



# Student forum on the future workplace

In a wide ranging discussion around students' preferences on their future workplace environments, **Eric Collins**, City Business Magazine Editor-in-Chief, sat down with **Hans Josef Tuble Velez**, **Sam Leung Chin-hin**, **Janet Ng Wing-hei**, all Exchange Student Club Ambassadors; **Jeffrey Wong Koon-kiu**, Exchange Student Club — External Affairs Secretary; **Maria Lin Dandan**, University of Groningen, Netherlands; **Igor Kasiho**, University of Ottawa, Canada; **Quentin Pellier**, EDHEC Business School, France, all inward bound exchange students.

## Work environment

**Hans Josef:** I prefer a hybrid environment. One where there is an office, but also to have the flexibility to be able to work from home or anywhere, not necessarily headquarters but it may be other countries. It would be good to sometimes have company culture, meet colleagues and work together. That's beneficial too.

**Sam:** I also prefer hybrid mode, more diverse so that I can meet more people from different countries, from all walks of life. More flexible working time is also preferable because I like to wake up early in the morning and then start my work very early, finish my work earlier and have my own time.

**Quentin:** I have to agree with both of you guys, but I also feel it's important to have some diversity, but the more diverse it is, the more adaptable everybody needs to be. Everybody needs to pay more attention to what they say, to what they think, what they write. And for my ideal workplace, I also feel flexibility is a must.

**Igor:** So, I think after Covid, everyone is falling in love with the hybrid mode and I'm also a fan of four days a week.

**Jeffrey:** My ideal is for sure being very agile. In a previous internship I worked in a very agile company, so as long as you got the deliverables done you could just work wherever or whenever.

## Differences between East and West?

**Jeffrey:** I think it's really different between the eastern and western culture because the western culture is more encouraging of working from home and in Germany they're considering cancelling Friday as a working day. But in Hong Kong eastern culture the employers want the workers to be there. They want to know that they're working.

**Igor:** I think there's more power to the employees after Covid. There's been an all-time high in people quitting their job. The turnover is really high. So right now, employers are much more flexible with their strategies.

**Sam:** I think it depends on the company culture, like in East Asia, most of the companies value their culture and then you have to be there and mingle with the other colleagues and build strong bonding. You have to know how to socialise with the colleagues and that's a big thing in East Asia culture I think.

**Maria:** In the EU they have more labour unions with better benefits and minimum wage compared to the US where if you are a waitress you get a wage based on your tips. They are not really brought up on now to employ everybody especially when they're in a recession.

**Janet:** I think in the east, like in Hong Kong, some international firms take working practices from the west, so workers can choose to work from home to finish their jobs and this can create a higher sense of motivation.

## Work life balance

**Sam:** Work life balance means you have your boundaries. If you work for 8 hours, then you are not supposed to do overtime work without pay. I think in Hong Kong it depends on the industry. Some industries for example like the audit department in a big 4 accounting company, don't really have work life balance. My brother works in one and as junior staff, he had to work overnight until 7am. And back to the office like 9am or 10am or something like that.

**Quentin:** If you apply the idea of work life balance to France or Belgium, it looks like people don't have it. And even less for students doing internships. In France we have this culture of the more you are in the office, the more you work. So interns would start at 7am and stay until 8pm just to show their boss that they're working. Even if there's no hybrid mode, people are still going to come to big companies. You can compare it to working

at fast food companies as students. There are so many people who want to go there that they don't really care if you feel comfortable or not.

**Jeffrey:** I think one problem is that a lot of people are working overtime, but they're not compensated. And I think work life balance is actually not achievable because by definition it means "after work. I don't think about work." If you need to think about work, then you're not resting.

**Janet:** I would analyse from the performance and compensation perspective. So if employees are able to complete everything in a really nice manner, then it's fine to work for fewer hours. We should emphasise more on the productivity or the quality on the work itself. Also there should be a maximum of 9 hours per day. If workers do overtime, companies should arrange a budget compensation package.



## Response time

**Eric:** As long as you're contactable you are accountable, so then the question is what is the expected response time? And that varies a lot between cultures.

**Jeffrey:** I'd say it's efficient in Hong Kong. My experience in the US is everything is so slow. Like I was trying to get my driving license there. I had to wait for 6 hours. Then they told me, sorry please come back another day. Now, I appreciate how efficient Hong Kong is. If you have any problem you message your teacher, the professor is going to message you back.

**Quentin:** I agree. Yeah, in France it's not as bad as in the US, but pretty much and for example teachers. 2 weeks before we have our SEG exams, the teacher says that you can always message me and they answered 2 hours before the test at like 6am. I asked questions to Jasmine Wong, our coordinator for exchange or a teacher and they answer in the same day. Hong Kong is pretty impressive.

**Maria:** In the Netherlands they answer pretty fast during the week. They do not answer at all during the weekend, so they do have a better work life balance because if they have 8 hours they only do 8 hours.

**Igor:** Yeah, Canada is not even efficient. I'll give you an example. They're supposed to build a hospital in Ottawa and it took them 5 years to decide on the location. Lack of efficiency due to the chain of command. And also in terms of work life balance, I think in Canada it definitely depends on the sector. Not much if you work in finance or especially in the medical field, but in the other industries, it's actually great.

## A career for life?

**Hans Josef:** I think nowadays people are more opportunistic. The world now is very interlinked. So if there's a better opportunity elsewhere most people will go for it. If there's an opportunity to work overseas with a work visa and then transfer to actual citizenship, people will jump at that.

**Sam:** I'm one of the people who wants to work overseas after graduating because I know there would be no work life balance in Hong Kong and I value my own time. I want to explore more cultures and more places and then I won't stick to the same company for a long time.

**Jeffrey:** I think this all depends on the benefits. Like good pension, citizenship, good sponsorship, good holidays. Then I'll be there. Like better pay, of course then I will be there. For me, I'm looking for more stable and more future oriented.

## Innovation

**Eric:** Looking at Amazon where everyone is encouraged to innovate, is this something that you would aspire to in your future working lives?

**Hans Josef:** I think what Jeff Bezos is doing has value and you just look at the value chain model. Different areas of the business can add value to whatever service or product you're giving. So, if you're for example a warehouse worker, you're in the front line. You have more idea of what can be efficient in the warehouse.

**Jeffrey:** I think innovation is a must. To adapt to the trend, to adapt to the market you have to change. I think hybrid mode is also an innovation, how people are treated at work. Because if more of the employees are more satisfied, they tend to have better loyalty, better productivity and stuff.

**Janet:** I agree, in the Hong Kong context we often talk about ESG, so in order to catch up with these practices, a lot of companies implement a lot of policies that encourage us to innovate and try to reduce the use of the resources in different ways. They try to allow staff to think of new ways in order to achieve the ESG goals. And try to let the Hong Kong culture be more flexible and creative.

**Igor:** Yeah, I think it's better to give the space to your employees to be able to innovate. We've heard about companies like Google for example, where they maybe have 20% of the work time dedicated to peer projects. Everyone says innovation, innovation, but when do we have time to think about it?

## Entrepreneurship

**Eric:** Are any of you considering being entrepreneurs?

**Many:** That's the goal!

**Sam:** If you own something like a website domain or a system, then for the first few years maybe it's very difficult for you to have work life balance, but the outcome is you can have the whole system, you can earn money, you can gain passive income. So, I think it's kind of a must or a trend in our generation that we want to work for ourselves. We need side hustles.

**Hans Josef:** To be an entrepreneur it's a must to be innovative. It's a struggle as well because it is hard to find new ideas which are better than what is currently out there.

**Maria:** As you have seen, we had brick and mortar stores for DVDs, but then Netflix came in and it was a disruptor of the industry. So like, we can also be a disruptor, we can offer the same product, but differently. Business environments change over time. You may have a sneaker store with flying drones coming in with the sneakers. People look for experience, not just product.

**Quentin:** I feel being an entrepreneur is not hard at all if you want to be one. There's a saying that once you get to enjoying your job, it's not a job anymore. And I believe that. For example, when I play sports I enjoy it. The people that do it professionally, I don't feel it's like a job for them. That's pretty much the same if you're an entrepreneur. Working 14 hours a day is hard, but if you really want to do it and you have a goal, I don't feel it's really your job. It's a mindset, your goal, and a lifestyle choice.

## ChatGPT

**Eric:** How do you think ChatGPT or similar variations are going to affect the workplace?

**Sam:** I think it will be a tool for the people to brainstorm their ideas.

**Jeffrey:** I think it will eliminate all the dirty work going through all the proposal looking for proofreading, help us to be more precise and be more accurate. I think it's going to change the whole workplace, I think it also helps us like to reinforce, like brainstorming, to think about better ideas. Then we can just focus on innovation.

**Quentin:** Jobs are going to disappear and others are going to come up. The only problem with this is that the jobs that are going to come up are more specific jobs and need more qualifications, so workers who are not really qualified are going to have more and more problems. For us, if we're being honest, we're going to have a job. The gap between qualified workers and workers that are not really qualified is going to get bigger.

