

# Examining Telecommuting During Pandemic in Malaysia: Is There Support?

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## Abstract:

**Purpose:** This paper aims to examine key issues and challenges in telecommuting practices in Malaysian workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Design/methodology/approach:** As telecommuting literature is deep-rooted in Western countries, there might be variables that are under explored in different contexts. Thus, a qualitative research design is used to examine telecommuting in Malaysia. Online semi-structured interviews are done with 15 employees from various fields to explore their telecommuting experiences.

**Findings:** Findings reveal telecommuting is a double edged sword that offers both positive and negative impacts on employees. Employees experience limited resources, boundaryless working hours, reduced perceived organizational politics and high spill over during telecommuting. Thus, managerial and technology support appear significant in leveraging the benefits of telecommuting practices in Malaysia.

**Research limitations/implications:** This study is drawn from a limited sample of participants from various industries. The different organizational context may have a different impact on support. Incorporating mixed method design is suggested for future research.

**Practical implications:** The study findings enable understanding on telecommuting practices in Malaysia, which assist policy makers to review HR policy and practices. One practical implication of the study findings is the importance of organisational support and resources in implementing telecommuting. Based on findings, companies should provide technological tools for employees to perform their work remotely. To leverage the gains from telecommuting for employee satisfaction and productivity, investment in remote technology and good telecommuting policies should be highlighted.

**Originality/value:** There are limited telecommuting studies in Malaysia. This study addresses the gap, enabling organisations to determine key issues and challenges in telecommuting practices. Compared to previous studies, analysis reveals that dual impact exists in telecommuting which has an unstructured and flexible context. The study findings are vital to improve organisation policies and strategies as telecommuting is widely practiced during pandemic.

**Keywords:** Telecommuting, pandemic, work-life, Malaysia, qualitative, organization

## Introduction

Malaysia announced its first Covid-19 case on 25th January 2020, which involved three China tourists who had entered Johor from Singapore (The Straits Times, 2020). The first wave of cases increases to 22 by Feb 16, and since then the number of coronavirus cases has risen to more than 6,000. A two-week extension of a national lockdown has been implemented to contain the coronavirus outbreak. However, the "movement control order" was earlier set to

expire on April 14, 2020 (The Star, 2020) is now prolong. Since the order went into effect last year, people are required to stay home. The exemption is only given to those who are working in essential services such as health care, transportation, banking, law enforcement and the food industry.

The current pandemic is forcing telecommuting to become the norm in Malaysia. Malaysian workers are required to continue full-time jobs while simultaneously attending to family responsibilities. There is a dire need to reorganize work-life, integrating work and family domain. Mismanage of demands on both work and life given rise to work-life conflict (Ghislieri et al., 2021). Work-life conflict has posed huge challenges on human resource management to devise strategies and practices necessary to minimize the negative effects on employee performance. Since work-family conflicts affect employee performance, organizations can enhance employee performance by reducing those conflicts. Withdrawal behaviors such as reduced work efforts, and presenteeism can be rectified by creating effective telecommuting strategy (Leitão et al., 2021).

However, it can be challenging to implement telecommuting in some industries, mainly in manufacturing industries (Mital, 2010). Due to the nature of the working conditions, most employees are required to be physically present on a specific given time. This imposes difficulty to employers in designing effective telecommuting strategies. Nevertheless, companies that fail to embrace change and reorganize themselves, particularly during covid-19 pandemic will face a risk to their competitive advantage.

### **Literature Review**

Work-life balance issues are currently pertinent and heavily researched in organizational literature. Today's workforce encompasses diverse employees with specific requirements and resources. Work and life are intertwined into each other, and people spend most of their time at work. Due to work commitment, employees are concerned about not spending enough time with their families (Allen et al., 2020). Statistics showed that most people on average spent more than a third of 24 hours on work (OECD, 2021).

The benefits of work-life balance have been evident over the last decade. Previous studies showed that work-life balance support improved employee's behaviours and performance as well as reduced employee's stress level (Zheng et al., 2015). Demonstration of strong connection between work-life practices and reduction of absenteeism were widely publicized (Baadel et al., 2020). Moreover, work-life practices also enhance recruitment and retention, increase job satisfaction, and minimise leave utilization (Allen et al., 2020). Work-life practices were found to assist in worker's fulfilments and devotion, increased adaptability of business working hours and enhanced corporate reputation (Konrad & Mangel, 2000).

One of work-life practices is telecommuting which has been practised previously in the West, but scarcely practised in the other parts of the world, particularly in the Southeast Asian region (International Labor Organization, 2020; International Labour Organization, 2021). 57.2 percent of Swedish reported having done some telework in 2015, and 25 percent reported telecommuting in Portugal and Italy in the same year (OECD, 2020).

Nevertheless, telecommuting which involves working from home using technology with minimal supervision seems elusive for most organisations in Asia. Formerly, telecommuting is known as work practice that contributes to many positive work outcomes and behaviour (Gajendran & Harris, 2017). In India, telecommuting is a discreet privilege provided by the big companies, and it is only offered to a selected few (Kumar et al., 2021). In major companies, telecommuting is regarded as a perk (DeSilver, 2021; Lincoln & Khan, 2020).

However, pandemic covid-19 has redefined telecommuting's role in organisations. During the lockdown period of the COVID-19 crisis, telecommuting has been a major work practice for many organizations to survive and remain productive. The abrupt change of work arrangement

has impacted many workers across the globe. With the swift impact of COVID-19 pandemic, employees find multiple challenges in work-life domains (Yavorsky et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, telecommuting is an infrequent practice compared to the Western countries. Since March 18 2020, when governments ordered people to stay at home, companies left with no option (The Star, 2020). This is where working from home or telecommuting has been pushed to the limelight and become an organizational survival strategy. Like many other countries, Malaysians faced unique challenges in telecommuting during the lockdown. While some embrace and adapt to telecommuting, others are struggling with the new norm.

Research indicates that organization strategies and programs that facilitate employees to improve work-life balance has a positive impact on employee job satisfaction and commitment, which in return benefits the organization (European Union, 2020; Garg & Agrawal, 2020). Organizations need to implement work-life strategies that measure employees' perspectives and satisfaction, which further lead to employees' retention and performance (Garg & Agrawal, 2020).

Indeed, telecommuting is a pressing business issue that influences employee performance and business outcomes during the pandemic. Thus, solid research on telecommuting is fundamental when crafting effective organizational strategies. Nevertheless, there is limited empirical evidence detailing telecommuting in Malaysia. Within this perspective, this study aims to examine telecommuting in Malaysian organizations, exploring issues and challenges of its implementation during the pandemic.

## **Methods**

The study used qualitative research design to examine telecommuting issues in Malaysia. The qualitative research design is used when variables are not clearly identified and to develop a classification for testing (Lewis, 2015). This design provides a better understanding in examining telecommuting in Malaysian companies. It also provides a better insight and understanding in measuring different variables in the research area.

Purposive sampling was used to select interviewees who experience telecommuting during lockdown in the year of 2020 and 2021. 20 participants from various organizations were invited and 15 participants consented to participate in this study at their convenient time. Interviewing participants from various organizations allows a broader understanding of telecommuting in different contexts.

Online semi-structured interviews were done as it allows an interviewee's perspective to be explored and it is more flexible in process. The interviews followed a list of questions, however there was a flexibility to further discuss on issues raised and it did not necessarily need to follow a structured flow. Sub-questions were also asked depending on the responses of the participants.

All questions were open-ended which enables participants to freely express their thoughts and ideas on a given area (Newton, 2010). Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one and half hours. All interviews were transcribed and content analysed. The recurring themes emerged from the data. Due to small data, NVivo is not used to aid thematic analysis (Welsh, 2002; Zamawe, 2015). Peer debriefing was also executed by a colleague, who re-evaluated and enquired about perspectives adopted and assumptions relating to the findings (Nowell et al., 2017).

## **Findings**

The aim of this study was to assess the key issues and challenges in telecommuting practices. Of the fifteen participants interviewed, a majority of the respondents are female (57.3%), aged of 40-45 (57.3%%) and married (66.6%). For privacy and confidentiality, participants are identified by numbers. Details of participants are explained in Table 1.

*Table 1 Demographic*

Participant s	Gender	Age	Status	Position	Company
P1	Male	26	Single	Engineer	Private
P2	Male	30	Single	Purchasing Executive	Private
P3	Female	40	Married	Economic Planning Officer	Government
P4	Female	38	Married	Senior Tender Executive	Private
P5	Female	37	Married	Senior Tender Executive	Private
P6	Female	36	Single	Admin Executive	Private
P7	Female	36	Married	Engineer	Private
P8	Female	30	Single	Property Coordinator	Private
P9	Male	33	Single	Business Development Manager	Private
P10	Female	41	Married	Principle Engineer	Private
P11	Male	45	Married	Project Engineer	Private
P12	Male	40	Married	Assistant Director	Government
P13	Male	28	Married	Network Officer	Private
P14	Male	28	Married	Engineer	Private
P15	Female	45	Married	Customer Relationship Manager	Private

This section will describe the findings found from the deductive thematic analysis. Main themes will be described and supported with extracts from the data.

### **Theme 1: Limited resources**

A consistent theme mentioned by the participants is limited resources during telecommuting, which requires extra effort to ensure work is done efficiently. All participants described that everyone was expected to adapt immediately to work demands. Resources which include internet connection, infrastructure or technology tools must be arranged and prepared by employees. During the early period of lockdown in 2020, guidelines of telecommuting were not provided. Most of participants highlighted that employer were more concern on monitoring during telecommuting rather than giving resources and support.

Participant 6 remarked, “We are having ongoing online meetings and deadlines are tight. Nobody asks whether I need support or resources.”

“I have to plan and arrange the infrastructure that I need. The responsibility falls on the employee automatically”, stated Participant 11.

Participant 8 commented, “In the beginning, we have a logbook to complete, with every hour of activities is recorded on daily basis. It’s very tedious”.

Participant 2 added, “Talking about support, what we get is mainly remote access support. We could contact IT people if we are having any remote access problem”.

Due to limited resources, employees were having difficulty in managing work and home responsibilities. Most participants stated that the difficulties have created stressful situations in the beginning period of telecommuting. The period of adjustment is painful and uncertain as there are no guidelines provided.

Two participants (P13 and P15), who are married and work in the telecommunication industry, emphasized the struggle to balance demanding work-life commitments.

“One of my team members who lives in a crowded flat house has to sit on stairs for better internet connection and privacy. He gets scolded by the boss when his children make noises,” Participant 15 explain sadly.

### **Theme 2: Boundaryless working hours**

Interestingly, many participants concur that telecommuting has enhanced boundaryless working hours. Few participants described that their supervisors contacted them incessantly (i.e. after working hours, at night or weekend). The workplace WhatsApp’s group has been a prominent communication channel to check work updates, especially on weekends.

One participant (P5) stated that the boss felt right to intrude on their weekend because they were working from home on weekdays.

Participant 4 agreed, “I have to be ready all the time. The message to update the work progress comes day and night, 7 days a week. It is now boundaryless”.

“I’m working with my kids around, and my boss wants the camera and microphone to be on during office hours for better monitoring. On weekends, he will check our progress through WhatsApp group. He is very conservative about work from home”.

“No guidelines about how supervisors should lead during telecommuting. They expect us to be available 7 days a week.”, added Participant 12.

In contrast, one participant (P1) argued, “My supervisor is very supportive with the idea of telecommuting. We focus on the end result, and working time is flexible”.

### **Theme 3: Reduced perceived organizational politics**

Nevertheless, the majority (11 participants) agreed that telecommuting allows pure hard work to be seen and heard. One participant highlighted that telecommuting is more focused on the work result, diminishing the politics nuance of the workplace.

Participant 9 mentioned, “Telecommuting undermines politics at the workplace. It’s all about work and outcome. Small talks don’t matter and the work outcome is what matter”

“For me, it’s a healthy, refreshing environment without toxic people. A new norm that is flexible and open”, Participant 3 happily added.

Participant 10 explained, “My family time is enhanced. Previously, I spent most hours at work and travelling to work. Now, I can switch off the laptop and prepare dinner. No more traffic jams and I can spend time with my family right away after work”.

Participant 12 stated, “Telecommuting limits gossip-mongers’ activities and allows you to focus on work rather than stressing about hearsay”.

### **Theme 4: High Spill over**

Our results also show the existence of high spill over in telecommuting during pandemic. The spillover is a concept that acknowledges work and life domains are intertwined and spillover effects between these domains may be different. Findings show the employees did more housework and childcare during telecommuting in the pandemic. The shutting down of schools and childcare is likely to increase the amount of house chores for parents. Apart from doing work-related tasks, parents are also responsible for homeschooling their children.



Few participants highlighted that an excessive amount of work and housework made it more difficult to balance work and family during the pandemic.

Participant 7 commented, “Work and childcare are hand in hand. You're surrounded by children playing and doing their activities, while you're doing work”.

“It's a very difficult situation when your boss doesn't acknowledge the fact that telecommuting means everyone is in the house including children during lockdown. Ongoing online meetings doesn't help the situation at all”, added Participant 4.

Participant 3 explained, “It is supposed to be flexible, so we can have ample time for both family and work. Yet, I end up struggling to find time”.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Based on the results of the study, it was found that telecommuting is a double edged sword that offers both positive and negative impacts on employees. With proper support and guidelines, telecommuting can be a powerful tool for organisations to increase employee job satisfaction and performance.

Due to limited support and resources, employees were self-reliant to overcome challenges and sustain work productivity. As telecommuting is prevalent during the time of crisis, it is important to evaluate the organization's remote capabilities to adapt to unprecedented change. Until now, Malaysian companies have been slower to invest in remote technologies as telecommuting is not widely practised previously (Lim, 2021). Investment with remote technology will assist employees to adapt to telecommuting quickly. Providing employees with remote infrastructure such as Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) and cloud-based End User Computing (EUC) is no longer an option but a necessity to enhance employee performance, productivity and satisfaction.

In a similar vein, telecommuting highlights the importance of organizational agility and resilience. Based on findings, the inertia of organizational agility and resilience reflects deeply within the employees struggle in telecommuting during pandemic. Supervisors are not aware of paradigm shift during the time of crisis and the new norm requires a new style of supervising. The negligence of managing people can demotivate employees, which further affects job performance and satisfaction. Thus, best management practices, particularly in the time of crisis should be implemented to ensure organizational agility and resilience. With good policies and practices, telecommuting will allow organisations to be agile and adaptable to any changing situation.

Telecommuting during pandemic has put employee wellbeing at stake. With a swift change of pandemic effect on employees, work and family domains are more intertwined, resulting in boundaryless working hours and high spillover effects. The high work-family spillover during the pandemic have caused employees to suffer at both individual and organizational levels. This finding could assist policy makers in determining the appropriate system to manage telecommuting, without forsaking employee wellbeing. Training should not only limit the use of remote technology, but also leadership and wellbeing training should be implemented to support telecommuting practice. Good policies are crucial to enable both companies and employees to benefit from the many opportunities offered by telecommuting.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

This study extends the current understanding about telecommuting in Malaysia, which is previously not widely practiced and little is known about its key issues. Understanding telecommuting is important given the likely growth of this work practice globally. In particular, this study extends the theory of spill over that postulates both positive and negative spillover between the work and family domains. According to the theory, negative spillover occurs when work-family relations are strictly structured in time and space (Hill et al., 2003). Based on this

study findings, negative spillover can also happen in telecommuting which has an unstructured and flexible context. The negative spillover can be attributed to limited support and resources from employers during telecommuting.

### ***Practical and Social Implications***

One practical implication of the study findings is the importance of organisational support and resources in implementing telecommuting. Based on findings, companies should provide technological tools for employees to perform their work remotely. To leverage the gains from telecommuting for employee satisfaction and productivity, investment in remote technology and good telecommuting policies should be highlighted.

Indeed, telecommuting has been crucial to sustain organisational activities during the crisis, but its effects on employee wellbeing are unclear. Thus, telecommuting related resources, specifically designed for employees to work safely and practically during pandemic should be identified and delivered.

### ***Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research***

This study is drawn from a limited sample of participants from various industries. The different organizational contexts may have different impacts on support and resources. Future research may use mixed method research design to explore telecommuting. Triangulation data of both qualitative and quantitative with larger samples will be able to assess a better impact of telecommuting in Malaysia.

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