More will work from the office, but hybrid is here to stay
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2025 marks five years since Covid-19 shattered entrenched beliefs about the nature of work.

When the pandemic swept in, it forced companies around the world to accelerate digitalisation at an unprecedented pace so their employees could work remotely some or all of the time.

Workers quickly learnt to treasure the benefits of remote and hybrid work, which allowed them to better balance corporate and personal commitments.

Headlines hailed hybrid as the default work mode in 2023, but by the end of 2024, the tables were turned as multinationals from e-commerce giant Amazon to tech company Dell recalled their white-collar staff back to the office five days a week.

Coffee chain Starbucks threatened to fire staff who did not work three days in the office, and some companies started tracking their employees' location in various ways, such as when they scanned their passes.

In Singapore, employers are calling the shots even in a tight labour market.

About 61 per cent of the workforce is now working from the office, up 7 per cent year on year, according to Blackbox Research's platform SensingSG. It polls 1,500 Singaporeans and permanent residents aged 18 and up every three months.

Yet, survey after survey indicates that Singapore workers want flexibility in their jobs, which covers not just telecommuting but also arrangements such as flexi-hours, compressed work weeks and part-time work.

Workplace experts say that despite the wave of return-to-work mandates, hybrid arrangements are here to stay.

"We are seeing a natural fluctuation as both employers and employees try to work out a middle ground between work arrangements between pre-pandemic times and during or immediately after the pandemic," says Assistant Professor Ong Wei Jee from the Department of Management and Organisation at NUS Business School.

"The decline in hybrid work the past year is not unique to Singapore and reflects a broader trend where individuals and organisations are slowly coming to a more stable new normal."

Associate Professor Trevor Yu from NTU's Nanyang Business School believes that most companies here are not out to do away with work-from-home (WFH) or remote work arrangements.

"It will still be about trying to find the right balance between in-person and WFH days for which types of jobs and what types of teams," he says.

Organisational sociologist Issac Lim points to the fact that the public service – the nation's largest employer with about 153,000 officers – advocates for and practises flexible work arrangements (FWA).

"This has a significant impact on workplace practices locally," says Dr Lim, founder of Anthro Insights, a social enterprise focused on driving development innovations.

It remains to be seen what impact the month-old Tripartite Guidelines On Flexible Work Arrangement Requests will have on employee satisfaction and turnover rates, but Prof Yu thinks they will help workers who may not have dared to ask for flexible options previously.

"Knowing that there is a formal guideline policy in place should give some reassurance that asking for and receiving FWAs is within each individual's rights," he says.

The guidelines aim to make it easier for workers to request such arrangements and help employers retain and attract talent, although bosses can veto such requests based on business considerations.

Prof Yu also sees more companies engaging their employees to understand their needs and designing customised flexible arrangements in terms of schedule, location and workload in 2025.

Market competition will result in better flexible options for workers over time, says Prof Ong.

"If workers increasingly choose companies because of FWA-related reasons, those companies with poor policies will have to improve to compete," he says.

That is certainly the case with Gen Zers, born between 1997 and 2012, who will make up 27 per cent of the Asia-Pacific workforce in 2025.

As their number grows, so will their voice in the boardroom.

Seven out of 10 Gen Z workers say having hybrid options influences their decision to stay in their current jobs, according to an International Workplace Group (IWG) survey of 1,003 office workers aged 18 to 29 in July 2024. IWG owns serviced office brands such as Regus and Spaces.

Whatever their age, it is clear that the widespread success of hybrid work arrangements has "permanently altered" workers' expectations, Dr Lim notes.

"While job seekers in Singapore are generally practical and understand when on-site presence is

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necessary, they're also perceptive. When companies mandate full-time office attendance for roles that could be performed remotely, it reveals much about their organisational culture and management philosophy," he says.

"Companies that resist this evolution risk two significant disadvantages. They'll restrict themselves to a smaller talent pool and potentially sacrifice productivity gains. Moreover, those maintaining rigid workplace policies may find themselves losing their most capable employees to competitors who embrace more flexible arrangements."

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Hybrid work arrangements are not likely to disappear even as more workers return to the office. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

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