telecommuting employees to identify any organisational level challenges that may be impacting their performance, for example in working with onerous processes or outmoded technology, or not feeling adequately connected with the organisation's mission and culture.

As their direct reports telecommute, **people managers** will want to support effective individual and team performance while minimising any unnecessary differences in how telecommuting employees are managed. This includes:

- Setting clear team goals and individual performance expectations, with a focus on desired results instead of detailed activities.
- Recognising effective work behaviours and individual/team achievements.
- Addressing performance issues if there is a negative change in performance for a telecommuting employee, including clarifying if the performance issue is related to or being negatively impacted by working virtually/telecommuting.

- Setting clear and consistent expectations on the frequency, mode, and timing of communications. (Refer to *ENGAGE: Aligning expectations*)
- Defining expectations in project management, especially if the team is accustomed to providing verbal updates when working together, such as how project work will be coordinated and progress tracked to ensure all team members remain up to date.
- Be careful to avoid creating a dynamic that 'favours' those who are working in-person over those who are working remotely.

For example, meetings that include team members who are co-located in a meeting room can create an unintended 'insider-outsider' dynamic as comments and visual cues can be shared in the meeting room that those on a microphone/video camera may not be able to hear or see. Avoid this by having all team members, even those in a room together, log into a virtual meeting

individually and share one microphone so that all team members see and hear the same information.

- Being flexible and intentional in how the team wants to work together based on the type of work that is needed. For example, more interactive activities involving team idea generation and project collaboration may best be done in-person, whereas activities like team check-ins and project updates may be done virtually.
- Making recognition a priority, including celebrating personal/professional milestones and team accomplishments. It is easier to miss or overlook recognition opportunities when team members are working remotely, so it is important to include time during regular team meetings to have team members share and recognise accomplishments. Speaking with the manager/team members if there are physical conditions, team behaviours or working practices that are negatively impacting an individual's productivity.

Company Examples - PERFORM

Toshiba Asia Pacific Pte Ltd is the regional centre of Toshiba group of companies in Southeast Asia and Oceania.

As its workforce began working virtually, Toshiba recognised that '*out of sight*' does not mean '*out of mind*'. To emphasise the important role that managers play in taking care of the well-being of their team members, anyone with supervisory duties is expected to and will be appraised on how well they "*manage the well-being of subordinates during the work-from-home period*". Appraisers were provided with a guide on the steps to take when conducting a virtual appraisal session.

● Develop

The continuous development of knowledge and skills, including reskilling and upskilling, is critical for organisations to stay competitive and respond effectively to changing market and customer needs. Employees benefit as they learn and grow professionally and see that the organisation is investing in them. A great amount of professional development happens on-the-job through in-person experience, with learning opportunities taking many forms – formal and informal, structured, and spontaneous. As more employees telecommute it becomes important to increase their access to virtual learning opportunities and platforms.

In the past few years, there have been significant improvements in online learning technology, accessibility, and content. Many training, education, and certification programmes have shifted from live, in-person, and in-classroom to asynchronous and on-line – and this movement accelerated significantly in response to Covid-19 and

mandated work from home restrictions. Yet, there remain several challenges to employee development for those working virtually, including:

- A large proportion of employee learning and development happens informally and organically – by observing and interacting with colleagues. Learning opportunities are often spontaneous and situation-specific and may occur less frequently as the number and frequency of in-person connections decrease.
- Perceptions that working virtually could reduce an employee's visibility at the office, which in turn may lead to being overlooked for real-time assignments and development opportunities.





These concerns can be addressed by taking an intentional and considered approach to sustain and enhance development opportunities for those working virtually. At the **organisation level**, this can be supported by:

- **Promoting a learning culture** that goes beyond simply providing formal, in-person training. Organisation leaders and people managers need to actively support, reinforce, and model the importance of ongoing learning and development for all employees. This includes replicating 'informal learning' opportunities that may have otherwise taken place during lunch or over coffee through virtual lunch time sharing sessions, for example.
- Providing **access to online learning platforms** that allow employees to access professional development libraries and resources from anywhere.

People managers can support the professional development of telecommuting employees and teams by:

- Creating an appropriate platform for employees to discuss development plans (e.g., during one-to-one online check-ins).
- Enabling direct reports to block out dedicated time for development when required (e.g., when the employee is attending an online course).
- Taking care to assign work and provide learning and developmental opportunities fairly (e.g., not based on an employee's physical presence or absence).
- Promoting team learning by creating opportunities to debrief projects, process experiences, share knowledge and incorporate learnings. Like virtual collaboration, virtual learning requires creating both planned and spontaneous opportunities for team members to connect, whether a formal project debrief or an informal lunch and learn session on a topic of shared interest.

Telecommuting employees can be proactive in managing their development and better ensure that they remain 'visible' to their manager and colleagues by:

- Proactively eliciting feedback on their performance from their managers and colleagues, including the strengths they can build on and areas to improve.
- Creating and maintaining a professional development plan with their manager.
- Maintaining an active professional network, in-person and virtual, including contacts from both inside and outside the organisation.
- Identifying and utilising online professional development resources. These can include online learning resources provided by their employer, professional conferences, and industry events (many of which are free), as well as joining online professional and management communities.

Company Examples - DEVELOP

Dell's HR team proactively equipped all of their people managers to lead employees and teams in a fully remote setting. HR and Learning & Development teams coordinated regular 'How-To' webinars for managers on topics such as *"Managing Remote Employees"*, *"Managing Zoom Fatigue"*, and *"Managing a Remote Team"*. A mental health toolkit was distributed to managers with tips on virtual listening skills, guidelines on how to have sensitive conversations, and a wellness action plan.

In-depth conversations were held with people managers to help them better understand their leadership styles and approaches, followed by the provision of coaching. Managers were also encouraged to connect with their teams and direct reports on a regular basis to check-in on their well-being.

Singtel encourages their employees to continuously learn, unlearn and relearn and this did not stop when most employees started working virtually because of the circuit breaker measures. As more employees switched to work from home, Singtel curated courses onto their *Curious Platform*, Singtel's on-line Learning & Development site, that is available to all employees. They provided online training modules for their leaders on topics including *'Leading Change'* and *'Leading with Empathy'*, and identified resources that focus on mental health and wellness, to better prepare leaders to support their employees and teams in working virtually.

● Overcoming the Challenges

Employers in certain industry sectors, including Consulting, IT Services & Software, and Financial Services, have had success having employees telecommute on a large scale for many years. Employers in sectors like manufacturing, construction, and oil & gas, have had more limited experience as the nature of their work requires many of their employees to be on-location. During our interviews, we spoke with several employers from these sectors to better understand their experiences in moving to work from home as a result of the circuit breaker.

They shared some common challenges in supporting employees to work from home, including:

The nature of the work for many of their jobs did not allow for telecommuting.

Their workforce is composed of two main groups of employees: i) those whose work could be done from home (e.g., those in management and administrative positions) and, ii) employees in positions that required them to be on the worksite (e.g., construction and manufacturing) or at a client's location (e.g., sales, installation, and servicing). Different work arrangements based on job roles potentially stirred up feelings of unfairness and inequity.

Organisations had limited experience managing telecommuting work arrangements.

Limited experience in managing telecommuting employees and teams gave rise to uncertainty around outcomes and work performance, which impacted take-up rates.



Employees could be reluctant to adopt new ways of working.

Organisations experienced challenges in getting employees to adopt new technology and business process changes. In one example, a company faced resistance in moving to a virtual platform as an alternative to in-person meetings even if it meant time and expense saved in traveling. Another employer was unable to get staff to transition to a paperless workplace using digital solutions like cloud-based file hosting and e-signature software.

With the circuit breaker measures, these organisations experienced steep learning curves in moving staff to work from home. Initially, they focused on the basics that would allow their employees and key processes to continue functioning virtually, with the plan to make it through the circuit breaker period and then return to their pre-Covid-19 practices.

These initial efforts involved:

- Providing staff with IT equipment, tools, and technical support to enable digital access.
- Purchasing and implementing new online platforms to enable virtual communication via instant messaging and virtual meetings.
- Setting expectations for telecommuting and training staff to use the new technology/applications.
- Changing workflows to enable telecommuting, digitising processes, and approvals.
- Providing staff communication and updates via email, intranet sites, and video.
- Encouraging managers to stay connected with their direct reports/teams.

As these organisations, their leaders, and employees gained more confidence and experience with telecommuting, and the duration of work from home requirements was extended, these companies enhanced their telecommuting practices and provided additional support to managers and employees, including:

- Training people managers on how to manage virtual teams.
- Moving to cloud-based platforms to enable secure information access and sharing and adding communications software to enable better team and company communications.
- Paying more attention to employee engagement, including mental health and wellness, and encouraging employees and their managers to define clearer boundaries between work and personal/family time.
- Being persistent and creative in engaging employees informally, with a focus not only on work matters but also encouraging non-work connections and fun activities.



Over time, organisations that had less experience with telecommuting became much more supportive as they learnt what was needed to support telecommuting – from hardware/technology to people and management practices. Leaders also had their own experiences with telecommuting – they saw their organisations overcome the initial challenges and personally experienced the benefits. Managers' confidence and trust increased as employees successfully

transitioned to new technology and ways of working and demonstrated that they could work effectively from home. As a result, many of these companies plan to continue supporting telecommuting in the future as an option for employees who are in roles that do not require them to be on-site.

● Conclusion

According to many recent articles and white papers about evolving workplace trends, the hybrid workplace is here to stay, and the practice of telecommuting will continue to expand due to improved technology, employee preferences, and positive employer and employee experiences in response to Covid-19 restrictions.^{xii xiii}

This *Telecommuting Guide* was developed to encourage and support Singapore employers to implement and sustain telecommuting as an arrangement that both meets the organisational and operational needs of the employer, as well as the personal, professional, and lifestyle needs of

employees. The Guide provides a framework and key principles for Human Resources and organisation leaders to consider in sustaining and enhancing telecommuting and in managing a hybrid workforce. While specific employer considerations may vary and scenarios will change in the months ahead, the principles for managing telecommuting employees will continue to apply.

Successful workplaces in the future will continuously learn from and build on their organisational and employee experiences, rapidly adopt new technologies and evolve their processes, and demonstrate agility in changing ways of working and mindsets

to drive greater employee engagement and innovation. The response to Covid-19, including the circuit breaker measures, accelerated the adoption of these practices as many employees had to switch to working from home overnight. As employers and employees worked together to overcome the challenges and capture the learnings, many eventually realised the benefits of this forced, accelerated change. While this Guide focuses on sustaining and enhancing just one of the many flexible work arrangements, we hope that the experience and learnings gained can be applied across as employers look to evolve other workplace practices in the future.



END NOTES

- ⁱ <https://www.rgf-professional.com/talent-in-asia-2020>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/8-in-10-in-singapore-want-to-work-from-home-or-have-more-flexibility>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://hbr.org/2018/06/96-of-u-s-professionals-say-they-need-flexibility-but-only-47-have-it>
- ^{iv} <https://www.shrm.org/understandinganddevelopingorganisationalculture.aspx>
- ^v <https://www.mckinsey.com/reimagining-the-postpandemic-workforce>
- ^{vi} <https://www.tal.sg/tafep/employment-practices/work-life-harmony/telecommuting>
- ^{vii} <https://www.tal.sg/tafep/Getting-Started/Fair/Tripartite-Guidelines>
- ^{viii} <https://www.tal.sg/tafep/2020/How-to-Conduct-a-Fair-Remote-Interview>
- ^{ix} <https://virtualdistance.com/>
- ^x <https://hbr.org/2020/10/give-your-remote-team-unstructured-time-for-collaboration>
- ^{xi} <https://hbr.org/2020/07/remote-managers-are-having-trust-issues>
- ^{xii} <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/st-editorial/opting-for-hybrid-work-arrangements>
- ^{xiii} <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/managing-remote-work-and-optimizing-hybrid-working-models>

Company Profiles

- Dell Technologies
- Foo Kon Tan
- Rajah & Tann
- SAP Asia Pte Ltd
- Singtel
- Toshiba Asia Pacific Pte Ltd

Dell Technologies

Dell Technologies Inc. is a leading global IT solution company with 1,500 team members in Singapore. Its products include personal computers, servers, smartphones, televisions, computer software, computer security and network security, as well as information security services.

Championing Flexibility as a Key Component of Culture

The *Dell Culture Code*, which provides Dell team members with clarity about the company values and ways for employees to lead and interact, was developed with input from thousands of Dell employees. For more than a decade, championing a flexible work environment has been a key component of Dell's culture. In 2009, Dell established a work from home policy, named *Connected Workplace*, aimed at providing employees the ability to choose a work style that best fulfills their needs on the job and in life in a highly mobile, collaborative, and flexible setting. For Dell, this was seen as a strategic business initiative – not just an HR policy. The *Connected Workplace* programme aimed to change how its team members viewed work, where work is not anchored to place and time but is instead focused on outcomes.

Dell recognised that not all employees might be able to telecommute successfully for personal/family reasons, including limited space at home and potential issues with landlords in being home during the day. To provide added flexibility,

Dell set up a table reservation system for these employees to reserve a workspace at the Dell office, with an understanding that mask wearing, safe distancing and other safety measures would apply.

Equipping Leaders to Manage Remote Teams

When Dell introduced its flexible work policy, the company sought to enable its employees to get work done successfully in any situation. Their experience with telecommuting paid off as 95% of Dell staff switched to a full telecommuting work arrangement as a result of circuit breaker measures. While Dell had existing policies, resources and equipment in place to support telecommuting, there were still transitions to be made as the number of telecommuting employees almost doubled. This included equipping all of their people managers to lead employees and teams in a fully remote setting.

The Dell HR team stepped in to support people managers through this rapid transition. Many managers were not comfortable or experienced managing fully remote teams, and staff reported

increased stress caused by actions such as managers closely monitoring staff working from home. In response, the HR and Learning & Development teams coordinated regular 'How-To' webinars for managers on topics such as *"Managing Remote Employees"*, *"Managing Zoom Fatigue"*, and *"Managing a Remote Team"* during that challenging period. A mental health toolkit was also distributed to managers with tips on virtual listening skills, guidelines on how to have sensitive conversations, an overview of short-term reasonable adjustments for a team member with mental health concerns, and a wellness action plan. In-depth conversations were held with people managers to help them better understand their leadership styles and approaches, followed by the provision of coaching. Managers were also encouraged to connect with their teams and direct reports on a regular basis to check-in on their well-being. Over time, these efforts resulted in positive feedback from Dell team members who saw notable changes in their managers' behaviours.

Building Camaraderie and Connection

Dell utilised a variety of approaches to help maintain connection and build camaraderie in their virtual workplace. Regular townhalls were held to share business updates, answer questions, and keep staff connected with company leaders. Employees were also encouraged to make use of Dell's wellness programs consisting of a good mix of webinars, digital platforms, one on one sessions, trainings and online resources to support them in managing work and personal changes. Dell's Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) stepped up to provide supportive, on-line communities for their members as they faced specific challenges. For example, their Young Parents ERG provided a forum to share resources and experiences in managing their work and family demands.

Conclusion

Dell's clearly articulated telecommuting policy and decade of experience in supporting telecommuting arrangements gave it a strong head start as 95% of its Singapore office switched to working from home. At the same time, Dell also recognised the importance of preparing and supporting its people managers to build awareness and comfort to lead fully remote teams through timely training webinars and coaching. These efforts helped employees to work from home more effectively, reduced their stress and enhanced camaraderie. Globally, Dell has exceeded its goal of having 50% of its workforce working flexibly by 2020, enabled by a well-developed ecosystem of technology, infrastructure, training and resource groups.

Foo Kon Tan

Foo Kon Tan LLP is one of Singapore's most established and respected accountancy practices. Together with its associated companies, Foo Kon Tan provides a full range of assurance, tax, and advisory services to help clients navigate the ever changing dynamics of the business and regulatory environments in the domestic as well as global markets.

With over 200 employees, Foo Kon Tan's workplace culture is built on people-focused leadership that encourages two-way communication and dialogue. Leaders trust employees to do what is best to ensure that both their personal and professional needs are met. Employees have flexibility in their work hours and the firm does not expect employees to respond to e-mails between 7PM and 7AM, or on weekends, unless there is an urgent exception.

Telecommuting Practices Pre-Covid-19

While most of their staff have laptops and are permitted to telecommute, much of Foo Kon Tan's accounting work involves teams working together and in-person with their manager, involving iterative processes that often require real-time inputs. Employees benefit from spontaneous exchanges and learn from in-person observations, including in-person meetings with clients. Given this, prior to circuit breaker only a few employees practised telecommuting on an ad-hoc basis, resulting in a lack of experience in supporting telecommuting on a large-scale basis.

Enabling Telecommuting for Staff (and Customers)

With the onset of circuit breaker, 95% of Foo Kon Tan staff switched to working from home. Foo Kon Tan leaders recognised that their employees have a large capacity to learn and adapt to changing situations. Staff were permitted to purchase IT equipment they needed to work effectively from home, including monitors and personal printers. To enhance internal communications, team communication platforms and applications were introduced to keep their

teams connected, including staff who were unable to return to Singapore as a result of border closures.

Given the confidential nature of the business, there was also a need for Foo Kon Tan to re-think the way it interacts and communicates with clients, in view of a wide range of client digital capabilities. To ensure timely, secure communication and document exchange with their clients, secure folders were created using cloud storage services for clients to upload and download confidential files digitally, rather than exchanging physical documents. Mobile communication applications were used for instant messaging with clients.

In preparation for working from home, the company held a '*Telecommute Day*' to have employees test their IT systems and access and training sessions to familiarise staff with the use of communication platforms and other telecommuting software. IT support was increased to provide timely resolution of technical issues. Leaders communicated with staff about the objectives and expectations of the telecommuting process.

Leadership Communications

In line with its leadership philosophy of a focus on its people, senior leaders were intentional in communicating more frequently as the firm transitioned to widespread telecommuting. They were transparent and open in their communications, acknowledging that working from home was a new arrangement for everyone, honestly sharing what they knew and did not, but committed to regularly adjusting and refining their approach as they learned more. Leaders reinforced that employees would be treated fairly and expressed trust that each would do the right thing for the benefit of everyone. Polls were conducted to gather feedback about the challenges that employees were having working from home, the support they needed, and suggestions staff might have to address challenges. This staff feedback led to timely adjustments, including providing temporary reimbursements to their lower paid staff to cover increases in their home utility bills.

Virtual Onboarding

Even during circuit breaker, Foo Kon Tan continued hiring and adapted its onboarding process to virtually onboard new hires. Laptops and other equipment were sent to new employees' homes and virtual IT support provided to guide them through the set-up process. Managers connected virtually to provide an orientation to the firm and their work, and to discuss the plan for the new hires' on-boarding. With the end of circuit breaker, Foo Kon Tan arranged to have new employees visit the office to provide a sense of the workplace and opportunities for in-person interactions with their managers and team members.

Looking Forward

As a result of the firm's successful telecommuting experience during and after circuit breaker, Foo Kon Tan plans to continue offering employees the flexibility both in hours and work location, as works best for their employees and teams.



Rajah & Tann

Rajah & Tann Singapore is a market leading law firm and a member of Rajah & Tann Asia, one of the largest regional networks with over 800 fee earners across Southeast Asia and China, including regional desks focusing on Brunei, Japan and South Asia. In Singapore, Rajah & Tann is one of the country's largest full-service law firms with approximately 680 employees, including 340 lawyers.

Rajah & Tann was an early adopter in offering flexible work arrangements. Even before circuit breaker, requests for telecommuting work arrangements were granted to employees with family or personal needs, including parents with children taking the PSLE, staff with caregiving responsibilities such as elderly

parents or children with special needs or those who needed to accompany spouses on overseas work assignments. On average, about 5% of its workforce was working under some form of flexible work arrangement.

Business as Usual for Rajah & Tann

When circuit breaker was introduced in Singapore, almost all Rajah & Tann employees switched to work from home, with only a small number of essential operations staff remaining in the office. The transition was facilitated by efforts that Rajah & Tann had undertaken to digitalise many of the work process prior to 2019, including digitisation of staff personal files and development of e-learning modules to onboard new hires. These efforts enabled a smooth transition to remote work. Performance appraisals were carried out using training videos that had been developed earlier and were available on the firm's intranet. The firm's signature internship and mentorship programmes proceeded as planned. With the switch to work from home, Rajah & Tann intensified its online training efforts, conducting multiple runs of online training to support lawyers in conducting online meetings and hearings, and sessions to familiarise their support staff with telecommuting platforms.

Rajah & Tann continued to hire during this period, onboarding about 120 new hires in 2020. The firm hosted 2-3 week-long virtual

internship programmes for about 160 interns and coordinated 25 virtual secondments for the lawyers across all the overseas offices. This continuity was made possible by the earlier digitisation of core work processes and development of virtual onboarding and mentorship programmes.

Virtual Internship Programme

Annually, Rajah & Tann hosts up to 200 interns in a month-long internship programme. The programme provides opportunities for interns to get to know Rajah & Tann Asia better and gain insights into life as a lawyer in their Singapore office. It also provides an opportunity for the firm to talent-spot potential new hires and give back to the community. With the challenges presented by Covid-19, the firm innovatively converted their 4-week, in-person programme to 2-3 week virtual sessions. While compressed, the firm focused on ensuring that the goals of the programme were not compromised and creatively provided a virtual platform for interns to experience what life was really like in a leading law firm.

The virtual internship programme was designed to facilitate and encourage interactions between interns and key members of the management, the Recruitment Committee, the Associates Management Committee, and their individual mentors. Additional sessions were held to introduce the interns to the firm's technological ecosystem and interact with its leading disputes and transactional lawyers. Interns also had opportunities to work on client presentations over video calls. Senior practitioners were invited to engage with the interns through online talks and engagement sessions. The *Group Project* segment of the programme provided the opportunity for interns to work together and gave the firm a chance to "talent spot" potential future trainees. Opportunities to have fun and build camaraderie were also incorporated through virtual fitness classes led by Rajah & Tann's lawyers and a farewell session on the last day of each programme.

Conclusion

Enabled by its culture of trust, prior experience with telecommuting, and earlier success digitalising many of its HR operations, Rajah & Tann was well-positioned to adjust and adapt to circuit breaker quickly. This included giving back to the community by investing time and effort to mentor 200 interns virtually and developing the ability to hold internship programmes either in-person, virtually or in a hybrid format.

RAJAH & TANN
Singapore

SAP Asia Pte Ltd

SAP is a market leader in enterprise application software, helping companies of all sizes and in all industries run at their best. With 1000+ employees in Singapore, the company takes pride in its strong workplace culture of success, one based on teamwork, integrity, accountability, professionalism, and trust. This culture of success underpins the organisation's people philosophy. SAP's HR team believes that it is critical to partner with the business to drive the successful translation of its business strategy to its people strategy with a focus on employee experience.

Flexible Work Arrangement as an Employee Engagement Strategy

SAP is a well-recognised employer of choice that has won multiple accolades locally and globally. It has long established that providing flexibility is an important employee engagement strategy. SAP recognises that there are times when leave and flexible workplace arrangements will go a long way to helping employees better manage work and life responsibilities, and other commitments. It has in place a structured and formalised Flexible Work Arrangement (FWA) policy for employees to work remotely or where they are most productive (Flexi-Place) or re-distribute their work hours across the work week as long as the employee fulfils the required work hours per week (Flexi-Time). The policy is designed as a framework for all employees to utilise and discuss any needs they might have with their direct manager. Support is offered based on mutual trust and consideration for the individual's needs, balanced with business needs. It allows employees to focus on impact, productivity, and innovation rather than physical presence.

Adapting Processes to Enable Telecommuting

With the implementation of circuit breaker and the need for all employees to work from home, SAP did not experience a difficult transition in moving to a full telecommuting arrangement. Its workforce was already adept at working flexibly and being part of a technology company, competent in integrating digital tools and technology into their daily operations. With almost 100% of its workforce now telecommuting (some staff had to be on-site to access special equipment), SAP's leaders and HR team could focus on taking care of the well-being of its people.

Employee Well-Being a Top Priority

Super Awesome People – this is what SAP employees call themselves. With the uncertainty of the pandemic setting in, it was clear to SAP's leadership that it needed to provide a workplace environment that allowed 1,000+ strong workforce in Singapore to continue to work where they were most productive to help their clients and partners run better and improve people's lives, in these unprecedented times.

SAP as an organisation demonstrated great empathy in connecting and supporting its people. The SAP leadership team views well-being as a strategic priority and a core business enabler, and this emphasis on mental, physical, and emotional wellness took on greater urgency in response to Covid-19. Throughout the organisation, there was awareness that employees were handling multiple responsibilities at home that could cause unplanned interruptions of their work. In addition to SAP's people survey which runs three times a year, additional remote work pulse surveys were conducted to listen to employees – to understand how they were coping and how telecommuting was working for them. In response to employee feedback, the organisation adjusted its policies in real-time, addressed emerging themes at townhall sessions, and organised talks by internal and external experts to provide employees with knowledge and resources to better cope with their challenges.

SAP recently declared April 27, 2021 as Global Mental Health day for all employees to recharge with an additional day-off and a clear message from SAP leaders that "it's okay to relax".

Building a Community of Leaders

Good leadership has never been more important than in this extended time of uncertainty and anxiety. SAP understands how important it was for leaders to actively connect with their teams, not just for operational meetings, but to engage on a personal basis. However, not all of their leaders were equally comfortable doing so. Virtual connect meetings for leaders were set up so leaders could discuss any challenges, share best practices, and support one another to better connect with their teams. Several toolkits were also provided for leaders on what questions leaders could ask team members to have more impactful SAP Talk (development) conversations. Within the community of leaders, an environment was created for leaders to feel safe enough to share openly with one another, including their anxieties, challenges, and fears. In turn, these leaders would create the same culture of openness with their respective teams.

Through their own behaviours and guidance, leaders encouraged employees to find ways to integrate their work-life commitments and engage in self-care to sustain a healthy state of mental and physical well-being. Examples included taking periodic leave to rest and recharge and declaring 'meeting free' afternoons and coordinated days-off so that teams could recover from virtual meeting fatigue.

Conclusion

Having management take such a people-centric approach has enabled SAP's team performance to exceed quarterly expectations. It has increased conversations and connections between managers and their teams. As a business, SAP is committed to help the world run better, to improve peoples' lives and during these challenging times, to help its clients move forward from Covid-19. As an employer, SAP is living out the same commitment to its employees, focusing on what is best for them, creating a safe and healthy work experience, and providing the right emotional and mental health support to succeed and navigate an uncertain future.



Singtel

The Singtel Group is Asia's leading communications group. Headquartered in Singapore, Singtel has 140 years of operating experience and played a pivotal role in Singapore's development as a major communications hub. With approximately 25,000 employees located in Singapore, Singtel provides a diverse range of services including fixed, mobile, data, internet, TV, infocomms technology (ICT) and digital solutions.

Telecommuting Practised on a Need-To Basis

Prior to the pandemic, telecommuting was not a work arrangement commonly used by Singtel's Singapore-based employees. While there was a formalised policy in place that provided employees with flexibility to telecommute one day a week (depending on job role and with mutual agreement between the employee and supervisor), this option was not widely utilised. There were several reasons that kept staff from telecommuting, including concerns about the infrequency of participation by other employees and a perceived lack of managerial support and openness.

Further, approximately 30% of Singtel employees are in positions that require them to work on site or at a client's location. This includes the field engineers and technicians who install, maintain and service telecommunications equipment. As a result, telecommuting at Singtel was practiced on a one-off or need-to basis, which meant that the organisation lacked experience managing telecommuting on a large scale, across the entire workforce.

Introducing Telecommuting Organisation-Wide

In response to the pandemic, Singtel Singapore created a *Pandemic Control Committee* that focused on business continuity planning, compliance with government advisories, and coordination of Covid-19 policies and practices across its businesses, locations, and employees. This included developing a Covid-19 portal to provide employees with a single, trusted source of company information and government advisories.

With the introduction of circuit breaker measures, approximately 70% of Singtel employees were required to work from home on very short notice. In response, Singtel purchased laptops and other hardware to enable employees to work from home. They communicated to employees about the objectives and expectations of the telecommuting process. They evaluated and purchased new online meeting platforms to enable virtual meetings and discussions. Workflows were changed to support processes being done completely online. Certain job scopes were redesigned to ensure that roles could be performed away from the office. Singtel also

prepared their leaders to manage remote workers and teams using webinars and online resources. They emphasised employee experience as a key performance indicator and encouraged managers to show empathy during a period of significant personal and professional change.

Virtual Recruitment and Selection

In the months following the circuit breaker, Singtel switched to virtual interviewing, hiring, and onboarding processes. Paperwork was sent to new hires and employment agreements signed via *DocuSign*. While the process was digitally enabled, as employees are able to return to the workplace, Singtel plans to have all new hires work at the office/work site for their first three months (coinciding with the length of their probationary period). This will provide them with opportunities for in-person interaction with their new supervisor, team members and colleagues, when they are in the office under Singtel's hybrid work arrangement, so as to facilitate engagement and accelerate their success. At the end of three months, new employees can explore telecommuting arrangements with their supervisors.

Enabling Effortless Connection

Initially, there was a period of significant adjustment for those telecommuting. Employees, managers, and teams were not accustomed to working virtually and needed to address technical

issues with hardware and connectivity, learn to use new collaboration and communication tools, and establish new team norms and practices. For example, many Singtel employees are located at client sites and were not able to access the internet given client firewall restrictions. To ensure that all Singapore employees could access company communications when working virtually, Singtel developed software that enabled employees to access Singtel's intranet through their mobile devices, in addition to laptops and desktops. This evolved into its new mobile app, *iConnect*.

Listen, Listen, Listen

Singtel stayed connected with employees through weekly online, employee pulse surveys. Each survey focused on different themes, including challenges in working from home, dress code, and work location preferences. The most significant work from home challenges identified were: 1) time management and setting clear boundaries between work and personal time, 2) home conditions that were not conducive to working, 3) managers who were not empathetic, 4) IT and connectivity issues, 5) increased mental stress due to being cooped up at home, loneliness, etc. Notably, after an initial learning period and adjustments made in response to survey findings, many Singtel workers reported an increase in their personal productivity as well as an interest in continuing to work from home.

Continuous Learning

Singtel encourages their employees to continuously learn, unlearn and relearn and this practice did not stop when most employees started working from home. With widespread telecommuting Singtel curated courses to put onto #CURIOUS, their online learning and development site that is accessible to all employees. Online training modules were developed for leaders, focusing on topics such as *Leading Change* and *Leading with Empathy*, as well as curating resources that focus on mental health and wellness to better prepare leaders to support their employees and teams in working virtually.

The Way Forward

Singtel sees building organisation culture as a journey, and they are at an inflection point. Digital transformation is key to its business strategy and having more employees comfortable with digital technology as a result of working from home can help drive this change. To Singtel, the business case is clear. It will continue to encourage employees to keep an open mind, adopt an innovation mindset and build on their experiences in adapting to change.



Toshiba Asia Pacific Pte Ltd

Toshiba Asia Pacific, a subsidiary of Toshiba Corporation, provides support to Toshiba companies in Southeast Asia, India and Oceania with the strong focus in the areas of power systems, social infrastructure systems, and building solutions.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, telecommuting was not a common work arrangement although the organisation has explored other forms of flexible work arrangements like flexible working hours. When circuit breaker was implemented, the business however was quick to implement work from home arrangement for all employees.

This change in working style did not affect employee's productivity and business outcomes, line managers saw employees who continued to put in their best while working from home and employees found that time saved from commuting allowed them to give more attention to family.

Adapting Processes to Enable Telecommuting

At the start of the pandemic, the company activated the Business Continuity Plan (BCP) team to assess the impact and provide guidance to adopt telecommuting. The Human Resource team, together with the BCP team developed guidelines for telecommuting and engaged with divisional leaders to identify obstacles and challenges divisions would face as team members switched to a telecommuting work arrangement. Team members then embarked on a pilot programme and worked through teething issues before transiting entire teams to telecommute fully.

At the organisational level, the BCP team had to identify necessary changes to procedures and adapt how work was done. For example, while the Finance team previously had to get sign-offs on physical documents, the company introduced the e-signature, allowing contracts and documents to be processed electronically for approval.

Two-Way Communication a Key Focus

Regular communication both from the business and division leaders was emphasised as the business switched to a telecommuting work arrangement. Mr Ryuji Maruyama, Managing Director, Toshiba Asia Pacific and Corporate Representative for Asia Pacific, Toshiba Corporation increased the cadence of his communication to the team, sharing updates on business performance and corporate values, and expressing messages of care for employees' well-being through different formats – emails, messages, and newsletters.

In addition to having staff share feedback during regular division meetings, employee opinion surveys were deployed by its corporate headquarters in Japan to understand employees' engagement level. Locally, pulse surveys to understand employees' experience working from home are also conducted regularly, ensuring that leaders get regular feedback from employees. Some challenges relating to telecommuting include network stability, need for physical meetings to facilitate conversations and better communication which the local team worked to address them as these get surfaced through the pulse surveys.

Engaging Staff

At the team level, leaders were reminded to hold frequent dialogues with their team members, on an individual and team basis. Employees were also encouraged to carry out company-sponsored activities such as connecting with colleagues virtually over meals. During this period, the company recognised the heightened importance of giving back to the community and continued the annual activity of rallying Toshiba Group Companies in Singapore to raise funds and provided Covid-19 related medical supplies to a charitable organisation.

Refining the Appraisal Process

As its workforce began working virtually, the company recognised that 'out of sight' does not mean 'out of mind'. To emphasise the important role that managers play in taking care of the well-being of their team members, anyone with supervisory duties is expected to and will be appraised on how well they "*manage the well-being of subordinates during the work-from-home period.*"

To communicate this change, the HR team shared the rationale for the change with its heads of department during their regular bi-weekly meetings. Appraisers were provided with a guide

on the steps to take when conducting a virtual appraisal session including:

- *Provide feedback on the overall work performance.*
- *Discuss ways to address areas identified for improvement.*
- *Seek to understand if staff face any difficulties or challenges.*
- *Check on staff mental well-being and be aware of signs of potential mental health issues.*
- *Inform them of expectations.*

Conclusion

Toshiba is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic with measures that prioritise the safety of employees and their families, and of customers and business partners. The company will continue to monitor the situation and to follow government guidance and instructions, while ensuring business continuity. The pandemic and circuit breaker provided an opportunity for the organisation to explore new ways of working, digitise processes and improve productivity as a result. Working from home as a result of Covid-19 created a more flexible mindset. Telecommuting is now regarded as part of the firm's progressive approach towards helping their employees better meet their work and personal responsibilities.

TOSHIBA



About Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices

The Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) was set up in 2006 by the tripartite partners (Ministry of Manpower, National Trades Union Congress, and Singapore National Employers Federation), to promote the adoption of fair, responsible and progressive employment practices.

TAFEP is one of three agencies under TAL, along with the Tripartite Alliance for Dispute Management (TADM) and the Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Council.

TAFEP helps employers build workplaces where employees are respected, valued and

able to achieve their fullest potential, for the success of the organisation. Employers can approach TAFEP for tools, resource materials and assistance to implement fair and progressive practices at their workplaces. Employees or individuals who encounter workplace discrimination or harassment can seek assistance and advice from TAFEP.