







## Work from home practices and employment relations during COVID-19 movement control order in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

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The presence of COVID-19 movement control order (MCO) and working instructions from home contribute to a flexible working arrangement. Work from home (WFH) is likely part of the 'new normal' as the global community continues to fight COVID-19. The question arises as to how the employment relations takes place while working from home due to MCO and whether technological facilities and smart devices have successfully created harmonious and effective employment relationships. This paper aims to explore how WFH during MCO can affect employment relations in Malaysia. Based on qualitative online survey data with 725 respondents and analyzed using the reflexive thematic analysis technique, this study found that four major elements influence employment relations, namely: Digital Transformation, Digital Communication, Support (institutional & social), and New Working Style. These elements can either strengthen and at the same time weaken existing employment relationships. The study also showed that the success of WFH on employment relations is a concept of relationships that exist based on trust and this is shown through a symbol of cooperation that is trusted on the commitment of work given. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each member of the organization to put in their utmost and maintain smooth and harmonious employment relations. Employees and employers with the support of the Government should join hands to overcome the challenges of COVID-19 and ensure that the new work style of WFH efficiently functions for the betterment of everyone, society, and the nation at large.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study is the first that has investigated the effect of WFH practices on the nature of employment relations during the COVID-19 MCO in Malaysia. It contributes new findings whereby social limitations in employment relations as the new norm of WFH during MCO has changed the way employees and employers interact.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Working from home is commonly practiced in developed countries and its effects on individual employees and organizations are often debated (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2015). In Malaysia, work from home (WFH) is uncommon (Siti Aisyah, 2020). However, the context of the worldwide spread of COVID-19 and the implementation of movement control order (MCO) as well as lockdown orders in some countries has led to the increasing practice of WFH.

Work from home (WFH) is one of the most flexible work practices implemented to achieve the flexibility to increase the commitment of employees to perform their work duties. During the public health crisis, WFH was seen advantageous since workers could continue to practice physical distancing, making them less likely to be infected with COVID-19 or infect others, which benefited not only the workers but the society at large.

Following the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic made an impact on various sectors such as tourism, education, manufacturing industry, and many more. The MIER (2020) estimated that the MCO has likely affected 2.4 million jobs. It is obvious that the pandemic has changed the world of work and made the working conditions to be more dynamic. Eventually, it certainly affects social relationships and work and non-work role commitments of individuals working from home (Purwanto et al., 2020). As such, this paper focuses on how working from home (WFH) during MCO affects employment relationships.

## 2. EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

According to William and Adam-Smith (2010), employment relations is concerned with understanding work and employment relationship and has a particular focus on the relationship between employers and their employees. Meanwhile, Torrington, Hall, and Taylor (2005) stated that employment relations (or employee relations, as it is also known) is responsible for preventing or alleviating conflict and ensuring that a harmonious working environment is facilitated. The term employment relationship describes the link between employers and employees in the workplace. The basis of employment relationship is an undertaking by an employee to provide skill and effort to an employer in return for which the employer provides a salary or wage, a safe workplace, and an obligation to act in good faith towards employee. It is also normally referring to the formal and informal relationship that exists between the employer and employee. The relationship between an employer and employees is governed by the contract of personal service. The world today is becoming increasingly complex as the pattern of employment relationships has increasingly changed from standard to non-standard (Williams, 2014). This is because the nature of a standard employment relationship such as standard working hours, working in the provided premises, having standard employment arrangements, has become blurred due to the existence of complex and flexible types of employment. This is further compounded by the growing practice of WFH during COVID-19 MCO.

The presence of COVID-19 MCO and working instructions from home also contribute to a flexible working arrangement. The implementation of WFH without face-to-face interaction with colleagues, employers, and stakeholders can reduce, if not eliminate organizational politics, and increase the integration of work and family responsibilities. Yet, at the same time, the absence of employee-employer face-to-face relationships can create segregation (Baruch, 2000), reduce a sense of belonging, responsibility, and organization (Noon, Blyton, & Morrell, 2013), and create non-standard working patterns (Williams, 2014). Srivastava, Sethumadhavan, Raghupathy, Agarwal, and Rawat (2015) also found that employees feel less sense of work ethics due to unsuitable and comfortable working conditions. Thus, the question arises as to how the employment relations process takes place while working from home as a result of MCO. Is it effective? Have technological facilities and smart devices successfully created harmonious and effective employment relationships? Hence, this paper aims to explore how WFH during MCO can affect employment relations in Malaysia.

## 3. METHODS

This exploratory study is based on a more comprehensive study, however for this paper, the discussion only focuses on WFH practices and their implications on employment relationships. The data discussed in this paper also focuses only on findings from qualitative data obtained through a mixed quantitative-qualitative survey. The mixed quantitative-qualitative survey was used through Google Form which was sent randomly via email, WhatsApp, and Facebook during MCO and targeted those who work from home only to answer it. A total of 725 participants from all over Malaysia responded to the questionnaire. According to Davey, Clarke, and Jenkinson (2019) online

qualitative survey research potentially ‘gives voice’ to people who ‘might not otherwise be able to participate in qualitative research’, and from this study context it was a result of COVID-19 MCO. The qualitative survey consisted of a series of open-ended questions and centered on a particular topic. They were self-administered with questions presented in a fixed and standard order to all participants. As participants responded by typing responses in their own words, qualitative surveys produced rich and complex accounts of the type of sense-making typically of interest to qualitative researchers – such as participants’ subjective experiences, narratives, practices, positionings, and discourses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Within the framework of what was important to the researcher, qualitative survey data captured what was important to participants, and accessed their language and terminology as both frequently claimed advantages of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The qualitative data obtained were then analyzed using reflexive thematic techniques. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to answer broad or narrow research questions about people’s experiences, views, and perceptions, and representations of a given phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 illustrates the profile of the respondents. 65% of the respondents are female and 35% are male. The majority of them (64.3%) are working as civil servants, 23.4% work in the private sector and the rest are working in the statutory bodies (9.1%), small-medium enterprise (0.3%), self-employed (2.2%), Government-linked Companies (GLC) (0.1%), and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) (0.6%). In terms of employment category, most of the respondents (75.2%) are in managerial and professional positions, followed by 21.5% are supportive workers, 2.1% are top management, 1% are self-employed and 0.3% are in other categories. For the level of education, more than half of the respondents have a Bachelor degree (52%), Master’s degree (19.2%), Ph.D. (13%), and the rest have STPM/Diploma (9.7%), SPM/MCE (5.7%), PT3/PMR/SRP (0.4%) and primary school background (0.1%).

Table 1. Profile of the respondents.

	Profile	Frequency	(%)
Gender	Male	254	35.0
	Female	471	65.0
Employment sector	Public sector	466	64.3
	Private sector	170	23.4
	Statutory bodies	66	9.1
	Small-medium enterprise	2	0.3
	Self-employed	16	2.2
	Government-linked company	1	0.1
	Non-governmental organization	4	0.6
Employment category	Top management	15	2.1
	Managerial and professional	545	75.2
	Supportive group	156	21.5
	Self-employed	7	1.0
	Others	2	0.3
Level of education	Primary school	1	0.1
	PT3/PMR/SRP	3	0.4
	SPM/MCE	41	5.7
	STPM/Diploma	70	9.7
	Bachelor’s degree	377	52.0
	Masters	139	19.2
	PhD	94	13.0

Note: PT3/PMR/SRP: Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3 (PT3) is Form 3 Assessment, formerly known as PMR or Penilaian Menengah Rendah and Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP). It is equivalent to the Lower Secondary Assessment. It was taken by all Form 3 students to qualify for the Form 4 term. The exam has now been abolished. STPM: Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (Malaysian Higher School Certificate) is a pre-university examination in Malaysia. SPM: Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education, MCE) is a national examination taken by all fifth-form secondary school students in Malaysia.

Generally, findings show that out of 725 respondents, 614 (84.4%) respondents said this was the first time they practiced WFH. Meanwhile, 497 (68.1%) of the respondents did not think that working from home was easier than working at work, and 409 of the respondents (56.4%) liked to work from home. The study also found that out of 725 respondents, 503 (69.1%) of them agreed that face to face communication was better than online communication. This indicates that although more than half of the respondents like WFH, but more than half of respondents also prefer to have face-to-face interaction as opposed to online which is one of the main elements needed when WFH is practiced.

The findings from the qualitative data show that there are themes that exhibit WFH practices whereby it can either strengthen and at the same time weaken existing employment relationships. Figure 1 illustrates the factors of WFH that can influence employment relations during COVID-19 MCO.

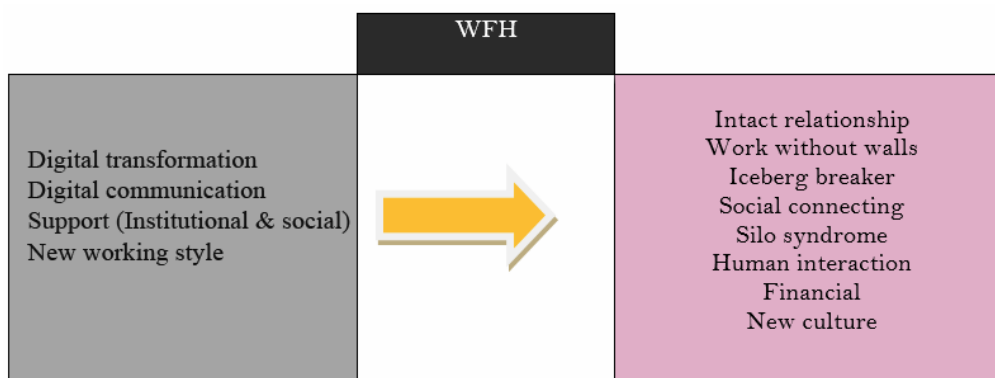


Figure 1. Influence of WFH on employment relations during COVID-19 MCO.

#### 4.1. How WFH Influences Employment Relations?

Digital Transformation. In ensuring that WFH practices run efficiently, the technological aspect is an important component that must be available in every employee's home. This is not only limited to computers, smartphones, tablets, and all related digital devices, but accessibility to the internet also needs to be at the best capacity level to ensure WFH runs successfully. Facilities of technology and efficient digitalization elements will certainly facilitate employment matters even during the MCO. This is how respondents foresee that efficient technology and digital transformation will facilitate better employment relations and *intact relationship* as shared by the respondent, "...the relationship between employees and employers remains intact despite working from home as technology now allows work to be done online." Others also share a similar experience, "...the company provides VPN to communicate in case any employees want to work in the system"; "adequate ICT support is important [for better employees-employer relationship]".

However, the lack of technological and internet support while WFH can also contribute to weakened employment relations as it can hamper the efficiency of the task delivery. A respondent shared, "When the internet line has a problem, the meeting is not smooth and even some staff are difficult to contact. This causes a lot of work to be disrupted." Others also shared how lack of technology contributes to their disliking of WFH, "limited access to certain software"; "the lack of technological facilities made it difficult for me during WFH"; "difficult to WFH due to information and internet data constraints"; "I have no computer at home"; "Printer and scanner are all in the office". Without adequate technological and digital equipment, efforts to ensure WFH practices run efficiently are futile. Indirectly, the coveted employment relationship will also not be achieved.

WFH through digitalization and virtualization also contributes to the tendency of employees to *work without walls*. Having all work in the 'cloud' and that floating in cyberspace with work assignments can be done at home also causes long working hours and no time limit. Respondents shared their experiences, "working hours when work from home is quite flexible but [ I ] always work longer hour, sometimes until night"; "I feel that work from home just like

*working without walls – no limit*. Other respondents stated that “*when working from home [I] do not see the boundary between work and non-work. Most of the time the borders are blurred*”; “[*WFH*] has many constraints and (*working online causes*) *working hours and housework cannot be distinguished*”. These experiences indicate how the border of work and life domains become porous and responsibilities from both domains can overlap each other. If this is not well managed, it can lead to work-life conflict.

COVID-19 has made digitization more difficult and urgent than ever. Therefore, organizations and employees need to understand their digital needs for efficient WFH and will indirectly lead to great employment relationships.

Digital Communication. Digital communication is the most dominant medium for communicating during WFH in COVID-19 MCO. It allows for seamless and easy-to-communicate interactions because someone with an introverted personality, for example, no longer needs to restrain themselves from feeling anxious when it is necessary to speak up especially with their superiors or even their colleagues. The study found that the practice of WFH allow some *ice breaks* to be done. This experience is shared by respondents who stated, “*When working in the office, we always feel there is a constraint to talk to the boss. But while WFH we talk digitally, our faces are not visible, we can communicate without feeling shy and feel free to talk*”; “... *when WFH started, [I have] online communication with colleagues and bosses felt easier and more friendly, without barriers.*”

WFH through digital communication also made *social connecting* easier as respondents highlighted their views, “*WFH causes us to only talk during meeting sessions over the internet, but the WhatsApp groups allow it to be enhanced*”; “*we have WhatsApp group and have a frequent online meeting*”. This indicates that digital communication allowed both formal and informal communication which can build and enhance the relationship among workers and employers, and some even extended to their stakeholders.

However, the study also found that misunderstandings occurred in employee-employer relationships. The common problems like misunderstandings and miscommunication were compounded by the shortcomings of digital communication. Lack of context, asynchronous responses, and the inability to see body language are some of the challenges that make digital communication problematic. These contribute to a *lack of human interaction/touch*. The following views of respondents highlight the problem, “*Face-to-face discussions are still better than virtual ones. We still need the human touch*”; “*When WFH, there is no personal touch with staff because communication only involves online*”. Others also shared, “...*because we do not communicate face to face then no emotional connection occurs when interacting with colleagues*”.

Digital communication also causes *ineffective communication* as shared by respondents, “*Too long at home due to MCO, only causes us to forget how to interact with office mates in reality, except interaction via conference video*”; “*Although communication can be done online for essential tasks, informal communication between colleagues is often enjoyed face-to-face. This did not happen during the MCO due to the busy schedule of each in carrying out the actual duties and also the duties of a mother/father/wife/husband.*”

COVID-19 has brought the world to digital use to the optimum level especially when it becomes an important element in WFH. Therefore, employers and employees need to understand what they need if they want to implement WFH, and to what extent they can be digital because certain elements cannot be replaced by technology. Digitization of the world of work should not lead to dehumanization in work. The human values should still be intact as the main pillar and support for a more flexible world of work in this decade.

Supports (institutional and social). To succeed in WFH practices during MCO, the support of organizations and employers are needed. The tools and equipment commonly used in the workplace should also be at home. This is however not easy because not all employees who work from home can afford it. Hence, they need support from the organization. However, the study found that respondents who work from home faced difficulty fulfilling their responsibilities because of the burden they had to bear without the support of the employer. A respondent shared, “*Normally, all equipment and hardware are usually provided in the workplace, but with WFH, all of that needs to be prepared by employees. Without the support of the employer, all that has to be borne by yourself.*” This lack of institutional support only



contributed to weakening of the employee-employer relationship as others shared the same sentiments, *“Employers often bother even during working hours. Lack of convenience. All costs are borne by yourself”; “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”*.

Without effective support particularly from the organization and superiors, workers will also experience *silos syndrome*. In this study, “silo” is a term that refers to workers who work in a “silo” (or a “siloed” environment) operate in isolation, focusing strictly on their narrow concerns and not sharing ideas with their peers. Respondents shared their experiences, *“With WFH practices, I work alone. I feel like I am working in a silo”; “[I] feel so isolated, lonely, the company did not bother”; “I have not received any supports – be it instrumental neither emotional”*. These experiences indicate that supports from the institution play a pivotal role to prevent the feeling of isolation which could be detrimental to workers’ health.

Additionally, institutional support through *financial* also paramount. The study found that there are cases whereby workers are not paid during MCO or for some, WFH causes their pay to be deducted. This is shared by respondents, *“The company does not pay salaries”; “By working from home, many tasks cannot be done as when working in the workplace. So the company cut my salary.”* Although working from home is a Government directive to curb the spread of COVID-19, employers should ensure that the welfare of employees does not get neglected. Additionally, the Government should also ensure that WFH directives can be regulated to ensure workers' rights are protected.

*New Working Style*. Ergonomic aims to increase efficiency and productivity and reduce discomfort. The Government's directive to implement WFH during COVID-19 MCO for most employment sectors in Malaysia made it a new norm and practice. Work environments and work organizations that changed location from work premises to their respective residential homes had to be adopted by those involved. This situation created a form of a *new culture* as the work system in terms of working time, dress code, way of working, and ergonomics of work station changed which in turn impacted on the employment relationship. Excerpts by respondents below illustrate the situation of this new culture.

- *“Social culture in Malaysia in general, and in Sabah in particular, will only be achieved to the maximum by face-to-face or physical interaction. Online culture has less impact on the relationships between colleagues and employers”*.
- *“Being working from home, this is a new working environment”*.
- *“WFH allows me to work whenever I like”*.
- *“I do not have to think about what clothes to wear today or what time to leave for the office”*.
- *“I no longer have to be stranded on the road due to traffic jams and can save money on fuel, save money on lunch at restaurants”*.
- *“No need to bother to make up or mess up early in the morning to go to the office because with WFH we are free to choose what we want to wear or how to take care of children”*.
- *“I have created a special workstation at home especially for WFH purposes”*.

Although working from home is considered the most flexible job, the study found that due to lack of supports (digitally, and emotionally) from employers tends to reduce the social bond between employees and employers, and this is supported in Hill, Ferris, and Mårtinson (2003). Similar to the study findings, Larson, Vroman, and Makarius (2020) also stated that loneliness is one of the most common complaints about remote work, with employees missing the informal social interaction of an office setting. This proves that social isolation can happen when WFH employees feel lonely and lack face-to-face social interaction in doing work. The problem of two-way communication between the organization and employees remotely drives a decrease in the productivity of individual employees as this whole social change when working from the home can result in low-level collaboration between colleagues and supervisors (Ng & Khoo, 2000). Eventually, this situation leads to personal isolation and the nature of employee professionalism which is less encouraging in performing job duties (Hill et al., 2003). Furthermore, this situation is exacerbated when digital transformation is not supported, and supervision and monitoring are at a minimum level implemented by employers and organizations (Ng & Khoo, 2000). This scenario implies that there

are social limitations in employment relationships, thus inviting "job isolation" from the social point of view of employees when working from home.

The new norm about working from home as MCOs has changed the way employees and managers interact. While there are concerns about the efficiency of WFH practices, strong and positive communication and support from all parties will help keep everyone motivated and keep the employment relations intact as the world moves and takes on many challenges.

## 5. CONCLUSION

COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented crisis that was testing professional and personal relations around the world. It was the responsibility of each member of each organization to put in their utmost and maintain smooth and harmonious employment relations. The study shows that the success of WFH during MCO on employment relations is a concept of relationships that exist based on trust and this can be shown through a symbol of cooperation among all parties that are trusted on the commitment of work given. The concept of trust resulting from employment relationships will encourage employees to have high autonomy in the decision-making of work duties and responsibilities. Therefore, organizations and Government should play their pivotal roles to ensure that WFH directives can be regulated efficiently to ensure workers' rights are protected.

Efficient WFH cannot be implemented overnight as it needs proper planning, systemic, and cultural support. Maintaining employee morale through regular motivation and recognition is more important than ever because WFH without a harmonious employment relationship only contributes to many negative impacts for example, dehumanization of work, the isolation of employees from the real work environment or lack of organizational support. Therefore, virtual digital communication needs to be practiced and improved so that no employee feels left out. Managers and organizations should emphasize the fact that WFH gives employees additional accountability, and the organization trusts them to use that accountability well. This is also a great opportunity to promote skill improvement through online learning platforms. Moreover, personal messages and calls that acknowledge the difficulties each employee may be going through go a long way in boosting their sense of self-esteem as valued team members.

Besides the support of the Government, employer and employee are two sides of the same coin and must sail together during the difficult situation, for example of COVID-19, and ensure that the new work style of WFH efficiently functions for the betterment of everyone, the society, and the nation at large. Furthermore, change is the only constant, employees, and organizations that will adapt according to change will survive.

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