

Know what you want

THREE months ago, Mr Oliver Foo, 48, left his role as country head of a 350-strong MNC office to start his own consultancy firm. He wanted to branch out on his own but the move has also given him a more flexible work schedule and more time with his two children, aged three and seven.

But work-life balance need not be about drastic moves, he says. "There are a lot of things that the individual can take control of... Work-life balance cannot be an accident, and it will not fall into your lap. The individual has to pro-actively go after it."

For him, "the small things matter". They can schedule half-hour periods of down time into each working day, he says, whether to spend time with family, meditate or exercise.

Mr Foo's philosophy that the individual should take charge ties in with the views of many human resource practitioners, who say it is all the more necessary when employees seek some form of flexible work arrangement.

Employers are now more open to such arrangements but they are wary of employees who have an entitlement complex and who may abuse the flexibility given to them.

Individuals need to bear the organisation's needs in mind even as they determine what kind of

flexible work arrangement best suits them.

Ms Cheryl Liew-Chng, CEO of workplace consultancy Life-Workz, says that when discussing flexi-work arrangements with their supervisors, individuals should take care to show that they will keep "delivering not the same workload, but the same work responsibility".

An important element, adds Ms Liew-Chng, is for the individual to also involve his teammates, by meeting them to tell them "what's in it for them" and by making clear how he can be reached when out of the office.

For those who will be out of the office for an extended period of time, it is important to set aside a regular day to visit the office to keep in contact with the team, she says.

Once on such an arrangement, the onus is on the individual to also be flexible and step up more during his company's peak periods, says Mr Foo.

It is up to the individual to make the most of the work arrangement he has shaped with his employer.

Says Mr Foo: "You need to learn to give that same focus to your family or your faith or whatever you count important, that you would give to any other task at work."



When Mr Oliver Foo left a big MNC to start his own company, he found it gave him more control over his time. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM



Mr Ho, armed with an iPad, has been able to manage his work-life balance a lot better since his firm ramped up its use of technology. ST PHOTO: AZIZ HUSSIN

Tap technology

AN URGENT call from a client used to send engineer Ho See Fong scurrying back to the office at night to access information.

With his company's move onto a cloud server last year, he can now do the same from home.

That means dinner with his wife, before logging on to attend to his clients' queries.

Perhaps the biggest change of all: the 37-year-old will become a dad soon, though he laughs off any link between impending fatherhood and his firm's use of technology.

His engineering consultancy company, HY Mechanical and Electrical, invested in iPads for its 22 staff. It plans to recover the costs by applying to a government productivity fund.

Advances in technology infrastructure mean the cost of moving onto a cloud-based system by SingTel is less than the traditional e-mail system they used to maintain.

Even payroll and accounting systems can be put securely on the cloud.

Google and SingTel say such tools allow employees to be freed from the office and to access their work from anywhere.

In Mr Ho's case, as long as he has an iPad with him, he can directly update mechanical and electrical engineering plans from construction sites and at client meet-

ings, without needing to go back to the office.

Simpler tools exist. Google shares that its free applications include an online calendar where a person can set limits on his working hours - those who try to book a meeting outside those hours will get a warning message.

Its Hangouts application allows multiple-user video-conferencing. Not only is this used for meetings, Google has found that many employees working out of the office use it as a social tool to stay connected with their teammates.

But technology can be both a blessing and curse, says Randstad's managing director for Asia-Pacific Deb Loveridge.

The HR services company found that seven in 10 Singaporeans receive calls or e-mails outside regular office hours, and 67 per cent do so when on annual leave.

Half of all employees say their bosses expect them to be contactable at all times.

She says: "Employees need to set their own boundaries to ensure they spend uninterrupted time with friends and family and allow themselves the chance to relax..."

"They should talk to their employer to set clear expectations of what work needs to infringe on family and personal time."



Working hard, living well

The Prime Minister breathed new life into an old campaign to improve work-life balance, when he said in his National Day Rally speech that more needs to be done to help employers promote flexible work arrangements and improve local work culture.

The Government is also open to offsetting the costs to employers of implementing measures that help.

The new drive is all the more urgent against a backdrop of falling marriage and fertility rates. The pervasive dominance of work over life seems to be holding some young people back from starting families.

Yet, despite high-level committees and multimillion-dollar funds over the last decade, leaders acknowledge that little significant progress has been made. The feedback is that work-life balance remains more a wish than the norm.

Phua Mei Pin talks to employers, employees and experts, and proposes six ways to tip work-life balance from the realm of talk into reality.



A role for part-timers

IF THERE was a way for her to lead a pharmaceutical sales team on a contract basis, Ms Dawn Tam, 49, would rejoin the sector where she first cut her teeth in a heartbeat.

But though she continues to get calls from headhunters 16 years after leaving the industry, their offers are still only for a permanent employee.

"A lot of people actually want to work part-time now. And in my experience, I find that many companies can do more work on a project basis but they don't do so yet," she says.

No such arrangement existed in 1997, when she quit her job to spend more time on parenting. So

Ms Tam founded her own company where she pioneered a different employment model.

At enrichment education provider IQ Kidz, she has built up an 80-strong pool of certified teachers who work entirely on a choose-your-own-hours basis.

She sends out e-mail notices about the one- to two-hour slots of art, speech and drama, and science classes her company provides to pre-school centres and primary schools. Teachers sign up to suit their own schedules.

"Sometimes they even bring their kids to work," she adds.

This model has allowed her to bring housewives into the workforce, as well as degree holders who left full-time jobs they could not scale down, for more time with their families.

Teachers have stayed with her for more than 10 years because the arrangement gives them control over their time, which they

say is hard to find elsewhere.

What Ms Tam does to empower her whole company is something experts believe other organisations can do as well, to help their permanent staff have a better work-life balance.

In particular, they say that drawing out the economically inactive, instead of piling more duties on those already working, is a good solution, given Singapore's tight labour market.

Many companies cut their headcount during the 2008 global recession and have not stepped up hiring again, leaving the same permanent staff to do more work as business began picking up, they say.

Ms Stella Tang, the Singapore director of recruitment firm Robert Half, says: "What we tell companies is that they should hire contract staff to take care of the workload, to ensure that it takes away the burden from the permanent staff."

This can be done for predictable peak periods, such as at financial year-end for an accounting

firm, where contract staff can be brought on board for simpler tasks like data entry. This can also help to cover staff who are away on longer leave.

The plus point of this approach, says Ms Tang, is that it is generally easier to get approval from the head office for contract, rather than full-time, workers.

Human resources practitioners say the use of an interim workforce is particularly amenable to the services sector, and in sales and business development work.

It can also apply to senior-level project management work, not just lower-level duties. They say a company can build up and manage its own interim pool instead of turning to recruitment firms.

According to Singapore National Employers Federation executive director Koh Juan Kiat, some companies already plug their manpower gap by using flexible arrangements to attract housewives, retirees and students to work.

But Mr Koh notes that they must have sufficiently robust HR systems to achieve this.

IQ Kidz's Ms Dawn Tam, seen here teaching a Mandarin speech and drama class, allows teachers in her company to work entirely on schedules that suit them. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM



Buffet-style benefits

LOOKING around her office at UBS Bank, legal counsel for Asia-Pacific Jun Wong is not short of examples of colleagues on unique flexi-work plans, each tailor-made to meet that person's specific needs.

One colleague works from home two days a week to bring up a baby she adopted. The company gave her adoption leave.

Another colleague starts work at a later hour every day as her busiest hours are later in the day.

Yet others who are studying part-time get weeks of paid leave to prepare for their exams.

Ms Wong, 37, is herself a beneficiary of this make-your-own-flexi-hours approach. Six out of

her seven years at UBS have been spent in some form of flexi-work arrangement, so that she can manage her needs as a single parent of one.

The specific arrangement has changed over the years because her needs changed as her son, now eight, went from infancy to pre-school to primary school.

"It was actually my boss who suggested to me, whenever you want a flexible arrangement, let's talk... I looked at my workload, came up with a proposal and he said okay. It was easy," she says.

Ms Wong and her colleagues enjoy something that those in the human resource field say should be further explored to improve work-life balance for all employees across the board.

Says Mr David Ang, executive director of the Singapore Human Resources Institute: "Our administration of work-life balance seems

to be very one-dimensional now. Increasing maternity leave may just be useful for certain segments of the workforce. What about the call for time to take care of aged parents? What about those whose children need attention for their schooling?"

As he points out, there are multiple generations within the workforce, including the highly mobile Gen-Y, baby-boomers and older "traditionalists" accustomed to more formal working hours.

Mr Ang advocates a "buffet-style" system of leave and benefits, where employees can pick and choose what they need according to their particular stage in life.

To do this, he says an organisation must first develop a way, such as a regular survey, to learn the needs of its employees.

UBS also offers Ms Wong and her co-workers a "buffet" of benefits from which they can select the combination that fits them. While a young parent may trade in his employee points for more child-care leave, a single may use

(From left) UBS employees Suzanna Neo, Peter Gillman, Jun Wong, Veni Ramasamy, Chan Lai Hing and Alejandra Real-Mendez have individual flexi-work plans. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

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DIFFERENT PRIORITIES
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OCBC head of HR planning Jacinta Low

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his for recreational activities.

OCBC Bank has a similar system of "FlexDollars" that employees use to buy benefits. Its head of HR planning, Ms Jacinta Low, says: "The best work-life balance is different for each employee because we all have different priorities and different lives. Our priorities will change as we move through different life stages."



Colleagues who care

WHEN the stem cell treatment for her son's leukaemia went well, one of the first things Ms Martina Ling did was to send a "thank you" note to her managers and colleagues at OCBC.

"Because of your support, you have contributed to Joshua's recovery," she wrote.

When her son, who is now 21, was first diagnosed, she thought of quitting. Her boss and colleagues convinced her that they could work out a way for her to be her son's primary caregiver and remain vice-president of quality service management at her bank.

The 48-year-old mother of two stayed on as a full-time staff member, but most days she worked from the hospital on her company laptop. Her colleagues

volunteered to cover for her at meetings. They sent her mail to her home if it piled up.

"My colleagues were always very sensitive. I was never harassed by SMS or phone calls. Apart from giving me their work support, they were always concerned and asked how Joshua was doing," she said.

Ms Ling gained from social capital at the workplace, which lets an employee know she can count on help from her colleagues if she cannot do something alone.

That is how Mr Peter Ong thinks of social capital. He is chief executive of the Singapore Management University's Human Capital Leadership Institute.

He says employees are better able to manage their commitments both at and outside of work if they are in environments with high social capital.

"It is the same idea that makes a community or society work. It's neighbour helping neighbour. At work, it's colleague helping col-

league," says Mr Ong.

Workplace social capital is linked to each employee's own sense of resilience, optimism, hope and self-efficacy. So when both are at a high level, employees feel more engaged and happier at work, he adds.

This leads him to suggest tracking engagement levels in companies and supporting those that do well.

Mr David Ang, executive director of the Singapore Human Resources Institute, says it is important to acknowledge team members who step up to fill a manpower gap when a colleague goes on maternity leave or other flexi-work arrangements.

"If a team of five people has to fulfil certain objectives and one person goes on maternity leave, if the four can fulfil them, let the group of four benefit from it through some added bonus," he suggests.

Another approach is to divvy up the cost of hiring a replacement, and pay that out to the team members who covered for their absent colleague.

On her part, Ms Ling made

Ms Martina Ling (seated) got support from colleagues like (from left) Mr Neo Bock Cheng, 47; Mr Alfred Wong, 35; Ms Woon Yoon Hsieh, 49; and Ms Joyce Tang, 50, when her son was ill. PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

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REWARD THE TEAM
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– Mr David Ang, executive director of the Singapore Human Resources Institute

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sure her output did not drop. She turned up for key monthly meetings and was on call at all times. "If calls came in during a time when I had to be with Joshua in an emergency, I would SMS my colleagues to let them know what time I would call them back."



A boss who believes

MR ERIC Tan gives his staff extra leave for good attitude, good performance, length of service and even for staying healthy.

An employee at his real estate appraisal company, GSK Global, can get up to 49 days of leave a year.

"I tell them 'all of you are even better than a CEO'," says the 42-year-old, who takes no more than 10 days off a year.

Nor is it just a case of quantity. Mr Tan's employees can take their leave flexibly, a quarter of a day at a time, or encash it if they are not able to use it up.

They can also choose their working hours.

It is thanks to such measures that Mr Tan has been able to retain his staff in a highly competitive industry.

He realised this when one of his top performers showed him

seven job offers she had received, only to tell him that she would not consider any of them.

Such measures require personal commitment from the boss. As a member of the Tripartite Committee on Work-Life Strategy, Mr Tan says many bosses here still question the business case for work-life balance.

Experts add that even bosses who support more work-life balance for their employees still face cost and manpower pressures, and need the right tools.

Their greatest challenge, says president of the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (Asme) Chan Chong Beng, is how to set and track the right key performance indicators (KPIs) if they are to let their staff work from home or on flexible hours. It is for lack of the right KPIs that bosses continue to demand maximum face-time from their staff.

Agreeing, Ms Andrea Ross, managing director of recruitment consultancy Robert Walters, says: "Companies will need to closely watch their KPIs and clearly outline employee expectations if they

are to maintain productive management of staff."

In recognition of the role and difficulties of bosses, Asme intends to promote work-life balance "from the top".

Mr Chan says bosses can send the message from day one, during the job interview, that they are prepared for flexi-work arrangements.

They can also be the first to raise the idea of flexi-work when staff members face more family pressures, since "most people would not want to bring these up with the *tokay*", he says.

HR experts add that bosses can avoid sending e-mails on weekends and leave the workplace on time, especially where staff are afraid to leave before the boss.

Asme plans seminars for SMEs and is training its advisers to SMEs to include work-life balance as an element of enterprise development.

One way for bosses to overcome their anxieties is to pilot work-life balance measures for just one team, for example, or for a fixed period of time, before deciding whether to scale up the measures, suggests Mr Chan.

Counselling patience for results, he says: "At least give it a

One way for bosses to overcome their anxieties is to pilot work-life balance measures for just one team, for example, or for a fixed period of time, before deciding whether to scale up the measures, suggests Mr Chan.

try for three months, and set very clear KPIs."

To those who continue to have doubts, Mr Tan says: "With all this labour tightening, bosses have to really learn how to trust employees. Empower them first, adjust accordingly... If they can produce equally good results, who cares what they're doing outside the office?"

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