



Work-From-Home Policy Post-Pandemic: Into The Unknown?

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to inquire into the Work from Home (WFH) policy preparedness amongst Malaysian firms in the private sector, post-pandemic. During the pandemic, many Malaysian firms offered work-from-home options to their employees out of necessity. Post-pandemic, employees have expressed their preference for flexibility in work hours and some employers have reciprocated by allowing flexible or hybrid work schedules. WFH options have been said to increase productivity and improve employee retention. The amendments to the Employment Act 1955 (EA1955) in 2023 also appears to provide support towards flexible work hours. Despite these developments, many companies may not have clear policies for flexible work arrangements. This paper aims to shed some light on the recommended policy areas for adoption by the private sector. Interviews were conducted to glean insight from HR Practitioners to ascertain the “good-to-have” work-from-home policy terms amongst the private sector employers. Their responses revealed common themes that were used as the basis to formulate WFH policies in the private sector, particularly connected to three main areas: hours of work, location of work and nature of work. There appear to be varying levels of preparedness amongst organisations interviewed, in the implementation of work-from-home policies post-pandemic. Findings present a mix of opportunities and challenges for the employees and the organisations alike. This research provides a starting point for discourse on the form of policy that may be customised and implemented for organisations, based on their culture and practice.

Keywords: *flexible work; private sector; psychological contract; right to disconnect; work-from-home*

1.0 Introduction

When the first Movement Control Order (MCO) was imposed in Malaysia in March 2020 to contain the spread of the Covid-19 virus, many businesses accelerated the digitalisation of work processes to enable their business activities to continue (Priyono et al., 2020). As a result, the physical workspace that previously existed in offices were switched to home spaces, and working from home (WFH) became the new norm for many organisations (Lim, 2021; Nik Anis & Ibrahim, 2020). When the economy and offices are re—opened, many employees have expressed preference for flexible arrangements having had the work-from-home experience (Microsoft, 2021; Santana, 2021). It was reported that post-pandemic only 22% of Malaysian workers were inclined to return fully to “work-from-office”, with the remainder expressing preference for flexibility and WFH opportunities (EY Malaysia PR Team, 2021). As many businesses transition into a ‘hybrid’ working model, certainty from employers is sought relating to “*guidelines, policies, expectations, and approaches*” moving forward (Alexander et al., 2021).

This paper inquiries into and initiates discussion on the private sectors preparedness to adopt flexible working arrangements, derived from an earlier paper by Saludin et al. (2013) and extending the discussion post-pandemic. According to Amirul and Shaari (2021) there are typically four categories of flexible work arrangements namely *flexi-time saving account (time banking)*, *workload flexibility*, *flexibility of place*, and *alternative work schedule*. This paper focuses on *flexibility of place* where employees are provided the option to work from home (Parasuraman, 2023), with specific interest in three main areas of immediate concern and attention derived from the work of Saludin et al. (2013). They are work hours; workspace; and nature of work.

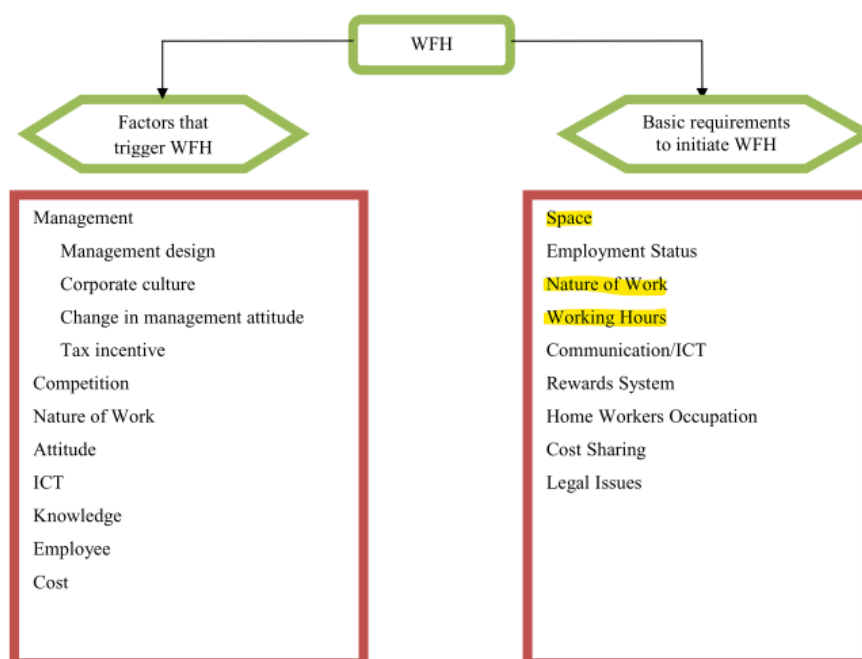


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of WFH (Saludin et al., 2013)

During the pandemic, organisational change was experienced, primarily because the work environment shifted from the office to the employees' homes (Ciuriak, 2020). This digitalisation shift results in changes in job location, job scope, and employer-employee expectations within their psychological contract (Anderson & Schalk, 1998). The pandemic experience provided a snapshot of how employers dealt with this "new normal" differently (Tan et al., 2020). The pandemic forced employers to adapt to a "new normal" in countless ways, and their responses varied greatly. Although there were challenges and disruptions, employers and employees must work hand in hand to ensure business continuity and those who cannot manage to keep up, needs to retrench their employees or suffer great losses. Globally, the World Bank projected a 15-20% decline in the number of formal micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises operating globally due to the pandemic. This translates to roughly 40-50 million closures. (Adian et.al., 2020) and in Malaysia, it was reported that 37,000 small and medium sized enterprises and some 200 sports-related companies have shut down their businesses following the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent movement restrictions (Augustin, 2021).

Post pandemic, the Malaysian Parliament made amendments to the Employment Act 1955 (EA1955). The amendment had been significant, bringing about changes that benefit employees and improve workplace protections. The key changes introduced in the Employment (Amendment) Act 2022 (EAA2022) are to include increased maternity leave and flexible work arrangements. The introduction of flexible working arrangements in the EAA2022 is a significant step towards a more modern and employee-centric work environment. Flexible work arrangement deviates from the traditional 9 to 5 office setting, and they can include remote work, flexible hours, compressed workweek, job sharing and many more.

The introduction of flexible work arrangement in the EAA2022 marks a positive step towards promoting a more flexible and employee-friendly work environment however, the implementation of this arrangement is left to the organisation itself and there is no mechanism or channel for the employee to go about if their application is rejected by the employers. Furthermore, organisations may not be ready for the implementation of flexible work due to certain considerations such as logistics, company culture, and many more. Although certain employees prefer to continue working from home post-pandemic, the preparedness of organisations to implement this is still a question. Therefore, this paper inquiries into the private sectors preparedness to adopt flexible working arrangements, taking into consideration their experiences, pre and post pandemic as it may be worthwhile for employers to look at WFH policies earnestly to retain workers of the future.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the amendments to the EA1955 encouraging flexible work arrangements, many private sector companies lack clear and comprehensive policies to effectively implement these options. Section 60P read together with Section 60Q of the EAA2022 states that employees may request in writing for flexibility in hours of work, days of work and place of work upon which the employer must respond within 60 days. Should the employer reject the employees' request, the ground of such refusal must be stated (Van Geyzel, 2022). In reality, many employers scrambled to implement WFH exercise to cope with the nationally implemented MCO during the pandemic and may not have given policy considerations much thought.

In addition, employee experience may not have been considered during the transition, and cooperation from employees was expected (if not demanded) as many local companies embraced the unfamiliar domain of virtual workspaces, enabling their operations to continue despite remotely dispersed employees (Kniffin et al.,

2020; Varshney, 2020). Worldwide, the digital workspace pie is expanding and post-pandemic, the trend of flexible working that started as a necessity will likely continue (Microsoft, 2021; Santana, 2021). Significant numbers of employees have expressed preference for flexibility and many companies are considering moving some employees to permanent remote work (Alexander et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2020).

Many Malaysian organisations have yet to adopt a proper work-from-home policy (Saludin et al., 2013; Tan et al., 2020), leaving questions such as proper safeguards for occupational safety when working from home (Anka et al., 2020) and/ or the entitlement of the “right to disconnect” when office hours ended (Shaari & Amirul, 2023). Employers need to address urgent issues related to work hours, occupational hazards and data safety as employees start working from home (Almeida et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020). Apart from legal policies and discussion of work flexibility, matters of wellness and mental health (Laker & Roulet, 2021) and the phenomenon of “quiet quitting” (Thapa, 2022) are equally of interest especially when gearing the workplace for next-generation employees.

The unpreparedness may lead to operational challenges for the employers and employees. For the employees, lack of clear policy leads to inconsistent application of flexible work options, potentially causing unfairness and resentment among employees. Ambiguous policies will also leave employees unsure about their rights and responsibilities under flexible work arrangements, potentially leading to confusion and conflict. On the other hand, organisations that are unprepared or does not comply with EAA2022 could expose them to legal challenges and penalties. Additionally, their unpreparedness can lead to communication difficulties, reduced collaboration, and decreased productivity. Failure of companies to offer competitive flexible work options can put companies at a disadvantage when attracting and retaining talent. Therefore, there is a pressing need for the private sector to develop clear and comprehensive policies on flexible work and WFH practices, to ensure smooth implementation of the EA1955 amendments and address the challenges faced by both employees and employers.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Work Hours

Working hours had been a topic of interest of many researchers in the past. There is substantial research on this topic and its impact in overall wellbeing. Many countries have a law on maximum working hours, Malaysia included. The provisions relation to working hours in Malaysia is provided in Part XII of EA1955. According to Section 60A (1) (b), (c) and (d) of EA 955, employees' maximum working hours per day is 8 hours, or a maximum of a spread over period of 10 hours per day or a maximum of 48 hours in a week. With the amendment of the law, EAA2022 provides that the maximum working hours is reduced to a maximum of 45 hours per week, from the previous 48 hours. This amendment is applauded because it can promote work-life balance. In 2022, the average hours of work in OECD countries are 37.7 hours per week (OECD, 2023). At 45 hours per week, Malaysia's working hours appear to be comparable to the market-based economy countries. Although there is no international standard of working hours, it is said that the ideal working hours is those that allows a person to maintain the balance between work and life.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has a vested interest in the ideal working hours. Since the early 19th century, it was already recognized that very long period of working may pose a danger to one's health. In 1919, Article 2 of the first ILO convention provided that a maximum working hours are 8 hours per day or 48 hours per week. In 1935, the convention was further amended to reduce the standard decent working hours to 40 hours per week (Forty-Hour Week Convention, 1935). Decent working hours is desirable as the number of hours a person worked have a profound influence on the physical and mental health and well-being of workers (International Labour Organisation, 2018).

Research indicated that working hours between 35 to 40 hours per week is often associated with optimal productivity and well-being. Virtanen, et. al. (2009) conducted a longitudinal study among 2,214 British civil servants and found that those that works more than 55 hours per week were associated with lower scores in the vocabulary test, compared to those who are working 40 hours per week. The researchers also found that long working hours have a negative effect on cognitive performance in middle-aged workers. In 2015, the municipality in a Swiss city in Gothenburg began experimenting a 6-hour workday in some organisations and found that shorter hours of work lead to positive outcomes in terms of employees' health and job satisfaction (Barck-Holst, et. al., 2017). In comparison to ASEAN countries, it was reported that employees in ASEAN countries work the longest hours (Harper, 2019). Employees in Qatar were reported to have the longest working hours at 49 hours per week and Malaysian employees work an average of 46 hours per week. This is contrary to the aspiration for employees to achieve work life balance.

Longer working hours is now no longer seen as aspirational, but it is seen to decrease productivity and increase stress. The Asean Post (2019) suggested that automation in jobs that included manual labour and repetition; and new technologies in jobs which requires critical thinking and efficiency may be the herald of the problem of long working hours. Workers then can free up their time to focus on creativity and innovation and therefore enhances their efficiency and productivity at work, without having to work long hours.

When employees work from home, research using data analytics among IT professionals found that employees work 18% more hours at home compared to the office, causing productivity drop between 8-19% (Gibbs et al., 2022). This is echoed by (Huls et al., 2022), in that workers tend to work at least 4 hours longer than normal

in their home offices with 5.5% productivity reduction and tend to spend less time on leisurely activities. WFH then, although seems to be desirable for many employees, can bring negative impact on employees due to the blurred boundaries in the number of working hours. Well-being is seen as pertinent and raised during the pandemic, as WFH can result in one working longer hours and blurring the lines between work and family life. No social interaction can be seen to become a strong stressor, while flexible work hours can become excessive working hours, without breaks continuing into the night, resulting in associated risks of insomnia (ILO, 2020). Combining office and home work is becoming increasingly common, offering flexibility while maintaining some face-to-face interaction. Many organisations are shifting towards measuring employees based on their productivity and results rather than simply how many hours they clock in. Organisations with strong "always-on" culture may lead to blurred boundaries between work and personal life and there is a need for a clear "right to disconnect" in flexible working setting.

2.2 Workspace

The evolution of digital workspace involved integration of technology with work processes, considered as a strategic direction for businesses. It is anticipated that the future workforce will redefine what is considered as 'traditional' workplace/ workspace (Caro et al., 2019; Roy & Shrivastava, 2020). An ideal digital workspace is adaptive, imaginative, compliant, predictive and location-independent (White, 2012). However, there is low digital adoption amongst Malaysia SMEs: the Ministry of Finance (MoF) Economic Report 2019/2020 highlighted that SMEs lag behind multinationals and larger corporations due to limited research, inadequate access to talent, and lack of capital for strategic planning and technological utilisation (Ying, 2019).

As WFH becomes a trend, this strategic direction is seen to be beneficial to the organisation. Technological advancements such as software as a service (Saas), artificial intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IoT) introduces agility and flexibility to the workspace (Clark, 2020). While many companies may have been mulling the digitalisation idea, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the implementation and encouraged organisations to plan a positive employee journey based on effective communication, collaboration, engagement, productivity, loyalty, sense of belonging, inclusion, ongoing learning and an overall culture of transparency (Clark, 2020). Adaptation to new technology has been known to cause anxiety and lack of confidence amongst employees, hampering the implementation of a successful hybrid virtual workspace (White, 2012).

Employees also seek certainty regarding WFH practice as many feels that they are not sufficiently prepared with detailed guidelines, policies, expectation, and approaches to embrace hybrid virtual work. Employees have expressed the wish to be included and supported, as it would influence their level of productivity. The current reality depicts that 47% of surveyed individuals feel the lack of a clear vision post pandemic which is leading to them feeling burnout. This pre-existing anxiety leads to employees preferring more flexibility. 30% of employees are likely to switch jobs if they are asked to return to a fully on-site workspace. Their wishes and hopes revolve well-being, security and reasonable compensation (Alexander et al., 2021).

At national level, many ministries of work (or equivalent) and/or national OSH institutes have taken note of the negative outlook technological advancement has brought to the forefront, requiring employers to assess OSHA considerations when offering WFH options (Junkin, 2020; Povera, 2021). As a result, basic checklists and guides were developed to help employers and workers assess the ergonomic risks related to digital based endeavours (IOSH, 2014). It however remains to be seen if these checklists are applied across working organisations as these adaptations may incur hidden costs and updated processes.

2.3 Nature of Work

It is generally agreed that not every scope of work is eligible for WFH (ARPM, 2020; Bloom et al., 2014). Once implemented there has to be appropriate mechanisms for employee monitoring and discipline. Employers need to balance monitoring and employee freedom, otherwise employees feel controlled or restricted and this may give rise to breach of privacy (Lockwood & Nath, 2020). It was proposed that the re-skilling/ upskilling and digital talent planning responsibilities rest of the shoulders of the human resource department, whose function is to align technology and people (Hughes et al., 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic exploded a WFH trend. Post Covid-19, this trend was involuntary, that birthed nuances on productivity and eligibility to work from home. Globally, 1 in every 5 jobs may work from home, but this ratio drops to one in every 26 jobs in low-income countries (Garrote Sanchez et. al., 2021). According to a survey of 592 Amazon MTurk workers, 68.4% of workers reported that their personal work productivity elevated, 66.2% of workers reported that their subordinates' work productivity had improved, and 55.7% of workers preferred to WFH post-Covid-19 than they did pre- Covid-19. These findings illustrate that workers who had spent more time WFH pre and during Covid-19 perceived higher personal productivity. These workers had a stronger inclination to opt for WFH, post Covid-19 (Baudot & Kelly, 2020). It is interesting to note, that these findings suggest a preference to work from home post Covid-19, with increased productivity, based on their personal assessment. Nevertheless, to assess the degree to which WFH influences work productivity, the nature of the job is considered (Baudot & Kelly, 2020).

According to the guidelines provided by the ILO, the three cornerstones of 'practicality' 'flexibility' and 'sensitivity' based on job description and the job holder are the overarching view. Some practical steps to assess if the job description allows for a WFH policy include identification of job description with the exploration of

innovative steps, technological devices, power supply and internet connectivity, legal considerations based on job description, safety and health based on the workers environment, which expands to living conditions and mental health. Workers that may be able to WFH may be based on the availability to telework, with conducive environmental conditions and resources (Garrote Sanchez et. al., 2021). It is well understood application of these guidelines are subject to discretion. For instance, in JetBlue Airlines, call centre workers embraced work from home, in contrast to American Airlines, which prohibits work from home, whereas United Airlines allows a mixture of different work practices (Garrote Sanchez et. al., 2021).

The stereotypical belief that working from home provides a flexible and comfortable environment may be inaccurate. In fact, the work from home practice has raised legal concerns regarding employee monitoring. The implementation of remote work policies necessitates careful attention to legal matters, as it cannot be undertaken without potential legal complications (Wahab, et. al, 2022). Employers may encounter labour disputes pertaining to aspects like performance-based terminations, retrenchment, and misconduct when it comes to remote work arrangements (Wahab, et. al, 2022).

Implementing remote working arrangements can pose challenges for employers. Some job roles may not be suitable for remote work, but companies may explore alternative approaches to adapt and achieve similar or better results. Employees may abuse remote arrangements by being absent from work or working at irregular hours, but employers can adopt a results-oriented approach to ensure accountability.

2.4 Psychological contract

When WFH arrangements are implemented, employers must acknowledge the impact of change to employees (when they transition from office to home); and the consequences on the employee-employer relationship (Van den Heuvel et al., 2016). Alexander, et al. (2021) observed that employees' overall hopes, and fears reflect a wish for flexibility, well-being and compensation. This in turn would infuse interest for collaboration, connectivity, training, and technology policies for employers to enforce and accommodate to retain their talent in the long run. Employers are to not only be aware of the legal rights an employment contract highlights and the transactional exchange of labour for reward, but they are also to be sensitive to the implied psychological contract that subsists. This psychological contract is seen pivotal as it intangibly contributes to organisational citizenship and overall loyalty.

The fundamental part of this psychological contract invites discussion of perceived reciprocal obligations between the employee and organization or employers. These obligations deal with feelings, attitudes and behaviour towards each other. Creating and maintaining these contracts are challenging. Lack of socialisation and mentoring activities (*typically occurring in a WFH setting*) may breach this contract. From the employees' perspective, a relational approach is preferred over a transactional one (Rousseau, Tomprou & Montes, 2016). Despite a burgeoning of interest and wealth of literatures pertaining to the psychological contract, there remains no one or accepted universal definition (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006). The expectations of both parties and the level of mutuality and reciprocity needed to be considered jointly. It was argued that the psychological contract should return to its roots in the form of including an 'employer perspective' to be able to fully assess the notion of mutual and reciprocal obligations (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006).

Fairness and equity in the transactional and relational aspects between the employer and employee underpin their relationship (Delcampo, 2007). Psychological contract fulfilment (especially low promise & high fulfilment) contribute to employees' perception of fairness and job satisfaction and reduces the intention to quit (Rodwell et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2019). On the other hand, when employees perceived that employers have failed to fulfil its obligations, a 'psychological contract violation' is said to have occurred. Klaus & Blanton (2010) suggests that these perceived unmet promises may be categorised into 4 areas: individual, system, organisation and process. Van den Heuvel et al. (2016) offered the explanation from affective, behavioural and cognitive aspects i.e., employers must consciously answer the employees' unwritten question of "*What's in it for me?*" and highlight personal benefits to employees when carrying them through organisational change.

When "office space" shifts to "home space", both the leadership and employees has to re-think questions related to employee experience and organisational expectations when employees are remotely dispersed and are not as socially connected as before (Lockwood & Nath, 2020). During this process of change due to the pandemic, the leadership role in engaging and communicating with employees during this transition is paramount. Despite employees' multiple locations and heterogeneity in age, work experience and digital skills, the human resource team is presented with the opportunity to use technology to connect this fragmented workforce, improve employees' experience and attract employees' buy-in of the digital workspace (Hicks, 2018). This digital disruption will set the stage for employees to innovate and thrive. Despite this potential innovation and a thriving workforce, employee experience and welfare should also be considered to prevent burnout and clear work policies need to be introduced to allay employee anxiety about their work situation post-pandemic (Alexander et al., 2021).

3.0 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, primarily utilizing semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. Qualitative method is chosen to gain a deeper understanding from the perspectives of HR and legal practitioners in Malaysia. Content analysis is utilised to interpret the participants' responses and

identify recurrent themes that emerged. The interview questions are developed based on a review of the existing literature, as well as input from experts in the field. Four interviews were conducted via face-to-face method, with each interview lasting between 45 minutes to 1 hour. Each interview was transcribed with consent for subsequent analysis. The use of open-ended questions enables participants to share their experiences in their own words, providing rich and in-depth data.

Coding and thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data (Cresswell, 2013). This method involves systematically identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the dataset. The process begins with data familiarisation, followed by generating initial codes. These codes were then organised into overarching themes that capture the perspectives of the HR and legal practitioners. The analysed data is reported in the next section.

3.1 Research Instrument

Interview with HR Practitioners

Overarching Question: How prepared were your organisation in embracing the work from home policy? [Context: pre, during & post pandemic experience]

Work Hours

1. What is your perception of the current (legislation) reducing work hours per week?
2. Do the current work hours align itself well with the work from home policy?
3. Does your organisation have a policy in place to account for the lower work hours per week?

Work Spaces

1. What is your perception of a digital workspace? [How did your company prepare the employees' workspaces to WFH?]
2. Does your company encourage digital workspaces? [Is your company supporting WFH? Where do your workers work from (location flexibility)?]
3. What are the concerns you may have with the adoption of WFH within a digital workspace?

Scope/ Nature of Work

1. Is the scope or nature of work provided by your organisation able to align itself with the work from home policy? [Does the nature of work determine the employee selection i.e., which job/ who's entitled to WFH?]
2. What are your concerns if the WFH policy is applied in your organisation? [Did your company have had to make changes to the scope of work, to adapt to WFH environment?]

4.0 Results and Findings

4.1 Respondent Demographics

Four practitioners in the human recourse and legal field were interviewed. Each interview was transcribed, and the demographics of the respondents are listed in the table below.

Table 1: Respondent's demographics

Interviewee 1 Senior Manager Human Resource, Higher Education Industry 50 years of experience
Interviewee 2 Human Recourse Assistant Manager, IT service provider 10 years' experience
Interviewee 3 Human Recourse/Owner, Legal Industry 10 years' experience
Interviewee 4 Human Resource, Construction Industry 15 years' experience

4.2. Common Themes (Keywords' Summary)

Table 2: Common Themes

	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3	Interviewee 4
WORK HOURS	Positive response Flexibility Trust Task Oriented Discretionary Attendance Record	Positive response No impact	Positive response Work life balance Reduced productivity Attendance Record	Positive response Work life balance Attendance Record

WORKSPACE	Device/Tech [TECH] Mobility Conformity Current trend Wellbeing	Productivity Abuse of work hours [DISCIPLINE]	Tech framework [TECH]	System access [TECH] Security [TECH] On-site workers No WFH Crisis management Productivity
SCOPE/ NATURE OF WORK	Support system Employee maturity Discretionary	No change	Not much difference	No change

5.0 Analysis

5.1 Work Hours

From the interviews, a common theme that was gathered was that the reduction of working hours is a positive measure taken by the government and it increases work life balance. All four interviewees connote the same positive response where interviewee 4 mentioned *“the amendment is good as to provide a work-life balance to employees”* and interviewee 3 mentioned *“reduction in working hours is a good thing as employees will have some form of work life balance”*, supported by interviewee 2 who mentioned *“it is a good move”*. The reduction of work hours had been long overdue as ILO had amended the work standard to 40 hours per week (Forty-Hour Week Convention, 1935) and previous research also stated that decent working hours (optimally between 35 to 40 hours per week) is desirable as it increases employees’ wellbeing and work life balance (International Labour Organisation, 2018; Virtanen, et. al., 2009).

However, trust may be one of the concerns with regards to work hours. When employees are given flexibility, the issue of mistrust can create friction within the organisation. This is because trust can be said to be the foundation of employer and employee relationship and the psychological contract between the employer and employee. When trust is abused, the foundation of the relationship will be gone and hence, WFH will no longer be deemed to be desirable on part of the employer, as mentioned by Interviewee 1 *“employees may carry out their other duties”*. Furthermore, constant monitoring may also reduce trust, as confirmed by Interviewee 1 who stated, *“employers trust the employees and do not want to resort to micromanaging them”*.

Therefore, a good WFH policy involves monitoring performance, instead of the hours employees put into their work, as suggested by interviewee 1. However, it should be noted that WFH is not suitable in type of work that requires constant collaborations, or those that requires physical labour, like the industry interviewee 3 is in. To ensure productivity, attendance record is a measure that can be taken by employers in monitoring attendance record as agreed by interviewee 1, interviewee 3 and interviewee 4. Interviewee 2 mentioned that their organisation working hours remained the same, pre, and post pandemic. As employees began working from office, the company interviewee 2 is in maintains their hours of work.

5.2 Workspace

A prevalent theme from the interviewees was a positive note to the perception of embracing a digital workspace. Interviewee 4 mentioned *“The company has been adapting to the technology advancement”* while interviewee 3 stated that *“it is really important for an organisation, for an employer to provide a digital workspace”*. Interviewee 1 anchored this sentiment in by specifically stating *“if you’re talking about a digital workspace for educators, I think. Looking at the people they are teaching. It can be formulated....”* These 3 interviewees were also consistent with their resonance towards its effectiveness being influenced by the nature of the industry itself and job requirements. Interviewee 1 identified this by stating *“it goes back to the industry we are in”* while interviewees 2 and 4 stated *“depends on the work requirement itself”*.

The perception of these interviewees is seen to naturally be related to the level of preparations taken by their respective organisations to embrace digitalisation. Aligned with the Industry Revolution 4.0 and colloquially equated to utilisation of technology and mobility, interviewees 1, 3 and 4 from the higher education, construction and legal sectors respectively impressed their ideas of preparations through the utilisation of technology ranging from devices, tech framework to system access. This interpretation was noticeable in the following statements:

Interviewee 1: “You know, just like how we embrace the technology during COVID. We embraced it...So, if in the future we have to embrace digital workspace providing employees an opportunity to use digital devices and work from anywhere that can be done and for as long as you know the hours, the employee is supposed to be in the office to provide that service, and the employee may need to use....”

Interviewee 4: “currently using many systems and cloud-based sharing drives in running our daily operation and the systems are accessible from anywhere.”

The effectiveness of this workspace type, however, is not without its share of concerns. Productivity was seen as the overarching concern while specific concerns were raised based on industries. Interviewee 3 raised a concern about social connectivity through the statement *“What I might be concerned about would be like the camaraderie between the employees”*. Interviewee 1 raised a concern over sense of security by stating *“This is a traditional space.... When you have traditional spaces provided somebody looks to come into the*

workspace allocated for employees. It traditionally gives the opportunity to all who are seated in that area to immediately connect with one another and whoever is around. It also gives a sense of security to employees". Interviewee 4 raised concern about the capability and stability of devices and internet connection by mentioning "device employee used may not fully supported to run the system that the company is using, and/or the stability of internet connection may affect the efficiency and productivity". Interviewee 2 raised concern about abuse of work by employees.

From the responses it may be derived that for a digital workspace to be effective, organisations must embrace technology utilisation, acknowledge plausible mobility, and manage the concerns of social connectivity amongst employees, safety of (network) security, device and network compatibility and abuse of work. Future research could perhaps probe into employee behavioural patterns angling on accountability and responsibility to measure the effectiveness of the digital workspace based on industry as well as basic checklists for employers to assess ergonomics risks in embracing the digital workspace long term.

5.3 Scope/ Nature of Work

From the interviewees, a prominent theme was observed when it came to the scope or nature of the work. Consistently, all interviewees describe not much concern or change is required to implement work-from-home policies. Interviewee 1 states that *'It goes back to the industry we are in' and 'the maturity of our employees and them understanding fully the kind of hours they have to dedicate in a day towards the work-from-home policy'*. The scope or nature of work would not make a difference if the tasks were achievable. Interviewee 1 describes it as, *'Acceptable as long as we apply maturity to advocating the responsibilities that we have... where the digital workspace is concerned, naturally'*. This was similarly echoed by Interviewee 3 stating that *"I think it wouldn't matter much because he would still be able to contribute well to the work that he has been given"*. Interviewee 2 states that the scope or nature of work that is eligible to work from home, is discretionary *"All office-based employees, who are based in HQ except for Finance/Accounts Team"*. The nature of job that connotes as 'all office-based employees' is subject to further deliberation. The main concern when it comes to implementing work from home policy is the support system given. Interviewee 4 expressly states *"internet, hardware, software"* however their company directive was for all employees to return to the office post-pandemic, hence there is no change to the nature of work.

This endorses literature on practical insights when assessing scope or nature of work, to work from home. The ILO assesses a person's job description, supplemented with clear innovative steps, technological devices, power supply, and internet connectivity, when implementing work from home policy. Workers that may be able to WFH may be based on the availability to telework, with conducive environmental conditions and resources (Garrote Sanchez et. al., 2021). Yet, these considerations are subject to discretion.

5.4 Common themes

Overall, the interviewees expressed support of the legislative amendment to reduce working hours. They also acknowledged the potential contribution of WFH to work-life balance (when reflecting on the MCO days). However, none of the companies implemented WFH post-pandemic citing concerns related to employees' productivity and trustworthiness about work hours and employee discipline. Due to this decision by their respective organisations (to return to office), the employees' nature and scope of work did not change much, except for the education institution which implemented online teaching, consistent with national and worldwide experiences.

The participants were also unanimous in agreeing that technology was the enabler of WFH implementation, each using targeted technology solutions to fit their operations. Companies can use communication tools such as video conferencing or instant messaging tools when it comes to communication within the organisation. In companies that requires monitoring, project management tools can be used to manage tasks or deadlines remotely. Participants also agrees that reliable hardware such as laptops and internet connections were crucial for effective remote work. Nonetheless, none of the participants mentioned ergonomic working space and hence this could be the direction for future research with regards to WFH.

When asked if they have the policy ready to implement flexible work, suitable with the amendment of the EA1955, all participants stated that they do are yet to have the policy ready as they are not looking into implementing WFH or flexible work and are more inclined that all employees to be present in the office during office hours. This may be due to the company culture that appreciate traditional work styles and beliefs that value physical presence in the office that could be hindering the adoption of WFH. The organisation may also have concerns on productivity, communication, and team dynamics in a flexi work environment.

6.0 Conclusion and policy recommendations

In recent years, the concept of work-life balance has gained significant attention in the corporate world. The COVID-19 pandemic forced organisations and employees alike to reevaluate their work arrangements. Many organisations expressed support for work-life balance and acknowledge its importance in fostering employee well-being and satisfaction. However, in practice, these proclamations are often left unfulfilled. Despite the growing understanding and acceptance of the significance of work life balance, many companies did not implement concrete measures to achieve it, prioritising productivity, and profitability over employee well-

being. They may fear that accommodating employees' work-life balance needs could compromise performance. Additionally, the absence of a clear implementation strategy may result from a lack of understanding of how to create a WFH-friendly workplace culture.

Technology played a significant role during the COVID-19 pandemic in enabling remote work. The sudden shift to remote work for many industries served as an experiment that showcased the feasibility of working from home. During the pandemic, businesses had to adapt quickly to remote work as a means of ensuring continuity. This shift was possible due to the availability of technology tools such as video conferencing, cloud-based collaboration platforms, and remote project management tools. These technologies allowed employees to stay connected and collaborate seamlessly from their homes. However, the shift to remote work might have been a temporary response to an unprecedented crisis rather than a long-term strategy. Organisations may be reluctant to fully embrace remote work due to concerns about productivity and trust, as expressed by the interviewees.

Some employers have concerns regarding remote work. A common concern is whether employees working from home will be as productive as they would be in a traditional office setting. Some believe that remote work could lead to decreased productivity due to potential distractions at home. Additionally, trust becomes a key issue in remote work arrangements. Employers may worry that they cannot monitor their employees' activities as closely as they can in an office environment. Concerns about whether employees are working the prescribed hours or maintaining a suitable work ethic may lead to hesitance in fully implementing remote work policies. Despite the changes brought about by technology and the pandemic, the essential scope of work remains constant. Regardless of whether employees work from an office or from home, the tasks they are responsible for and the goals they need to achieve remain the same. What changes is the way work is executed and managed. Therefore, it is imperative that organisations strike a balance between the evolving needs of the workforce and the goals of the business, ultimately creating a work environment where employees can thrive while contributing to the success of the organisation. Clear internal policies need to be deliberated, and a modern approach of employee trust adopted, in that employees get involved in drafting the policies that will eventually affect them.

Based on our research, we recommended three areas that organisations must consider when formulating WFH policy. One is the on the "right to disconnect". Organisations must establish a policy outlining employees' right to disconnect from work outside of core working hours or during holidays to promote work-life balance. Second is on the guideline on technology. Organisations must define clear guidelines on the provision of essential equipment and software tools required for remote work to ensure employee productivity and efficiency, without excessive monitoring or breach of employee's privacy. Lastly, companies must implement a robust data security protocols and training programs to protect sensitive company information when handled remotely. Compliance to the current personal data protection legislation is a must as the penalty for non-compliance can cost a company monetary penalty or even jail time.

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