

Opinion: Hong Kong could do more to adopt family-friendly employment practices

Dr Alex Wong
Principal HR Business Consultant
Cross Border Services Limited

Employees in Hong Kong work long hours and, because of rapid technological advances and intensifying global competition, employers are placing ever-increasing demands on their time.

Research on family-friendly employment practices (FFEPs) in Hong Kong commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and Women's Commission (WC) found many employers had asked, if not demanded, their employees be contactable 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Hong Kong is at an early stage in implementing the kind of FFEPs that are commonplace elsewhere, such as flexible working hours, part-time work, job sharing and employee assistance programmes.

The research conducted by the EOC and WC also found that adoption of the FFEPs was low - only 14 out of 137 responding companies (10.2%) had taken up FFEPs. Among the 14 respondents using the FFEPs, only 43.8% said they had a five-day working week in place and 24.8% implemented employee assistance programmes.

Many employers have not yet adopted FFEPs because they are concerned with the additional administrative workload and costs involved, as well as the tight manpower situation in which a leaving employee is not replaced and his/her workload is shared among colleagues. Also, very few leading organizations are setting an example by adopting FFEPs.

Sanfield Building Contractors, a subsidiary of Sun Hung Kai Properties Group, is one organization leading the way on FFEPs.

“Our group is keen to provide employees with a range of family-friendly employment practices,” said Mr Pele Lai, Sanfield’s Director of HR and Administration. “We offer flexible work hours and work arrangements, part-time employment, job sharing, compassionate leave, counselling services, emergency financial support to employees in need, free canteen facilities and recreational activities for the employees and their family members.”

“Since we treat all our staff as a member of the family, the employees’ morale, loyalty, commitment as well as productivity are always high,” added Mr Lai.

Generally speaking, work-family balance is threatened under the current working culture in Hong Kong, which neither encourages nor facilitates the adoption of FFEPs. The reason is that there is a deep-rooted working attitude of “7/11” (working from 7am until 11pm) among the majority of Hong Kong employees.

But work-family balance can benefit not only employees in the form of better health, more job satisfaction and more happiness at work but can also be a great advantage to employers by reducing staff turnover and absenteeism rates, thereby improving the organizational performance and productivity.

The Labour Department has said in its publication on *Good People Management and Family-Friendly Employment Practices* that if employers expect their staff to be devoted to work, they must understand that their employees have family responsibilities too.