

One step ahead

Sham Majid - 30 Nov 2016

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While employees are counting down the niggling hours left at work, staff at Ministry of Design saunter from their office at 3:30pm every Friday to kickstart their weekends early. However, as HRM Asia finds out, the work ethic at the architectural firm is anything but relaxed.

Sarah Conceicao spends her Fridays after work running personal errands or hitting the gym.

Sometimes, she ventures outdoors, going for a stroll down the Central Business District area and out onto Singapore's marina entertainment district before the city workers spill out to celebrate the end of another work week.

These post-work activities are enabled by a unique HR policy with the designer's employer Ministry of Design. The architectural firm deliberately ends the Friday work day at 3.30pm, giving all staff an early start to the weekend.

"Getting to do these things earlier also means less of a crowd and gives you the liberty to indulge in a little bit more," Conceicao says.

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Indulging in that little bit more time for personal interests is also appreciated by Joyce Low, Senior Designer with Ministry of Design.

She says the early knock-off time allows her to catch an early flight for a quick weekend sojourn.

When she isn't rushing off to the airport, Low says she can beat the queue to run bank errands, or tackle those "unavoidable" trips to some of Singapore's retail centres. Low also uses the time to catch up on her yoga classes.

An intense culture

Joy Seah, HR Director for Ministry for Design, says the early-release policy was not a result of recent calls for enhanced workplace flexibility. Rather, the policy has been in place since the company was founded.

"It was designed in part so that employees would be able to run errands on a weekday and beat the crowds, and partly because it meant a more concentrated period of focused energies together as a team from Monday to Thursday."

Seah says this makes for an intensive environment during the other 38 hours of the working week. The organisation is not laid back at all.

"Some firms have a culture where they are happy to stay late and work together, and so they take longer lunches, and have a more reasonable pace," Seah says.

"We work intensely in the day, our lunches are short and sharp, and we want to get as much good work done as possible before we go."

In fact, Ministry of Design makes it a point to tell all its recruits to leave work on time so they can experience "more of life" on the weekend, by having drinks, meals, and vacations, and going shopping.

This ensures staff can draw on these life experiences for inspiration in their design work.

Having a choice

The early Friday-release has also caught the attention of job candidates, with Seah saying it has become a frequent talking-point during interviews.

"It's such a popular policy; no one needs persuading to be a part of this," she says.

"Staff love that we all get to enjoy a longer weekend," she says. "Many book themselves 4.00 or 5.00 pm flights to head out of the country for a weekend vacation, or get their hair and nails done without the weekend crowd," she says.

Seah acknowledges that on certain occasions, often when there is a tight or significant design deadline, some employees may stay on a little longer.

"But, the main thing is choice - we all have the choice to have that work-life balance, and at the same time, we are all professionals who have a strong work ethic to do our jobs well," she says.

A retention weapon

It is no secret that flexible work options are a key tool in the battle for employee retention.

For Ministry of Design, the Friday policy serves as a powerful weapon in this ongoing war for talent.

"It's a great retention tool as our designers feel there is sufficient time and space to breathe outside of work, so that they get enough rest and inspiration to be really good at their jobs," says Seah.

This, she says, means Ministry of Design employees are less overwhelmed than their counterparts in other design firms may feel.

Besides being a magnet for retention, Seah says the policy also serves as a talent attraction tool. It leverages on the significant interests that high calibre talents have in flexible work options.

Seah says the fate of the policy is set in stone. "It's been in place since 2007 and we have no plans to remove it," she says.

"Once you get used to leaving at, 3:30pm on Fridays, it's hard to revert to regular work hours."

Intangible advantages

Joyce Low, a senior designer at architectural firm Ministry of Design, says her employer's policy of reduced hours on Fridays is an attractive prospect for future-hires.

"It can be that extra edge to hiring much-desired talent," she says.

In addition, Low says this policy is a great motivator and frames an employee to work more efficiently during the week.



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"It's a great feeling to be able to leave work while the sun is still shining," she says. "This benefits employees with young children in particular, as it means they can spend more time during the day with them."

Sarah Conceicao, a designer at Ministry of Design, says that aside from assisting with work-life balance, the policy tends to develop a mindset within employees, helping them to complete their day's work a little faster during the week.

Social tools for collaboration



Today's modern HR teams want to use social tools within their workplaces to more effectively collaborate with their talent and colleagues. Mat Newman, IBM's Collaboration Executive in Southeast Asia, explains how the company's product offerings are being tailored with this purpose in mind.

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