

An Assessment of the Effect of Work from Home on Academic Worker's Well-Being in Malaysian Higher Educational Institutions

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Abstract

Purpose: The effect of the pandemic Covid-19 virus has been felt worldwide. All stakeholders have been discussing issues relating to both the short-term and long-term effects of work processes in the world of work. The revival of the work from home policy from the flexible working pattern's location flexibility has led to organizations initiation of the practice to keep employees working and the economy active. This study attempts to assess the effect of working from home and work-family conflict on employee's well-being.

Methodology: The study employed a cross-sectional methodology through the purposive sampling technique. The study collected data from 310 respondents from 5 higher educational institutions across Malaysia through a web-based self-administered questionnaire. Data gathered were analyzed using PLS-SEM for the validity and reliability of the measurement items used. The hypothesis proposed was tested using structural equation modelling.

Findings: Results from data analysis showed that work from home and work-family conflict negatively impact employees' well-being. In addition, organizational psychosocial support positively moderated the relationship between work from home, work-family conflict, and employee well-being.

Practical Implication: The study lends valuable contributions to understanding how organizations can reduce the negative impact of work from home on well-being.

Originality: This study is first of its kind to study employee-wellbeing of academic employees and how they are affected by the work from home policy.

Keywords: work from home, work family conflict, employee well-being, organizational psychosocial support, location flexibility.

Introduction

Work from home (WFH) become popular in Malaysia through the release of the March 2020 movement control order (MCO) advisory by the Ministry of Health (MOH) under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Disease Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967. The MCO's implementation was to control and reduce the spread of the deadly novel Coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19), which has ravaged the entire globe and has caused a widespread hike in mortality

and other health risks. Fear and apprehension were prominent within nations, and governments were trying to promulgate policies to help sustain citizens' health and well-being since the virus is still under study and vaccines are yet to be discovered (Daud et al., 2021). Consequently, all employees, excluding those working within the categories labeled as essential workers (i.e., front-liners), were halted from physical presence at their workplaces, and most organizations had to shut their doors temporarily as a means of support to curtail the spread of the virus. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic brought a swift change to how employees operate and work is being done formerly, and many are now getting used to the "new normal" (Osman et al., 2020). However, since many workplaces, including higher education institutions (HEIs), are under lock temporarily to reduce social contacts and the organization's needs to continue operating to survive, employers and management devise ways to allow workers to carry on their duties remotely. One of the practical and achievable working styles advised was the WFH, enabling the individual employee to work remotely at their homes (Geurts et al., 2005). Therefore, it is pertinent to understand the execution of WFH and how it affects the employees (in this context, academics), organization and business context.

WFH is a subset of flexible working styles that permit employees to work remotely from their homes (Daud et al., 2021). It is a work practice that enables employees to perform their obligations to their organizations while off-site to achieve the organizational goal without hindrances from being physically absent. The rationale for millions of employees to WFH due to the Covid-19 realities has heightened recent remote work patterns with assistance in the rise of connectivity and communication technologies (Corbera et al., 2020). Many organizations, including HEIs, have resumed operation due to the recent WFH practices. The hope that work will return to normal was evident with a percentage of some HEI employees' subsequent allowance to physically attend jobs in the HEIs. However, all academic activities are still to be conducted online.

Meanwhile, the recent announcement by the Minister of Health on 28 June 2021, which extends the earlier movement control order (MCO) to the national recovery plan (NRP), may have doused the anxiousness earlier held by employees who had anticipated returning to work in the usual manner. Therefore, the perception of continuing to work from home will increase the employee's anxiety and further affect their psychosocial well-being (Daud et al., 2021). In a recent survey by Gartner (2020), 229 human resource departments reportedly had almost 80% of their workforce work from home at the early stage of the pandemic, with indications showing that this figure will continue to increase after the pandemic (Gartner, 2020). Undoubtedly, work from home has been reported to influence organizational performance positively and has been applied as a flexible working style by many organizations in the pre-Covid-19 days (Abdullah et al., 2020; Geurts et al., 2005; Osman et al., 2020). However, events in the pre-Covid-19 days are different, and an individual's current social relationship cannot be compared with that of the past, which means that the current realities for employees who have to work from home will be entangled with other factors that hinder their well-being and job performance (Corbera et al., 2020). The psychological strain of isolation, the physical challenges of new workstation, simultaneously attending to work commitments amidst increased childcare, sustaining home-schooling responsibilities, and concerns about aged family members who are highly immune-compromised or absent friends make the current realities more daunting and demanding for employees who need to work from home (Corbera et al., 2020). HEI management needs to be cognizant of and aware that managing employees' stress and fatigue levels facilitated by the pressures of trying to work during challenging times is pertinent. Therefore, the present study aimed to identify the impact of work from home on academic worker's well-being. The study will assess its aim through identified work from home-related factors such as emotional well-being, work-family conflict, organizational psychosocial support, and work from home.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development**Employee Well-being**

The notion of well-being has been in discussion for many decades now (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018; Parker & Griffin, 2011; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Well-being refers to the combined feeling in an individual of having good health and functioning well (Taylor et al., 2003). It can also be seen as the experience that an individual gets from having positive emotions such as contentedness and happiness, improvement in potential, being in control of one's life, possessing a sense of purpose, and having positive social relationships (Corbera et al., 2020; Geurts et al., 2005; Möhring et al., 2021). Well-being is a sustainable condition that enables the individual to grow and succeed. Accordingly, well-being has also been observed as subjective (Ruggeri et al., 2020). The subjectiveness of well-being is synonymous with positive mental health (Ruggeri et al., 2020). This notion is consistent with the World Health Organization's (2001) definition of positive mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to his or her community" (WHO, 2001 pg 34). This conceptualization of well-being transcends the absence of mental ill-health; it goes further to encompass the belief that life is going well (Ruggeri et al., 2020).

Employee well-being has been associated with success at an individual, group, and professional level. Employees with higher well-being display greater productivity in the organization and offer impactful knowledge, higher creativity, more prosocial actions, and positive socialization (Breevaart & Bakker, 2018; Geurts et al., 2005; Osman et al., 2020). Higher well-being is connected to several better consequences regarding psychological and physical health, longer life, improved employee performance, and higher life satisfaction. Furthermore, these outcomes have been linked to better national economic growth and performance (Sahu, 2020). Employee well-being has become an essential factor for organizational development and success, especially during pandemic times when employers need their employees' complete concentration and attendance to job performance while they are off-site (Geurts et al., 2005). Therefore, many organizations and researchers have become more interested in exploring the positive benefits of having employees with higher well-being in the workplace to achieve set goals and objectives during the current covid-19 pandemic (Daud et al., 2021). Anxiety, ill-health, fatigue and depression are aspects of a lack of mental health and the overall emotional well-being of any individual. Similarly, headaches and muscular aches are indications of physical ill-health (Geurts et al., 2005).

Emotional well-being refers to having consciousness and feeling positive, and expressing it healthily. It also includes the consistency of good mood, perception of well-being, the positive feeling when socializing, and having the ability to cope with stress in challenging and difficult situations (Daud et al., 2021). An employee's well-being is a propeller for organizational success. It prevents the organization from poor productivity and reduces ill-health insurance costs (Ruggeri et al., 2020). Progressive organizations will make sure that their activities have health benefits for the general well-being of their workers (Nakrošienė et al., 2019). Daud et al. (2021) posit that an employee's level of self-awareness and self-control determines their emotional well-being. This statement further emphasizes the pertinence of promoting a positive outlook about circumstances that can be encountered in life and the capacity to deal with stress and sustenance of fulfilling social relationships (Abdullah et al., 2020; Daud et al., 2021).

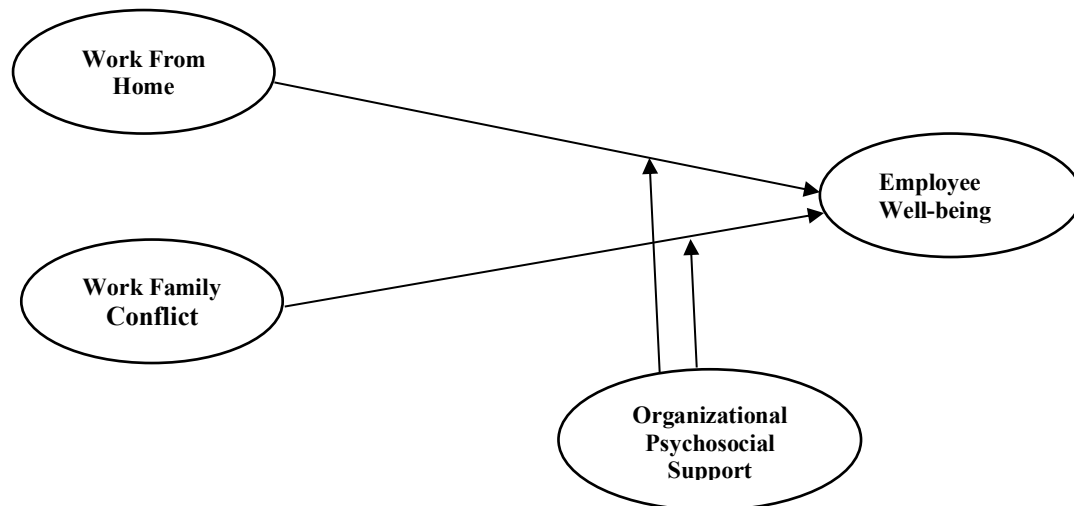


Figure 1. Research Framework. Source: Researcher's analysis

Relationship between work from home and employee well-being

Before the pandemic hit the world in 2020, work from home had been in existence and was frequently used as a subset of flexible working patterns in workplaces. With the increasing influence of digital connections, flexible work patterns such as working from home has become more popular because of some of the advantages it promised (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2015). Work from home, known initially as telework or telecommuting, is a flexible work pattern that allows employees to remotely perform their responsibilities and report their progress while operating from out of the organizational sites (i.e., their homes) with the use of information and communication technology (Nakrošienė et al., 2019). Working from home promises several benefits to the organization; however, it also has its negativities to the employees who need to bring work home or work after business hours at the expense of performing their family responsibilities (Nakrošienė et al., 2019). Working from home usually negatively affect family responsibilities through factors such as the amount of time spent with the children, the quality of relationships, the household environment, and other family responsibilities (Abdullah et al., 2020; Daud et al., 2021). Therefore, employers need to promote more organic working from home patterns primarily due to the current psychological demands that have been placed on employees with the current Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: There is a significant effect between work from home and employee well-being

Relationship between work-family conflict and employee well-being

Research on work-family conflict has revealed that employees' efforts to manage pressures from playing multiple roles (i.e., family and work) result in depleted resources and heightened stress, resulting in work-family conflicts (Demo & Paschoal, 2016). Work-family conflict and family-work conflict share differences; however, they are related to their inter-role conflict (Netemeyer et al., 1996). In the past decades, understanding how work roles affect family life and vice-versa has been advanced in several studies (Burke, 1988; French et al., 2018; Frone et al., 1992; Thompson et al., 1999). An adult's life is encompassed in two distinct domains of work and family. Unfortunately, these two domains are not always compatible with role expectations, causing conflicts between work and family life (Netemeyer et al., 1996). Work-family conflicts encourage adverse outcomes such as job burnout, turnover, and job dissatisfaction (Frone et al., 1992; Thompson et al., 1999). Netemeyer et al. (1996) define work-family conflict as a type of inter-role conflict where performing family-related

responsibilities is constantly interfered with by the overall demands of the job and the strain created by the job. Demo and Paschoal (2016) pointed out that when employees try to manage pressures from playing multiple roles, they usually result in negative consequences of conflicts between them.

Furthermore, work-family conflict is negatively associated with when employees try creating an opportunity to take a break during the workday and control when they bring work to their homes (Netemeyer et al., 1996). Moreover, the constant experiencing conflict between work and family life decreases employee well-being because it drains mental resources and increases psychological pressure (Netemeyer et al., 1996). Consequently, employees' levels of aggressiveness and anger increase when faced with constant work-family conflicts, creating problems for their mental well-being and causing them to consider job turnover. Quitting their job that is a source of their livelihood would further negatively affect the employee's well-being, and also, the organization will lose their valuable talents, which will lead to negative consequences (Asbari et al., 2020). Based on this argument, we proposed that:

H2: There is a significant effect between work-family conflict and employee well-being

The Moderating Relationship between organizational psychosocial support, work from home, work-family conflict and employee well-being

Reconciling work and family roles is demanding regardless of events or jobs (Brandl et al., 2019). Both demographic characteristics and job-related situations and contexts have changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The alpha male, acting as the breadwinner in the family, has become less popular today due to the dual-earning and shared responsibility practices common among modern and career couples (Mohiyeddini et al., 2019). The absence of a sole-parent family joined with increasing work demands and rapidly changing industrial landscapes makes it challenging for working individuals to balance work roles with family responsibilities and demands, thus causing stress levels to increase (Mohiyeddini et al., 2019).

According to Netemeyer et al. (1996), an individual's perception of a favorable balance between work and family promotes psychosocial well-being. This statement is consistent with the World Health Organization's (2020) report on "state of well-being", where a general well-being survey was used to measure the individual level of well-being under emotional, physical, mental, and social health (WHO, 2020). The WHO's measure assesses individuals' general quality-of-life, emotional state, and depression level, and their findings showed that diminished psychological well-being reduces employee's job immersion and intensifies absenteeism (WHO, 2020). Yang et al. (2018) argued that employees who show signs of enjoying higher psychosocial well-being are more productive, happy, and dedicated to their job. At the same time, those who have less psychosocial well-being are the opposite. Therefore, providing psychosocial support on the job is crucial, especially during the current pandemic where individuals have to face job tasks alone and independently without the usual support and organizational ambience the employees are familiar with.

According to Mohiyeddini et al. (2019) organizations can provide psychosocial support to their employees during challenging times via ensuring that working from home is conducive and virtual technical support are available at all times. Additionally, supervisors' support should not only be an intermittent affair rather it should be a constant activity to ensure that each employee has the perception of being important to the process of organizational 'going concern' (Möhring et al., 2021).

Furthermore, organizational psychosocial support is essential if employees perform while many changes happen to work before the pandemic (Daud et al., 2021). Psychosocial support denotes the extent to which workers perceive the amount of care and support being given by their employers towards their well-being and how much their contributions are valued (Thompson et al., 1999). Researchers in the past have supported the fact that employee's well-

being is impacted by their psychosocial work context and physical work environment (Gilbreath & B, 2004). Moreover, employees' perception of care from their employer through providing needed psychosocial incentives such as counselling, virtual technical assistance, among others during contingent situations that allow conflicts between their work and family lives, they will be more relieved to keep contributing their effort (Daud et al., 2021). Based on the above discussions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: There will be a significant effect between organizational psychosocial support and work from home

H5: There will be a significant effect between organizational psychosocial support and work-family conflict

Methods

The model from this study was tested using data gathered from an online survey of 310 academic staff of 5 universities consisting of three private and two public higher institutions within the peninsula Malaysia. The purposive sampling technique was adopted for use in selecting the participants in this study. The study utilized the G Power 3.1 software to calculate the sample size (Erdfelder et al., 2009) at the effect size $f^2 = 0.15$ (medium) (Cohen, 1988), $\alpha = 0.05$, and number of predictor = 3 with power set at 80% the sample size derived from G Power calculation was 77 and after a post hoc analysis was done the sample size increased to 150. Approximately 62 responses were collected from each university, and as soon as the online questionnaire reached a returned figure 310, the data was harvested and proceeded to code, cleaning, checking, and arranging using the SPSS (version 24). The cleaned data were then arranged and analysed using the SmartPLS 3.3.3 (Hair et al., 2014).

The survey used for this study was adapted and designed from surveys of previous studies. A pilot study was carried out in order to check the quality and clarity of the measured items. The pilot questionnaire was administered to 7 selected academics to assess the measure. The pilot study participants were requested to fill up the online questionnaires and identify items that seem too ambiguous or too complex to understand and answer. Adjustments were then made on the questionnaire according to the respondents' feedbacks from the pilot study. The questionnaire was divided into three sections; Section A (information about employee wellbeing), Section B (information about work from home, work-family conflict, and organizational psychosocial support), and Section C (demographic information). The items used to measure employee wellbeing was adapted from (Demo & Paschoal, 2016). A total of ten items were used to measure employee wellbeing. Work from home consisted of four items adapted from (Nakrošienė et al., 2019). Work-family conflict was evaluated using ten items adapted from (Geurts et al., 2005). Organizational psychosocial support, the moderating variable, was measured using six items adapted from (Gilbreath & B, 2004). Respondents were requested to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement using statements organized on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 7 Strongly Agree.

Findings

Partial least square structural equation modelling soft Smart PLS software version 3.3.3 was used to analyse this study's refined data (Hair et al., 2012). The SmartPLS software allows for examining the proposed research model's complexities while considering the model's measurement and structural model analysis since research that used surveys are usually non-normally distributed. It also has the merit of accommodating small sample sizes devoid of data normality assumptions (Kristensen & Eskildsen, 2010).

Measurement Model

The measurement model was assessed through the examination of the factor loadings of each construct, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) following the suggestions by (Hair et al., 2012) and (Ramayah et al., 2018). Three pertinent criteria were assessed vis-à-vis indicator loading must exceed 0.5, each construct's AVE must be greater than 0.5, the CR must be higher than 0.7. As shown in Table 1, all indicators loaded above 0.5, the CR figures ranged from 0.664 to 0.933, and the AVE ranged from 0.789 to 0.800. All the three conditions representing the reliability and convergent validity of the measures therefore hold.

Furthermore, the discriminant validity of measures was assessed using the more recent and preferred criterion known as Heteroriat-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) and suggested by (Henseler et al., 2015). The previously favored Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion has been criticized for being less satisfactory than the recently preferred HTMT (Ramayah et al., 2018). In assessing the discriminant validity using the HTMT ratio, the criterion set is that indicators are expected to load higher independently on their constructs than other constructs in the model. The average variance is shared between individual constructs and other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 2, all constructs exhibit sufficient or satisfactory discriminant validity because the square root of AVE (diagonal) is higher than the correlations (off-diagonal) for all constructs.

Table 1.

Measurement Model

ITEMS	LOADINGS	CR	AVE
EE WB1	0.933	0.976	0.800
EE WB10	0.848		
EE WB2	0.928		
EE WB3	0.852		
EE WB4	0.894		
EE WB5	0.927		
EE WB6	0.929		
EE WB7	0.925		
EE WB8	0.900		
EE WB9	0.799	0.958	0.792
OPS1	0.885		
OPS2	0.947		
OPS3	0.931		
OPS4	0.821		
OPS5	0.897		
OPS6	0.854		
WFC1	0.834	0.974	0.789
WFC10	0.886		
WFC2	0.855		
WFC3	0.916		
WFC4	0.909		
WFC5	0.854		
WFC6	0.903		
WFC7	0.918		
WFC8	0.894		
WFC9	0.907	0.890	0.672
WFF2	0.664		
WFF3	0.802		
WFF4	0.913		
WFFH1	0.878		

Table 2.

Discriminant validity (HTMT)

		1	2	3	4	5
1	Employee well being	0.895				
2	Org. psychosocial support	0.798	0.890			
3	Work family conflict	-0.563	-0.626	0.888		
4	Work from home	-0.692	-0.716	0.416	0.820	

Structural model

The structural model for this study was assessed based on the suggestions from (Shmueli et al., 2019) and (Hair et al., 2012) that four major statistical points in the structural model, which are path coefficient, standard errors, *t*-values, and *p*-values, should be measured in research. The assessment of the structural model was carried out using a 5,000 sample-resample bootstrapping process. The *p*-value criterion was substantiated by also assessing the upper and lower confidence intervals and the *t*-values. The decision is in accordance with the argument that testing the significance of a hypothesis with only *p*-values criteria is not enough. Rather, other criteria such as effect sizes and confidence intervals should be employed to substantiate the significance of the hypothesis in research (Hahn & Ang, 2017). The summary of the criteria used to test the significance of the hypothesis is presented in Table 3. As shown in Table 3, WFH had a negative but significant effect on EEWB ($\beta = 0.556$, $p < 0.001$). The finding provides support to H1, which indicate that work from home's negative effect on family responsibilities which can happen because of factors relating to the amount of time spent with the children, the quality of relationships, and the household environment, can lead to a negative effect on employee's wellbeing.

Furthermore, WFC also had a negative but significant effect on EEWB ($\beta = 0.331$, $p < 0.001$), which also tallied with the second hypothesis (H2) that when there is a conflict between balancing the family responsibilities and work tasks while working from home, employee's wellbeing will be impacted in a negative way and their productiveness will also be threatened. Hence the reason for the acceptance of H2 as well. For H3, H4, and H5, the moderating relationship explained the interactions between the variables. In Table 3 below, the moderating effect of organizational psychosocial support (OPS) and the interactions between the remaining variables are presented.

According to H4, when WFH is moderated through organizational psychosocial support (i.e., when organizations provide the necessary social and psychological support to employees who work from home), there will be a positive effect on ameliorating both employees' psychological, physical and emotional wellbeing. From Figure 3, the R^2 before the moderation analysis is 0.572. Then it increased to 0.682 after the moderation indicating a positive a positive change of 0.111. Therefore, this interaction effect indicates that with the addition of interaction term WFH*OPS and WFC*OPS, the R^2 has changed about 11% additional variance. Furthermore, the criterion provided for the interpretation of effect size (f^2) in (Cohen, 1988) is 0.02 (small effect), 0.15 (medium effect), and 0.35 (large effect). Therefore, based on the calculated f^2 of 0.012, the effect size is within small and medium effects (Cohen, 1988). According to Chin et al. (2003), a low effect size f^2 can still have a high impact on the interaction between variables under complex conditions. Therefore, it is pertinent to accept the conditions where the resulting beta changes are meaningful. To further substantiate the

interaction effect of the moderator, the slope analysis in Figure 2 depicts this interaction more graphically using an interaction plot or slope. As can be observed in Figure 2, the gradient of the slope for OPS is higher, indicating a positive and significant moderating effect in the relationship between WFH and EEWB. In Figure 3, the relationship between WFC and EEWB (H5) is also moderated by OPS with a positive interaction. The coefficient of the moderating interaction for the two variables that interacted with OPS (i.e. (WFH*OPS = 0.945) and (WFC*OPS= 0.115) also showed a positive moderating relationship between the variables. Therefore, the postulated hypothesis (H4 and H5) that OPS will positively moderate the relationship between WFH and WFC and EEWB is supported.

Figure 2
Interaction slope for WFH*OPS

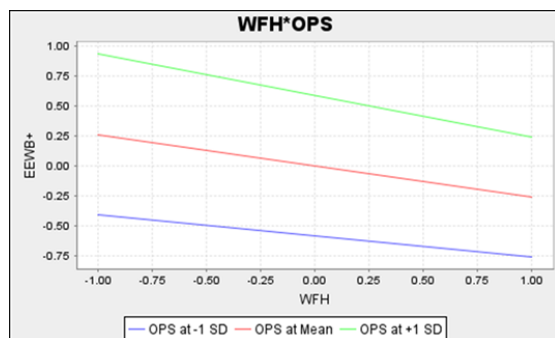


Figure 3
Interaction slope for WFC*OPS

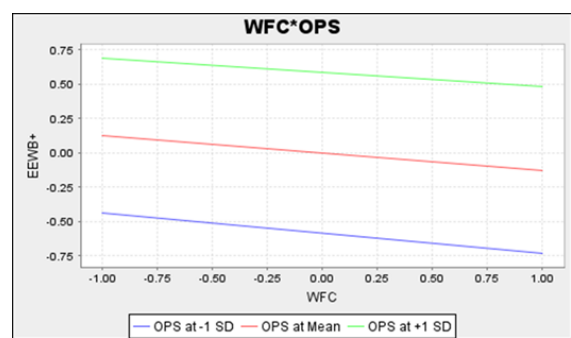


Table 3
Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	beta	beta (Moderator)	Std Error	T-values	P-Values	BC ILL	BC UIL
H1	WFH-> EEWB+	-0.556	-0.263	0.102	2.586	0.006	-0.373	-0.043
H2	WFC-> EEWB+	-0.331	-0.125	0.167	0.751	0.228	-0.507	0.055
H3	WFH -> WFC	0.416		0.084	4.978	0.000	0.243	0.523
H4	WFH*OPS-> EEWB+		-0.087	0.093	0.945	0.175	-0.203	0.067
H5	WFC*OPS-> EEWB+		0.020	0.177	0.115	0.454	-0.294	0.237

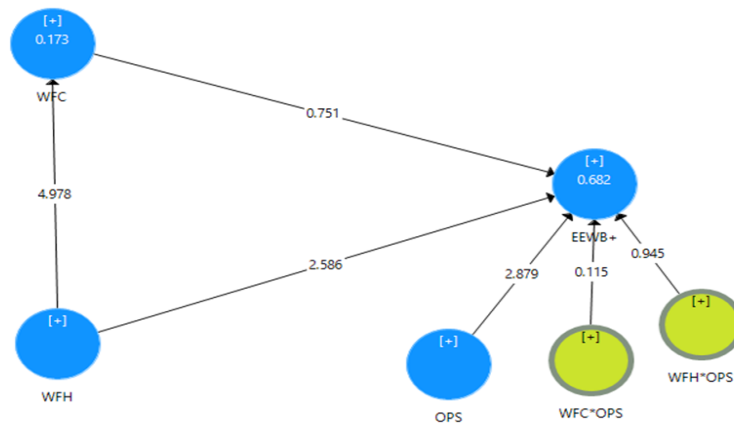


Figure 3: Moderating Effects of OPS on EEWB- WHF and WFC relationship

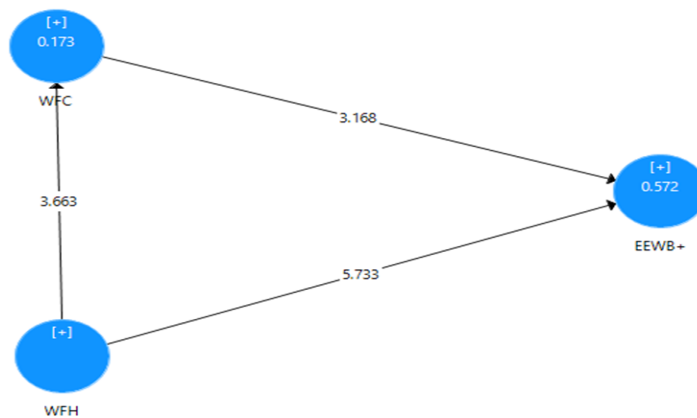


Figure 4: Model without moderation effect

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has been able to assess how the current policy of working from home has impacted academic employees' wellbeing in Malaysia. The study has also analysed the pertinence of having support from the organization to ameliorate the effect that working from home may have on an individual's wellbeing. The PLS-SEM was employed to access the constructs within the exogeneous variables and how they have interacted with the endogenous variable. Although the finding from this study revealed that organizational psychosocial support has between small and medium effects on the interactions of work from home and work-family conflict on employee well-being, the impact it lends in reducing the negative effects of working from home on employee's well-being is highly significant. Hence, the study showed robust evidence that the more organizations provide psychosocial support to their employees working from home, the lesser they experience negative effects of working from home on their well-being. This study also confirm previous studies finding on the relationship between work from home and work family conflict on employee well-being (Abdullah et al., 2020; Allison et al., 2018; Corbera et al., 2020; Daud et al., 2021)

Implications

This study has provided a critical understanding of the role of psychosocial support on the well-being of academic employees. Even though the impact reported in the findings of this study falls within the small and medium range, it is evident that when organizations provide an amount of psychosocial support to their employees, they will feel the organization cared for them. The pressure of working from home and the negative impact of conflicting boundaries between work and family responsibilities will be minimised to a bearable level.

In conclusion, this study has also contributed to the existing literature by introducing organizational psychosocial support as a moderator between the exogenous and endogenous variables. This process adds value to the existing studies on work from home and allows more insight and understanding into the pertinence of organizational support when implementing pandemic motivated policies.

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