Perceived Outcome of Working from Home among Malaysian Employees: A preliminary quantitative study

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Abstract

Work from home (WFH) was a new concept in Malaysia until the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country and forced firms and employees to opt for remote working to stop the spread of the deadly virus. This study explored the factors for and against WFH concerning work focus and perceived separation. It also investigates employees' perception of WFH as a new norm. 110 employees aged between 21 to 26 years old working remotely were randomly chosen to give responses to a set of questionnaires. The findings show that the advantages of WFH outweighed the disadvantages. While respondents preferred work and time flexibility, distraction made it difficult to focus on the given tasks. Perceived separation was quite apparent due to a lack of face-to-face communication and assistance. Generally, respondents were quite ready to embrace WFH as a new norm. Analysed data reveals interesting implications for working from home as a new norm.

Keywords: work from home, work focus, perceived separation, isolated

1.0 Introduction

In Malaysia, the practice of working by most employers and employees is that they have to be present in the workplace to carry out tasks efficiently despite working from home (WFH) being already in existence. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country and the movement control order (MCO) was implemented, they were forced to work remotely except for some essential services or businesses (Tang, 2022). With little or no WFH experience, the companies and employees were abruptly shifting from the traditional operating method to performing full or partial WFH (Tang, 2022). After decades of routine when staff reported to an office, the transition to this alternative work arrangement practice may either be negative or positive (Prihadi et al., 2021; Bakar et al., 2022).

It is believed that WFH affects work focus. Working at home when family members are present disrupts some employees' focus on the given tasks. Monitoring children's online classes, unconducive home office, and noisy environment are among the grievances that may affect work focus among home workers in Malaysia. However, flexibility is the plus point most employees enjoy when working remotely (Poo, 2021). Perceived separation is another issue that is often a concern when discussing WFH. This is because being physically separated from colleagues, superiors, and clients may negatively affect an employee. According to Marshall, Michaels and Mulki (2007), when there is an absence of support from colleagues and superiors, and when an employee lacks opportunities for social and emotional interactions with the team members, perceived separation or better known as perceived isolation can be formed. In another study, this

deficit in normal human social interaction is often associated with negative physical health effects and mental issues (Bhatti and Haq 2017).

With the pandemic having closed numerous premises since the total lockdown in March 2020, companies and staff have realised that WFH is the way forward. Improving organisational culture, IT tools and devices, ICT skills, digitalisation, and data security and privacy are among the initiatives that firms and employees should take to adapt to this new norm (ILO, 2020). Many researchers predict that WFH will remain the hybrid work arrangement practice (Marshalls, Michaels and Mulki, 2007; ILO, 2020; Poo, 2021) to curb the spread of COVID-19 and prepare for its consequent waves. Based on the McKinsey Global Institute report, which analysed 2,000 tasks, and 800 jobs in nine countries, more than one in five employees in the workforce could WFH three to five days a week as effectively as when working on-site (Poo, 2021). This suggests the possibility of a more permanent shift to remote working. Hence with this in view, it is pertinent to investigate the factors for and against WFH concerning work focus and perceived separation, as well as employees' perception of WFH as a new norm.

Concerning the arguments presented, the following research questions were formulated:
  i. Research Question 1 - How is the work focus among Malaysian employees since the implementation of working from home?
  ii. Research Question 2 - What is the perceived separation among Malaysian employees since the implementation of working from home?
  iii. Research Question 3 - What is the perception of working from home as a new norm for working among Malaysian employees?

2.0 Literature Review

The disadvantages of WFH have been discussed in previous studies. Messenger and Gschwind (2015) once analysed the European Working Conditions Survey which revealed that employees who WFH experienced negative effects more than those who did not. The major findings were that WFH interfered with a personal life that alters work-life balance which leads to health issues and the extension of working hours. Social isolation or perceived separation is among the drawbacks of WFH (Abdullah et al., 2020; Toscano and Zapalla, 2020). A study by Abdullah et al. (2020) identified that the mode of remote working reduces social networking and limits non-verbal communication among colleagues, which disrupts the work-life balance. In addition, Toscano and Zapalle (2020) have found a strong correlation between social isolation and stress, where the experience of feeling distanced from colleagues decreased work satisfaction which ultimately led to stressful conditions for employees that practised WFH. It can be concluded that perceived isolation may negatively affect the mental health of people who WFH.

Wang et al. (2020) identified four key challenges in the WFH context: work-home interference, poor communication, procrastination, and loneliness, which adversely affected employees' work effectiveness and well-being. It was revealed that ineffective communication among colleagues and superiors and procrastination led to low productivity. In addition, they also experienced feelings of loneliness due to a lack of social support. It was notable that young working parents faced a bigger problem in balancing work and family roles. Similarly, Schall (2019) reported that sometimes there could be inter-role conflicts in the family, which can affect the success of working from home. It can be said that work-home interference, procrastination, and inter-role conflicts may affect work focus when working from home.

When it comes to readiness to work from home successfully, the nature of occupation and good infrastructure, particularly the availability of the Internet connection, is crucial. Rahman, Jasmin and Schmillan (2020) found that 64.5 percent of jobs in Malaysia could not be conducted remotely. About 80 percent of respondents in rural areas had jobs that were not suitable to be done via WFH compared to 59.8 percent in urban areas. A survey done by the Communications and Multimedia Consumer Forum of Malaysia (CFM) shows that most Telco users were not satisfied with the slow Internet speed (Yeoh, 2001), which made remote working impossible. Indeed, technology readiness plays an important role in the success of WFH.

On the other side of the coin, WFH works well for many employees. Grant, Wallace, and Spurgeon (2013) found that employees were satisfied with the role autonomy and decision-making skills given. They were more productive and had no problems with work-life integration. Similarly, a study by Schall (2019) revealed that employees were thankful for their autonomy to make decisions. They also reported that they experienced less stress because they were not commuting to and from work. This correlates with later studies by Purwanto et al. (2020) and Liwanag (2020), who reported the same findings. It can be said that WFH benefits employees who can work independently.

Another major advantage of WFH is the flexibility of working. Liwanag (2021) discovered that a vast majority of the respondents agreed with their WFH arrangement as WFH provided autonomy and flexibility in working. This was supported by Ipsen et al. (2021), who identified three key advantages of WFH in Europe: WFH enabled work-life balance and greater work control. In a more localised context, Abdullah et al. (2020) revealed that employees found convenience in the flexibility given to them as they were more comfortable working in the confinement of their homes compared to working in the office. This also means good time management is needed to successfully WFH.

Reduction of costs is another advantage of WFH as highlighted in the literature. Both respective studies by Purwanto et al. (2020) and Liwanag (2021) highlighted that since WFH, employees had been spending less on transportation, gasoline, and parking. This is deemed a major contribution from the WFH despite the slightly higher consumption of electricity and Internet bills. Other advantages of WFH would be reducing distractions coming from the office and family values. Purwanto et al. (2020) reported that WFH has enabled employees to avoid distractions normally coming from colleagues at the office. Liwanag (2021) highlighted that employees could avoid office politics when working distantly. As for family values, Abdullah et al. (2020) found that WFH helped employees maintain positive relationships with their family members.

Local Malaysian studies on WFH following the presence of COVID-19 have been present since. Looking at Osman et al. (2020), the researchers have found that with WFH, workplace environment, peer support, and employee motivation positively impacted employee productivity, whereas organisational support had the opposite outcome. In addition, Prihadi et al. (2021), concluded that the WFH policy will not have a negative outcome on employees' efficacy, provided that the employees themselves perceive that their presence is significant to society and that they feel involved within their social circle. It was further discussed by the researchers that due to the nature of WFH which physically alienates employees from each other, the rapport between them with the inclusion of social media activities will not hamper their belief in performing in the workplace. Furthermore, since WFH involves most employees to be in the presence of family members, Wijayanuddin and Zulkifly (2021) in their study on work-family conflict and job burnout among female teachers discovered that work-family conflict is a predictor of job burnout. Their results found that via WFH, female teachers dealing with strain from work demands that interfere with their home commitments have caused job burnout.

3.0 Research Methodology

This research study was carried out using the quantitative research approach adapting the descriptive design. This research design was chosen as its effectiveness can be seen through the study differed by William (2007). The numerical and statistical approach would benefit the researcher in different aspects as it can save a lot of time and resources. The study employed a set of questionnaires in response to the proposed research questions. The items featured a 5-point Likert scale, specifically 5 (Strongly Agree), 4 (Agree), 3 (Slightly Agree), 2 (Disagree), and 1 (Strongly Disagree). The survey was divided into three parts which revealed three levels of questions that sentiment their opinions regarding working remotely, emphasising the factors that affect the employees' work focus, perceived separation, and their perspective on WFH as the new norm. The Cronbach Alpha Test was conducted and analysed by using the SPSS software. The rule of thumb for the Cronbach Alpha Test adapted reference from the research done by Nawi et al. (2020). This test proved that the index was acceptable and the items used in the questionnaires were seen as a good reliable result of 0.866.

The samples chosen were 110 young employees aged between 21 to 26 years old who were undergoing WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic from a variety of working fields. These samples were chosen at random based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970) to reflect on the estimated number of 360 employees within the research area. The data was collected virtually within three weeks through the application of Google Forms and the mean scores of the data collected were analysed via the IBM SPSS Statistics v21 software. All major findings are presented in tables.

4.0 Findings

The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors for and against WFH concerning work focus and perceived separation, as well as employees' perception of WFH as a new norm. The mean scores of the three main findings are presented in tables.

4.1 Findings for Work Focus

Table 1: Mean for Increased Work Focus

Item	Mean Score
Satisfied with the flexibility that comes with WFH	4
Satisfied with the flexible working time of WFH which gives me convenience	3.9
Comfortable to work in my home compared to my working space in the office	3.2
A quiet environment at home allows me to be more productive in doing work	3
More focused by WFH due to fewer distractions	2.7

Table 1 presents the mean scores for Work Focus. The highest mean score recorded was "satisfied with the flexibility that comes with WFH" with a mean score of 4 followed closely by the item "satisfied with the flexible working time of WFH which gives me convenience" with a mean score of 3.9. The lowest mean score recorded was "more focused by WFH due to fewer distractions" (2.7) while the other two items were "comfortable to work in my working space in the office" and "quiet environment at home allows me to be more productive in doing work" recorded mean scores of 3.2 and 3 respectively. This indicates that the employees were more satisfied with the flexible nature of WFH which brings them convenience. Furthermore, the findings also show that the employees were in slight agreement that it was more comfortable to WFH compared to working from the office (WFO), the quiet environment promoted productivity, and they were more focused due to fewer distractions at home.

4.2 Findings for Perceived Separation (isolated)

Table 2: Mean for Perceived Separation

Item	Mean Score
WFH hinders my social needs	3.5
Difficult to get assistance when I WFH	3.6
Feel lonely being an out-of-sight employee	3.1
WFH limits the support received from supervisors	3.3
WFH affects the effectiveness of supervision from my supervisors	3.3

Table 2 shows the mean scores for perceived separation faced by employees that are working from home. The item "difficult to get assistance when I work from home" records the highest mean value of 3.6 followed by "working from home hinders my social needs" with 3.5. The lowest mean score recorded is 3.1 for the item "feel lonely being an out-of-sight employee". The other two items "WFH limits the support received from my supervisors" and "WFH affects the effectiveness of my supervisors" record the same mean value of 3.3. Based on these analyses, it seems that the employees mostly faced difficulties in receiving the needed assistance when working from home and that WFH prevented them from their social needs.

4.3 Findings for New Norm

Table 3: Mean for Work from the home-new norm

Item	Mean Score
Can see actual individual demonstrating or acting out a behaviour	3.5
Allows me to accept verbal instructions from my superiors	4
Allows me to look up to my mentor (supervisor) at work	3.6
Allows me to model good behaviour from my mentor	3.6
Allows me to pay attention to my mentor's guidance	3.6
Allows me to absorb what I learned at work	3.9
Allows me to produce good work	3.7
Motivated to WFH	3.4
Can still take into consideration future plans	3.9
Still take into consideration future consequences	4
Take into consideration consequences from others	4
Take into consideration how decisions affect the behaviour of others	4.1

Table 3 displays the mean scores in the perception of the employees concerning WFH being a new norm. The item "take into consideration how decisions affect the behaviour of others" recorded the highest mean of 4.1, followed by items "allows me to accept verbal instructions from my superiors", "still take into consideration future consequences", and "take into consideration consequences from others" with a mean score of 4 each. Items "allows me to absorb what I learned at work" and "can still take into consideration future plans" recorded a mean of 3.9 each. The item that recorded the lowest mean score is "motivated to WFH" with a mean value of 3.4. The other items "allows me to produce good work", "allows me to look up to my mentor at work", "allows me to model good behaviour from my mentor", "allows me to pay attention to my mentor's guidance" and "can see actual individual demonstrating or acting out a behaviour" recorded mean values ranging from 3.5 to 3.7. From this, it can be seen that the employees were mostly in agreement that WFH has potentially positive outcomes being a new norm.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion
Based on the findings presented in 4.0, it can be inferred that WFH has the potential to increase work focus. On average, the employees were in favour of the flexibility offered by WFH. This is in line with Schall (2019), Grant, Wallace, and Spurgeon (2013) and Poo (2021)

who had similar findings. Osman et al. (2020) concluded that WFH brings light to work productivity. To increase work focus during WFH, employees should be trained on good time management. However, there is a concern about separation, which is common when we discuss WFH. When it comes to perceived separation, these young employees admitted that they somehow received less assistance and face-to-face communication, thus hindering their social needs. This is supported by Lee (2021), who stated that organisational support such as managerial decisions and supervisors' management style were key factors in promoting healthy emotions and psychological safety, especially during a crisis. Those who WFH need support from colleagues and superiors to assist them in making decisions. However, the findings from the current research differ from another study which revealed that when respondents worked from home, their roles did not have any significant impact on their performance and the experience of isolation allowed less distraction and more focus on the tasks at hand (Hickman, 2019). This can be related to Osman et al. (2020) who discuss that lacking organisational support negatively contributes to employees' efficacy. Relating to Prihadi et al. (2021), the authors stress that efficiency at the workplace can be safeguarded provided that the employees' social skills are well-maintained.

Finally, when asked about WFH as a new norm, the respondents were concerned about making decisions that would affect others and future consequences for others. According to Wang et al. (2020), the COVID-19 outbreak which forced remote working gave pressures such as worry about the pandemic, financial insecurity, and the like. In addition, this study also found that although working remotely, the respondents would also accept verbal instructions from their superiors well. Similarly, Lee (2021) revealed most respondents felt that trust was an important emotional resource and a type of organisational support in the new norm. Respondents would gladly accept verbal instructions but too much unnecessary interference could evoke an unpleasant emotional state. In the new norm, employers must trust their employees so that they are happy to embrace the flexibility of WFH.

This study implies that the employer needs to maintain communication and supervision towards employees that are working from home. In addition, employees should be given training on good management skills and skills to work independently to enhance work focus and productivity. The notion of WFH even if the COVID-19 pandemic becomes a distant past, should not be stopped. Instead, they should continue making the new norm a common norm. Nevertheless, due to the present study being a preliminary one, the present researchers would suggest for similar research employing inferential statistics triangulating qualitative findings with larger sample scope and sample size be implemented across the nation.

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