

**Promotion of Family-friendly Employment Practices
for Better Work-life Balance**

PURPOSE

This paper sets out the principles and common family-friendly employment practices (FFEPs), describes the current practices of implementing FFEPs in Hong Kong, highlights the effort undertaken by relevant parties in promoting the concept and explores the scope for further promotion of FFEPs.

WHAT ARE FFEPs

2. People's lives are getting busier all the time. Employees today are often juggling work and other personal commitments, especially those related to the family such as looking after young children and elderly parents. An employee who can effectively manage work and family responsibilities will be more productive and committed at the workplace. Thus, organizations which work with their employees to find and implement solution to work and family balance will create a win-win situation for both the business and employees. FFEPs commonly refer to formal and informal terms and conditions provided by employers that exceed the statutory minimum provisions. Generally speaking, they are voluntarily adopted by employers to help employees manage their family responsibilities and cope with changing circumstances and needs at different stages of life by offering more choices of flexible and varied work arrangements and support to employees.

3. There is no exhaustive list of types of FFEPs. Employers can flexibly implement different or even innovative practices to suit the best interests of both the organizations and employees. Generally speaking, FFEPs may comprise the following measures:

Flexible work arrangements

4. Flexible work arrangements differ from traditional workplace-centered arrangements of evenly distributed daily work hours, and are offered by employers to enable employees to better manage work and family responsibilities. Examples include flexible working hours, 5-day work week, home-based work (carrying out all or part of the work at home or at a location away from the conventional office that is more convenient to the employee), job sharing (sharing a full-time position with another employee), compressed work schedule (working full-time hours in fewer working days), etc.

5. A more common form of flexible work arrangements in Hong Kong is flexible working hours. Employees can choose, within set limits, the times they start and finish work. Some companies adopt core working hours around which employees work to deliver a total number of contracted hours.

6. More companies are also adopting a 5-day work week which allows employees more flexibility to attend to personal and family matters during the two rest days per week. For most people, this means Monday to Friday with a 2-day weekend to allow employees to enjoy with their families a longer period of leisure.

Family care leave

7. Another way in which employers can assist employees fulfill work and family responsibilities simultaneously is through the granting of non-statutory leave benefits relating to the family of an employee. Examples include additional maternity leave, paternity leave, marriage leave, compassionate or bereavement leave, adoption leave, parental leave, etc. They can either be paid or unpaid, depending on the contractual agreement between the employers and employees.

Employee support schemes

8. Examples of employee support schemes include childcare and nursery services, scholarships or education assistance for employees and

their dependents, counselling on a range of issues from emotional and stress management to financial, legal or personal matters, family recreational activities, etc. They are initiatives provided by employers to help employees effectively manage work and family responsibilities. Apart from providing the said services directly, some companies in Hong Kong are partnering with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in offering customized employee assistance programmes.

IMPLEMENTATION OF FFEPs IN HONG KONG

9. The Employment Ordinance is the main piece of legislation in Hong Kong governing the terms and conditions of employment. It provides for various kinds of leaves, including rest days, statutory holidays and annual leave so that employees can enjoy and cater for their various needs, including family needs. It also provides for maternity protection, including maternity leave and pay, prohibition of heavy, hazardous or harmful work and termination of employment during pregnancy. Besides, the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance makes it unlawful for anyone or any organization to discriminate against a person on the basis of family status in a number of areas including employment.

10. The Women's Commission ("WoC") and the Equal Opportunities Commission jointly commissioned the Lingnan University to undertake a study in early 2006 to review and investigate the needs, awareness, and prevalence of FFEPs in Hong Kong, and examine the expectations and benefits of FFEPs in our society. The study shows that FFEPs are good for both employers and employees. For employers, the benefits include improved reputation and image of the company, increased ability to attract high performing employees, improved morale among the workforce as well as improved retention of employees, reduced employee sickness and turnover thus leading to reduced costs. Employees also benefit at the same time in terms of improved morale and increased happiness, improved working relationships with colleagues, reduced burn-out and stress, as well as increased commitment to the company. Nonetheless, the research also reveals a low awareness of FFEPs among employers and a low prevalence of FFEPs in Hong Kong at the time of

survey.

11. The Labour Department conducted a questionnaire survey in August 2006 among member organizations of its 18 Human Resources Managers Clubs formed in various trades and industries. While the findings might not reflect the full picture of the overall labour market¹, they did, however, provide a useful source of reference. According to the survey, the most common FFEPs adopted were provision of extra leave on special occasions. Altogether 71% of the organizations offered compassionate leave on death of family members, 69% offered marriage leave while 16% offered paternity leave. Some organizations also introduced flexible working arrangements to enable employees handle their family duties more easily. Among the respondents, 37% implemented a 5-day work week, 17% set ceiling on working hours and 10% adopted flexible working hours. Yet, work arrangements like home office or job-sharing have yet to take root as they were only found among 1% to 2% of the respondents.

12. Although 43% of the organizations indicated they had never heard of the concept, some of them had been practising FFEPs without knowing the then newly coined words. A positive correlation was also observed between the employment size of the organization and the number of FFEPs adopted. On the other hand, it was rather encouraging that the participating organizations were receptive to the concept as about 32% of them revealed they would consider adopting more FFEPs in future. While there is increasing recognition of the importance of family cohesion and the value of healthy family life, there is still room for improvement, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Certain FFEPs that are commonly adopted in other parts of the world, such as job sharing or home-based work, are rarely seen locally.

13. The Government aims to provide a family-friendly working environment to enable civil servants to cope with both work and family commitments. It attaches great importance to the work-life balance of its staff members. It introduced the 5-day week initiative by phases from July 2006 to reduce the work pressure of staff and to improve the

¹ The survey was conducted among 1 359 member organizations of LD's Human Resources Managers Clubs. Responses were received from 326 organizations. As the sample was not selected on a random basis, the findings might not reflect the overall picture of the labour market.

quality of family life. The migration of government services to a 5-day week has largely been completed in July 2007. A total of some 94 300 (around 65%) government staff are working five days/ shifts per week. Staff welcome the new arrangement, noting that they are able to spend more time with their families, pursue further studies, sports and recreational activities, etc. during the longer weekends.

14. In addition, the vast majority of civil servants are provided with full-pay annual leave, ranging from 22 to 40.5 days, for the purpose of recuperation from the pressure of work and attending to personal matters. To allow more flexibility in taking leave, such annual leave can be accumulated up to a stipulated ceiling. Most civil servants have accumulated a considerable balance of untaken leave which can be used for meeting personal needs that may arise during the year, including taking care of their family members. In case an officer has insufficient earned leave but has special family needs to be absent from work, he may apply for advanced leave or unpaid leave under the established mechanism. Such applications will be favourably considered as far as operational circumstances permit.

15. In order to arouse the awareness of and promote work-life balance amongst civil servants, the Civil Service Training and Development Institute (CSTDI) has been organizing thematic workshops and seminars from time to time, and providing on-line resources and information inside the webpage of Cyber Learning Centre Plus. On an on-going basis, CSTDI provides advisory and consultancy services on request from departments to hold customized work-life balance programmes to meet specific need or to help departments drive their own initiatives as appropriate. Such workshops/ seminars and services were well received by the participants and departmental management. Apart from the services provided by CSTDI, about 10 departments are providing dedicated counselling service to help staff cope with stress arising from work or other personal problems. The Government has also commissioned a non-governmental organization to provide hotline counselling service to cover about 85 000 staff coming from some 60 bureaux and departments which do not have their own dedicated service.

IMPEDIMENTS IN IMPLEMENTING FFEPs

16. It is estimated that over 98% of the companies in Hong Kong are SMEs² which thrive on efficiency, competitiveness and flexibility. Cost and practicality considerations appear to be their major concern in the adoption and implementation of FFEPs. They may also have manpower constraint and staff deployment difficulties in institutionalising the various flexible work arrangements or family leave benefits.

17. While the above are genuine concerns, there are nevertheless a number of myths or assumptions about FFEPs in the mindset of some employers that may impede the wider adoption of FFEPs in Hong Kong. Some of the commonly held myths are:

- FFEPs are expensive and luxury of larger companies: in reality, there is no “one size fits all’ approach to FFEPs. Companies of any size can take steps, however small, to encourage a family-friendly culture within the workplace. Introducing FFEPs does not always cost much. Often, what is needed is a little thoughtfulness and consideration together with a stretch of imagination. There is a range of measures and activities that companies of smaller scale may adopt. They may take into account the nature and scope of business to determine the types of practice that fit their organisations.
- FFEPs are soft human resource issues, mainly for women: in most cases, it is true that women are usually the primary caregivers, responsible for child care, elder care and health care as well as household management. Yet, there is increasing discussion on the importance of involving men as the caregivers, especially in fathering.
- Equating results by the number of hours at work: in a traditional workplace, managers can always see their employees and so consider them to be working and productive. With employees exploring alternative ways to work such as home-based work, some managers

² According to the Trade and Industry Department, manufacturing enterprises with fewer than 100 employees and non-manufacturing enterprises with fewer than 50 employees are regarded as SMEs in Hong Kong. As at September 2007, there were about 270 000 SMEs in Hong Kong and they accounted for over 98% of the total business units.

may have concerns about what employees are doing during the day. In this respect, trust, clear performance targets and regular communication between the management and employees are the keys to the successful implementation of FFEPs.

- Management will lose control in implementing FFEPs: some managers may have concerns about giving up control over their workforce by implementing flexible policies and practices.
- Hard to measure impact on bottom line: for some employers, the cost of adopting FFEPs is actual and immediate but the potential benefits are intangible and will manifest only in the long term. They therefore have doubt on how FFEPs will positively impact on the bottom-line.

18. For individual employees, the main obstacle in having a balanced work and family life appears to be long working hours. This may reflect an undesirable work culture as well as poor internal work processes. For employees concerned with rising asset prices and costs of living, they are more likely to work longer hours.

PROMOTIONAL PROGRAMMES ON FFEPs

19. The Labour Department (LD) has been acting as a facilitator in encouraging employers to adopt FFEPs with a view to assisting employees achieve work-life balance and fulfill work and family responsibilities simultaneously. Major publicity efforts on the subject include:

- Organizing seminars/ briefings to promote FFEPs: a notable example is the large-scale seminar organized in June 2007 in collaboration with WoC, Hong Kong Council of Social Service, Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management and Hong Kong People Management Association. The seminar received overwhelming responses, attracting over 350 employers and human resources practitioners.

- Promoting FFEPs to human resources practitioners and trade representatives of employers and employees through the network of 18 Human Resources Managers Clubs in various trades and industries and the tripartite committees on 9 industries formed under the auspices of the department: meetings have been conducted for members to share experiences on latest developments of FFEPs and their implementation.
- Staging roving exhibitions at various locations throughout the territory to widely publicise FFEPs and increase public awareness on the subject.

20. Apart from the above on-going initiatives, LD will produce a series of newspaper supplements and a booklet with real-life examples to showcase exemplary employment practices, including FFEPs, in 2008-09 so as to encourage wider adoption of family-friendly measures and other good people management practices at the workplace.

21. To enable women to improve their economic and general well being as well as to promote gender equality, WoC considers it crucial to provide an enabling environment in which women and men can share family responsibilities and participate fully in all other aspects of life. In light of this, it has worked in partnership with other stakeholders to promote FFEPs. It produced and widely distributed a promotional leaflet “Let’s All Start with One” to different sectors in June 2007 to promote FFEPs. It also actively undertakes engagements to deliver speeches and promote FFEPs to different employers groups.

22. In 2008, WoC plans to further assist in promoting FFEPs to the business sector, in particular SMEs, by collecting cases of good practices in FFEPs and publishing a booklet/ leaflet for dissemination.

23. NGOs have also played an important and active role in promoting FFEPs in Hong Kong. For example, the Hong Kong Council of Social Services has launched the Caring Company Scheme since 2002 to recognize companies which demonstrate good corporate citizenship. Under the Scheme, a Caring Company Logo is awarded to companies that have fulfilled two out of six specified criteria, one of which is to provide

a family-friendly and gender sensitive environment for employees. In 2007-08, a total of 1 200 Caring Companies reported that they had offered family-friendly measures to employees, such as special leave to enable employees to take care of urgent personal or family matters, supporting services for employees or retirees, community activities for employees and their family members, etc.

24. As regards government staff not coming under the 5-day week initiative, the Government will encourage departments to explore, in consultation with staff, the feasibility of drawing up new, and/ or modifying existing roster arrangements to enable these staff to work according to a “5-day-work, 2-day-off” duty pattern, subject to the same basic principles governing the 5-day-week initiative and the proviso of not affecting public service interface. It will continue to assist the staff in managing work-related stress and better understanding of work-life balance. CSTDI will continue to promote work-life balance among civil servants through thematic workshops/ seminars and special projects, and to provide on-line resources and information on the subject.

STRATEGIES FOR FURTHER PROMOTION OF FFEPs

25. A research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development shows that a right balance between work and family life will provide a wide range of advantages such as a better child development and a more harmonious and cohesive society. Some strategies for further promoting FFEPs may include the following:

Cultivating a family-friendly culture in the society

26. Although the history of implementing FFEPs in some overseas countries, especially in Europe, is rather long, the concept is quite new to Hong Kong. The awareness for family-friendly environment and the community’s collective mindset have yet to be nurtured. While a more pro-family attitude in the society at large will positively affect the readiness of employers in launching different FFEPs voluntarily, more promotional work is necessary to raise the awareness of family-friendly workplace in Hong Kong.

Promotion targeted at employers

27. Employers and managers at different levels of companies all have a part to play in nurturing a family friendly workplace culture. They can provide supportive work environment for their staff, develop FFEPs appropriate to the business processes and employees' needs, put in place a system to communicate these practices and make them accessible to all employees, maintain a sound performance management system that provides basis for evaluating and rewarding performance of employees by outcomes and deliverables rather than by hours clocked and physical presence. Preferably, they can set the example in having a balanced work and family life themselves.

28. Management commitment is vital to the adoption and successful implementation of FFEPs. Therefore, targeted promotion to employers on the benefits as well as business cases of adopting FFEPs and dispelling the myths, is conducive to building up a pro-family attitude. Case study and experience sharing among employers, managers and human resources practitioners on FFEPs at the workplace are also useful and beneficial to promoting the concept.

Collaboration among the Government, NGOs and business community

29. Apart from the Government which has been acting as a facilitator in encouraging employers to put in place FFEPs, NGOs, charity organisations, business bodies and trade associations can also play an important role in promoting a family-friendly work culture and enhancing the community's awareness on FFEPs for better work-life balance. Cooperation and collaboration among relevant parties can achieve a synergy effect for planning future promotional activities.

ADVICE SOUGHT

30. Members' views are invited on the strategies or programmes to be adopted in further promoting FFEPs for better work-life balance in Hong Kong.

Labour and Welfare Bureau
Labour Department
May 2008