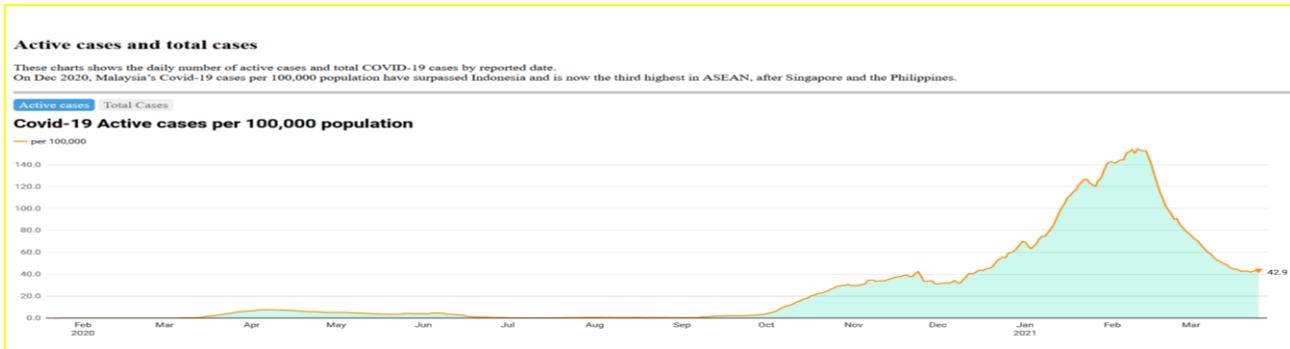# THE NATIONAL-INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYEE AND EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE ON WORK FROM HOME

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Work From Home (WFH) is a mode of work which is also known as telecommuting, telework, remote work, mobile work and flexi-work that enables employees to work without the need to commute (Woody, L.,1995: Subramaniam, G., Overton, J., & Maniam, B., 2015). WFH has become an important mode of work (Bonacini et al., 2021) and has become prevalent practice in Western Countries with more than half of its employees taking it up (Felstead & Reuschke, 2020).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the world starting from around March 2020 has made the Malaysian Government implement regulations and standard operating procedures to contain the said pandemic in Malaysia.

Active cases and total cases

These charts shows the daily number of active cases and total COVID-19 cases by reported date.
On Dec 2020, Malaysia's Covid-19 cases per 100,000 population have surpassed Indonesia and is now the third highest in ASEAN, after Singapore and the Philippines.

Active cases | Total Cases

Covid-19 Active cases per 100,000 population

With the continuous rising of COVID-19 active cases from 14 March 2020 till 25 March 2021, the Malaysian Public Servic via Circular 5/2020 has set out the reasons upon which its personnel are permitted to WFH.

Currently with the National Recovery Plan being implemented with MCO in most states, 80% of the civil servants work from home and only those classified as essential service and frontliners are permitted to work at their work premises.

The practice of WFH that is implemented for the private sector is on a different basis due to the need to avoid economic shutdown. Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) has come with listings of sectors allowed to operate during the MCO. However, there are sectors especially manufacturing, agriculture, construction and so forth that cannot operate on WFH basis. Therefore, with the current number of high COVID-19 positive cases and increasing deaths as of July and August 2021, WFH would be the safest mode of work and this article seeks to explore the following issues:

a)   How those who work from home have taken to it and what are their experiences with WFH?
b)   What standard procedure or guidelines has come out of WFH especially in the private sector and if there are none, should there be a guidelines set up to assist them?

Overall, this article seeks to gather the impact WFH has so far in the Malaysian Labour Market, identify possible shortcomings and make feasible recommendations to make WFH a pleasant reality.

THE ISSUES WITH WORK FROM HOME

This part has been divided into Employees and Employers perspective to better understand the effect of WFH on both the parties to an employment agreement.

EMPLOYEES PERSPECTIVE

<u>Productivity</u>

The concept of WFH has advantages or benefits to employees. From a positive perspective, WFH has several advantages such as flexible hours, quiet workplace and a good balance between home and office environment. A study by Ramos, J.P., & Prasetyo, Y.T. (2020) on the implementation of WFH on the relationship between job satisfaction, job performance, work stress and productivity stated that Job performance' decreases 'Productivity' while 'Job Satisfaction' increases it and 'Job Satisfaction' and 'Job Performance' are inversely related. The study also showed that job satisfaction and job performance are interrelated with each other. The statement is also supported by Troup & Rose (2012) and Church (2015) who said that work productivity and job satisfaction will be increased if those are employees allowed to leverage the WFH option. Moreover, a study by Raju, S. & Kumar, V.K. (2020) on the quality of life of workers who work at home during movement restrictions due to COVID-19 concluded that workers who work at home become more active, more flexible or mobile and that they balanced their official work along with family setup, whereas there is that percentage that struggle to maintain a work-life balance due to fear of being discriminated by their employers because of heavier family responsibilities.

Dutcher (2012) who also researched along similar lines has stated that the WFH concept influences and increases productivity plus motivation in areas of creative work that require quiet time. Furthermore, this study also stated that those with care giving reponsibilities are 25% male and 31% female. Eventhough they have improved Quality in Life, there is still the 29% responded that they have increased difficulty in the home front because they did not receive any support from employers.

Bhattacharjee S. (2020) further puts forth the relationship between burden of work and time management where employees struggle to achieve a healthy balance. Ghayathri N, & Benita S. M. (2020) have also summarised that work demands have a negative impact on domestic responsibilities of employees of the IT Sector. The importance of time management in balancing between work demands and household reponsibilities was also a point made by David (2020).

Technical Support and Materials

One of the challenges faced by employees are the lack of technical and material support which inhibits their ability to produce optimum work (Carter, 2016; David, 2020) and inadvertantly negatively influences professionalisme (Carter, 2016; Manimegalai A. & Asiah A., 2020).

About 27% of the respondens from the UNDP How We Work From Home Survey have indicated that they did not receive any technical and material support from the employers. Lack of the needed support from employers negatively affects productivity more than other factors, as without the right support, the work produced as mentioned is not optimum work.

Work Related Expenses

WFH has also brought about the issue of expenses where the top expenditures are in utilities (71%), work equipment (49%), food (46%) and mobile/internet expenses (42%). The lower income group that earns RM3,000 and less are the ones that incur more expenses especially the ones with children.

Further employees surveyed in the Ranstad survey in March 2021, have requested that employers not only take up the work related expenses but also provide allowances to cover for the costs incurred. There are also some researchers who say that operating costs can be reduced and some fixed expenses can also be shared (Halpern, 2005; Church, 2015; Teh, Ong & Loh, 2015).

Therefore to make WFH more effective employers should be open to absorb their employees work related expenses or reimburse costs incurred through allowances.

EMPLOYERS PERSPECTIVE

Continuity of Business

Businesses that had some form of continuity of business plans seemed to have fared better during the MCO. About 44% of local enterprises and 62% of multinational enterprises surveyed in the UNDP How We Worked From Home Survey had prior WFH arrangements before MCO was implemented. Further about 54% of local enterprises and 75% of multinationals in the same survey had or were able to develop Business Continuity Plans during the MCO.

However, about 39% had their operations disrupted even with prior WFH arrangements and about 48% who did not have WFH policies could not operate as well. It all boils down to the capacity of any given business to implement change in their organizations in any given situation including during COVID-19 pandemic.

Return to Work

With ease of lockdown in certain countries, employers are starting to call in employees to return to the workplace. The important question would be the willingness of employees to return to the workplace. According to the Ranstad survey at least 78% of the 27,000 employees have indicated that they are willing to return to work and 52 % have indicated that they would remain with the same employer.

This situation has not risen in Malaysia yet at the time of writing of this article as Malaysia is still under MCO, however about 71 % of the UNDP survey respondents prefer fewer days in the office and more work time at home indicating openness to the idea of hybrid arrangements where 45% of respondents have indicated that they can come into the office and have some days to work at home. With many respondents indicating their agreement to WFH in the future, the possible problem in the adoption of WFH can tantamount to rise in terminations, resignations and glut in office spaces.

Therefore based on the ILO guidelines, an item on the checklist for employers who want to implement WFH is to identify the type of jobs that are suitable to the requirements of WFH. Without employers classifying work suitable as WFH, there are going to be disgruntled employees making complaints or airing their grouses which will increase the cost of doing business which can be avoided with proper planning including WFH arrangements. The best solution would be to have a win-win situation to maintain continued business.

Policies

Employers who have implemented work from home should have clear policies on:

    a) Work timings;
    b) Work reporting;
    c) Scheduled meetings;
    d) Reviews; and so forth

The lack of WFH policies will give impact on inability of employees to disconnect from work. UNDP How We Work From Home Survey reported that 35% of the respondents were lack of guidelines on work from home and flexible arrangements as lack of technical support from employers.

Further employees who have the flexibility to accomplish tasks and productivity face obstacles when there is lack of access to files and documentation that are only accessible and available at the workplace.

The employees surveyed in the Ranstad Workmonitor 2021 have listed out the top 5 matters that they want their employers to provide being:

    a) policies on work hours to help keep a proper work-life balance – 27%;
    b) strict and clear protocols for on-site and remote working – 24%
    c) regular surveys of employees about their well-being and perception of the organization – 24%
    d) an (extra) allowance for remote working – 23%; and
    e) more training around technology – 20%

However, employees have also indicated that they did receive support from employers in 3 areas during the pandemic namely:

    a) strict and clear protocols for on-site and remote working – 53%
    b) policies on work hours to help me keep a proper work-life balance – 27%
    c) regular surveys of employees about their well-being and perception of the organization – 20%

Overall, employers still need to have clear policies on work from home to ensure not only the wellbeing of their employees but also continuity of business.

Physical Presence At The Workplace

Employers still have their reservation in adapting WFH as a permanent feature in relation to monitoring work performance, ensuring attendance, monitoring protection and secrecy of data / documentation as mentioned in the ILO guidelines where in a survey conducted in Japan prior to an announcement of a state of emergency showed that 31 % are still not opting for WFH for these reasons including the genre of work that requires physical presence at the workplace. Even SMEs face a predicament in implementing WFH.

Therefore, employers still have the need for physical presence of employees at the workplace due to nature of business and nature of work. However, it should be noted that employees have given reasons for not wanting to come in to work being:
  a) Have to wear face mask all the time – 59%
  b) Feeling risk of contamination – 42%
  c) Difficulty to maintain work-life balance – 29%
  d) Workload increase due to colleague ill or under quarantine – 24%
  e) Need to provide documentation to work at workplace – 13%

Ranstad Survey have also indicated that 51% are willing to return to work once COVID-19 vaccination has been widely distributed whereas 53 % would return to the workplace with their colleagues vaccinated.

Employers who have business continuity plans would be able to manage with WFH and planning the return of their employees to the workplace.

Overall, there is a high indication that employers have to come up with the right policies and incentives in accordance with the direction of their organization before WFH can be smoothly implemented. Therefore, the answer to the question on whether there are standard guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on WFH for the private sector would be in the negative as Malaysia is still handling the COVID-19 pandemic and much study has to be done to understand different business needs depending on each organization before a comprehensive guidelines and SOP can be set out.

Therefore, in the meantime, employers and employees can refer to the ILO's "An employers' guide on working from home in response to the outbreak of COVID-19" to cater for their respective organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has come up with guidelines for employers on WFH which does not instruct but lays out possible steps that can be taken to implement WFH in respective organisations.

The guidelines in a nutshell lists out the following matters that employers have to provide for in WFH situations, being:
- a) Safety and health of workers;
- b) Tools, equipment, supplies and technology;
- c) Home working setup and related expenses;
- d) Worker's compensation; and
- e) Liability.

The guidelines also goes on to talk about employers can mitigate challenges faced during implementation of WFH through having:
- a) Open and regular communication;
- b) ICT equipment and workstation set-up for employees;
- c) Data protection and security;
- d) Staff management to avoid potential abuse of WFH arrangements where results based management approach be established to identify objectives, tasks and milestones for discussion and monitoring;
- e) Organization of working time;
- f) Occupational Safety and Health;
- g) Promote health and mental well-being with support and understanding;
- h) Work-life balance;
- i) Performance and productivity that is flexible and supportive;
- j) Caring for children and dependants;
- k) Skills, staff training and development through promotion of a learning culture; and
- l) Discussions to keep in line with Government policies and directives.

Malaysia likewise needs practical guidelines on implementation of WFH that caters for all sectors that has the flexibility to address the concerns of both employees and employers on the difficulties that arise in implementing WFH.

Software or system that standardises attendance, application of annual leave, option to update work progress and tracker of activities without infringing the privacy of employees would be a much needed tool for every employer. The distinction is that there is no physical monitoring done at the workplace but these monitoring systems would do the job.

Still there are employers who would prefer employees' physical presence at the workplace to address issues with individual employees who lack self-discipline and the ability to motivate oneself to work from the comforts of home in order to avoid abuse of WFH arrangements, which the ILO guidelines has provided for as mentioned above.

Another solution would be to have a ratio of days at the workplace with the rest of work days being spent as WFH. According to Nurul, Maizatul & Ruzanna (2016), setting rules through the preparation of a good schedule can help guide employees to focus when performing a given task. A good work schedule is essential for the task to be completed before the deadline.

This flexibility allows for a better form of monitoring of work progress and datelines, as employees would have to face their superiors to answer on many issues. Further, this arrangement allows for discussions to take place in a one to one setting where there is room for more openness and interactions that allow for ideas and innovations with a sense of belonging to an organisation and less possibilities of being left out or uninformed or forgotten.

These possible solutions in implementing and monitoring WFH as mentioned before is suitable for jobs that can be done from home. As for nature of work that requires physical presence, the need for workplace and traditional work performance monitoring is still a reality.

Therefore, the need to conduct studies in various aspects of WFH including coming up with legislations, regulations and guidelines in Malaysia to cope with change in employment landscape would be acknowledging the need for regulators to adapt to modes of employment such as WFH.

CONCLUSION

WFH is a mode of work that has become prevalent due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After the easing of lockdowns, the possibility of this mode of work being adopted by agile organisations is very likely. This is due to the possibility of more employees looking for employment that allows for WFH to suit their family and personal needs. Thus, employers would be looking for guidance in the long run on the workings of WFH.

Therefore, WFH is a permanent evolving feature in employment in Malaysia that could change the traditional contract of work agreements as applied in Malaysia, as labour market changes according to developments in the Industrial Revolution.

Malaysia has already taken steps to regulate WFH in the public sector as mentioned and it is only a matter of time before regulated WFH in the private sector is brought forth.

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