



Creating a Fully Flexible Workforce

Background

Cisco Systems (Cisco) is a global leader in the IT industry which seeks to transform the way people connect, communicate and collaborate. Established in Singapore 20 years ago, the office now serves as the company's headquarters for the Asia Pacific, Japan and Greater China business markets, and employs 1,000 staff.

Cisco's Work-Life Strategy

Cisco's Work-Life strategy has developed organically over the years, evolving to adapt to the changing needs of the business as well as employees. At Cisco, the management recognises that employees want to enjoy career progression and also maintain fulfilling personal lives. Thus, the company has made it a priority to provide the space, avenues and tools to empower employees to be effective in both arenas.

As the company strengthened its commitment to Work-Life practices and employees became increasingly savvy over the past decade, Cisco has evolved from having just 80% of its sales and marketing staff on flexible work arrangements (FWAs) to having a fully flexible workforce in 2013.

The company has formalised its FWAS in the Cisco Flexible Work Practices, where flex options such as flexi-time and telecommuting are available to almost all employees, except a select few such as security and reception staff who are needed on-site. In order to provide effective and immediate flexibility options for employees, implementing these practices is kept simple; taking business needs into account, employees and their managers work together to structure how and when a flex option will be utilised. The company also offers on-ramp and off-ramp options such as sabbatical leave for employees who require long leave for personal reasons but are still keen to return to a career with the company. As this is a long-term absence, employees will need to formally request approval from the management.

Information Management Strategies

Cisco's success in creating a strong flexible work culture for its employees can be attributed to targeted strategies by the company.

In a bold pro-flexibility move, Cisco has centralised its operations in a single regional headquarters in Singapore this year. Notably, the new office located at UE Biz Hub enables full mobility of its workforce. Here, employees are not assigned work desks or offices. Instead, the office is an intelligent building fully equipped with various types of workspaces to facilitate the different work needs of employees. More than 140 audio privacy rooms to hold confidential meetings, quiet rooms for teleconferences and web meetings, as well as collaboration spaces with movable walls for brainstorming sessions and team meetings are available to all employees. Employees can use any workspace on any floor, using mobile work desks and allocated storage lockers on a daily basis when they work at the office. The management team at Cisco has also gone a step further to create unique relaxation areas on each level, where employees can play foosball, use massage chairs or even use the outdoor terrace area to relax, work on their own or as a team.



Enabling full mobility has allowed Cisco to maximally utilise their office space. By removing individual offices for senior management, the company has created additional space that is more optimally used for meetings. The management has also found that creating mobile workspaces has increased employee efficiency; each team member is more intentional about their work as they choose their own workspace and times. The new space configuration also creates an unstructured melting pot of talent which encourages ad-hoc meetings and knowledge sharing.

Effective change management has been crucial in communicating the relevance of the new work environment as well as managing staff expectations. Managing Director, Mr. Joshua Soh, was the key driver of this process. Together with a steering

committee and nominated change champions, it took a full year to communicate the changes to the Cisco team, prior to relocating to the new premises.

As employees were shifting out of centrally located town offices to a new location, Cisco offered employees a shuttle bus route to tide them over the initial adjustment period as their travel schedules changed. Over time, as employees found their own public transport routes, usage of the bus shuttle slowed and it was repurposed. Ultimately, the initial hesitation of staff was replaced by confidence in the new way of working as the workspaces fully facilitated their work tasks, and they were no longer limited by space constraints.

Consistent communication is a crucial factor in effectively managing a fully mobile workforce, and Cisco taps on its internal expertise as a technology company to address this need. The management recognises that 'face-time' is necessary for collaboration between employees and also between the company and its clients. However, the company has redefined the traditional concept of 'face-time'; at Cisco, employees work remotely, yet still maintain a virtual presence through IT.

"Face-time is important for collaboration – but now, we can have face-time through IT connectivity. We are changing the paradigm that face-time is bound by physical space."
Mr Joshua Soh
Managing Director,
Singapore and Brunei,
Cisco

- Employees use the Cisco® Jabber application to communicate with each other, and proactively update their status so that other team members are kept apprised of their current location and activity.
- Employees log into their desk phones when they are at a mobile desk, ensuring that they are easily accessible wherever they may be seated within the office.
- Employees can access each other's online calendars to check if the other party is available for a meeting.

Cisco TelePresence® is an IT tool that has changed the dynamics of meetings for employees. The company has a broadcast facility which allows a large group of individuals to participate virtually in an event via their IT gadgets, without being bound by physical locations and time zones. The launch of the new regional headquarters was broadcast to 75,000 Cisco employees worldwide.

Cisco employees who work remotely are also provided with easy access to all information and documents they require in the course of their work. The company

uses its Cisco® AnyConnect software which enables smart phones, tablets and other IT devices to launch a secure connection to access and share information.

Leadership Strategies

Cisco's leadership has proven to be the linchpin of the company's successful Work-Life integration. The management has signalled its commitment to flexibility practices by 'walking the talk'; Mr. Soh and his senior management team utilise the same mobile work stations and facilities as the rest of the team.

The management also recognises the need to maintain touch points with employees in a culture where the entire team may be working from different locations. Thus, company-wide pod-casts are held once every quarter to connect leadership with the rest of the team.

At Cisco, new hires are provided with a comprehensive range of resources to ensure their quick assimilation into the company's work culture. Every employee undergoes New Hire training and is assigned a mentor who will share their working experience and respond to queries and concerns. A website for new hires is also easily accessible with resources and HR policy details for easy reference.

The management has also taken the additional step of formalising its practices by including them in the company's HR policies and developing guidelines on mobility and IT security. This ensures that employees are able to tap on the flexibility options and relevant resources without any ambiguity as to how they should be used.

Performance Management Strategies

At Cisco, employees are assessed based on their performance and work results. Here, the company has rejected the 'longer hours culture', opting instead to implement an effective performance management system where employees are valued and rewarded for their efficiency and effectiveness at work. The comprehensive performance management matrix has various elements to ensure that it accurately monitors and captures the efficiency of employees:

- Employee reviews are conducted bi-annually; at the half-year mark, managers have an informal meeting with each team member to assess individual performance on yearly goals and identify areas for development. At the end of each year, a formal performance assessment is held to gauge each employee's performance and the way forward.
- Managers set clear and measurable goals and deliverables for each team member, to ensure that their performance can be tangibly captured in the matrix.

- Managers and employees work closely together and are encouraged to have open, positive communication to ensure that each team member reaches their fullest potential ; this is seen in the way employees can tailor their work hours and workplace such that they spend their time efficiently.

Cisco's performance management system has also led to a strong culture of trust and personal integrity amongst the team. As employees are treated as mature professionals and empowered to manage their own time for maximum productivity, they have responded by working more efficiently and effectively, which impacts the bottom-line.

Outcomes and Conclusion

As a global leader in the IT industry, Cisco's transformative flexibility practices have proven to be an effective retention strategy, and also enable the company to attract quality employees who will deliver stellar results for their clients. This is especially noteworthy in the current work environment where IT-savvy millennials are entering the workforce, and looking for innovative solutions to meld their personal and career ambitions. Cisco has also gained recognition on a wider platform, receiving the 2013 HRM award for the Best Use of Technology.

Cisco's commitment to empowering employees to achieve Work-Life integration has been successful for the company and employees alike. Individuals are enabled to achieve their personal best, and the company has experienced business growth due to the contributions of its staff.