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Circuit breaker: Working from home

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How one company's early efforts to accommodate employees' work-life needs primed it for COVID-19-triggered work from home requirements

When Terence Quek, CEO of [Emergenetics Asia Pacific](#), accepted the invitation to go on air on Singapore's current affairs radio station CNA938 to talk about his personal experience of having his employees work from home, he never would have guessed that the Prime Minister would announce a "Circuit Breaker" to minimise spread of COVID-19 just two days before his interview, making "Work From Home" ("WFH") a national reality most Singaporean businesses and employees have needed to grapple with.

Singapore's fight to contain the COVID-19 spread started with an announcement of [DORSCON Orange](#) on Friday, 7 February 2020. From the Monday that followed, business continuity plans kicked in for Emergenetics Asia Pacific. Based in Singapore and with a full-time team of 13 supporting a regional network of more than 2,000 associates, the company is the regional headquarters for a global company that delivers people and organisation development solutions. To ensure business continuity, Terence and his team reorganised themselves into segregated work teams, working mostly from home, going to the office only when necessary. The team also scheduled timings when employees from the same work team could go to the office to minimize contact.

One of the reasons why Terence's company could switch to working remotely entirely was because the company had already implemented Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA) for several years. Seeing this as the future of work and workplaces, the company had, over the years, innovated its human resource policies and put in place various practices such as FWA.

"There are organisations out there like the [Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices \(TAFEP\)](#) that have been promoting FWA for a while, not necessarily WFH, but to keep work arrangements as flexible as possible to accommodate employees' needs according to their life stages," Terence explains.

While FWA introduced at Emergenetics Asia Pacific were motivated by the company's desire to address employees' needs, they allowed Terence to transit his entire team speedily to working virtually and remotely when the Circuit Breaker kicked in. Looking back, Terence believed they were lucky they had such practices already in place.

"This situation now forces companies to really think about how to redefine the future of work to ensure that they can continue to keep the business running." Saying so, Terence was also quick to recognise that not all organisations can have their employees work remotely or adopt the full suite of FWA practices, but he believed for those that can, it was time to embark on such practices.

MAKING WORKING FROM HOME WORK

Given that most people would be navigating working from home for the first time, Terence was asked to share what he thought worked for him and his team after almost two months of working from home.

He cited that caring for the well-being of employees was crucial, especially paying attention to mental well-being. Making reference to Emergenetics Asia Pacific's business philosophy – "WE value people", Terence emphasised that "it is important to take care of the people who chose to work for us. We are responsible in ensuring that they are doing well mentally."

Terence shared that adjusting to a new routine can be stressful, and stress can be further exacerbated by uncertainties during challenging times. "More than ever, we need to support one

another, encourage team members to practice self-care and for team members to believe that we can ride through this together,” he shared.

While working remotely from home means no physical social gatherings, “we still need to maintain the community and take care of one another, even if it means doing so through different format or means.” Terence also cited that the company encouraged the practice of mindfulness.

Besides following the [best practices](#) recommended by TAFEP, Terence shared that to make WFH work, ground rules built on core values are important, especially in preventing burnout that can happen when boundaries between work and personal hours are blurred.

“We put clear guidelines on how we should work, even when we work from home. We created team norms and use technology to help us safeguard each other’s personal time. For example, after office hours, we avoid sending text messages and instead, send an email or message over Slack which allows for the snooze function.”

To further safeguard personal time of his team members, he communicated with stakeholders to ask that they reach out to his team members only during office hours. “Respect is one of our core values, and we have built a culture of respect within the team. We respect each other’s time and understand that working from home does not mean working or being available 24/7.”

Aside from these guidelines, what contributed to the success of WFH for the company was that employees had a good understanding of each other’s preferred way of communicating, interacting and working and learnt the skill of collaborating with people who may think or behave differently. The company uses the Emergenetics psychometric instrument as part of their employee integration, new member onboarding, and team development. This allows everyone to establish interpersonal strategies to strengthen relationships, reduce misunderstandings, and be more effective when collaborating remotely.

For Terence, insights gained through such a tool also allowed him to be a better leader. “Understanding how my team members prefer to think and behave at work allows me to better engage them regardless of whether we are working together physically or remotely,” says Terence.

Terence saw this situation presenting businesses with the opportunity to learn, to adapt, and to transform. He also believes that when it comes to FWA or WFH, companies will be able to find an approach that works for them. “We just need to be creative, keep innovating, and keep going.”