

# Maximising Our Workers' Potential and Business Productivity through Workplace Flexibility

Report of the Tripartite Workgroup on the Tripartite Guidelines  
on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests



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12 April 2024

**Dr Tan See Leng**

Minister for Manpower and Second Minister  
for Trade and Industry

Dear Minister,

## **REPORT OF THE TRIPARTITE WORKGROUP ON THE TRIPARTITE GUIDELINES ON FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENT REQUESTS**

In September last year, the Tripartite Workgroup on the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests (TG-FWAR) was convened to develop guidelines and resources to promote the effective and sustainable provision and utilisation of flexible work arrangements.

2 I am pleased to present the Workgroup's Report. The Workgroup saw that FWAs have become more common in workplaces over the past decade. The COVID-19 pandemic boosted FWA provision significantly as telecommuting was mandatory for many employees. Following the pandemic, we need a new equilibrium on FWAs that is both sustainable for the business and caters to their employees' needs for flexibility. This is particularly important given our demographic trends, where businesses will need to find new ways to access manpower amid slower resident workforce growth, and where employees will have growing caregiving needs.

3 Over the past seven months, the Workgroup consulted extensively with a range of stakeholders, including employees, employers, and human resource (HR) professionals, to understand their hopes and concerns about FWAs, and to forge a path forward with workers' and businesses' needs in mind. We also examined other countries' approaches to establishing workplace norms around FWAs.

4 The Workgroup found that in countries with high workplace flexibility, employees and employers are able to discuss their respective needs and constraints around flexible working openly. From our consultations, there was strong consensus among stakeholders that communication and trust form the foundation for flexible and harmonious workplaces. With the right tools and skills, employees, employers, and HR professionals can collectively create workplaces where employees feel that it is acceptable to request FWAs to better manage their work and personal needs, and where employers and HR practitioners are equipped to assess their requests and implement FWAs in a productive and sustainable manner.

5 The Workgroup proposes 10 recommendations to advance 3 key strategies to improve the provision and utilisation of FWAs in Singapore. First, make it easier for employees to request for FWAs, while preserving employers' prerogative to decide on work arrangements. Second, increase awareness of how FWAs can help employers harness the benefits of FWAs. Third, strengthen employers' capability to implement FWAs effectively and sustainably.

6 The Tripartite Guidelines will advance these strategies by providing guidance on processes around the request and assessment of FWA requests, while giving employees and employers the space to discuss and land on FWAs that work for both parties.

7 These Guidelines will bring us closer to our vision of an inclusive and productive workforce, where each of us is able to contribute at work to the best of our abilities at each stage of our lives, and employers have access to the talent they need to help their businesses grow.



**Gan Siew Huang**

Co-Chair, Tripartite  
Workgroup on TG-FWAR  
Minister of State,  
Ministry of Manpower and  
Ministry of Education



**Yeo Wan Ling**

Co-Chair, Tripartite  
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National Trades Union Congress



**Edwin Ng**

Co-Chair, Tripartite  
Workgroup on TG-FWAR  
Honorary Secretary  
Singapore National  
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## TRIPARTITE WORKGROUP MEMBERS

### Union Representatives

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**Ms Jessie Chiu**

Union Leader  
Singapore Union of  
Broadcasting Employees

**Ms Pravita D/O Nithiah Nandan**

Union Leader  
National Transport Workers' Union

### Government Representatives

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**Mr Ng Chee Khern**

Permanent Secretary  
Ministry of Manpower

**Mr Ye Yongfeng**

Director  
Public Sector Transformation  
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### Employer Representatives

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**Mr Thian Tai Chew**

Executive Director  
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**Mr Ang Yuit**

President  
Association of Small and  
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### Tripartite Representatives

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**Ms Faith Li**

General Manager  
Tripartite Alliance for Fair and  
Progressive Employment Practices

**Mr Aslam Sardar**

Chief Executive Officer  
Institute for Human  
Resource Professionals

15 April 2024

Dear Co-Chairs and Members,

Thank you for your letter of 12 April 2024 submitting the final report of the Tripartite Workgroup on the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests (TG-FWAR).

2 This Workgroup's work is both important and timely. Singapore's population is ageing rapidly, and our workforce growth is slowing, even as more of our workers will need to balance work commitments with caregiving for family. FWAs are important to ensure our workers can remain in the workforce and contribute productively at work, while taking care of family needs. Workers should feel empowered to request for the FWAs they need, and employers need to be equipped to consider these requests properly and provide FWAs where business circumstances allow.

3 I commend the Workgroup on its comprehensive and balanced recommendations. Most employers and employees already discuss and land on mutually acceptable FWAs today. The Workgroup's recommendations encourage such discussions to continue. For those who need a more structured process, the Tripartite Guidelines will serve as a means for employees to set out their requests clearly, and for employers to consider and respond to them thoughtfully. The Workgroup's emphasis on maintaining communication and trust between employers and employees will also ensure workplaces remain harmonious, even as they become more flexible.

4 The Government accepts all the 10 recommendations by the Workgroup, as well as the Tripartite Guidelines that the Workgroup has collectively developed and agreed upon. The Ministry of Manpower will work closely with our tripartite partners and other stakeholders to implement the recommendations.

Yours sincerely,



**Dr Tan See Leng**

Minister for Manpower

# Executive Summary

1. Our vision is to build inclusive and productive workplaces in Singapore, where workers can give their best both at work and at home, and businesses are able to harness the full potential of our workforce. Workplace flexibility is a key enabler, and for us to build more flexible workplaces, trust and communication between employers and employees is crucial. To this end, we need to:
  - a. Shape the right norms and expectations around flexible work arrangements (FWAs);
  - b. Increase awareness about how having various types of FWAs can help businesses thrive; and
  - c. Help employers implement FWAs effectively and sustainably.

## Introduction

2. FWAs benefit employers, employees and society at large:
  - a. **Employers:** Offering FWAs enables employers to access a larger talent and manpower pool, and retain valuable employees who require the flexibility to continue working for their employer.
  - b. **Employees:** Having access to FWAs suited to their needs enables employees to achieve better work-life harmony, by helping them manage work and personal commitments.
  - c. **Society:** When we build more flexible workplaces, we make them more inclusive by allowing more people to be part of our economy and society through employment. This increases our labour force participation.
3. Promoting FWAs helps us better manage the impact of our demographic trends. With an ageing population, Singapore will face the twin challenges of slowing resident workforce growth and growing caregiving needs. More Singaporeans will need to juggle caregiving and work responsibilities in the years to come. FWAs are increasingly important in helping working caregivers manage their dual responsibilities, and attracting caregivers and seniors who left the workforce to return – thereby sustaining labour force participation and helping businesses better attract and retain talent.
4. Tripartite partners have been promoting the provision and adoption of FWAs for many years. The breakthrough came when the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that implementing FWAs on a larger scale is possible. Workers were required to work from home where possible, and businesses were encouraged to stagger work hours to minimise transmission of the virus. Workers are now more aware of both the benefits and challenges of implementing FWAs. Tripartite partners agree that we must build on this experience. Now is the time to make a concerted effort, to enable businesses to implement FWAs effectively and sustainably.

## Findings of the Tripartite Workgroup

5. With this in mind, a Tripartite Workgroup was set up in September 2023. The Workgroup's task was to develop guidelines to ensure that FWA requests are considered in a practical manner, taking into account both workers' and businesses' needs. The Workgroup also studied how to support employers and employees to comply with the Guidelines and implement FWAs in a productive and sustainable way. The composition of the Workgroup is at **Annex A**.
  - a. To better understand the needs and views of different segments of society, the Workgroup consulted widely with a diverse group of stakeholders including employee groups, employers, trade associations and chambers, union leaders, human resource and legal professionals, as well as community organisations. A list of the stakeholders engaged is at **Annex B**.
  - b. The Workgroup also examined other countries' approaches to building the right norms around FWAs. This included organising a study visit to Australia and New Zealand, where workplace norms around FWAs have been in place for some time and have become a key part of workplace culture.
6. Through the extensive consultations and learning from other countries' experiences, the Workgroup identified several themes that resonated with the various stakeholders:
  - a. **FWAs can benefit all employees. We should cultivate a norm where employees feel that it is acceptable to request for and use FWAs.** While not all industries or jobs can accommodate all types of FWAs, all jobs can accommodate some form of flexibility. Employees should be encouraged to discuss their needs with their employers. Employers should similarly be equipped to engage their employees to come up with flexible arrangements that work for both parties.



Engagement with employers on 24 October 2023.

- b. **FWAs can benefit employers as it is an increasingly important strategy for manpower attraction and retention.** At the same time, FWAs are only sustainable if they make business sense, by enhancing or maintaining business productivity and operations. Hence, employers should continue to assess and decide on FWA requests taking into consideration their business needs. We can also do more to prepare our employers to implement various types of FWAs effectively.
- c. **Trust and communication between employers and employees are critical for the successful implementation of FWAs. We should establish harmonious workplace norms around requesting for and assessing FWAs.** This enables both parties to discuss and land on arrangements that address their respective needs and constraints, and ensure that workplaces continue to function well and harmoniously. Employees who understand their employers' constraints are better able to make reasonable requests for FWAs, while employers who feel assured that their employees will continue to stay efficient at their work and use FWAs responsibly are more likely to accommodate FWA requests.

## **Recommendations for the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests**

- 7. The Workgroup has made the following recommendations for the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests (TG-FWAR):
  - a. Recommendation 1: The TG-FWAR should establish a clear set of workplace norms around requesting FWAs and considering FWA requests. This will better manage employees' and employers' expectations on the process and their respective obligations. These guidelines set out the minimum requirements, and do not preclude employers from adopting more progressive practices.
  - b. Recommendation 2: The TG-FWAR should guide the process of requesting and considering FWAs, and not the outcome of FWA requests.
  - c. Recommendation 3: The TG-FWAR should require employers to properly consider FWA requests based on business grounds, and employees to request and use FWAs responsibly.
  - d. Recommendation 4: The TG-FWAR should only apply to formal FWA requests. Formal requests may be defined as requests that are documented and that contain the information needed for the employer to make an informed decision.
  - e. Recommendation 5: The TG-FWAR should cover all employees who have completed probation, the duration of which may be determined by employers.
  - f. Recommendation 6: The TG-FWAR should not require employers to consider FWA requests from jobseekers. However, employers could still state their FWA approach or policy in job advertisements and interviews, to manage jobseekers' expectations on the FWAs they can provide.

- g. Recommendation 7: The TG-FWAR should cover all employers, including Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Guides and templates should be provided to help all employers comply.
  - h. Recommendation 8: Adopt an educational and enabling approach to implementing the TG-FWAR, with a focus on equipping employees and employers with the resources and skills to make and properly consider FWA requests respectively.
  - i. Recommendation 9: Strengthen communications and engagement to help employers understand how FWAs can help their businesses and raise awareness of the types of FWAs available. This builds on the progressive practices that were promoted under the Tripartite Advisory and Tripartite Standard on FWAs, which will be replaced by the TG-FWAR and its accompanying resource package.
  - j. Recommendation 10: Provide greater support for employers to build and invest in critical FWA implementation capabilities. Resources and training to build capabilities on FWAs should be scaled up in partnership with key business and employee associations and unions. Resources should be customised to cater for different firm sizes, sectors, and nature of work.
8. Through the introduction of the TG-FWAR and supporting resources, we seek to create workplace norms and capacity for effective implementation of FWAs – where employers see FWAs as an integral part of their HR and talent strategy, and where employees in turn use FWAs responsibly and are engaged at work even as they fulfil other personal responsibilities and goals. We are hopeful that this will translate into higher provision and utilisation of FWAs, with flexibility embedded within each workplace.
9. Nonetheless, creating more flexible workplaces is an effort that must continue beyond the work of this Workgroup. Every employer and employee must continue to play their role to build a workplace culture of trust and mutual understanding, so that employees can access the FWAs they need and to make FWAs a win-win for all. Tripartite partners will monitor the adoption of FWAs and continue to work together to support workplace flexibility.



MOS Gan attending a dialogue session with employees on 11 October 2023.

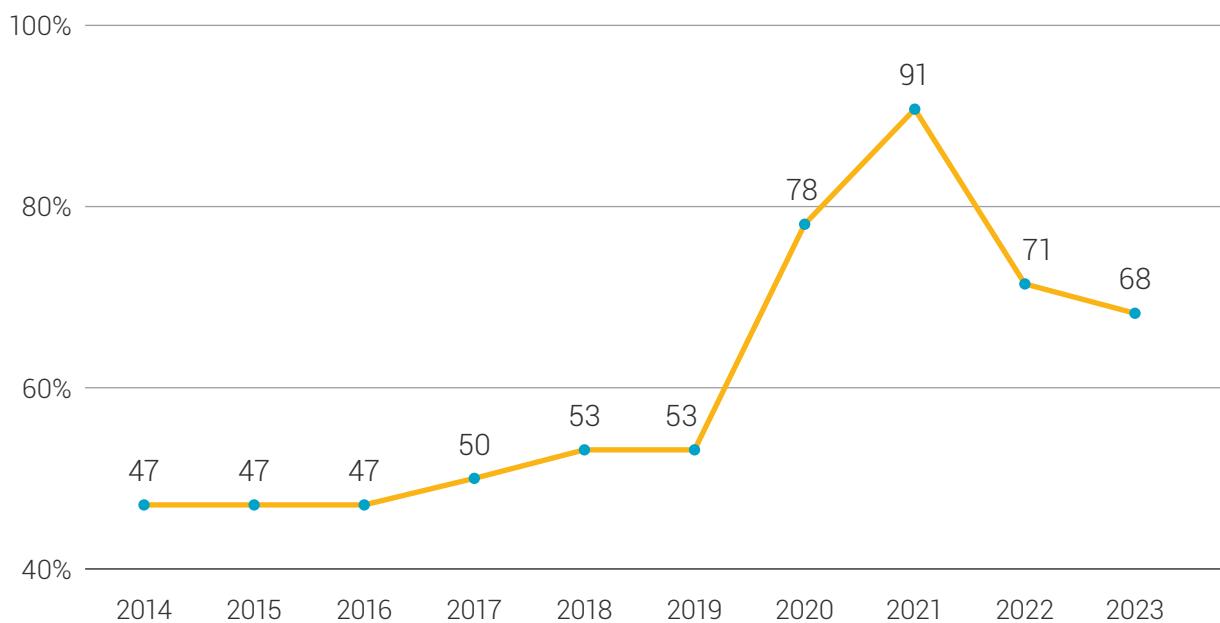
# Chapter I

## Landscape of Flexible Work Arrangements in Singapore and impetus for Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests

1. FWAs can take the form of flexi-time (e.g. staggered hours, flexi-shift), flexi-place (e.g. telecommuting), or flexi-load (e.g. part-time, job sharing). Higher FWA adoption benefits employers, employees and society at large:
  - 1.1.1. **Employers:** Offering FWAs enables employers to access a larger talent and manpower pool and retain valuable employees who require the flexibility to continue working.
  - 1.1.2. **Employees:** FWAs enable employees to achieve better work-life harmony by helping them manage work and personal commitments.
  - 1.1.3. **Society:** When we build more flexible workplaces, we make them more inclusive by allowing more people to be part of our economy and society through employment. This increases our labour force participation.
- 1.2. Singapore's population is ageing rapidly, with one in four Singaporeans expected to be aged 65 and above by 2030, up from one in six in 2020. More Singaporeans will become caregivers to their elderly family members; some may also be seniors themselves. FWAs will become increasingly important in helping such employees juggle their caregiving responsibilities with work and enabling them to remain in the workforce. This will help sustain our labour force participation. Employers who offer FWAs will also be better able to attract and retain talent.
- 1.3. Tripartite Partners have embarked on continued efforts to support FWA adoption over the past two decades. The journey started with 2007's Tripartite Workgroup on Enhancing Employment Choices, which recommended supporting greater provision of FWAs to bring more women back to work. Since then, we have introduced various other initiatives and grants which have set a good foundation to build on to further encourage FWAs:
  - 1.3.1. The Work-Life Grant (2013 – 2020) provided incentives for companies to implement FWAs;
  - 1.3.2. The Tripartite Advisory on Flexible Work Arrangements (TA-FWA) (2014) provides guidance on how employers, supervisors and employees can implement FWAs effectively and use FWAs responsibly;
  - 1.3.3. The Tripartite Standard on Flexible Work Arrangements (TS-FWA) (2017) recognises employers that voluntarily put in place measures to support FWAs;
  - 1.3.4. The Tripartite Alliance Awards (introduced in 2018) recognises employers that put in place fair and progressive practices, including those that improve work-life harmony;
  - 1.3.5. The Citizens' Panel and Alliance for Action on Work-Life Harmony (2019 – 2021) saw individuals from all walks of life co-creating solutions to increase FWA adoption in Singapore, many of which were eventually implemented with Tripartite Partners' support.

- 1.4. Provision of FWAs – specifically telecommuting and staggered hours – increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as workers were mandated to work from home where possible to avoid crowded workplaces. As the pandemic subsided, businesses are adjusting to a new normal, where the proportion of employers providing FWAs has decreased from the artificially high pandemic peak. Nonetheless, the proportion remains higher than in 2019, before the pandemic (**Chart 1**).

**Chart 1: Proportion of Firms Offering at least 1 Scheduled FWA, 2014 – 2023 (%)**



Source: Conditions of Employment Survey, Manpower Research & Statistics Department, MOM

- 1.5. Given the increasing share of working caregivers in the workforce, and evolving expectations of how work arrangements and workplaces should be structured, we are already seeing the importance of FWAs in talent attraction and retention. Demand for FWAs among job applicants and employees has been increasing.

- 1.5.1. A 2022 Randstad survey found that 41% of Singapore employees would consider changing jobs for better flexibility, while 27% had quit their jobs due to insufficient flexibility.
- 1.5.2. JobStreet job posts offering FWAs tend to attract 2 – 3 times more applications<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.5.3. In a 2023 Ernst and Young survey, workplace flexibility was cited by employees as the top reason for leaving their roles, with 34% of Singapore employees citing it as a key concern<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> "Most S'pore workers returning to office; HR reskilling urged", The Straits Times, 28 August 2023

<sup>2</sup> EY's 2023 Work Reimagined Survey ([https://www.ey.com/en\\_sg/news/2023/11/well-being-pay-and-flexibility-prolong-workplace-tensions-for-singapore-employees](https://www.ey.com/en_sg/news/2023/11/well-being-pay-and-flexibility-prolong-workplace-tensions-for-singapore-employees))

- 1.6. However, some employers still have concerns over whether and how FWAs can be implemented for their businesses. From a MOM survey conducted in 2023, the top three reasons cited by employers for not offering FWAs to employees include the need for employees to be physically present at the workplace due to nature of work (60%), difficulty for teams to collaborate when away from office (28%), and difficulty in monitoring employees' work performance (27%)<sup>3</sup>. These employers will benefit from guidance on how to manage employees on FWAs. Employers are also encouraged to consider the different kinds of FWAs that may be possible for different kinds of jobs. This will help them continue to retain talent and keep their workers engaged, without compromising business operations or impacting productivity.
- 1.7. Due to Singapore's aging demographics, many more employees will have caregiving responsibilities and will need FWAs to keep working for years to come. At the same time, employers will need to respond to shifting workplace norms that place greater emphasis on flexibility, while ensuring that their workforce contribute to their fullest potential. To do so, it is important to provide for a clear process for employees to request for the FWAs they need if there is not already a working process, and for employers to properly consider and respond to these requests. The TG-FWAR will set out this process so as to make FWA requests a norm at workplaces, and help employees and employers land on arrangements that suit both their needs. In addition to the TG-FWAR, tripartite partners will also work together to support employers to implement FWAs effectively and sustainably.



Visit to Chye Thiam Maintenance Pte Ltd on 28 November 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Manpower Research & Statistics Department, MOM

## Chapter II

### Approach taken by Workgroup

- 2.1. The Workgroup was convened in September 2023 with the following terms of reference:
  - 2.1.1. Discuss and develop guidelines to ensure that FWA requests are considered in a practical manner, taking into account both workers' and businesses' needs;
  - 2.1.2. Study the support needed and develop resources for employers and employees to comply with TG-FWAR and implement FWAs;
  - 2.1.3. Provide guidance on the communications and engagement approach to promote effective and sustainable provision and utilisation of FWAs, as well as compliance with the Guidelines among employers, HR practitioners, and employees.
- 2.2. The Workgroup consulted a wide range of stakeholders – employers, employees, caregivers, and HR professionals – to gather their views on FWAs and how they can be implemented well. Consultations were conducted through a series of focus group discussions (FGDs), roundtable discussions, and dialogues. Through these consultations, three key insights emerged:
  - 2.2.1. Firstly, **FWAs can benefit all employees, and we should cultivate a norm where employees feel that it is acceptable to request for and use FWAs**. While not all industries or jobs can accommodate every type of FWAs (e.g. compressed work week, telecommuting, part time work), all jobs can accommodate some form of flexibility. Employees should be empowered to discuss their needs with their employers. Employers should similarly be equipped to engage their employees to come up with work arrangements that work for both parties.
  - 2.2.2. Secondly, **FWAs can benefit all employers as a strategy for manpower attraction and retention**. Since a larger proportion of the workforce will be caregivers in the future, FWAs are crucial for employers to attract and retain talent. **At the same time, FWAs are only sustainable if they make business sense**, and can enhance or maintain business productivity and operations. Hence, employers should continue to assess and decide on FWA requests taking into consideration their business needs. We should also do more to prepare our employers to implement FWAs effectively.
  - 2.2.3. Thirdly, we should **establish harmonious workplace norms around requesting for and assessing FWAs. Trust and communication between employers and employees are critical critical to implement FWAs successfully**. This enables both parties to discuss and land on arrangements that address their respective needs and constraints, and ensure that workplaces continue to function harmoniously. Employees who understand their employers' constraints are better able to put forth FWA requests that are workable, while employers who feel assured that their employees will use FWAs responsibly are more likely to accommodate FWA requests.

2.3. Across employers, employees, and HR professionals, there is consensus that implementing FWAs effectively requires four critical elements:

- 2.3.1. **Trust and mutual understanding between managers and employees.** During our consultations, employers expressed concern that employees might become less productive when on FWAs. Employees hoped that employers would respect their work boundaries and provide them the autonomy to manage their schedules more flexibly. Nonetheless, employees agreed that FWAs that have been granted can be reviewed if there is suspected misuse.
- 2.3.2. **Focus on outcome-based performance management.** Employees raised concerns that requesting for or using FWAs may have a negative impact on their performance appraisals. Having a clear, fair, outcome-based performance management framework will help to ensure employees are appraised fairly and objectively regardless of whether they are on FWAs.
- 2.3.3. **Adequate tools, training and resources such as job redesign support, templates, HR guides and IT support (e.g. workflow and monitoring systems).** Some employers indicated they were not familiar with how to implement FWAs in their teams without affecting productivity. They were also not sure how to assess employees' output and performance on FWAs. They agreed that it would be useful to have resources to help them in doing so.



Roundtable discussion with human resource practitioners on 16 January 2024, organised by the Institute for Human Resource Professionals.

- 2.3.4. **Clear and transparent organisational communications on FWAs.** Employees need clear organisational communications on the practice of FWAs in their company. This allows employees to calibrate their expectations and reduces the need for repeated requests due to a lack of understanding of FWAs in the company. Employers also benefit from clear communications of their provisions and expectations on FWAs, as doing so can reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings or disputes. For example, employers can set out upfront the types of FWAs that can or cannot be provided in each job role due to the nature of the job.
- 2.4. Some countries, such as the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, have high levels of FWA provision and utilisation. They had started their respective FWA journeys more than a decade ago, and flexibility has become a part of their work cultures over the years. As part of its research, the Workgroup travelled to Australia and New Zealand to learn from employers, unions, and government representatives and glean best practices.
- 2.4.1. While both Australia and New Zealand have had legislation on FWAs for over a decade, their legislation mandates only that employees have the right to request for FWAs; employers retain the prerogative to reject requests based on business needs. In any case, most FWAs are requested and discussed in a non-formal manner, rather than requested through legislated processes. Employees typically only make a formal request under such right-to-request legislation when their non-formal requests are rejected.
- 2.4.2. The Workgroup observed that the real enablers of high workplace flexibility in both countries were therefore not legislation, but the following practices:
- a. **Supportive workplace culture and norms surrounding FWAs.** These are critical for FWAs to be implemented well. Employees who request for FWAs are seldom frowned upon, while employers are open to working out arrangements that meet their employees' needs within their business context. Senior management should set an example for effective implementation of FWAs, creating a 'trickle-down' effect to middle managers and staff who will in turn be more receptive to FWAs.
  - b. **Resources such as tools and templates are made readily available to help employers implement FWAs.** In Australia, employers and workers make good use of resources provided by the government on who can request for FWAs and what employers should do with a request; Employment New Zealand is an e-platform run by New Zealand's Ministry of Innovation, Business and Employment that provides easy-to-follow templates to help employers understand and meet their obligations, and help employees make clear requests for FWAs.
- 2.5. The learning points from Australia and New Zealand are consistent with the feedback received through our engagements and consultations with stakeholders in Singapore. Taking in the insights, the Workgroup landed on three strategies to increase FWA provision and utilisation in Singapore:
- 2.5.1. Strategy 1: Make it easier for employees to request for FWAs, while preserving employers' prerogative to decide on work arrangements;
  - 2.5.2. Strategy 2: Increase awareness of how FWAs can help businesses;
  - 2.5.3. Strategy 3: Strengthen employers' capability to implement FWAs effectively and sustainably.

## Chapter III

### Making it easier for employees to request for Flexible Work Arrangements, while preserving employers' prerogative to decide on work arrangements

- 3.1. To help both employers and employees enjoy the benefits of effective and sustainable FWAs, we need to set the right norms and expectations around requesting FWAs and assessing FWA requests. Both parties' needs can then be met as much as possible, while ensuring that workplaces remain harmonious and productive.

#### A. Introduce Tripartite Guidelines to Establish Workplace Norms Around FWAs

- 3.2. **Recommendation 1: The TG-FWAR should establish a clear set of workplace norms around requesting FWAs and considering FWA requests.** This will better manage employees' and employers' expectations on the process and their respective obligations. These guidelines set out the minimum requirements, and do not preclude employers from adopting more progressive practices.
- 3.2.1. In our public consultations, employers, HR practitioners, and employees unanimously agree that workplace trust is critical for FWAs to be effective and sustainable. Employees want autonomy and line managers hope that employees remain accountable for their performance without the need for close monitoring. HR and senior management also play a crucial role in ensuring proper assessment of FWA requests and fair appraisal of employees' performance, including for those who request and use FWAs. These practices have helped organisations build mutual trust and facilitated successful FWA implementation.
- 3.2.2. While some countries have introduced right-to-request FWAs legislation to support FWA adoption, the Workgroup is of the view that a legislative approach is not the best way to build mutual trust as it could result in an acrimonious workplace culture. Instead, the Workgroup recommends introducing a set of Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests (TG-FWAR), which will focus on setting expectations for employees and employers to play their respective roles in requesting and using FWAs responsibly, and considering FWA requests properly. Both employers and employees will be required to follow the TG-FWAR when considering and making FWA requests respectively. The TG-FWAR will allow for a more calibrated approach to resolving disagreements, centred on facilitating communication between employers and employees. This will foster a give-and-take mindset towards FWAs rather than creating a litigious workplace culture.

## B. Scope of TG-FWAR

- 3.3. **Recommendation 2: The TG-FWAR should guide the process of requesting and considering FWAs, and not the outcome of FWA requests.**
- 3.4. **Recommendation 3: The TG-FWAR should require employers to properly consider FWA requests based on business grounds, and employees to request and use FWAs responsibly.**

3.4.1. During our consultation and engagements, employers have emphasised that in order to be sustainable, FWAs must meet business needs. FWAs should also not be perceived as an entitlement. Employees agree and acknowledge that employers and managers need to consider a range of factors when assessing FWA requests, such as the employee's suitability for the FWA, the nature of the job role, the impact on individual and team performance, as well as the broader impact on the firm's productivity and ability to meet clients' demand (see Box 3.1).

### **Box 3.1: Feedback from Employers and Employees on Considerations for Assessing FWA Requests**

*"When we adopt flexible work arrangements, we should consider the business' and individual's needs, rather than doing it just for its own sake."*

*– Employer, Head of Department, MNC*

*"When we wish to brainstorm, we cannot say 'let us wait for next week'. For instance, if there is an urgent meeting that has to be conducted immediately, but one employee is working from home while another is working flexi hours, it will be very difficult to find a meeting slot."*

*– Employer, SME*

*"Give the company flexibility to implement FWAs based on its company culture. You can have laws or guidelines, but the company must have flexibility in executing FWAs."*

*– Employee*

*"The nature of the job is important in deciding how FWAs should be applied."*

*– Employee*

3.4.2. There is also strong consensus among employers and employees that responsible use of FWAs is essential to building and maintaining trust and giving employers the confidence to continue providing FWAs to employees. Employees should meet deadlines and performance standards that have been agreed upon with their managers and remain responsive during agreed work hours (see Box 3.2). Employers may review FWAs with affected employees, including those FWAs already granted, to assess the effectiveness of the FWAs and make adjustments where necessary to meet business needs. Employees agree that approved FWA requests can be reviewed if there was suspected misuse of the FWAs.

**Box 3.2: Feedback from Employers and Employees on Responsible Use of FWAs**

*"It is acceptable as long as you can fulfil your job requirements. There needs to be a transparent arrangement. You need to show that your work is completed even while you are on FWAs."*

*– Employee*

*"Responsible use of FWAs means that employees should be contactable – it's not right if your boss is unable to reach you during your agreed work hours."*

*– Employee*

*"We have a very clear target. We have communicated to him that he will not have to report where he is, or what time he starts work, but we need to know how much he has achieved in sales. For my QC (Quality Control) staff, their targets are also clear – the target is the number of items they have to QC every day. Once done, they may leave work early."*

*– Employer*

3.4.3. Given the above feedback, the Workgroup agreed that employers should continue to have the prerogative to decide on work arrangements based on their business needs. However, employers should also consider their employees' FWA requests properly. This means providing a timely response, clearly communicating the reasons for rejecting requests, and rejecting requests only on business-related grounds. Doing so ensures that employees have a workable process to express their need for FWAs, and are not deterred from requesting for FWAs.

3.4.4. Taking this feedback into consideration, the TG-FWAR will include examples of reasonable and unreasonable grounds for why requested FWAs cannot be provided.

3.4.5. The Workgroup also recognises the concerns of women and seniors who are more likely to request FWAs due to caregiving responsibilities and need for reduced workloads. These employees may be deterred from requesting and using FWAs out of concern that doing so may affect their career and performance appraisal. The Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices already requires all employers to adopt fair and objective performance appraisal systems with measurable standards for evaluating job performance. This applies to all employees, including those who request and use FWAs.

3.5. **Recommendation 4: The TG-FWAR should only apply to formal FWA requests.** Formal requests may be defined as requests that are documented and that contain the information needed for the employer to make an informed decision.

3.5.1. Some employers, especially SMEs, shared that FWAs are often mutually agreed upon through non-formal discussions between managers and employees. These work well when there is a strong culture of open communication and trust in the workplace. Such non-formal practices should continue where they are already working well. The TG-FWAR should not cover these non-formal requests, to avoid adding administrative burden to employees and employers to document the process of requesting for and considering FWAs even when it is not necessary.

3.5.2. The TG-FWAR should instead focus on facilitating effective communication through formal FWA requests, to help employers who do not have such practices in place. Formal requests should be documented to ensure each party's considerations are clearly communicated to the other.



The Workgroup Co-Chairs visiting AsiaOne on 31 January 2024.

### C. Coverage of Employees and Employers

- 3.6. **Recommendation 5: The TG-FWAR should cover all employees who have completed probation,** the duration of which may be determined by employers.
- 3.6.1. There is broad agreement across employers, HR practitioners and employees that all employees should have the opportunity to formally request FWAs and have their requests be properly considered. This is to avoid invidious comparisons and disputes between employees. In contrast, scoping the TG-FWAR to only cover selected groups of employees could inadvertently affect their employability.
- 3.6.2. Stakeholders also recognised that while all employees can request FWAs, employers ultimately need to assess each request on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the employee's job performance and potential business impact of the FWA. Employers should therefore properly consider all formal requests, but can exercise discretion in their decisions.
- 3.6.3. There is also consensus among stakeholder groups that new employees may need to start with regular work schedules to facilitate training and building of team rapport, before employers can assess their suitability for FWAs. As such, many agree that employers should only be required to consider formal FWA requests from employees who have spent a minimum period in employment. Notwithstanding this, employers can still choose to consider and grant FWA requests from employees on probation at their discretion.
- 3.7. **Recommendation 6: The TG-FWAR should not require employers to consider FWA requests from jobseekers.** However, employers could still state their FWA approach or policy in job advertisements and interviews, to manage jobseekers' expectations on the FWAs they can provide.
- 3.7.1. During the hiring process, employers may interview many candidates for the same position, some of whom may eventually not be suitable for the role. It would not be practical to mandate employers to consider and evaluate requests from all jobseekers, as employers may need to consider the employee's performance on the job before assessing FWA requests.
- 3.7.2. Employers should therefore not be required to consider formal FWA requests from jobseekers. Nonetheless, progressive employers who want to be more attractive to jobseekers can share about their FWA policy or approach to FWAs in job advertisements and during interviews.

3.8. **Recommendation 7: The TG-FWAR should cover all employers, including Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Guides and templates should be provided to help all employers comply.**

3.8.1. All employers stand to benefit from leveraging workplace flexibility as a talent attraction and retention tool. FWAs are particularly important for smaller employers with limited manpower to become employers of choice amidst a tight labour market. For example, successful implementation of flexi-time and flexi-place arrangements has helped HUAY Architects maintain a stable workforce size and a higher employee retention rate than the industry average (see Box 3.3).

**Box 3.3: Leveraging FWAs for Employee Retention: An SME's Perspective**

Operating in a sector known for its culture of long working hours, architectural firm HUAY Architects recognised the changing workplace landscape and the role of FWAs in their overall talent attraction and retention strategy.

The firm offers staggered working hours for their workforce of 24 employees. And even though the nature of the work calls for frequent in-person collaboration to exchange design ideas and provide real-time feedback, employees are nevertheless provided with 20 days of work-from-home per year. This allows employees flexibility to adjust their work around their personal schedules, particularly for those with young families and other caregiving responsibilities.



The management invested in infrastructure and processes that support sustainable FWA implementation. For example, employees can easily make FWA requests through an online HR Management System App, and managers can assess and approve or reject these requests via the app. Weekly check-ins have also been instituted to foster high levels of collaboration and communication, even as employees work remotely.

These efforts have helped HUAY Architects achieve a positive employee retention rate.

3.8.2. Nevertheless, the Workgroup recognises that the administrative requirements under the TG-FWAR should be kept light, with supporting resources to help employers adhere to the TG-FWAR. This way, a balance can be achieved between helping all employers gain greater access to manpower, and minimising administrative burden.



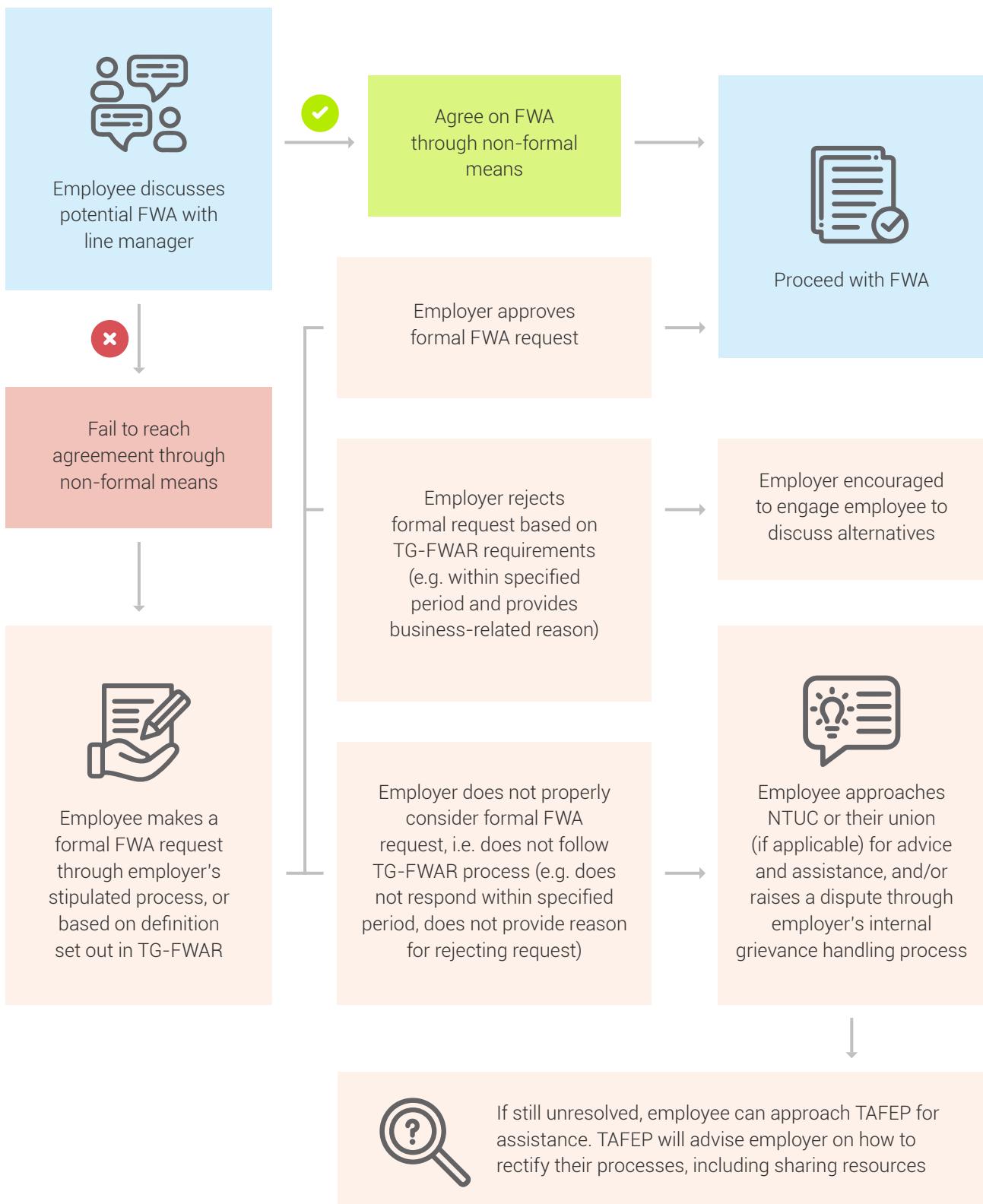
The Workgroup Co-Chairs attending an engagement with employers on 24 October 2023.

## D. Approach to Implementation

- 4.1. **Recommendation 8: Adopt an educational and enabling approach to implementing the TG-FWAR**, with a focus on equipping employees and employers with the resources and skills to make and properly consider FWA requests respectively.
  - 4.1.1. Employers hope that disagreements about FWAs can continue to be resolved through discussion and internal grievance handling mechanisms, as FWAs should meet the needs of both employers and employees. Unionised employees can also seek advice and assistance from their unions.
  - 4.1.2. As such, the Workgroup is mindful not to adopt an overly prescriptive approach to implementing the TG-FWAR. Instead, the focus should be on helping employers cultivate a workplace culture that facilitates adoption of FWAs.
  - 4.1.3. Employees whose employers have not adhered to the process for proper consideration of formal FWA requests as set out in the TG-FWAR can seek assistance from the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP). TAFEP will advise these employers on how to rectify their processes, and provide resources to help them adhere to the TG-FWAR.

4.1.4. As the TG-FWAR will guide the process of requesting FWAs and not the outcomes of FWA requests, TAFEP will not arbitrate on outcomes of requests. [Figure 4.1](#) describes the recommended approach for managing complaints under the TG-FWAR.

**Figure 4.1: Recommended Approach to Managing Complaints under TG-FWAR**



# Chapter IV

## Increasing awareness of how Flexible Work Arrangements can help businesses

- 5.1. **Recommendation 9: Strengthen communications and engagement to help employers understand how FWAs can help their businesses and raise awareness of the types of FWAs available.** This builds on the progressive practices that were promoted under the Tripartite Advisory and Tripartite Standard on FWAs, which will be replaced by the TG-FWAR and its accompanying resource package.
- 5.1.1. The Workgroup's engagements with employers, employees and HR practitioners revealed a common misperception that FWAs mainly refer to telecommuting. Many employers and employees therefore assume that FWAs are not suitable for industries with heavy reliance on frontline operations, or that FWAs are only feasible for office-based workers. In reality, there is a wide range of FWAs beyond telecommuting (i.e. flexi-place) that can suit different employees' and employers' needs. These include flexi-time, which includes staggered work hours and flexi-shift; and flexi-load, which includes part-time work and job-sharing.
- 5.1.2. Employers are also concerned that FWAs will hurt productivity by reducing employees' ability to meet key performance indicators, making it difficult for teams to collaborate, or requiring changes to manpower allocations. These concerns are not insurmountable. FWAs can be compatible with high productivity if employers and HR practitioners have good understanding of the suitability of different types of FWAs for their particular industry and job role, and possess the knowledge and skills for effective FWA implementation.



Dialogue session with union representatives on 23 January 2024.

5.1.3. As such, the TG-FWAR will be accompanied by targeted communications and engagement efforts, to familiarise employees and employers with the types of FWAs available, and to provide examples of best practices among progressive employers, which will inspire and guide other employers to implement FWAs (see Box 5.1).

#### **Box 5.1: Making FWAs Work in Diverse Job Roles**

Keller Singapore provides ground improvement solutions for construction developments. With over 70% of their 150 employees based externally at project sites, FWAs have proved an effective talent attraction and retention strategy for Keller by supporting employees in managing their work and personal responsibilities. As such, they have seen increases in employee engagement and productivity.



At Keller, eligible employees can utilise staggered working hours, choosing between three options for start and end times to the workday. They may also telecommute on a specified day each week. Eligible on-site employees may request for a compressed work schedule (i.e. compressing full-time hours into fewer days per week, which gives employees more off days).

Keller also redesigned some of their job roles to better accommodate FWAs. Individual job scopes were broken down into tasks that could be completed remotely (e.g. landline calls could be taken from home or using virtual conferencing tools). In addition, while the receptionist (on-site) and personal assistant (hybrid) roles were originally held by separate employees, both roles were redesigned to share on-site (manning the reception counter) and off-site (administrative and event support) duties. Staff in these roles are now able to telecommute on alternate weeks when not required on-site.

Keller also invested in IT infrastructure such as soft phones (i.e. software that makes phone calls over Internet rather than with physical phones) and laptops for employees, ensuring they remain productive and can communicate well with internal and external stakeholders while working flexibly.



## Chapter V

### Strengthening employers' capability to implement Flexible Work Arrangements effectively and sustainably

- 6.1. Beyond guidance on how to handle FWA requests and knowledge of the range of FWAs available, employers and HR practitioners require greater support to build the necessary capabilities to implement FWAs effectively and sustainably.
- 6.1. **Recommendation 10:** Provide greater support for employers to build and invest in critical FWA implementation capabilities. **Resources and training to build capabilities on FWAs should be scaled up in partnership with key business and employee associations and unions.** Resources should be customised to cater for different firm sizes, sectors, and nature of work.
- 6.2.1. Employers and HR practitioners have shared with the Workgroup that there could be more training in HR competencies that can help companies better manage employees on FWAs, such as change management and performance appraisal. Adoption of technology enablers, such as complex shift rostering systems and performance tracking for remote employees, can help employers maintain or even boost productivity while providing FWAs.



Focus group discussion with employers on 24 October 2023.

6.2.2. Job redesign is another important enabler that can help employers expand the range of FWAs they can offer, while maintaining or boosting productivity (see [Box 6.1](#)). The Workgroup received feedback that employers, especially SMEs, lack the know-how and financial resources to engage in job redesign.

#### **Box 6.1: Winning the War for Talent with FWAs (and Customised HR Tech)**

Like many other businesses, AsiaOne Online first implemented FWAs in early 2022 in response to COVID-19 workplace restrictions. After six months, they were pleasantly surprised to discover they had experienced gains in productivity and operational flexibility.

This gave AsiaOne the confidence to retain these FWAs permanently:

- Flexi-load: Former apprentices and full-time staff have the option of transitioning to part-time arrangements.
- Flexi-time: Staff who are not constrained by the news cycle have scheduling flexibility, allowing them to balance their work and personal commitments, and avoid the rush-hour commute.
- Flexi-place: Staff are eligible for 6 telecommuting days per month, and up to 12 days should personal circumstances evolve (e.g. caregiving, parenting duties).

Upgrading their IT infrastructure along the way has helped AsiaOne better facilitate FWAs. In 2023, they received funding support through the Productivity Solutions Grant to customise their HR system to enable online FWA application and approval, reducing administrative load on supervisors.

As a news and media company, talent is critical to AsiaOne's success – and the effort they put into FWAs has paid off. Since implementing FWAs, AsiaOne has improved employee retention by 50%.



6.2.3. TAFEP and the Institute for Human Resource Professionals (IHRP) will develop a package of resources to help employers and employees adhere to the TG-FWAR, as well as implement and use FWAs effectively. This includes templates and guides that make it easier for employers to ensure that their processes are aligned with the TG-FWAR. The resources will also include hands-on workshops on redesigning jobs to enable FWAs. These resources will be customised to cater for different firm sizes, sectors, and nature of work.

# CONCLUSION

7. Flexible workplaces benefit employers, employees and society at large. We have made significant progress over the past few decades in building inclusive workplaces that help employees achieve better work-life harmony. Nonetheless, employers and employees agree that more can be done to sustain FWA provision.
8. The Workgroup's recommendations are aimed at building a workplace culture of trust and mutual understanding so that FWAs are a win-win for employers and employees. The Workgroup's approach has therefore focused on making it easier for employees to request FWAs, strengthening public communications and education on FWAs, and equipping employers with the skills and resources needed to implement FWAs in a sustainable manner.
9. We need the support of all stakeholders, including senior management, line managers, and fellow co-workers in helping us achieve our vision for more flexible and productive workplaces. Each stakeholder has a role to play in showing understanding and support to those who may need FWAs so that they can give their best both at and outside of work. At the same time, those who take up FWAs should do so responsibly to maintain trust with their employers and fellow co-workers.
10. Collectively, these efforts will build a Singapore where employees can achieve harmony between their work and personal aspirations, and where businesses can continue to tap on a wide talent pool amidst demographic change.



Focus group discussion with employees on 11 October 2023.

## **Annex A – Composition of the Tripartite Workgroup on the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests**

<b>Co-Chairs</b>		
<b>Union Representatives</b>	<b>Government Representatives</b>	<b>Employer Representatives</b>
<b>Ms Yeo Wan Ling</b> Director Women and Family/U SME Assistant Secretary-General National Trades Union Congress	<b>Ms Gan Sioh Huang</b> Minister of State Ministry of Manpower Ministry of Education	<b>Mr Edwin Ng</b> Honorary Secretary Singapore National Employers Federation
<b>Ms Jessie Chiu</b> Union Leader Singapore Union of Broadcasting Employees	<b>Mr Ng Chee Khern</b> Permanent Secretary Ministry of Manpower	<b>Mr Thian Tai Chew</b> Executive Director Jobs & Skills Division Singapore Business Federation
<b>Ms Pravita D/O Nithiah Nandan</b> Union Leader National Transport Workers' Union	<b>Mr Ye Yongfeng</b> Director Public Sector Transformation Public Service Division	<b>Mr Ang Yuit</b> President Association of Small and Medium Enterprises
<b>Tripartite Representatives</b>		
		<b>Mr Aslam Sardar</b> Chief Executive Officer Institute for Human Resource Professionals
		<b>Ms Faith Li</b> General Manager Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices

## Annex B – List of Companies, Trade Associations, Unions and Community Organisations Engaged

<b>Community Organisations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Association of Women for Action and Research</li> <li>• Centre for Fathering</li> <li>• Centre for Seniors</li> <li>• Financial Women's Association</li> <li>• People's Association Women's Integration Network Council</li> <li>• Singapore Council of Women's Organisations</li> <li>• SG Enable</li> <li>• SG Her Empowerment</li> <li>• Singapore Muslim Women's Association</li> </ul>
<b>Companies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AsiaOne Online Pte Ltd</li> <li>• Chye Thiam Maintenance Pte Ltd</li> <li>• Hanbaobao Pte Ltd</li> <li>• Radha Exports Pte Ltd</li> </ul>
<b>Trade Associations and Chambers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Singapore National Employers Federation</li> <li>• Association of Small and Medium Enterprises</li> <li>• Singapore Business Federation</li> <li>• Singapore International Chamber of Commerce</li> <li>• Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce &amp; Industry</li> <li>• Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce &amp; Industry</li> <li>• Association of Informational Security Professional</li> <li>• Institute of Singapore Chartered Accountants</li> <li>• Restaurant Association of Singapore</li> <li>• SG Tech</li> <li>• Singapore Food Manufacturers' Association</li> <li>• Singapore Logistics Association</li> <li>• Singapore Manufacturing Federation</li> <li>• Singapore Retailers Association</li> <li>• Singapore Shipping Association</li> <li>• Singapore Transport Association</li> <li>• The Law Society of Singapore</li> </ul>
<b>Unions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amalgamated Union of Public Employees</li> <li>• Attractions, Resorts &amp; Entertainment Union</li> <li>• Building Construction and Timber Industries Employees' Union</li> <li>• Creative Media and Publishing Union</li> <li>• DBS Staff Union</li> <li>• Food Drinks and Allied Workers' Union</li> <li>• Housing and Development Board Staff Union</li> <li>• Healthcare Services Employees' Union</li> <li>• Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore Staff Union</li> <li>• National Transport Workers' Union</li> <li>• Public Utilities Board Employees' Union</li> <li>• Singapore Chinese Teachers' Union</li> <li>• Singapore Airlines Staff Union</li> <li>• Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering Employees' Union</li> <li>• The Singapore Manual &amp; Mercantile Workers' Union</li> <li>• Singapore Organisation of Seamen</li> <li>• Singapore Teachers' Union</li> <li>• Union of Tripartite Alliance Limited</li> <li>• United Workers of Electronics &amp; Electrical Industries</li> <li>• U SME</li> </ul>

