

WORK-FROM-HOME PRACTICES IN THE ERA OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MALAYSIA: A WAY FORWARD?

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BACKGROUND

- Since the Movement Control Order (MCO) was announced in Malaysia on 18 March 2020, all organizations except the essential sectors have been directed to work from home (WFH) aimed at breaking the chain of COVID-19
- WFH was not a common practice in Malaysia before COVID-19 and mostly possible for less than 30 percent of workers (Tumin, 2020).
- 64.5% of jobs in Malaysia cannot be performed from home (Abdur Rahman et al., 2020)
- In the public sector, civil servants have done well WFH and it will definitely be a long-term policy beyond the pandemic- WFH can also be seen as a stepping stone towards further digitalising public service
- most employers in the private sector prefer 'old norms' as WFH is not part of Malaysian culture yet but things can be changed to suit the times

RESEARCH PROBLEMS

- Having employees work from home raises major issues:
- issue relates to the concerns over deteriorating work-life balance and the potential of WFH to help address this (Bloom et al., 2015)
- The practice of WFH is aimed at maintaining production and efficiency, but the COVID-19 pandemic can contribute to a decline in productivity around the world and threaten economic growth for years (Golick, 2020) .
- The most challenging aspect of working at home for parents with young children and still in school is managing their children. The closure of schools and the transition to online learning for students has forced many working parents to take on additional work as full-time teachers.
- One of the conditions for the success of this 'work from home' practice is that children are in school or childcare center. However, this does not apply when the MCO takes place.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

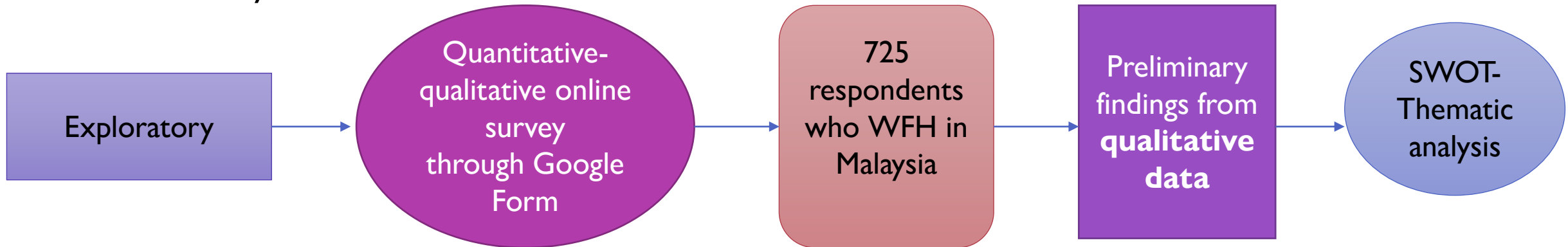
- how the employee-employer employment process takes place while working from home due to MCO?
- Have technological facilities and smart devices successfully created harmonious and effective decent work?
- Ideally, WFH that has been practiced in most developed countries before COVID-19, is to provide opportunities to increase work-life balance. But there is the question of whether WFH, when the whole family including the children are in the house, is effective and what are the implications for employees.

OBJECTIVE

To discuss the extent WFH can be practiced decently and sustainably as a way forward.

METHODOLOGY

- This study is based on a more comprehensive study, however for this paper, the discussion only focuses on the extent to which work from home during MCO can be practiced decently and sustainably as a way forward in Malaysia .



RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

	Profile	Frequency	(%)
Gender	Male	254	35.0
	Female	471	65.0
	Public sector	466	64.3
	Private sector	170	23.4
	Statutory bodies	66	9.1
Employment Sector	Small-medium enterprise	2	.3
	Self-employed	16	2.2
	GLC	1	.1
	NGO	4	.6
	Top management	15	2.1
Employment Category	Managerial and professional	545	75.2
	Supportive group	156	21.5
	Self-employed	7	1.0
	Others	2	.3
	Primary school	1	.1
	PT3/PMR/SRP	3	.4
Level of Education	SPM/MCE	41	5.7
	STPM/Diploma	70	9.7
	Bachelor degree	377	52.0
	Masters	139	19.2
	PhD	94	13.0

RESULTS

SWOT	THEMES
STRENGTH	Flexibility Work-life integration Commuting time Job satisfaction Work engagement Job autonomy
WEAKNESS	Internet & technology inadequacy Dehumanized environment Work-life conflict Multi-roles burden intensification Distraction
OPPORTUNITY	Hybrid model Family/life satisfaction Culture of trust
THREAT	Transition of responsibilities Un/productivity issues Blurry work-life boundaries

WFH: A WAY FORWARD?

STRENGTH

Flexibility	<p>WFH allows me to spend more time with family, as long as office work is completed (R275)</p> <p>WFH is more flexible and I spend more time with family while doing my office work. The important thing is that work can still be completed as usual [like when work from office] (R510)</p>
Work-life integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -WFH allows me to spend time with my children while completing my work (R619) -Working at home gives me the opportunity to balance personal and work life (R27) -My sick child needs immediate attention during working hours. When he is asleep, I can continue working until the work is done (R9)
Save money/ commuting time	<p>I was able to reduce my own expenses in terms of petrol and car parking. In fact, I was able to reduce my personal and travel expenses (R510)</p> <p>Not wasting time, energy and money to get to work (R97)</p>
Job/life satisfaction	<p>My level of satisfaction as an employee who can work from home is very high and this will boost my productivity to ensure I will be able to continue working from home. My home will be more peaceful because I can do my responsibilities as a mother and wife while achieving my KPIs as an employee (R91)</p>
Work engagement	<p>Job autonomy</p> <p>I can determine my working hours according to my own circumstances and situation (R369)</p>

WFH: A WAY FORWARD? WEAKNESS

Inadequate digital infrastructure	<p>Difficult and unsatisfactory internet access. [Hence] not fully able to work, as computer & internet being a constraint... not comfortable [to WFH] (R127)</p> <p>Internet access is very low and the applications I use are not user friendly and difficult to monitor people under my supervision (R290 a School Headmaster)</p>
Dehumanized interaction	<p>Face-to-face discussions are still better than virtual ones. We still need the human touch. This WFH makes me feel lonely (R38)</p> <p>We do not communicate face to face, then no emotional connection occurs when interacting with colleagues [when WFH].</p>
Work-life conflict	<p>Difficult to do work demands if you are managing household chores and small children at the same time (R63)</p>
Multi-roles burden intensification	<p>There are times when working time is quite limited if WFH, due to house chores which are quite burdensome during MCO, for example, washing and ironing clothes, sweeping, mopping the floor, and having to quarrel with my spouse due to being too busy with chores (R73)</p>
Distraction	<p>Daytime is usually interrupted by domestic duties [with children and house chores] (R4)</p> <p>My superiors do not respect my privacy and personal time because they like to call/give work on weekends or evenings (R218)</p> <p>[With WFH] disturbances and noisy atmosphere of family members sometimes out of control (R24)</p>

WFH: A WAY FORWARD?

OPPORTUNITY

Hybrid model	409 (56.4%) of the respondents like to work from home 316 (43.6%) of the respondents prefer to work from office
New work culture	New work strategy: Our work activities require group monitoring to the location, however, during MCO this monitoring is indeed very limited. We need new methods to do that (R284)

WFH: A WAY FORWARD?

THREAT

Transition of responsibilities	By working from home and everything has to be borne by yourself - utility costs like the internet, extra electricity bills, it is just too much
Productivity issue	-WFH [during COVID-19 MCO) makes my work output ineffective and less successful (R436) -Working from home made it difficult to access the documents I needed and caused all work and services to be disrupted (R71) -[To do] WFH, output does not meet standards (R432)
Blurred work-life boundaries	WFH does have a lot of constraints. [One of them is] working time and family time cannot be clearly distinguished (R19)
Inconsistent working hour	The time for WFH becomes 24 hours. Employers can always check on employees all the time as compared to while working from the office (R698) If it's been 22 hours of work, do you think I have time to rest? (R76)

DISCUSSION

- COVID-19 gave the world an option to experience WFH, which had long been a desired work option for many especially in a place like Malaysia where an increasingly dual family workforce exists.
- Changed working format have been favorable. However, there are many gaps in the current WFH structure, and consequently, there is more dissatisfaction with the lack of policies to conduct decent WFH.
- To ensure that WFH can be practiced decently and sustainably, the opinion of those who WFH is essential to consider
- Employers should provide workers with the necessary tools to WFH
- Various factors can prevent WFH practices from functioning properly
- Opportunity for WFH sustainable in the future is by creating a hybrid workplace model

CONCLUSIONS

- As medical experts have predicted that world economies and society will normalise in 2022 at the soonest, WFH arrangements will continue to be in place for the next year or so until the coronavirus is brought under control.
- A large proportion of jobs can mobilise a greater proportion of the workforce to work from home
- The practice of WFH in the new era of post-COVID-19 will require much wider use of a new kind of management
- Workers also should not incur additional costs when performing their work from their homes
- A continuous dialogue between the employer and the employees is vital
- Better digital infrastructure will help enable workers to work from home efficiently
- Better guidelines and policies from the government



THANK
YOU

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