

# COMMENT: Protests, coronavirus may finally force HK bankers to embrace working from home

by [Renee Conklin](#) 20 hours ago



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The recent civil unrest and the new [threat from the coronavirus](#) have forced banks in Hong Kong to kick their working from home (WFH) policies into overdrive. And I hope this will herald a new willingness by banks and (just as importantly) their employees to embrace WFH over the long term.

The Hong Kong government took the lead last week by asking 176,000 civil servants to work from home amid coronavirus safety concerns, while employers of all descriptions – including banks – have told staff who’ve recently returned from China to work remotely for 14 days.

Traditionally, however, many Hong Kong banks have been uncomfortable with the concept of WFH or providing their employees with more flexibility in their jobs. In Hong Kong, a city with the longest working hours in Asia, employers have long held onto a traditional model of working, underpinned by the concept of “face” and the need to be seen to be present in the office. Moreover, there are certainly still banking professionals in Hong Kong who are reluctant to take advantage of WFH policies, because they are worried that their managers will not approve their requests or that their teammates will think they are taking a day off or slacking.

Largely thanks to enforced periods of WFH, which started during the outbreaks of unrest last year, managers at banks have had an unplanned opportunity to demonstrate that WFH can work for people in their teams. I’m hopeful that these recent events will cause a long-term change in attitudes about WFH, but it’s hard to know for sure right now.

If the past six to nine months have proven to senior managers that their teams can remain as productive and engaged as normal when working from home, that is a small silver lining to the uncertainty we have all gone through in Hong Kong.

How can banks embed a long-term culture that supports WFH? In my personal experience (I've worked in HR at both Barclays and UBS in Hong Kong) WFH policies only really get off the ground by having a test case/pilot programme that works successfully. On top of that, a senior leader at the bank who vocally and consistently champions WFH by walking the talk can really help to spearhead change.

Of course, most banks in Hong Kong have had technology and policies in place for WFH for several years now, driven primarily by their business continuity planning. However, the take-up of these policies is still largely determined not by these overall strategies but by an employee's manager or department head. When I worked at Barclays, for example, my manager was a big proponent of flexible working and encouraged the team to utilise the policy. Not everyone in banks in Hong Kong has been so lucky.

Some roles in banking, such as trading or client-facing jobs, are not suitable for WFH over the long term. Banks, more than most employers, have to think about a bevy of concerns related to WFH, including compliance, tax, security, intellectual property, and health and safety issues.

However, these limitations for certain roles should not be used to diminish the benefits of WFH for everyone else. Each request for WFH arrangements should be considered on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the bank's policies, the broader impact to the team etc. Most banks have put together comprehensive policies addressing each of these concerns because they understand that WFH is an important way to keep their employees engaged – not just a way to address the current temporary work disruptions.


*Hong Kong-based Renee Conklin is the founder of RC HR Consulting. She previously worked in HR and recruitment roles for Barclays and UBS.*

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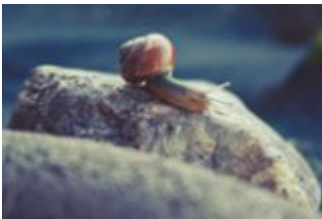
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# Bankers sent home due to virus post photos of themselves hiking in mountains

by [Simon Mortlock](#) 12 hours ago



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The ability of banks in Asia to make sure their newly home-based staff are doing their jobs properly has been called into question by Hang Seng Bank trainees who posted [Instagram pictures](#) (which have since gone viral) of themselves hiking when they were meant to be working.

One of the photos, tagged “best WFH [working from home] activity”, shows a group of about six young Hang Seng management trainees posing at the Red Incense Burner Summit of Braemar Hill in Hong Kong. Another image is labelled “men in the wilderness” and shows them on a hillside, cheering at the camera.

As in Singapore, banks in Hong Kong have instructed some of their staff to work from home as one of their responses to stem a potential wider outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus. As a rule, about a third of investment banking and markets teams in Hong Kong are working from home, while another third are in the office, with the remaining staff based at disaster recovery units, according to an industry insider. Retail banks have closed some of their branches.

A spokesperson for Hang Seng, which is owned by HSBC, says the firm views the actions of the trainees “with grave seriousness”. “The individuals concerned are new joiners to the bank and, while not excusable, they may not have been fully familiar with the work from home arrangement. This will be further reinforced. The bank has an established mechanism to deal with such incidents and we will continue to strictly follow up on the matter,” she adds.

The Hang Seng case suggests banks should be doing more to monitor staff who are temporarily based at home. Unlike in Western markets, banks in Hong Kong don’t have a long tradition of allowing flexible working, and the policy has only come to the fore [over the past nine months](#) in the wake of the 2019 protests and the current coronavirus outbreak.



Banks do, however, have systems in place to hopefully ensure that incidents of breaching home-working rules don't become a common occurrence. Remote desktops and other IT monitoring tools are being used to track what people are doing, says former trader Warwick Pearmund, now an associate director at search firm Hamlyn Williams in Hong Kong. Many banking teams have also set up new groups on WhatsApp or Symphony as an additional way to track workflows, he adds.

Ultimately, says Pearmund, it's not just about the tech. Managers at banks in Hong Kong and Singapore "must now be in even more regular communication with their staff" to set and monitor daily tasks and goals. Team leaders should keep an especially keen eye on junior employees, who may lack the "maturity and engagement" to work remotely, he adds.


As banks in Hong Kong plough on with WFH arrangements, the hope is that the immediate challenges will be ironed out and more banking professionals will [work remotely by choice](#), not just in reaction to short-term events, says former Barclays and UBS HR manager Renee Conklin, who now runs Hong Kong-based RC HR Consulting. "That is a small silver lining to the uncertainty we have all gone through in Hong Kong," she adds.

Photo by Mark Goh on Unsplash

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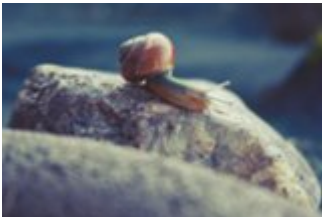
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