

the future of work

is remote.



a glimpse into  
workplace transformation



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For the longest time, employers refused to believe that remote work at scale was possible. But after the COVID-19 pandemic forced companies to transition to remote work, both employers and employees have found that their work environments have not only changed, but improved.

Remote work isn't just a pipe dream — it is the future.

As long as there is trust, empathy, and structure in an organisation, employees can remain productive and thrive at their workplaces. Remote and flexible work options give them better control over their time, so achieving work-life balance is no longer a myth but a reality. Employers are benefiting too. They are enjoying higher productivity, decreased costs and greater agility thanks to remote and flexible work arrangements.

Now more than ever, workers see remote and flexible work as a standard employee benefit in their company of choice. Companies have to reckon with these changing trends, and move with the times or risk getting left behind.

What do these new expectations and experiences mean for the future of work?

Armed with quantitative studies, extensive research, and qualitative interviews with 16 human resources professionals across Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, 'the future of work is remote' white paper looks into how these changes will impact the way employees work and how organisations will lead in the next normal.

# 1



# how COVID-19 changed our workplace forever.

2020 brought plenty of changes for both businesses and employees. As governments enforced social distancing measures, many companies found their operations disrupted — and some shuttered unexpectedly.

The ill effects of the pandemic resulted in a slew of job losses in the early days. According to Randstad's 2021 Employer Brand Research (REBR) reports, 1 in 3 respondents across Asia Pacific (APAC) saw their employment situation change.

As talent reflected on the benefits, perks and compensation that were most meaningful to them, their employee value propositions (EVPs) shifted in response. While "attractive salary & benefits" (62%) still ranks as the most important EVP factor that organisations can offer, "work-life balance" (60%) came in a close second.

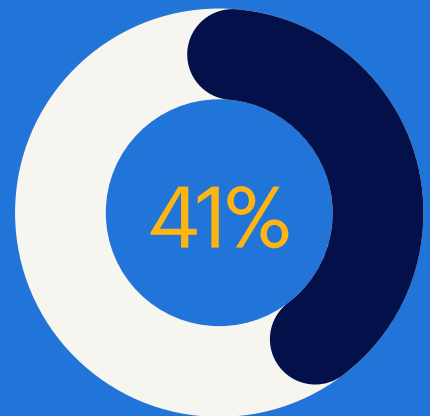
Randstad defines work-life balance as the "state of equilibrium where a person equally prioritises the demands of one's career and personal life." Valuing work-life balance has been a notable trend across all three markets over the years, but there has been a significant spike since the pandemic began.

% of employees that were either furloughed, became unemployed, or worked different hours than usual due to the pandemic.

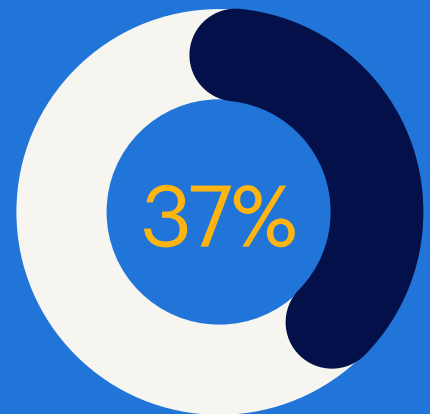
Hong Kong SAR



Malaysia



Singapore





One of the reasons for the increasing emphasis on work-life balance is the sudden shift from office to remote work. REBR reports found that 70% of respondents worked remotely at least some of the time in 2020, while one in four worked exclusively from home.

In the initial stages of the transition to remote work, employees struggled with:

- Blurring boundaries between work and personal life
- Distractions from other members of their households
- Lack of proper resources or infrastructure to maintain productivity

While the transition to remote work was difficult at first, it opened employees' eyes to the possibilities of flexible work arrangements — and it seems that they're not going back. A 2020 Skillsoft study across APAC<sup>1</sup> found that 9 in 10 employees expect HR policy changes to become permanent when everything blows over.

## work-life balance increased in importance among local respondents.

	% of respondents that ranked "work-life balance" as a top EVP factor in 2020 (pre-COVID)	% of respondents that ranked "work-life balance" as a top EVP factor in 2021 (during COVID)
Hong Kong SAR	57%	60%
Malaysia	48%	69%
Singapore	62%	74%

When comparing 2021 with previous years, please note that the survey question regarding EVP choices has been revised. Respondents were free to choose as many EVP drivers that were important to them from a list of 16, while they were only allowed to pick five in previous years.

# shifting work preferences.



**59%**

are expecting flexible hours to be the norm



**58%**

want more work from home opportunities



**11%**

are happy to return to how things were pre-pandemic

Employees realised that flexible work arrangements have their perks. They are able to save more time and money on commuting, spend more quality time with their loved ones and gain more control over how and when they work.

This represents a seismic shift in the way employees perceive remote work. According to the 16 HR professionals interviewed for this white paper, the majority of their employees want to retain remote and flexible work arrangements as a standard offering.

Employers are also changing their tune about remote or flexible work. HR professionals found that remote work has significantly improved productivity and reduced costs for their companies. These benefits, and the general desire for remote work amongst employees, have emboldened many companies to continue offering hybrid work options for the long term.



# case study

cepheid.



## offering choice, autonomy, and trust

Before COVID-19, the office was the default workspace for molecular diagnostics company Cepheid Singapore. The organisation was already operating with agile tools, which made the shift to remote work slightly easier. However, some of Cepheid's employees experienced anxiety because of communication delays and the lack of space or equipment at home.

Arun Kaimal, Human Resources Director for India, SEA, and ANZ, was aware that different departments and employees would naturally develop their own working styles and unique needs.

He said, "We provided [different strategies and tools] like a cafeteria approach and allowed our managers to pick and choose what they want to do."

Some options included:

- Employment Assistance Programme (EAP) to help those experiencing mental health issues or a lack of space at home
- Manager toolkit on associate wellbeing
- Inclusion work such as mindfulness lessons

Following the successful implementation of these initiatives, the company plans to develop long-term hybrid work arrangements. Rather than simply offering the choice to work in the office or from home, Cepheid's HR managers will develop a HR strategy that optimises both offline and online working methods.

# how teams adjusted to remote work.

Changes had to be made as employees transitioned to remote work, and everyone experienced their fair share of challenges during the pandemic. Here are a few ways companies adjusted their work processes to remain productive:

## automation of functions

Digital tools are key to operating in a remote environment. The pandemic gave companies a new impetus to accelerate their digitalisation strategies and explore other opportunities to automate processes.

Singapore's Changi Airport Group gamified their company's health initiatives so employees could sign up for various health activities and earn "vitality points" in the process. Hong Kong-based real estate company Grosvenor Group introduced chatbots, among other measures, to engage employees remotely.

Companies will continue to digitise more HR workflows and create new digital initiatives to create a positive experience for their employees, no matter where they are working from.

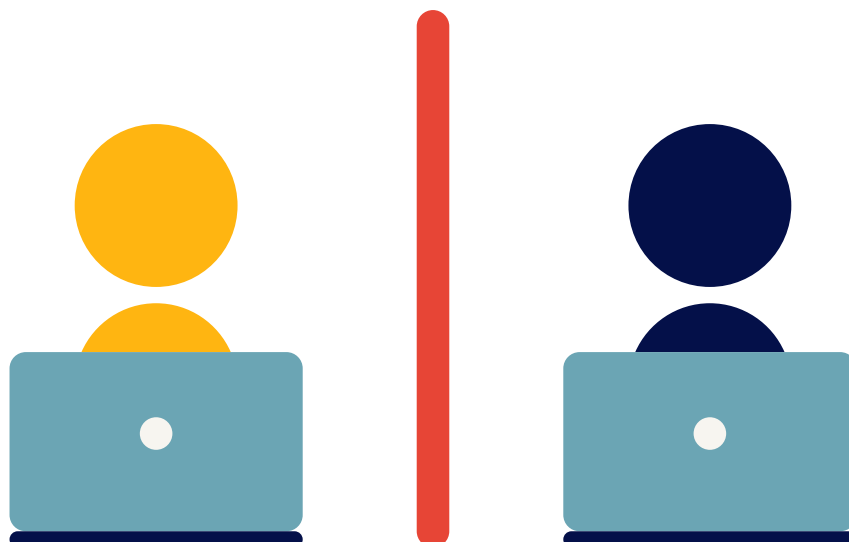
## work-from-home provisions and stipends

Space was a challenge for employees, particularly those from small, densely populated cities like Hong Kong SAR and Singapore. Not everyone has strong home WiFi or a company-issued laptop. Many companies tackled this by providing employees with the resources they needed to do their work with ease. Energy company Shell Malaysia offered employees a one-time, no-strings-attached stipend of up to S\$650 (US\$483.56) to build a productive home office.

## hybrid learning and development programmes

When in-person training and workshops became too risky to carry out, companies like Cepheid, Klook, and TDCX shifted their learning and development sessions online. With on-demand access to learning materials and a brand new training schedule, employees now have equal opportunity to develop new skills, knowledge, and competencies at home.

While global companies may have more resources to offer a wider variety of online training programmes, smaller firms are working with external partners like LinkedIn Learning to extend their upskilling offerings to their staff.



## changes to feedback loops

Without in-person collaboration, many employers have increased the frequency of meetings and feedback loops. Some companies have more than doubled the number of touchpoints to stay connected with their employees and track their progress.

These increased points of contact have also served to bring leadership closer to the rank and file. Hong Kong-based alt-lender start-up Oriente conducted more frequent company-wide town halls that allowed employees to hear directly from the company's founders, which has helped sustain morale through a disruptive period.

"When you're going through difficult times like these, making sure that the leadership of the organisation is [frequently] available sends quite a strong signal," explained Karun Arya, Vice President of Corporate Affairs for Hong Kong's Oriente. "Leaders are sharing both their personal experiences and future plans for the company in a more transparent way to show employees that they're going to manage new challenges together and provide them with the support they need."

## video conferencing

Global business travel spending dropped from a record-breaking US\$1.29 trillion in 2019 to just US\$504 billion in 2020<sup>2</sup> — the lowest amount companies across the world have spent on annual business travel in two decades. Funds that would normally have been spent on business travel were diverted towards online video conferencing and communication solutions, which have proven to be highly effective and affordable in lieu of face-to-face meetings.

Following the success of video conferencing platforms, some global companies have reportedly planned to reduce future business travel budgets to only accommodate essential travels.

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## food for thought

# how will work change for your company?

- How will you measure an employee's success and performance going forward?
- What functions and tasks can be performed remotely?
- Which tasks are best accomplished at the workplace?
- How will you manage the flow of communication in a hybrid workplace?
- What can you do to support employees' emotional and mental health?

“Now that [company leaders] know it's possible to have successful meetings with clients or stakeholders through video call, they'll be taking fewer business trips.”

Chan Kee Siak  
Founder of Exabytes



# 2





# employers agree: the hybrid workplace is the future of work.

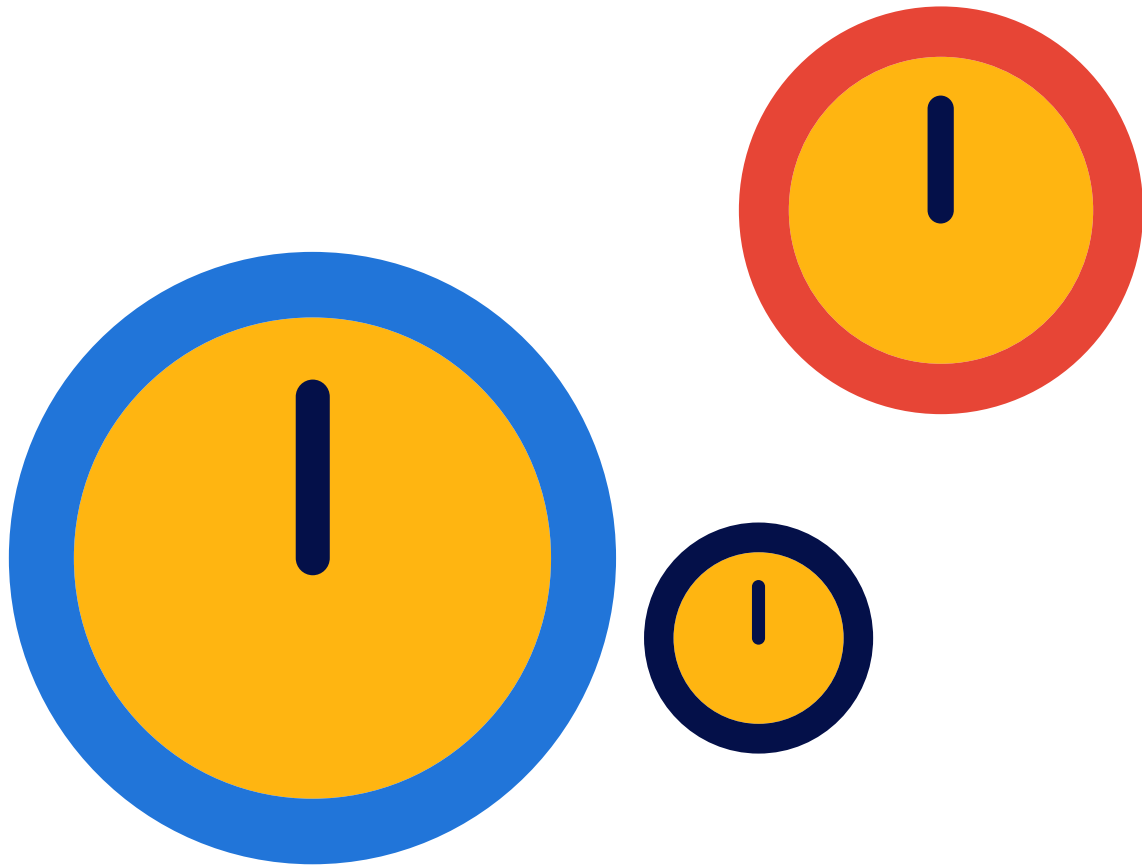
Most HR professionals interviewed for this white paper agree that the on-site office will never truly disappear.

In recent years, many cities have developed their trade or industry hubs that are specifically designed as highly collaborative ecosystems between private and public sectors. Certain industries are predicated on an in-person environment, such as airports or scientific laboratories that depend on on-site infrastructure or specialised equipment.

Most importantly, face-to-face interactions bring a different energy that remains important in fostering innovation and camaraderie among colleagues.

The changing movement restrictions and varying office capacity regulations allowed HR leaders to experiment with the different modalities of hybrid work.

Many adopted digital technologies and implemented new policies that helped streamline operations and reduce costs. As a result, companies which had never considered remote work as an option are now centring it in their long-term strategies.



## employers want the best of both worlds.

Whether companies expect employees to work purely remotely or on-site, it's important to note that either of these options has their fair share of shortcomings.

The traditional 9-to-5 model enforces the notion that hours spent in the office have a direct correlation to overall performance and productivity. However, it could create an unhealthy culture of presenteeism in the office and deteriorating mental health among employees.

Even though companies saw improved productivity with remote working in place, a fully remote arrangement cannot replicate the human aspect of work. Because remote work arrangements focus on tasks and outcomes, it's easy to forget about the workers behind the deliverables. While not impossible, it takes more effort to foster collaboration and camaraderie in a remote setting.

The "happy medium" lies in hybrid work models. Employees can choose when or where they want to work, so long as they follow the parameters set by their company.

Some companies have already experimented with remote work prior to the pandemic with a pilot group of employees. The lockdowns have also helped further define these remote work policies for organisations that are looking to extend them across their entire workforce.

Some of the new standard operating procedures (SOPs) that we have seen from remote working in the past years are:

- "Check-in by 10:30 AM every morning"
- "Work in the office at least one day a week"
- "Always be responsive to emails and chats during work hours"

“It is a mental battle that each employee is facing: how COVID is affecting them, their personal situations, their families, and the prolonged uncertainty that COVID brings. I think the mental aspect of it is probably one that is often overlooked.”

Karun Arya  
Vice President of Corporate Affairs  
Oriente



## employees want flexibility.



The 9-to-5 workday was invented in the 1890s<sup>3</sup> to keep factory workers from clocking in more than 40 hours a week. Since this work model was introduced over a century ago, it's safe to call it a dated concept.

Rather than have their company dictate when and where they should work, the modern employee wants more autonomy over their workday. And it's not just the Millennials or the Gen Zers clamouring for greater flexibility. Who else wants flexible work?

### working parents

Many families rely on dual incomes to improve their quality of life and provide the best for their families - from basic needs to accommodation; novel experiences to education. Hybrid and flexible work arrangements allow working parents to adjust their work hours to their unique needs. They can save on childcare, spend more time with their children, and create more harmonious work and parenting schedules.

### those with dual or slash careers

Many young workers now hold more than one job or position<sup>4</sup>. For example, it has become common to see talent on LinkedIn with long titles such as "Content Writer/Consultant/Animator" — indicating their commitment and availability to take on different types of work, both within and beyond their workplace.

### those caring for family members

Even before COVID-19, multi-generational households have been a common cultural phenomenon in Asia. Hybrid arrangements allow employees with familial responsibilities to care for their elderly relatives, children, and sick family members who are living in the same home.

### those who wish to explore other pursuits

The traditional 9-to-5 schedule doesn't leave full-time workers with much time or energy for other passions. Hybrid arrangements that focus more on work completed and less on hours spent allow employees to spend time volunteering, pursue their hobbies and personal projects, or attend part-time classes.

Employees exist on a spectrum, and offering more flexibility accommodates the varying needs and preferences of each individual.

# remote work's implications on the office space.

Since companies now realise that work is what you do and not where you do it, what will happen to expensive real estate leases?

Many companies believe that the office space should be retained, but redesigned. Cubicles and private office spaces will be transformed into meeting rooms, pantries, and shared amenities — essentially, collaborative and leisure spaces that accommodate the needs of hybrid work.

To figure out how office spaces should transform, HR leaders can ask these questions:

- What percentage of the office space should be dedicated to collaboration and/or leisure?
- How often should employees come in to conduct group meetings?
- How much space is required if only a few employees come in at a time?
- How conducive are these office spaces to fostering collaboration, productivity, and positive work experiences?
- Will the office's current location be considered accessible and convenient in the next normal?

Besides reinventing office spaces for better collaboration, employers will have to consider incorporating new technologies to make physical offices safer and more sanitary. Companies are expected to install motion sensors that can automate certain functions, such as opening and locking doors or turning lights on and off. Organisations in high-risk environments such as healthcare, manufacturing, and food & beverage can also install self-sanitising stations so their employees feel safer at work.

These changes to the workplace improve how work is done and result in greater cost savings for companies, especially in cities like Singapore and Hong Kong where real estate is expensive.

According to McKinsey, organisations that explore alternative workplace strategies could reduce their real estate costs by 30%<sup>5</sup> over time. These budgets could be used in other business-critical activities such as investing in new technologies or upskilling the workforce.



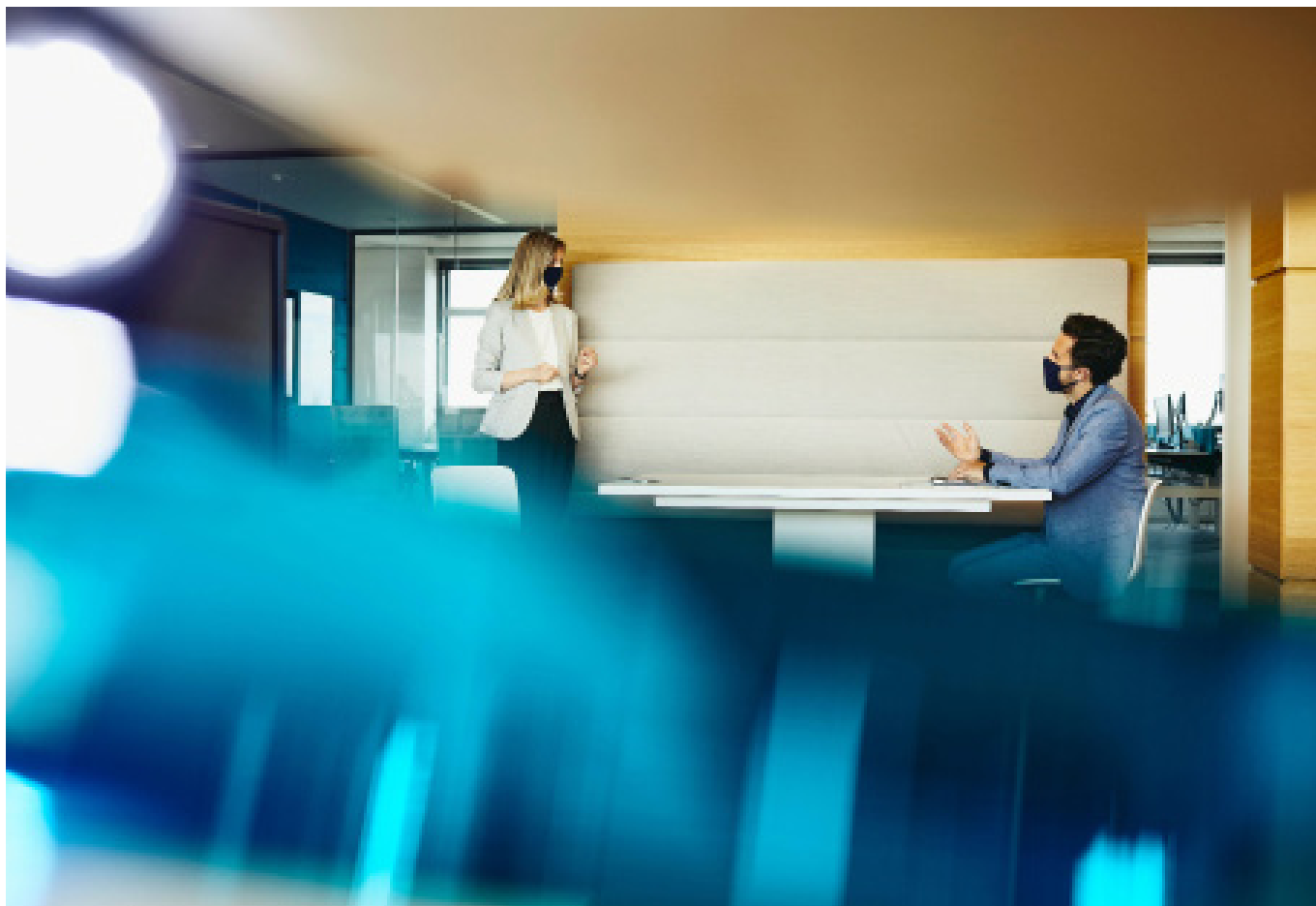
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food for thought

## how should companies view space?

For the longest time, companies invested in big, fixed real estate in central locations to conduct operations. How can companies integrate space management with alternative workplace strategies? Instead of fixed office spaces, can they partner with co-working spaces or decentralised satellite offices to cut costs and improve accessibility?





## expectation vs reality.

Many companies are using "collaboration, reconnection, and better communication with colleagues and peers" as reasons to enforce a return-to-office policy. But it's important to note that an office touted as a collaborative space in theory may not be one in practice. In some cases, there is a clear disconnect between what employees want from being in the office and what they are experiencing.

When companies bring their employees back to the office, they must ensure that their workplaces actually provide the benefits they promote. Even in offices that are already redesigned for the future of work, employers still need to consider their employees' varying needs—and refrain from applying the same solution to every individual.

3





# empathy and trust are the keys to success.

Before 2020, “work-life balance” was an afterthought for many business leaders.

Employees were exhorted to emulate the “ideal worker”<sup>6</sup>, whose relentless commitment to paid work meant staying overtime as a rule, and deprioritising family and personal matters. But the shine has worn off<sup>7</sup> the “ideal worker” over the past decade, as employees have increasingly challenged the dated assumptions presented by the concept and its practical failure to deliver its stated benefits, long before the pandemic hit.

Today, employers and HR managers largely acknowledge that a more humane approach to work-life balance is in order. Management teams are now taking deliberate steps to address the gap between worker satisfaction and productivity, and implementing new policies and initiatives to create kinder work environments.

From our interviews, we have learnt that trust and empathy need to go beyond lip service. They have become essential characteristics in managing today’s workforce.

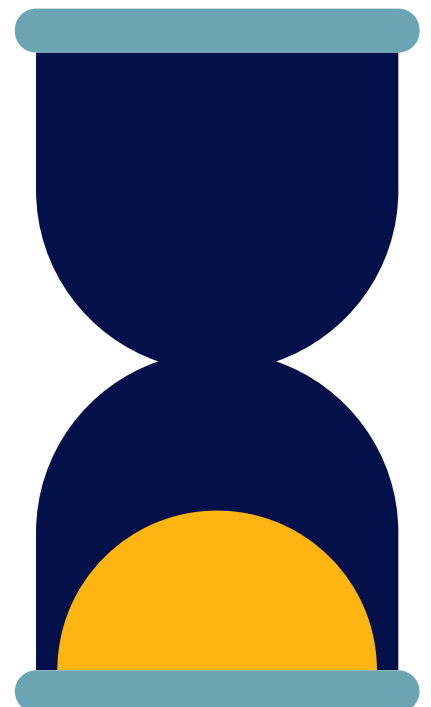
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food for thought

## does “996” culture really benefit the company, or anyone?

Overtime culture is an institution in many Asian countries. “996”<sup>8</sup> culture (working from 9am to 9pm, 6 days a week) is par for the course in China and Hong Kong SAR; Singapore consistently ranks in the bottom 10<sup>9</sup> for work-life balance in global surveys. But as high profile overwork fatalities<sup>10</sup> haunt HR personnel and employees demand better work-life balance, business leaders must ask hard questions about whether their company culture is leading them in the right direction.

- Do companies foster an unhealthy overtime culture to extract the most value out of their workers?
- Is a candidate’s willingness to adhere to “996” culture seen as a hiring advantage?
- Does overtime culture have any effect on a company’s attrition rate?
- Does a company’s overtime culture have an impact on how others perceive their employer brand?
- Do companies punish employees who refuse to participate in “996” culture?
- Does overtime culture inadvertently privilege unmarried individuals with no familial commitment?
- Can one’s company thrive in the absence of overtime culture?





“Even if there are people who can function very effectively in a remote setting, they are also definitely affected by how they're trapped in the house, even outside of working hours.”

Jun-Elle L.  
People Manager  
Storehub, Malaysia

# how companies helped remote workers by putting empathy first.



## understanding employee sentiment through frequent feedback loops

HR leaders introduced new feedback channels to increase employee engagement. Pulse surveys, polls, and virtual town halls were conducted more frequently to get a better measure of employee sentiment.



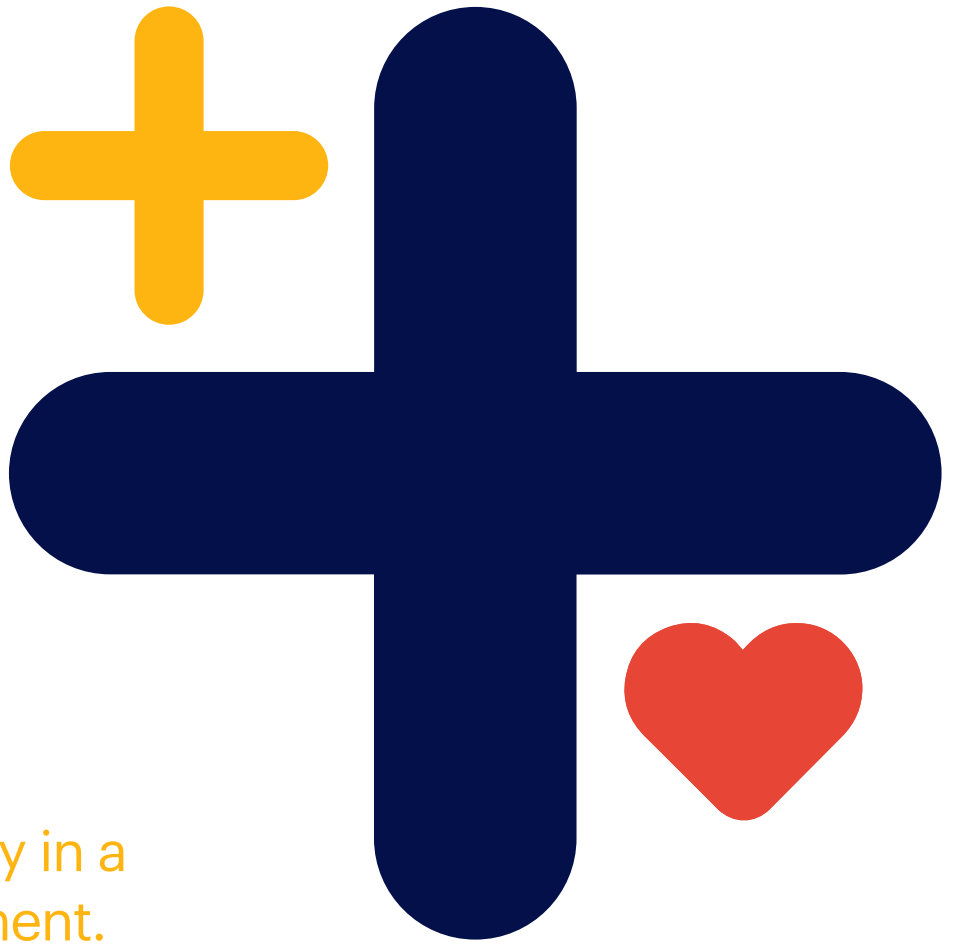
## changing culture and language

The new remote status quo forced organisations to reconsider their day-to-day interactions, and in a broader sense, rethink how to nourish the existing company culture. Leadership sets the tone for company culture, so HR leaders have trained managers to be more considerate and competent in a remote environment.



## offering new employee benefits

Understanding that the usual employee benefits package was ill-suited to the current situation, most companies revised their compensation and benefits schemes. Companies expanded access to both mental and physical healthcare, hired trained psychologists to counsel employees and increased allowances to permit staff to consult their personal therapists more often.



## showing empathy in a remote environment.

The “new normal” of remote work has been an immense challenge for both leaders and employees. Managers stressed that remote work was an extraordinary response to an extraordinary problem; there was simply no such thing as a “normal” psychological or sociological reaction to transitioning from the office to a work-from-home setup.

Business leaders recognised the importance of “leading with empathy” in the present situation, providing both necessary emotional support from afar, and modelling healthy work habits in a variety of ways.

Many of our respondents found that the pandemic forced a shift in perspective and action.

Raul Galera, chief advocate for Singapore-based promotion platform ReferralCandy shared, “The biggest change that we had in terms of communication was being more open, and encouraging people to share about how they were feeling even if it was something personal.”

Employers recognised that the changing situation required an understanding of their staff’s personal circumstances. “Let’s try to understand what makes them have poor performance — [it could be] personal challenges, family challenges or obligations,” explained a Group Head of Talent Acquisition of a consumer services company in Hong Kong SAR.

“I think as a manager, we need to understand first, to see what are the challenges before we jump in and say, ‘okay, your performance has dropped,’” they explained. “[Find out] what is really happening and why [before going] straight to blaming your team.”

## trusting and measuring productivity through clear outcomes.

Prior to the pandemic, managers could monitor their employees' work performance in person. It was easy to ask someone how they were doing or point out the improvements they needed to make to a particular project. Now that remote work is the status quo, executives need to trust their subordinates' ability to get work done even without personal oversight — and for many of our respondents, the transition was not easy to make.

Changi Airport Group's Shirley Cheong said that managers initially found monitoring employee productivity and performance to be "challenging to overcome, and difficult for leaders to reinvent their leadership style" — some checked in with their teams too often, while others were "out of sight, out of mind".

The degree of remote employee oversight depends on whether a company has a culture of trust. For the latter, managers may feel compelled to constantly monitor their staff, sometimes to the detriment of progress. For example, conducting too many check-in meetings or spamming employees' work chats or e-mails with non-urgent and confusing information will only slow them down.

Managers need to learn to rest easy, and trust their employees to do their best for the business. Among our respondents, Shell Malaysia and one IT company in Singapore do not monitor their staff's check-ins and check-outs or when they choose to take leave. The companies trust their staff's sense of personal responsibility and accountability for their work.

In a remote setting, productivity is often measured through outcomes. "It's [now] easier to identify employees who are not performing when everyone is working remotely," explained Chan Kee Siak, Exabytes' founder and CEO. "When everyone is working from home, you don't get to travel or see each other. So the only thing you can do to determine results is to look at the data."

Shriram Krishna, senior director of Singapore-based biotechnology company Thermofisher, echoes this sentiment. As the company had been monitoring productivity primarily through KPIs before the pandemic, little changed in its operations during the transition to remote work. "In general, we don't expect people to be micromanaged. As long as their KPIs are in the green, we are okay," Shriram said. "It's one of the core tenets of how we operate. Being able to trust our employees is an important part of our culture."

The increased frequency of manager-to-employee alignments also helped to engender a sense of trust on the part of the managers and a sense of accountability on the part of employees. At Malaysian serviced office ADA, employees fill out a daily Excel sheet with short updates about their daily tasks and personal experiences. This, CEO and founder Louis Soo says, helps foster a deeper understanding of employees and creates opportunities to troubleshoot issues more easily.

Companies like Hong Kong-based travel start-up Klook have begun to use regular online meetings as the primary transmitter of company culture. They use this platform to introduce new employees, conduct virtual celebrations such as birthdays, and share updates and progress reports to get everyone on the same page.

# case study

# klook.



## democratising learning and development

For Hong Kong-based Klook, the downside of work-from-home was immediately apparent. “Productivity increased with longer working hours at home, because we don’t have a clear boundary between work and life,” Klook’s VP for People and Culture Cary Shek explained. The blurring between work and life began to take a toll on some employees’ mental health.

Starting with a considerable shift in mindset “from quantity of work done, to the quality of work achieved,” Klook acted fast to rein in bad habits and put its workers’ well-being first. The changes they made include:

- **strengthening feedback culture**  
Klook encourages regular check-ins between staff and managers, not just about company KPIs but challenges at home that may hinder productivity.
- **quality, not quantity**  
Employee performance reviews have shifted from pure metrics to the quality of work done and goals achieved — “has the employee done the best they could given their situation?”
- **virtual community building**  
The company set up experience teams in all offices worldwide to improve staff engagement through online recreational activities and celebrations. During festive seasons, teams also created activities to enjoy together over Zoom.
- **enhancing employee perks**  
Klook rolled out support for vaccinations — providing information on available vaccination centres close to them and time off for employees who get vaccinated.



## new tools and rules for building trust and empathy.

Our conversations with managers across the region have underscored the deep interconnection between trust and empathy. The pandemic may have challenged both — but our respondents have largely risen to the challenge, continuing to build on existing relationships using new tools.

The way forward, especially when hybrid work models come into play, is for companies and employees to build a foundation of trust. To do that, they need to be able to connect on a more personal level, by showing empathy and creating real relationships, whether face-to-face or from a distance.

As our respondents have explained, the tools and procedures of remote work haven't made it harder to build trust and empathy, they've simply changed the way work relationships are nurtured.



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food for thought

## how do you build trust and empathy in a remote work environment?

Face-to-face interaction is now reduced to virtual meetings and chats over our screens. Most of us miss the ability to see and interact with our peers in person, which is a crucial step to building trust and empathy across the organisational hierarchy.

Without face time, how can employees truly connect with each other in the workforce?

- Do online communication tools allow employees/managers to accurately gauge the intentions, values, and characters of their leaders, peers or subordinates?
- How can managers develop and monitor KPIs with a workforce they don't meet face-to-face?
- What team-building exercises can you initiate for a remote workforce?
- What activities can you organise to propagate company culture online?
- What have your business leaders learned about building relationships with their workers since the pandemic began?



# 4

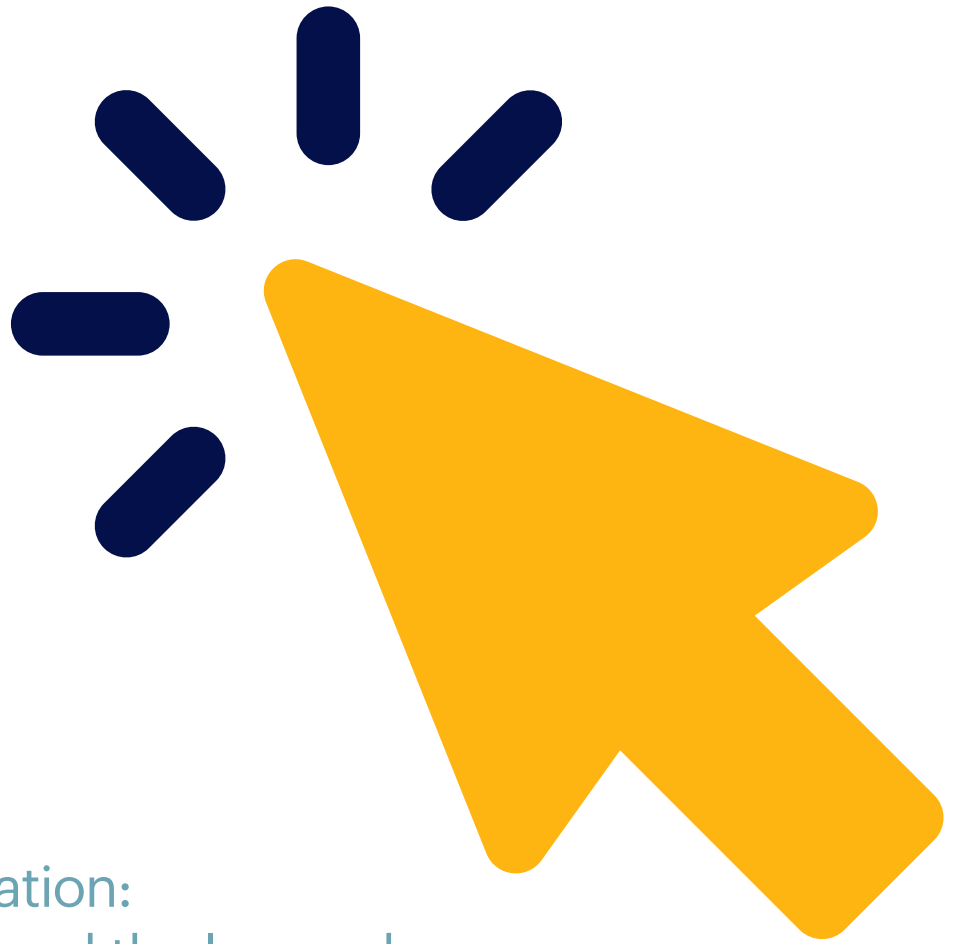


# change breeds innovation.

As 2020 ushered in lockdowns and the rise of remote work, companies found hope in digitalisation.

The need for social distancing meant that most basic business interactions had to be performed virtually. The COVID-era boom in Zoom meetings was especially telling. The platform saw its meeting participants rise from 10 million in December 2019 to 200 million by May 2020<sup>11</sup>, and 300 million a month later<sup>12</sup>.

The trend towards digitalisation was already underway prior to 2020 — the pandemic only accelerated it<sup>13</sup>.



## digital transformation: the frontrunners and the laggards.

Not all digital transitions happened at the same pace. The companies that easily transitioned to remote or hybrid work setups already had key infrastructure and policies in place long before COVID-19.

Malaysian web hosting company Exabytes, for instance, was already allowing employees to work from home; workers used a mobile app to clock their attendance and location. Their most prominent barrier to the adoption of hybrid working was the lack of a proper environment or resources to work from home with.

A few respondents reported more challenges in the beginning. Some pondered over the need to turn on their video during virtual meetings, or if they should be using e-mails or messaging tools to communicate with colleagues.

A 2020 McKinsey survey of executives<sup>14</sup> found that COVID-19 had accelerated companies' digitalisation of their internal operations by three to four years; this was also characteristic of many of our respondents. All of the HR professionals interviewed were already in the midst of their respective post-COVID digitalisation efforts.

Digitalisation was instrumental to each of their post-pandemic pivots, whether they were moving to a hybrid work setup or pioneering new markets for their business.

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food for thought

## how did technology help your company survive the lockdowns?

Some companies were prepared for remote work long before the pandemic while others struggled to catch up when the lockdowns were announced.

How well did your own company fare, and what part did technology play in your transition to the new normal?

- What collaboration infrastructure did you have (or did not have) in place before the lockdown?
- What key business needs did your technology need to address?
- Were any technology-related capital expenditures limiting or prohibitive?
- How long did your workforce take to get accustomed to the infrastructure needed to work-from-home?
- What challenges did your management team face in rolling out any organisational changes in the wake of the pandemic?
- How did technology help in onboarding new hires, or reviewing employee performance during the pandemic?



# digital tools for the new normal.

Many of our respondents were already familiar with the tools used to digitise their operations. But as work-from-home became more common, these platforms evolved from being optional to essential business tools — and even helped to fill other purposes.

The most common tools our respondents used fell into three broad categories:

## cloud-based collaboration tools

The need to share documents, give presentations and collaborate on whiteboards was more important than ever during the pandemic. Respondents like Storehub reported using Google Suite and Miro for their day-to-day collaboration. Randstad uses Slack, Atlassian and Google Suite products such as Google Meet, JIRA and Jamboard to promote internal collaboration and track project progress.

## communication platforms

During lockdowns, video conferencing solutions stepped in to replace face-to-face meetings. These solutions have since expanded to meet other business needs, such as hosting webinars; tallying polls and quizzes for interactions; and serving as breakout rooms to encourage creativity and ideation in smaller groups.

Zoom, in particular, became a tool for other purposes including company-wide town halls, and in Storehub's case, hosting monthly "Friday fun lunches" for team bonding.

## learning & development

The LinkedIn Learning platform came up more than once as respondents' preferred solution for remote learning & development (L&D). Cepheid and TDCX both signed up, finding the platform to be a viable virtual enabler for their existing L&D development roadmaps.

Many organisations were also open to exploring alternative learning solutions. When Malaysian e-commerce platform Instantestore needed to develop new features for their website, it purchased a Udemy video course for its programmers.

L&D requires the human touch through classroom interactions and group activities to truly be effective. TDCX shared that while e-learning only made up 10% of their entire L&D curriculum, the company also considers mentoring and coaching (20%) and on-the-job training (70%) as key parts of the upskilling process.

# the rise of tech-enabled work.

Besides internal engagement, digitalisation also paves the way for automation, where emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and machine learning can augment repetitive, manual and time-consuming tasks.

At first glance, digitalisation poses the danger of eliminating certain job functions. However, they also create fresh demand for others.

New jobs are emerging so quickly that many children in school today will likely work in roles that don't yet exist. It is difficult to anticipate the skills they will need, but there is a clear trend toward soft skills such as creativity, emotional intelligence and negotiation. As machines augment tedious tasks and traditional roles, they create new opportunities for careers that require irreplaceable human skills.

# case study



## changgi airport group.

### using technology to bring people closer

Shirley Cheong, VP of People Development & Experience of Changi Airport Group, says, "When you're in the office, there are few opportunities where people can come together. You can't quite do that remotely."

Changi Airport Group solved this challenge by developing in-house technology that could bring people closer. They created various apps to streamline processes and communication, conduct office check-ins, host virtual town halls and speed up their procurement processes.



5



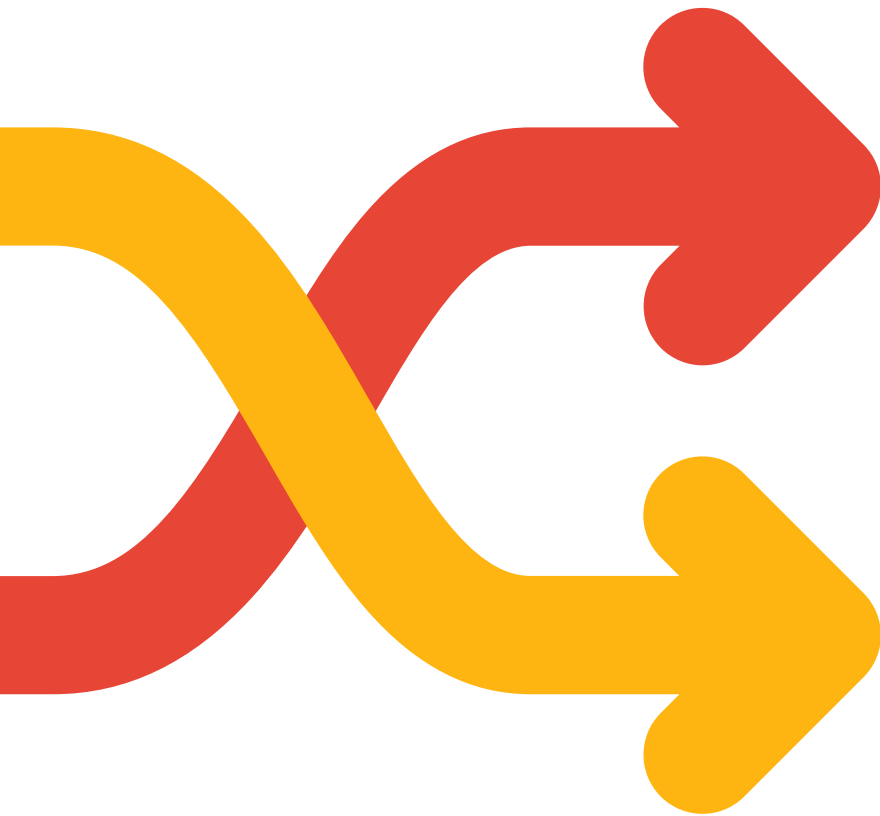


# reimagining the future of work.

When remote working began, organisations had to adapt and pivot swiftly.

Companies took what they knew and transformed their inner workings into their remote equivalents<sup>15</sup>. In-person meetings turned into virtual meetings, and physical whiteboards gave way to digital interactive platforms.

This may have worked for certain simple and straightforward processes, but is “direct translation” the best way to adapt every process? Now that the dust has settled and companies have hit their stride with remote work, there’s room for leaders to reimagine how work will look like in the future.



leverage the whole continuum of talent without the limitation of borders.

Before the pandemic, proximity to work was a significant limitation. Companies looked for talent who stayed in the same city to clock in regularly from 9-to-5. Otherwise, they would go to great lengths to relocate talent, often incurring additional costs in the process. On top of that, there was the risk of the relocation being unsuccessful, which would result in wasted resources and a poor candidate experience.

Now that remote work is an option, companies can hire talent from anywhere.

This offers a number of advantages:

- Save time and money and mitigate risk
- Employers can have their pick of top talent, wherever they are
- More inclusivity and diversity in the organisation

This is a boon for employees as well, because it means they don't need to leave their families and relocate to cities with high costs of living. They also have more opportunities for work-life balance because location independence means they can work from anywhere — including the beach.

The pandemic has also shown that companies don't need to be made up of only permanent hires. Outsourcing portions of work to managed services, contractors, freelancers, and other third-party companies can greatly enhance agility and flexibility, and save on costs.

According to Gartner<sup>16</sup>, 32% of organisations are replacing full-time employees with contingent workers. While this was initially used as a cost-saving measure, Gartner predicts that organisations will continue to employ more contingent workers to maintain flexibility. This paves the way for other job models, including talent sharing and partial compensation (80% pay for 80% work).

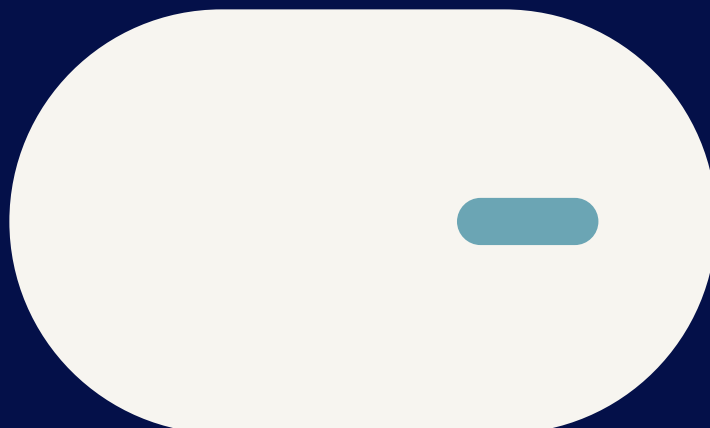
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food for thought

## how will workplace structures change?

These new ways of working put the traditional model of talent management in question, and invite leaders to re-evaluate the linear approach<sup>17</sup> companies have for attracting, developing, and retaining talent. Here are a few questions to consider:

- Is your organisation fully optimising the skills and capabilities of your employees across the enterprise and the broader ecosystem?
- How do you interact with and support your employees to build compelling relationships?
- Since the potential for remote work is determined by tasks and activities, not occupations, what changes can you make to your workforce?
- Instead of building teams based on their specialisations, what other ways can you structure your teams?



# disrupt learning and development initiatives for community-based learning.

Classroom-based learning has always been the most effective method of knowledge sharing for corporate L&D programmes. However, with social distancing measures in place, L&D practitioners had to figure out a new way to continue workforce upskilling — both remotely and virtually.

Earlier, it was mentioned that most of the HR leaders Randstad interviewed, such as Cepheid and TDCX, turned to learning marketplaces such as LinkedIn Learning. This is because these platforms offered a wealth of existing resources as well as virtual, self-learning opportunities for employees during the pandemic.

While they provide continuous learning opportunities for employees, learning marketplaces mean that L&D programmes cannot be customised to suit company needs. Besides the fact that not everyone prefers or excels at classroom learning, many existing L&D programmes have proven to be ineffective<sup>18</sup> for numerous reasons.

The traditional approach towards learning requires change, and it needs to be revamped in light of remote work. Community-based learning<sup>19</sup> is a powerful form of engagement, and it can be applied even in a remote setting.

According to the 2021 Workplace Learning Report<sup>20</sup> Southeast Asia edition by LinkedIn Learning, learners who used the platform's social features watched an average of 30 times more hours of learning content compared to those who didn't.

These social features include:

- Joining Learning Groups to share what they've learned (1,100% increase since the pandemic)
- Sharing courses within a learner's professional network (225% increase)
- Participating in course Q&As (121% increase)

Besides using these platforms, L&D professionals also have the opportunity to create virtual classrooms and courses based on the company's and employees' development needs. For instance, Klook Hong Kong shared that it launched an e-learning portal during the pandemic. Its L&D team prioritised creating courses around skills that would help employees adapt to the transition to remote work, such as "taking ownership of their tasks and responsibilities."

Klook also promoted knowledge sharing within the organisation, and encouraged individuals to lead "train the trainer" sessions where they could share their expertise through virtual workshops. Some courses Klook trainers have conducted include Python programming and SEO marketing.

Randstad's on-demand e-learning portal "Randstad University" allows employees from all over the world to access more than 2,000 course modules, allowing them to learn at their own pace and stay ahead of the recruitment game.

As learning technology becomes more sophisticated, L&D professionals could experiment with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning to create more personalised courses. These technologies can identify difficult subject matters for learners and recommend additional resources to improve engagement and help them catch up.

As the world continues to digitalise and business environments grow more competitive, the upskilling and reskilling of talent will be a key theme for HR leaders moving into the future of work.



% of respondents that consider “good training” an important employee value proposition, based on the Randstad Employer Brand Research report 2021

Hong Kong SAR	45%
Malaysia	55%
Singapore	59%

Based on the Randstad Employer Brand Research report 2021

## achieving sustainable workplaces.

According to a report published by Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit<sup>21</sup>, 21% of the world's 2,000 largest public companies have committed to meet net zero targets. Global warming and quickly depleting natural resources have contrived many companies and individuals to become more conscious and adopt sustainable practices.

One of the ways to make an impact on sustainability is hybrid or remote work. When fewer people drive or commute to work, it creates a positive environmental impact. Flexjobs noted that with 3.9 million employees<sup>22</sup> working from home, the ensuing reduction of greenhouse gas emissions would have the same effect as taking 600,000 cars off the road.

This can be supplemented with other sustainability measures associated with digitalisation and remote work. Paperless offices; reduced air-conditioning and electricity consumption, and minimised infrastructure through the cloud help complete the “green” package for companies looking to reduce their eco-footprint.

# what do companies risk when they don't innovate?

Even before the pandemic, remote and flexible work arrangements were a priority among employees. Flexible working has evolved from being seen as a perk to an expectation.

A 2019 IWG Global Workspace Survey<sup>23</sup> of more than 15,000 respondents around the world found that 75% of employees believe that flexible working is the new normal.

More importantly, 83% of workers said they would choose a job that offers flexible work over one that doesn't. Respondents also said that being able to choose where they work is more important to them than working in a prestigious company (54%) or having a more prestigious role (32%).

The rising expectation for work flexibility comes hand-in-hand with the growing importance of work-life balance — a phenomenon that is aligned with the REBR study results. If people have more control over their schedules, they will be better able to manage work and personal life. Flexibility also empowers employees<sup>24</sup> to decide what the best way for them to work is, rather than having employers decide where and when work needs to be done.

However, some business leaders are reverting to their old ways when faced with the decision to offer hybrid work arrangements as a long-term option. The 2019 IWG survey found that this resistance to change comes from a fear of modifying organisational culture (60%). This sentiment rings true today, with many companies opting for a return to office<sup>25</sup> when the pandemic abates.

Choosing to delay or forgo implementing hybrid work policies can cost companies much more in the long run. Businesses that resist the call for remote or flexible work not only risk losing out on quality talent, but may also struggle to retain existing employees. Companies that refuse to offer flexible work may be perceived as being inconsiderate of employees' needs, which will reflect negatively on the company's employer brand image.

One such example is when Apple's CEO Tim Cook asked his staff to return to the office<sup>26</sup> in early September 2021 after months of remote work. Employees were expected to spend three days of the week in the office, and the other two remotely.

In response, about 80 employees penned an open letter to Cook, saying they delivered "the same quality of products and services that Apple is known for, all while working almost completely remotely." So why the insistence on going back to the office?

Apple employees felt like the company's flexible work policy forced people "to choose between either a combination of our families, our well-being and being empowered to do our best work, or being a part of Apple." This rigid enforcement of office work unsurprisingly compelled some of their staff to resign.

Microsoft's chief people officer Kathleen Hogan<sup>27</sup> said it best when she affirmed that companies need to have "a really good reason why it's really important for people to be in the office 9-5." Otherwise, employees have plenty of companies that offer flexible and remote work arrangements to choose from.

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food for thought

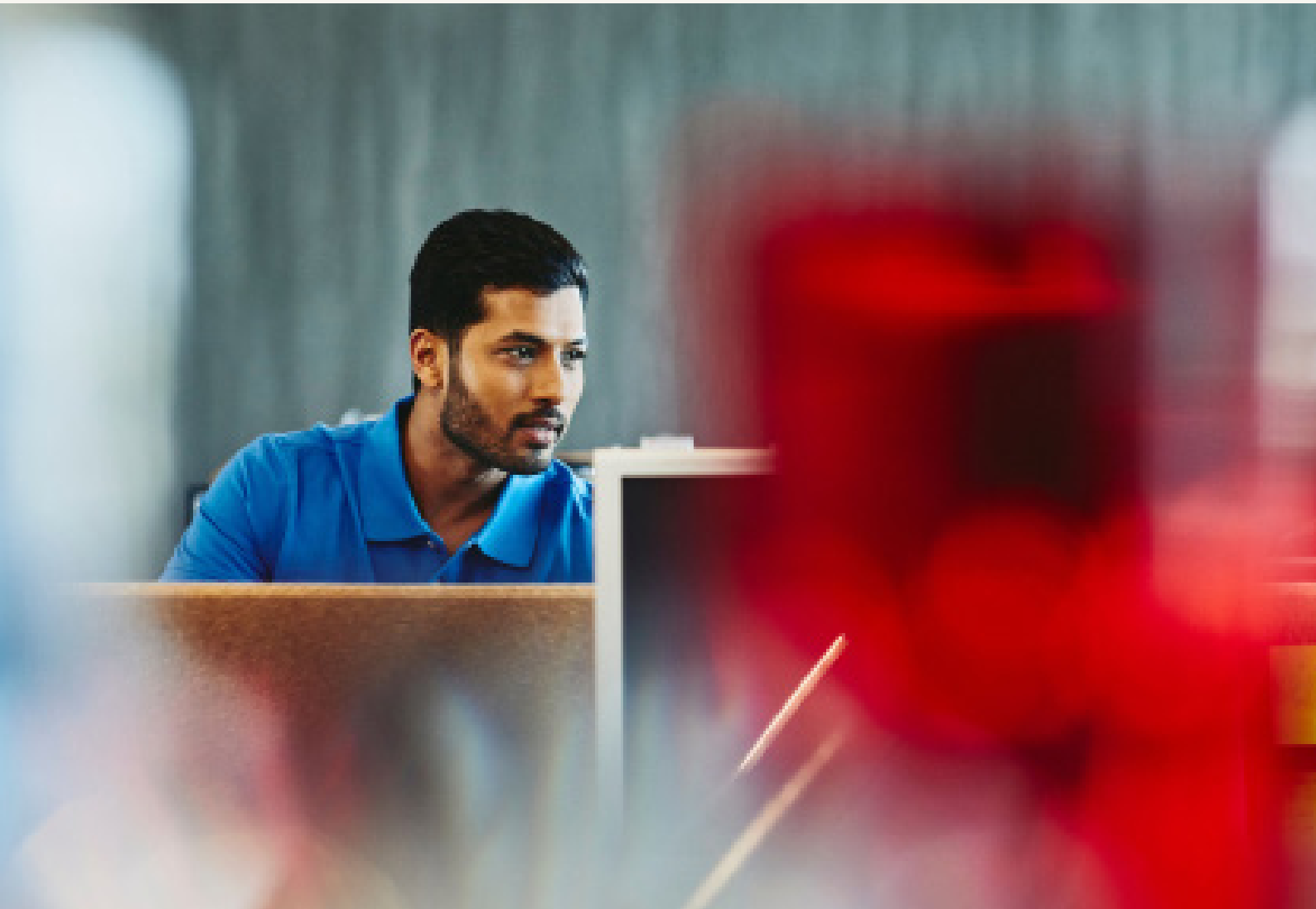
## is offering remote work enough?

Companies need to consider the broader changes that need to be made in the future of work. Yahoo, for instance, was an early adopter of remote work, but reverted to an office-centric culture later on. It lost ground to newer competitors over the years due to its slow response to move with modern times.

This is proof that going remote without organisational and cultural overhauls won't necessarily result in positive results. What changes need to be made to make remote and flexible work beneficial for everyone in the new normal?



6





# the challenge for human resources leaders.

When reorienting one's entire workforce from an office-based setup to a hybrid or remote arrangement, the question for employers is less of a "why" and more of a "how".

“When you shift your approach to work from 9-to-5 to getting things done, it changes the whole mentality of the company.”

Raul Galera  
Chief Advocate  
ReferralCandy





HR leaders accustomed to a fixed, in-office culture must now face the challenge of envisioning and enabling the transition into a new work model.

Here are some challenges they may face in the process:

### implementing new HR policies to accommodate flexible work

HR leaders will need to develop new SOPs for hybrid working environments. Employers will need to consider training programmes to help assimilate teams back to the workplace and determine best practices for flexible work. HR leaders will also need to rethink employee benefits packages for a hybrid work model and consider how they will deviate from existing ones. They may consider offering more work-from-home benefits such as subsidies for tech equipment or utilities, and even insurance coverage that includes employees' homes as official workplaces.

### adjusting leadership styles for the new normal

Many leaders had difficulty changing their leadership styles to accommodate new ways of working. Some overcompensated by micromanaging team members, while others took a more hands-off approach. In developing the company's hybrid work culture, business leaders must build trust across the organisation through employee ownership and empathy beyond day-to-day work requirements.

### communicating effectively across a hybrid workspace

Engagement is one of the biggest challenges that HR leaders face. Establishing clear lines of communication between teams and being consistent and concise will be integral in nourishing the company's culture, especially in a hybrid or flexible work environment.

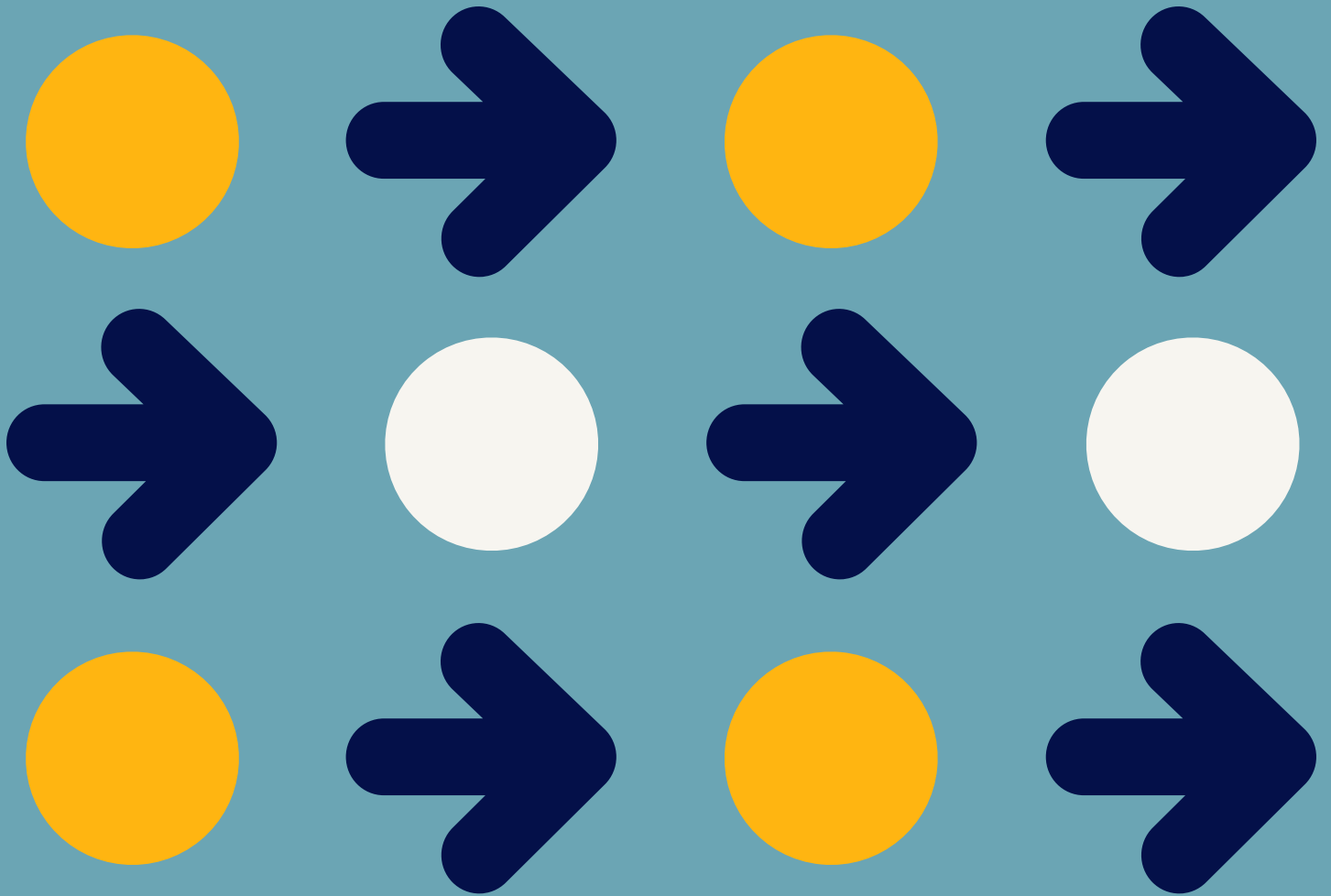
### creating an environment where it's genuinely safe and acceptable to work remotely

Lastly, HR leaders need to ensure that the entire company buys into the new way of work. Even if companies offer remote or flexible work, company culture may not actually encourage it — one such indicator is if employees who come into the office are favoured for promotions over the ones who work remotely. The entire workforce — no matter the tenure, age or gender — needs to change the way they measure productivity and understand that work is what you do, and not where you do it.

what does  
the workplace  
of the future  
look like  
for you?

On the cusp between recovery and a new normal, companies are now faced with the inevitability of change.

But what that change encompasses is in our hands now.



This is an opportunity for companies to deliberate rather than react, and choose how they want to be perceived by not just their workforce, but competitors, customers, and potential candidates. Our research has shown that people are the most important asset of any company, and taking a people-centric approach to work can spell the difference between failure and success.

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We support people and organisations in realising their full potential, and we strive to move them forward because we understand that your success depends on the people around you. Randstad believes in the power of people and matches great candidates to the right employers. By serving as a trusted human partner in today's technology-driven world of talent, we help people secure rewarding jobs and stay relevant in the ever-changing world of work.

## about the research

Randstad's "The Future of Work is Remote" report is based on the Randstad's 2021 Employer Brand Research (REBR) report — the most comprehensive independent research on employer branding anywhere in the world — and interviews with 16 founders and HR professionals from both multinational corporations and medium to large startups across Hong Kong SAR, Malaysia and Singapore. It provides unique insights into the world of work and gives an understanding of employee and job seekers' drivers and motivations. With Randstad's long and successful track record in delivering employer branding insights since 2000, you can use this research to shape your organisation's branding, talent attraction and retention strategies.

## we can help

As employer branding and HR experts, we combine both global knowledge and local insights to help you transform your employer brand into the most powerful attraction and retention tool you have. Whether you are interested in elevating your employee experience or understanding how you can use our research to drive more effective workforce strategies, we can help.

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## acknowledgements

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