# Era of hybrid work setups

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The Marcos administration was understandably elated over the Philippine Statistics Authority’s report last week that the country’s jobless rate had gone down to 3.2 percent in November last year from 3.9 percent the prior month and the 3.6 percent in November 2023.

Job quality likewise improved, as the number of employed Filipinos who were either looking for additional jobs or eager to put in more hours went down to 10.8 percent in November from 12.6 percent in October and 11.7 percent in November 2023.

Secretary Arsenio Balisacan of the National Economic and Development Authority said that the “consistently high” employment rates and reduced underemployment were evidence that the Philippines’ labor market “remains robust.”

“The next step is to expand business and employment opportunities to enable more Filipinos to actively and productively contribute to the economy,” Balisacan added.

To do that and therefore build on the hard-fought gains in reducing joblessness and improving job quality, Balisacan said the Marcos administration was turning to increased adoption of “alternative work arrangements.”

## Improving morale

These substitutes for the traditional, in-office, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. arrangement include flexible work hours, work from home, work from a satellite office, or work from another fixed place alternatives that gained popularity at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The pandemic is now in the rear view mirror but many local corporations have chosen to keep these new work arrangements as they have proven to be beneficial to their bottom line.

These have allowed their employees to stay productive while improving morale and fostering loyalty, enabling companies to attract and keep the talent that they need to chart their next growth course.

For one, employees who are able to work some—if not all—days at home are spared them the agony of spending hours commuting to and from their offices, thus conserving their funds for other needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, not to mention their energy for their home and family.

Some have also been able to move out of the city and work in the provinces where the cost of living is much lower, helping cushion the impact of stubbornly high prices of basic goods and services.

## ‘The Great Reconfiguration’

And for another, those with the right skills and qualifications but who would otherwise not be able to work in a traditional office setting, such as those who have to take care of children, of ailing parents, or young children, are now able to join the labor pool.

Indeed, the private sector and even the government may have no choice but to rethink their traditional work systems given evolving preferences, especially among the younger generations who specifically seek more flexible work hours.

Jobstreet by SEEK said in its “Decoding Global Talent Report: GenAI Edition” that flexibility in work arrangements to include hybrid or remote setups and good work-life balance ranked high among employee preferences.

Peter Bithos, chief executive officer of the Asia division of Jobstreet’s parent company SEEK, said the last few years have been a wake-up call to many.

“Today, we are knee-deep in the era of ‘The Great Reconfiguration’ as employees are reconfiguring their work and personal lives, prioritizing the latter with greater demand for work-life balance and flexibility,” Bithos said in a statement.

## Wide digital gap

Employers, he said, are increasingly looking for great talent with digital and technology skills.

This jibes with the 2023 Universum Talent Survey that revealed that 82 percent of Gen Z respondents–or those between 16 and 23 years old–said they were very much interested in remote work opportunities.

It makes sense therefore for the Marcos administration to revisit existing policies governing alternative work arrangements, including the Telecommuting Act of 2019 that allowed private sector employees to work from an alternative workplace with the help of the latest technologies.

But all of these advantages will be for naught unless stable, affordable, and reliable internet access is made available to the majority of Filipinos, especially those outside the traditional centers who need the connectivity the most given the already wide digital gap.

Providing some hope is the Philippines Digital Infrastructure Project approved for $287.24 million in funding by the World Bank last year. The project calls for investment in the government’s national fiber optic backbone, connectivity infrastructure that is secure against cybersecurity threats and climate risks.

The latest numbers by industry data provider Statista showed that 89.34 percent of Filipinos had internet access last year, and projected to increase to 98 percent by 2029. But then the quality of access may not be high enough to allow for flexible work arrangements.

Combine this with updated rules to allow for flexible work arrangements and the Marcos administration stands a better chance of achieving its goal to provide more and better quality jobs for more Filipinos.