

Flexibility is a term that is often associated with variety, chaos and confusion. When applied to organisations in the form of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA), it conjures up for Management nightmares of complexity, administrative wilderness and loss of control. It's probably inconceivable to implement FWA in a hitherto formal and legalistic industry where one is often required to deal with high volumes of extremely sensitive documents of highly confidential nature.

This need not be the case. As demonstrated by one of Singapore's largest full service law firms, Rajah & Tann LLP; all that are needed to make it simple and workable is trust and the commitment of the Senior Management.

INTRODUCTION TO RAJAH & TANN

Founded in the 1950s, Rajah & Tann LLP (RT) has grown to become one of the largest full service law firms in Singapore and the Asia Pacific. RT has nearly 280 lawyers and support staff team of another 300.

CORPORATE VALUE

As explained by partners Rebecca Chew and Patrick Ang, RT's philosophy is "To provide value to clients, to engage our lawyers to meet their full potential and to reward them for their efforts. We value excellence, hard work, integrity and team players."

"We encourage our lawyers to use practical yet creative approaches to develop legal solutions. The challenging nature of our work constantly propels us to innovate and provide efficiently produced, quality work to meet every client's expectation."

"We firmly believe that lawyers will only thrive if they practise in a conducive environment. We take pride in the team work, camaraderie and high morale we have cultivated among our lawyers and staff through the early adoption of many progressive and enlightened management policies."

WORKING HARD AND PLAYING HARD

RT has established itself as a Firm known for good staff welfare with a number of industry "Firsts". It was ahead of competitors in emphasizing work-life balance (in the mid 90s) and the first firm to implement 5-day work weeks; first to have casual dress down on Fridays, first to address all on given name basis and have open door policy.

This can be largely attributed to the Founding Partners who firmly believed in taking good care of their staff. Thus proudly, the work-life balance initiatives were "driven from the Top" rather than as a result of employee feedback.

RT began providing "lifestyle" amenities when they converted an entire floor of office space and dedicated it to an in-house cafe and lounge area called the *Courtyard*. Here is where lawyers and staff gather for food and drinks, games of pool and table soccer, engage in Xbox games and TV viewing or even 'chill out' on a massage chair. The *Courtyard* serves daily breakfasts and weekly lunches on Wednesdays.

The Firm also organises a myriad of social events such as biennial firm trips to destinations like *Cairns, Hong Kong, Bangkok* and Ho Chi Minh City; some practice groups within the Firm organize group trips annually for their lawyers.

“Movie Nights” are hosted at local cinemas including special “Movie Night” for the children of RT’s staff and lawyers. During festive occasions such as like Christmas, New Year and Chinese New Year, the Firm would organize firm wide celebrations.

There are also specific events to get the people together so that staff and lawyers can get to know each other outside of work like “Family Days” where staff and lawyers with their families would gather for a day of fun-filled activities. RT makes an effort to reach out to others outside of the Firm through their pro-bono legal clinics, raising funds for the needy as well as participating in competitions with other law firms and law students such as soccer, bowling and competitive running.

FLEXIBLE WITH FLEXIBILITY

The Firm does not have any fixed Flexible Work Arrangement (FWA) schemes. Notwithstanding, the Firm has been able to adequately address their staff and lawyers’ needs for FWA. Every effort is made to carefully consider and assess the individual requests for FWA.

With the help of the WoW! Fund, the Firm set up a home networking system that allowed telecommuting four years ago. In addition, the Firm’s lawyers can access information on a worldwide basis.

The following are examples of FWAs in RT:

- Consultants work on a part-time basis.
- One property lawyer is on flexi-hour.
One litigation lawyer works 4 day weeks
- One lawyer chose to work from 10 pm to 1 am so she can spend more time with her children in the day.
- One staff has a flexible work arrangement so she is able to provide eldercare to a parent. This allows her to bring her parent for dialysis. In this instance, her work hours were adjusted.
- One staff opted to start work earlier so she could end work earlier to pick up her child from childcare.

Of course, telecommuting may require lawyers to sometimes take highly sensitive and confidential documents home. How does RT ensure the security of these documents in such instances?

When asked, partner Rebecca assured that there is little risk as the lawyers understand that they have a professional duty to uphold and will take utmost care in ensuring confidentiality of clients’ documents and information. The Firm will also take care to ensure that all their lawyers uphold this duty.

To find out more, we spoke to two of the employees on FWA.

THE STORY OF FAZILAH

Meet *Fazilah*. She is in her mid thirties with an *LCCI* diploma in Secretarial Studies. Prior to joining RT she was working in the Civil Service for eight years. Choosing not to believe her former colleagues' warning that working hours in the private sector would be long, unlike the *Civil Service* where the work days are from 8:30 am to 6:00 pm five days a week; she uprooted herself two years ago and joined RT. She has been enjoying herself proving her former nay sayer colleagues wrong ever since.

On The Job

As a *Legal Secretary* in the *Appeals and Issues Department* supporting two lawyers, *Fazilah* has found that she has been able to pretty much maintain a balance between work and family life. Her department handles the paperwork for clients who, not entirely satisfied with the results of litigation in the *High Court*, wish to file an appeal. While this work of copying, scanning, searching and finding and compiling dossiers may sometimes require extra hours to be put in, work pressures have been mitigated by understanding superiors.

Fazilah has found that the understanding and commitment of her employers to balancing work and life extend beyond "talking the talk". Their "walking the talk" is evidenced by their willingness to listen to staff members' problems and then working out individual solutions to these problems.

For example, there is a great deal of "give and take" and staff members are willing to put in extra hours when needed as they are confident that efforts will be recognised. There is quid pro quo as well as flexibility in fulfilling working hours. When needed, staff can offset time off to attend to personal matters against hours put in during situations when they needed to put in extra hours to clear urgent work.

What It's About

Like everyone else, *Fazilah's* working hours were supposed to have been from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm, five days a week. But because of her unique circumstances, the company has been willing to let her work four-a-half (4½) days a week on the condition that on her work days, she will begin work earlier from 8.30 am and finish at 6.30 pm or start later at 9.00 pm but leave later correspondingly at 7.00 pm . She also has to keep her superiors and colleagues abreast of her intended schedule one week in advance.

This arrangement has allowed *Fazilah* to focus more on her personal needs while being committed to RT. She is treated equally when it comes time for computing bonuses or other employment benefits.

Why It's Important

Five years ago, *Fazilah's* mother began suffering from kidney failure. She was then put on water dialysis, a process that can be carried out at home. Then sometime a month ago at the time of this interview, she had had to be moved to hospital. Two weeks ago, *Fazilah* began her FWA when her mother was discharged.

This was because *Fazilah's* mother now has to go for dialysis treatment three times a week. So *Fazilah* takes turns with her father and sister to accompany her for these treatments.

For This To Work

For any FWA to work well, trust is a key and critical element. Trust must exist between the staff on FWA, such as *Fazilah*, and her peers and superiors in the department. This trust is earned by the staff understanding that commitment cuts both ways. There must be commitment and understanding from the staff to ensure that his or her FWA does not affect the running of the organisation effectively. That is, the staff's FWA must not cause delays or bottlenecks to the efficient operation of the group.

Proper planning of work is thus essential and there must be understanding, commitment and confidence in solving problems together when they inevitably arise.

Fazilah's peers and superiors have been extremely supportive and have not in any way made her feel inadequate. This has increased her confidence in the Firm and her commitment not to let anyone down.

It is *Fazilah's* belief that the main reason for the success of FWAs in RT is the senior management's philosophy of balancing work and life.

Going Forward

Fazilah has been married for the last six years and is expecting her first child at the time of this interview. She is into her third trimester of pregnancy. Who knows what the future will bring? But for now, she plans to make the best of her situation. She will revisit her working arrangement with her superiors after her maternity leave is over. What will happen then, whether she reverts to normal hours or otherwise will depend on the circumstances with her mother and her new born.

THE STORY OF ELSA

We also spoke to Elsa. Married since the late nineties with two kids, Elsa has been with RT from 1997. With degrees from NUS and London, she specialises in Corporate Real Estate. Prior to joining RT, she worked briefly for about one and a half years with another firm, where she met her husband.

Why Flexibility Matters

In her work, pressure comes from the nature of the work, where the demand on time is high. Added to this are calls for focus, attention, quick turnaround and sheer volume of work. All this drains energy and pushes the boundaries between work and life. But then that is the nature of the legal profession. Despite having the assistance of two legal secretaries, the amount of work very often threatens to swallow up personal time and life. So, in order to balance work and life, flexibility in employment arrangements would greatly enhance the quality of life.

Flexible About Flexibility

This is especially so in the case of Elsa. The elder of Elsa's two daughters is a Special Needs child. Elsa needs the flexibility in work arrangement in order to accommodate her daughter's medical appointments and therapy sessions.

RT does not impose any condition on her so long as work is properly carried out. This requires her to exercise a great sense of responsibility in ensuring that work is not affected and clients' needs are well looked after. If need be, Elsa will work from home into the wee hours or stay back at the office beyond the "usual office hours".

In addition, where she needs to take files home, files are kept strictly confidential. It is a routine for her to commute from the office to her home by car. She does not use public transport in this case.

Where Support Matters

Elsa is supported in many ways to make this arrangement work. From working through infrastructural support by BlackBerry, emails, Cell Phones, SMSes to the understanding, support and care of her superiors, colleagues and peers.

This Is How To Make It Work

Just as in Fazilah's case, Elsa also cited that for FWAs to succeed there must be mutual commitment by both the employee and the organisation to make it work. This calls for the employee to demonstrate responsibility and refrain from abuse. The employer, on the other hand, must exercise trust.

In Elsa's case, there has been no greater evidence of this than when in September of 2007, she needed to take one month off to bring her child overseas for intensive therapy. RT gave her that time off with her colleagues covering her work in her absence. On her part, Elsa remained updated and current through daily emails.

Elsa's circumstance will remain for the long term and she cannot think of a better place to be at than RT, where "walking the talk" is evident every day.

愚公移山

The story is told of an old man, 愚公, in ancient China who, fed up with the Twin Mountains blocking his way, decided one day to remove them by the shovels.

When reminded by his neighbour that he was an old man and unlikely to see the end of the project, he replied that even after he was gone, his children would carry on the work. And beyond that, their children and the rest of his descendents following. Eventually, the mountains will be carted into the sea.

Which brings us back to where this story began.

Flexible Work Arrangements to foster work-life balance need not be cumbersome and bureaucratic. When Management is determined and trust is entrenched, even mountains must make way.