

A SMART WORKPLACE FOR THE WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

WHAT COMPANIES CAN DO TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN EMPLOYER AND EMPLOYEE EXPECTATIONS

ROBERT WALTERS



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INTRODUCTION

The work environment is changing. Advances in technology, a shift in generation and changes in the way companies do business have driven the need and demand for a new kind of workplace. These factors have led to the rise of the “smart workplace”.

Many companies have redesigned and digitalised their workplace, but this is only a part of the journey. Have they created a total solution that has successfully enhanced employee productivity, engagement and performance?

Companies are also having to manage the expectations of a more diverse workforce, while at the same time clearly communicating their culture and values.

In this report we explore the different elements that make up the smart workplace, including a digital workplace, flexible working policies and workspace design, as well as the gap between employer and employee expectations. We also offer recommendations to companies that have built or are looking to build a better workplace to meet the evolving needs of their employees, and suggest what more they could do to improve and promote their employer brands.

METHODOLOGY

This whitepaper was published in August 2019 and is based on a survey conducted by Robert Walters. It gathered the views of more than 1,650 HR professionals, hiring managers and candidates working in companies across Greater China. Additional interviews and research were collated to complement the survey findings.

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PART 1 – MAXIMISING WORKPLACE TECHNOLOGIES TO FOSTER COLLABORATION AND EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORKPLACE

A digital workplace encompasses all the technologies - platforms, systems and software - people use in order to be productive in today's workplace. It gives employees the tools they need to improve their communication, collaboration and connections with each other.

Advances in technology have already changed the way companies and employees work. With teams more dispersed and covering more time zones, working with others via phone, virtual meetings and video has become a norm.

Adopting a digital workplace has also helped companies streamline operations and enhance speed of communication, as well as accessing the information in a much more effective way.

PRINCIPAL WORKPLACE TECHNOLOGIES COMPANIES HAVE ADOPTED



Mobile devices (such as tablets, smartphones etc.)



Company-wide messenger systems



VPN access

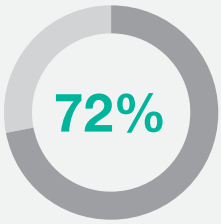


Virtual meeting applications

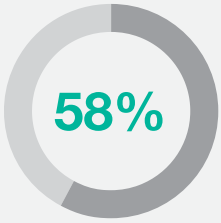


Mobile apps

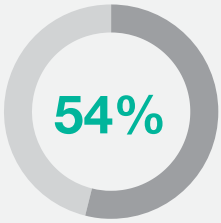
TOP REASONS FOR COMPANIES TRANSFORMING THEIR WORKPLACE DIGITALLY



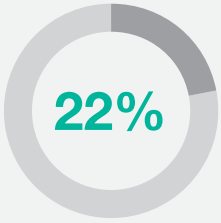
To improve workflow and overall staff productivity



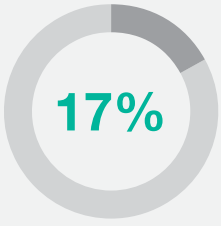
To strengthen collaboration between staff and improve communications



Digital transformation is a global trend



To track results and streamline decision-making



To attract and retain talent

WHAT EMPLOYEES SAY ABOUT THE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

85%
PRODUCTIVITY IS ENHANCED

80%
FEEL MOTIVATED TO WORK IN A TECH-SAVVY COMPANY

78%
COORDINATION BETWEEN DEPARTMENTS IS ENHANCED

42%
WORK-LIFE BALANCE IS HINDERED

22%
I FEAR WORKPLACE TECHNOLOGIES WILL REPLACE JOBS

11%
DIFFICULT TO LEARN AND APPLY NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Of the professionals surveyed, 85% agree their productivity would be enhanced by technology and 80% would feel motivated working in a digital workplace and a tech-savvy company. The assertion that a digital workplace can potentially overcome organisational silos and enable a more collaborative way of working is accepted by 78% of employees.

However, digital transformation alone does not create a smart workplace and it brings challenges. There is the expectation of being "always on", compromising their work-life balance. Also some employees fear technologies will replace some jobs, and struggle to learn and apply new technologies.

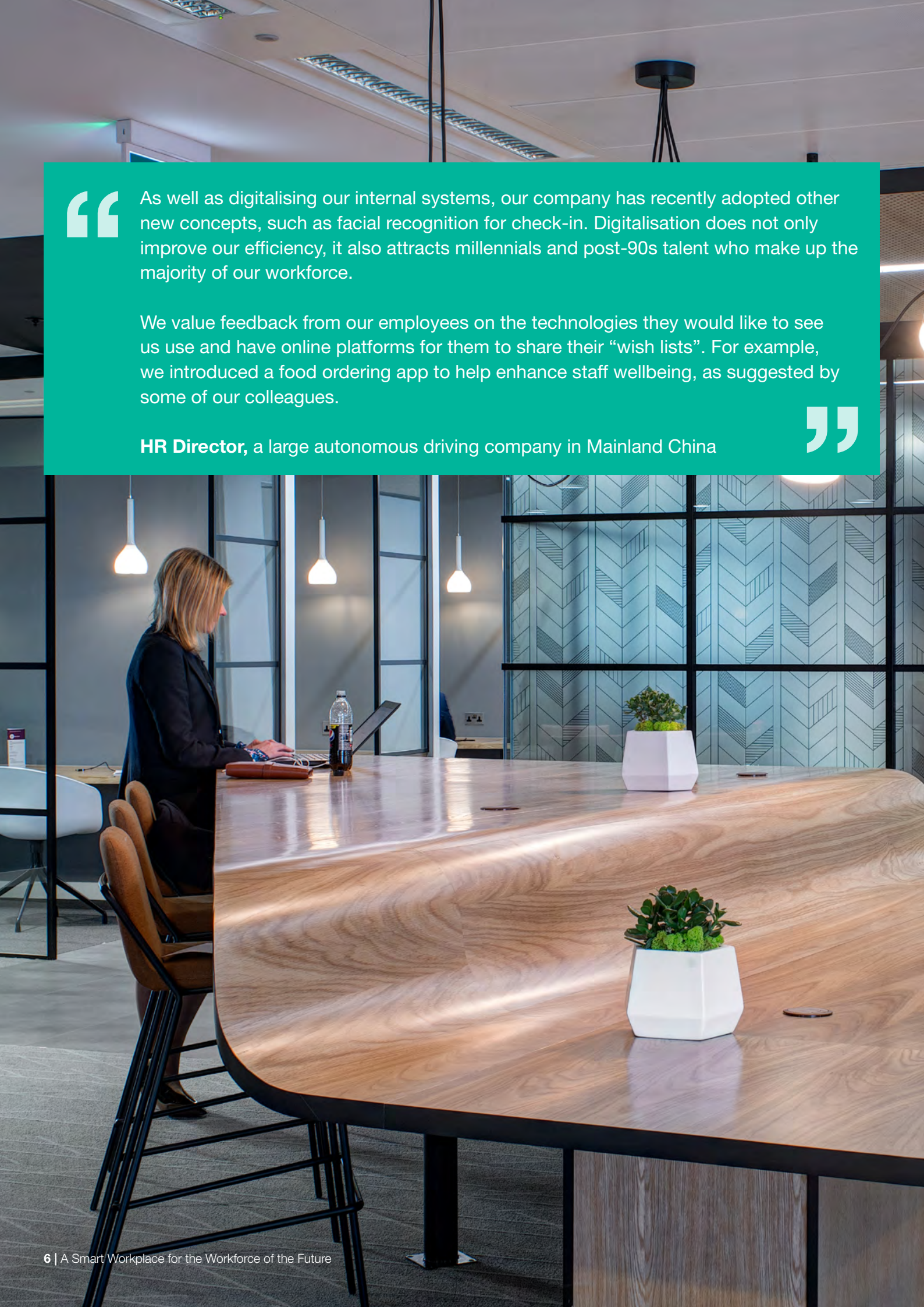
A TOP-DOWN APPROACH TO MITIGATE CONCERNS OF THE DIGITAL WORKPLACE

Digital transformation of the workplace should be a top-down initiative; executive support and adoption is crucial. Business executives are recommended to act as "digital champions" to embrace and promote new technologies in order to create an innovative culture within the company.



"We advise business leaders to take time to identify their business focus and commercial objectives when creating a digital workplace strategy. Communicate the value of adopting these workplace technologies to employees and the technical support they would need, rather than just implementing the new technologies. Managers should also encourage their staff to articulate any concerns when transitioning into an increasingly digital workplace."

Ricky Mui, Managing Director, Robert Walters Hong Kong



> As well as digitalising our internal systems, our company has recently adopted other new concepts, such as facial recognition for check-in. Digitalisation does not only improve our efficiency, it also attracts millennials and post-90s talent who make up the majority of our workforce.
>
> We value feedback from our employees on the technologies they would like to see us use and have online platforms for them to share their "wish lists". For example, we introduced a food ordering app to help enhance staff wellbeing, as suggested by some of our colleagues.
>
> **HR Director,** a large autonomous driving company in Mainland China

PART 2 – THE IMPACT OF WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY ON PRODUCTIVITY, ENGAGEMENT AND DIVERSITY

FLEXIBLE WORKING POLICIES ADOPTED BY COMPANIES IN GREATER CHINA

	Hong Kong	Mainland China	Taiwan
Flexitime[1]	29%	47%	55%
Work from home/remote working	22%	12%	18%
No such arrangement	58%	46%	39%

Workplace flexibility is when an employee and an employer make changes to when, where and how a person will work, to better meet individual and business needs. It encourages employees to find the work-life balance that suits them best.[2]

There are a whole range of reasons why companies from different regions may be more likely to promote flexible working policies than others. The living conditions, commute time and even social norms should be taken into account when devising a flexible working policy.

FLEXIBILITY AS AN ENABLER TO DRIVE PRODUCTIVITY AND ENGAGEMENT

On the other hand, if applied effectively, workplace flexibility puts freedom and autonomy in the hands of the employees, allowing them to determine their work schedule among other priorities. This can generate high satisfaction and employees are more likely to be focused, dedicated and productive.

EMPLOYEES AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE THAT FLEXIBLE WORKING COULD HELP THEM ACHIEVE:



HIGHER MOTIVATION



BETTER WORK-LIFE BALANCE



MORE FOCUSED AND PRODUCTIVE



HIGHER QUALITY WORK



[1] The employee chooses when to start and end work (within agreed limits) but works certain 'core hours', for example 10am to 4pm every day.
[2] What is Workplace Flexibility? (Advantages for Employer and Employees), OpenSourcedWorkplace, 2019

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY

Top three concerns of employers and employees regarding workplace flexibility:

Employers

60%

EMPLOYEES MAY ABUSE THE POLICY

45%

DIFFICULT TO SUPERVISE EMPLOYEES

41%

DIFFICULT TO TRACK STAFF PERFORMANCE AND PRODUCTIVITY

Employees

35%

FEWER OPPORTUNITIES TO COMMUNICATE WITH COLLEAGUES

30%

CREATES INEQUALITY AS IT DOES NOT BENEFIT ALL STAFF

27%

ENCROACHES ON PERSONAL LIFE

The biggest barrier to implementing flexible working arrangements – cited by 60% of employers – is concerns about possible abuse of the policy. For employees, the top concern about introducing flexible work arrangements is fewer opportunities to communicate with colleagues (35%).

With options such as home office and flexitime, 27% of employees are concerned that there is no clear delineation between work and home, while 45% employers find it difficult to supervise their staff if they cannot monitor them visually.

> Previously, we rolled out a home office policy for our developers, but it didn't work for us in the way we hoped. We didn't see the rise in efficiency we had expected. Because of the nature of the job, the amount of time taken up by additional communications via online resources increased disproportionately. We also found that physical proximity between team members makes for more efficient collaborative working.
>
> **General Manager,** an international software company in Taiwan

TOP TIPS TO OVERCOME CONCERNS WITH FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Changing from behaviour-based to outcome-based assessment

On a day-to-day basis, managing smart working requires a move from behaviour-based monitoring to outcome-based mindset. Instead of solely assessing performance according to what an employee is seen to be doing, managers should take their output or other deliverables into account and establish an environment of mutual trust.

Devising innovative alternatives to face-to-face communication

Flexible working can create communication challenges, as employees may feel less connection with each other. This can lead to a lower sense of belonging. Apart from specifying a set time of the week when the team can get together, we also advise managers to use alternative tools such as instant messaging and virtual meetings to foster communication.

Create an open culture of flexibility

Companies should also create a culture where employees do not feel they will be disadvantaged by flexible working arrangements. Some new joiners may struggle to learn if their manager or team members are not around. Managers are strongly recommended to discuss flexible working arrangements openly with all team members to ensure that everyone is treated equally.

Beware of 'burn-out'

With the use of mobile devices, the line between work and private life is blurring. Managers are advised to conduct reviews to ensure remote working employees are not working excessively as this can lead to high stress level and 'burn-out'. Signs to look out for are a reduction in productivity/output, uncharacteristic detachment and increased cynicism or complaining.[3]



"Employees and employers should engage in regular and open discussions about the ongoing effectiveness of the working arrangement and feel comfortable about making changes as needed. There should be mutual trust, but at the same time, we advise managers to roll out flexible working in phases, and to set rules and guidelines. This ensures they have the right to withdraw an arrangement if it is being abused."

Tiffany Wong, Director - Walters People Division and HR, Robert Walters Hong Kong

[3] Managing smart working, City of Wolverhampton Council

SUPPORTING DIVERSITY BY IMPLEMENTING A FLEXIBILITY-AT-WORK AGENDA

Workplace diversity is an important issue for today's employers. Women are now encouraged to return to work after maternity leave, and we hear constantly from managers looking for guidance on how to support diversity in the workplace. Inevitably these discussions turn to the importance of flexible working arrangements.

It is important to note that balancing career and family is no longer gender specific. Organisations are advised to recognise that to support gender diversity and close the gender gap in the workplace, flexible working arrangements should be available for both men and women.

With increasing numbers of women returning to the workplace after taking maternity leave, family and childcare responsibilities are becoming more equally shared between both genders. Managers are encouraged to discuss flexible working arrangements with all team members to ensure that everyone is treated equally.

87%

of respondents with family and childcare responsibilities prefer the option of a work from home policy but only one-third of them get it.

Respondents with family and childcare responsibilities



Female
58%

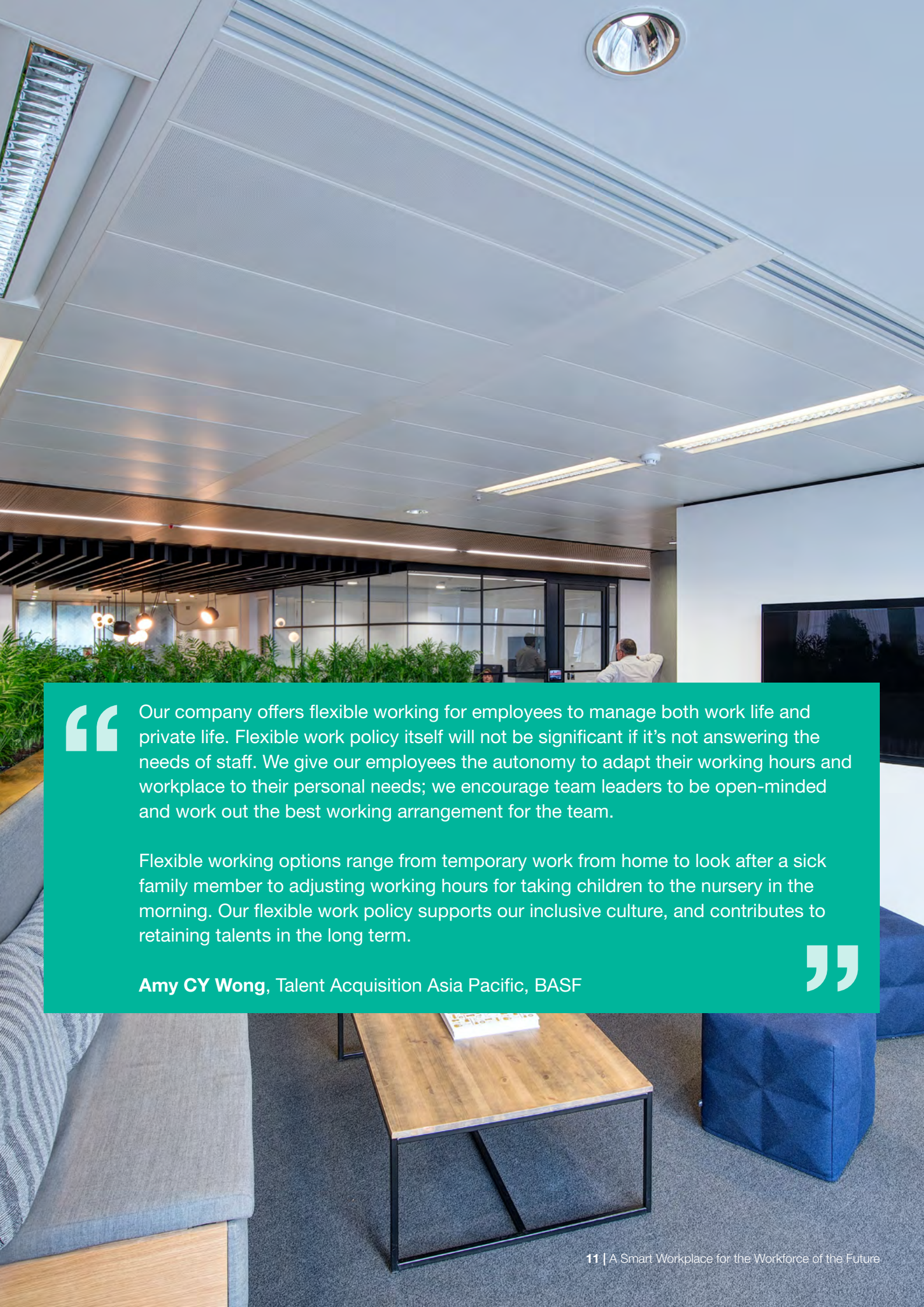


Male
42%



"Flexible working arrangements broaden your talent pool by promoting diversity. With advances in technology that allow employees to work remotely, new ways of working such as home offices are now available for those who need them. Flexible working arrangements are no longer considered just a perk for employees; they are a crucial business strategy to help encourage workforce diversity, attract talent and increase employee satisfaction and productivity."

John Winter, General Manager, Robert Walters Taiwan



> Our company offers flexible working for employees to manage both work life and private life. Flexible work policy itself will not be significant if it's not answering the needs of staff. We give our employees the autonomy to adapt their working hours and workplace to their personal needs; we encourage team leaders to be open-minded and work out the best working arrangement for the team.
>
> Flexible working options range from temporary work from home to look after a sick family member to adjusting working hours for taking children to the nursery in the morning. Our flexible work policy supports our inclusive culture, and contributes to retaining talents in the long term.
>
> **Amy CY Wong**, Talent Acquisition Asia Pacific, BASF

PART 3 - WORKSPACE DESIGN THAT ADDRESSES THE COMPLETE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

WHAT DOES A SMART WORKSPACE MEAN TO EMPLOYEES?

There are many different factors that motivate employees, such as pay, the opportunity to progress in their career and working conditions. Many companies seek to build a stronger employer brand and motivate staff by investing in renovation work. However, some overlook the importance of having a workspace that is employee-centric, and taking into account the employee experience.

According to our survey, employees think a smart workspace should have the following qualities:



WHAT KIND OF WORKSPACE DESIGN DO EMPLOYEES PREFER?

Some companies are introducing “hot desks” and open offices to create an atmosphere that encourages greater collaboration between employees at all levels. One of the advantages of this is that everyone is sitting close to each other, which helps break down barriers to collaboration. The flipside is that noise levels can be a problem for individuals trying to concentrate on their work.

A semi-open plan, on the other hand, provides open space where employees can work together easily, and also private and quiet places, such as phone booths or a quiet hub, that employees can go to when they want to focus on an important task, or hold private conversations.

Depending on the nature of your company and specific teams, some settings may be more suitable than others. For example, our survey shows that more professionals from technology/innovation and banking space prefer an open plan environment, whereas those from legal/compliance and human resources prefer closed plan.



12%

OPEN PLAN

(with no visual partitioning between the work stations)



67%

SEMI-OPEN PLAN

(a combination of open plan and private rooms)



21%

CLOSED PLAN

(entirely enclosed offices)



> Our workspace gives staff a versatile environment which includes meeting rooms that range from formal to informal settings depending on the needs of each team or project. We also have wellness rooms, a relaxing breakout area, prayer room, and mother's room to cater to different needs. This creates a culture of sharing and collaboration.
>
> The employee experience is core to our office transformation. Aside from taking reference from Headquarters to support Diversity & Inclusion on the design, we conduct voting and "sprint" sessions where employees can share their ideas and preferences while giving us insight into what they want. We also adopt this practice before rolling out any benefits to ensure that our objectives match employees' needs.
>
> **Philip Morris Asia Limited**

PART 4 – PROMOTING THE SMART WORKPLACE TO ATTRACT THE FUTURE TALENT

DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE IN TALENT ATTRACTION AND RETENTION

So far, we understand that building a smart workplace is about creating an environment where the elements of work are interwoven to deliver a seamless working experience.

Employees who feel a deep sense of satisfaction are naturally more loyal and have a strong sense of belonging to their employers. They are more likely to be positive about their company and share their opinions with their social networks. According to our survey, employees who believe their companies operate smart workplaces are five times more likely to recommend their employers to others.

This shows that the employee experience can bolster a company's image and employer brand, which in turn can have a direct impact on talent attraction and retention strategies.

55%

of employees will consider a job with lower pay if it allows them to work in the kind of workplace they desire.

KEEP TRACK OF EMPLOYEES' FEEDBACK AND APPLY EVALUATION METRICS

WHAT PROCESSES DO COMPANIES HAVE IN PLACE TO MEASURE THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE?



71%
Employee satisfaction survey



36%
Management collection of feedback during townhall meetings



33%
One-to-one evaluations with HR or hiring managers



30%
Regular roundtable discussions with selected staff



24%
Online feedback collection platform



8%
No specific measures

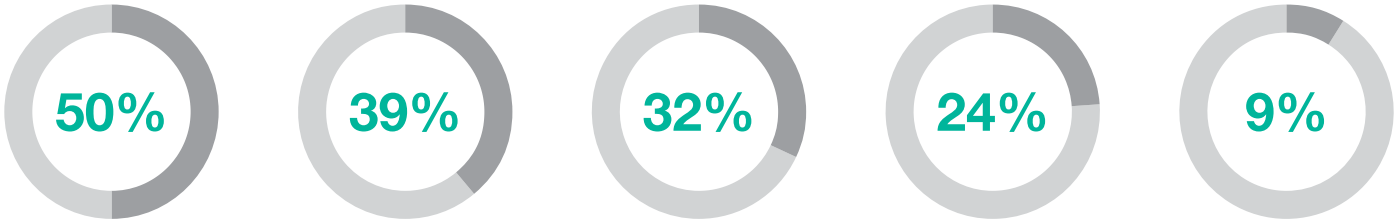
In order to bridge the gap between what employees expect and what a company has delivered, businesses that have successfully set up a smart workplace are strongly advised to keep track of employees' feedback and engage in close communication with them through various touch points.

While different companies may have varying opinions about using metrics to gauge employee satisfaction, there is a constant challenge to find the right parameters to evaluate the effectiveness of a workplace. There are some indexes on the market that might help, such as the Leesman Index, Gensler Experience Index and Cushman & Wakefield's study.[4]

[4] 2019 Workplace trend predictions, Workdesign.com, Jan 2019

LET CANDIDATES GET A FEEL FOR THE WORKPLACE

Top channels that companies use to promote their workplace during the recruitment process:



Companies that have successfully set up a smart workplace should also assess whether their recruitment promotion is effective enough to spread the message to the best candidates.

Companies which promote their smart workplace during the recruitment process could differentiate themselves from other employers and attract a greater share of the top candidates. These could include references to smart workplaces in job advertisements and on career websites, and also discussing any flexibility and wellbeing policies during job interviews.

Less than 15% of employers have promoted these aspects on social media, or organised an open day. Social media is one of the key channels for companies to promote their employer brands, and candidates are often doing background research before applying for jobs.

Share videos and images of your office environment - potential candidates can visualise the space and get a sense of what working for your company would be like. They could also share the videos with their connections if they find interesting.

Organise open days - give potential candidates opportunities to get "a day in the life" glimpse of your smart workplace and a feel for the vibe of the working environment. This is also a chance for HR and the recruiting team to see how potential candidates fit in with existing employees and company culture.

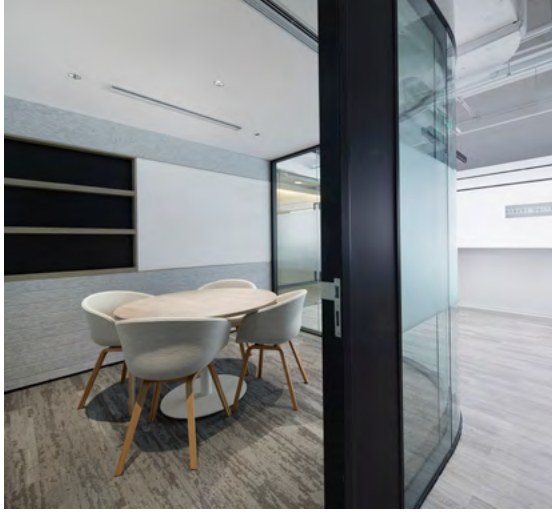


"A smart workplace is powered by a strong employee experience, including how people feel about the places they work in – if they're empowered, fulfilled and engaged. Employers are strongly advised to pay close attention to the employee experience and engage with HR leaders to bring together the environment, location and working pattern. Isolating HR will ignore the key human factors and thus not optimise the return on building a smart workplace."

Sommer Nisbet, HR Director – Greater China, Robert Walters


POWERING PEOPLE AND
ORGANISATIONS TO FULFIL
THEIR UNIQUE POTENTIAL
#PowerOfPurpose







"It's clear that in today's world talent expect more from their workplace – higher efficiency, flexibility and more collaboration. Our purpose as a business is powering people and organisations to fulfil their unique potential, and the way we implement a smart workplace by putting our people front and centre underpins our purpose."

Rachel Wang, Regional Director – Northern China, Robert Walters

CASE STUDY: WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION OF ROBERT WALTERS' SHANGHAI OFFICE

When the Shanghai team moved into their new office at Park Place Tower in 2019, the company had the opportunity to re-design the workplace and change the way employees work.

Using workplace technologies to build a culture of trust

The role of technology in enabling flexibility becomes integral to the business – all Robert Walters China consultants are equipped with smart devices, which empower work mobility and allow them to access flexible working arrangements.

"With the culture of trust, brought to life through flexible working practices, we have greater employee engagement and productivity. Teams can now organise the working arrangements that suit them best."
Sean Li, Director, Robert Walters China

Office design for a great employee experience

Introducing a combination of hot-desking and closed office spaces has addressed the needs of different teams and staff. The design encourages communication between teams, resulting in greater collaboration and higher employee morale. The company also invests in the wellbeing of staff by having ergonomically designed furniture and a spacious break out area.

Creating a purpose-driven smart workplace

Instead of focusing on promoting the hardware, Robert Walters finds the value underlying the smart workplace a more effective tool for talent attraction and retention.

The thinking behind the smart workplace is something the HR team also promote to candidates during the interview process, as Robert Walters believes it is one of the significant competitive advantages that set the company apart.

Attract future talent with open days

Robert Walters hosts regular open days which gives the company the chance to show how its business operates and promote the smart workplace to future talent, in particular to candidates who are unfamiliar with the recruitment industry.

"Attendees are more excited when they see the office, the innovations and the environment they would be working in, rather than just reading about them."
Carrie Huang, Senior HR Manager, Robert Walters China

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To optimise their efforts when building a smart workplace, companies should start by identifying any gaps between the employer's concerns and their employees' needs, and work around them to align expectations.

1 THINK HOLISTICALLY WHEN BUILDING A SMART WORKPLACE FOR THE FUTURE

Having the infrastructure of a smart workplace should not be a means to an end for employee motivation and engagement; rather, companies should create a total solution around the employee experience to successfully establish a smart workplace.

2 IDENTIFY THE BUSINESS FOCUS AND EMPLOYEE CONCERNS IN THE DIGITAL WORKPLACE

A clear understanding of key objectives and goals is crucial for the strategic planning and implementation of a digital workplace. Employers should also understand employees' concerns and create a work culture that inspires and encourages their workforce to embrace the change.

3 ADJUST THE MINDSET TO EMPOWER EMPLOYEES WITH AUTONOMY THROUGH FLEXIBLE WORKING

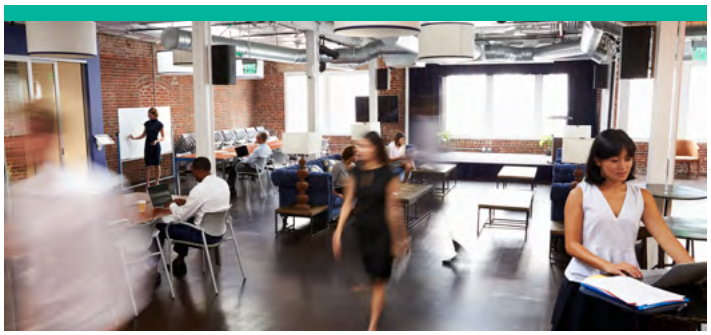
Our survey identifies different concerns voiced by employers and employees about the implementation of a flexible working policy. Recognising the needs of your employees and finding ways to mitigate managers' concerns are essential if the policy is going to meet individual needs and drive employee motivation.

4 USER EXPERIENCE IS KEY TO ACHIEVE AN EFFICIENT WORKSPACE

Different departments and teams have different needs in terms of their working environment. Instead of fixing the workspace into one rigid configuration, be flexible in the use of space to cater for different user requirements. Most employees prefer a semi-open space, with a combination of shared and private areas, as it allows for both collaboration and for more privacy to focus when needed.

5 COMMUNICATE YOUR SMART WORKPLACE EFFECTIVELY TO ATTRACT TALENT

Promoting the smart workplace is an effective way for businesses to attract new talent. Our survey finds that 55% of employees will consider a job with lower pay, if it offers the kind of workplace they prefer. As well as including details in their external communications, such as on their website and at job interviews, we advise companies to host open days and be innovative in the way they promote the quality of their workplace.



CONTACT US

To discuss this whitepaper or talk about your recruitment needs in more detail, please contact your Robert Walters recruitment consultant or get in touch with one of our offices below:

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