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How Does Flexibility, Work-Life Balance, and Work Life Performance Affect the Perception of Working from Home?

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Abstract

Working from home (WFH) has become the new norm for millions of employees in Malaysia and throughout the globe as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the epidemic, many employees and businesses were forced to abruptly and unpreparedly transition to WFH which has impacted employee's productivity. This study aims to explore employee's perception on flexibility, work-life balance and work-life performance of WFH. This study employed a quantitative survey comprising three sections focusing on employee's flexibility, work-life balance and work-life performance. A total of 100 employees from both private and government sectors in Malaysia served as the respondents of this study. The results obtained show that employees prefer WFH as they benefited from the flexibility given by their employers. In addition, working from home has provided a work-life balance and increased the performance of employees. The findings have important ramifications for organisations, working professionals, and policymakers.

Keywords: Work from Home (WFH), Flexibility, Work-life Balance, Work-life Performance, Productivity

Introduction

Background of Study

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed many aspects of human life, including in the work sector. This is because the process of spreading the virus from one person to another is so fast. As a form of preventing the spread of the virus, many countries have implemented protocols for handling and preventing Covid-19 as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) starting from washing hands with soap or hand sanitizer, maintaining distance from each other, avoiding crowded places, and to limit oneself from going out of the house. To minimize the chain of transmission of Covid-19, the government has taken a policy of implementing social distancing, which is an action where everyone is required to keep a distance from one person to another. In addition, the government also urges people who are exposed to the Covid-19 virus to quarantine themselves. The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared Covid-19 as a global pandemic in Malaysia.

When the pandemic outbreak happened back in the year 2020, many offices, both government and private, implemented a way or pattern of work better known as WFH (work from home). According to Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, during the Movement Control Order (MCO) execution, employers and employees from sectors or services that are not designated as vital services have been advised to work from home as mentioned by (Chan, 2021). At the beginning of the implementation, many employees were confused by the changes in the new work scheme that requires them to work from home. Working from home is a company's effort to ensure the health security of employees from the Covid-19 pandemic and comply with government regulations related to the policy of working from home (Rakha, 2021). In the first and second weeks of the implementation of the WFH scheme, many people were in a frenzy to adapt to the new work environment, whether or not each had just started learning online applications for meetings and so on, but after entering the third week, employees seem to get a hold of this new way of working. In the following weeks, you can see the joy of Malaysians sharing photos on social media, attending meetings and doing their office work which was previously difficult. At this point, employees also share ideas, methods and ways on the best way to conduct work online.

Statement of Problem

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that working from home (WFH) has been a norm ever since we were living during the outbreak of Corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic. Employees all around the world in most of the countries including Malaysia are urged to WFH as it might help in reducing social contacts to a minimum level throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The study by Dubey and Tripathi (2020) found that more than 73% people had a positive sentiment towards work from home and the word "good" was tweeted most in context of WFH. The study also found that the experience of working from home had given a positive perception worldwide. The study further suggested that checking whether there is a major shift in terms of changing emotions and sentiments of people are carried out to explore the major shift over a period of time. Another study by (Irawanto et al., 2021) identified that employees manage to balance their work and personal life as they have the flexibility and autonomy during WFH. Also, tend to increase satisfaction level towards their career.

However, when people are working from home, they do not always have positive work experience. There are still several problems and issues being faced by the employees. Women employees went through additional burden as they needed to play two different roles, handle

the presence of kids and perform in their job duties which did not help them in achieving work life balance during WFH period (Rani & Prathiba, 2021). A study by Mann and Chitranshi (2021) found that there is a problem in terms of collaboration when employees are working from home. This somehow affects their work life performance as they found it is difficult to collaborate while working remotely and it is also hard to find colleagues who are willing to collaborate virtually. Besides, the majority of employees also faced physical difficulties while working from home as they tend to use home furniture such as dining chair or plastic chairs to complete their job (Nathan et al., 2021).

Hence, this study is done to investigate how flexibility, work life balance and work life performance affect the perception of working from home. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

- a) How does flexibility affect perception of WFH?
- b) How does Work Life Balance affect perception of WFH?
- c) How does Work Life Performance affect perception of WFH?

Literature Review

Advantages of WFH

Though the concept of working remotely from home is something that has been embraced by different cultures, there is no widely agreed-upon definition for the broad and multiplex phenomena known as Work from Home, or more commonly known by its acronym, WFH. In Malaysia, the concept is still relatively new. There have been many other terms used to denote work done outside of a traditional office setting besides work from home, such as telecommuting, teleworking, home-work, remote work, virtual work, home-based teleworking, mobile working (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Nilles, 1997 in Nakrosiene et al., 2019) distributed work, flexible work arrangements etc. (Feleen et al., 2021) Though these terms can be used interchangeably, it is crucial to understand the characteristics of some of the terms that are mainly used to describe this type of working arrangement.

'Telework' is defined as a type of work where tasks are completed away from the employment building, therefore setting apart the worker from direct interactions with fellow co-workers there; and new technology facilitates this separation by making communication easier (Ruiz and Walling 2005, as cited in Beno, 2018). On the other hand, the term 'Telecommuting' or sometimes interchangeably referred to 'work at home' or even 'home work' is also another type of remote work (Klopotek, 2017). It is explained by Madsen (2011) as bringing work to the worker through information and communication technologies. Finally, as for WFH, it basically means workers working from home or any other location away from the main working space (Feleen et al., 2021). A more conclusive definition was given by Rahmat et al (2022) that defines WFH as a present-day way of working made possible by the internet and accessibility that enables a worker to work from home regardless of where they are.

These are the main terms that are used to refer to remote working. No matter what term is used, what can be concluded is the major characteristics are the use of technology to complete work responsibilities and the flexibilities of a work area.

Challenges/ Problems with WFH

The pandemic had a major effect on global economic growth, particularly on the labour force and career prospects. This effect caused economic shock, which is a very abrupt change, and unanticipated changes in the economy caused both numerous employment market viewpoints (Bennet, 2015). Employees with a concentration in low-skilled occupations have been impacted by this situation since their productivity depends on a working environment that could be continuously endangered in the future. In contrast to employees who are in better occupations, they are more likely to be able to move between jobs and recover faster from an economic recession.

Cho (2019) stated that it has impacted numerous people's career behaviours and productivity results. Due to the lockout, most employees have had to completely embrace working remotely from home using technological solutions like collaborative platforms and video conferencing technologies (Davison, 2020). Employees who are still having trouble learning digital tools may become frustrated as a result of this. In the worst case, one's location affects whether the internet is accessible.

While working from home has its benefits, there are drawbacks as well. Although employees may spend less time travelling to work, they typically work more hours at home than they would in the office (Thulin et. al., 2019).

Past Studies

Past Studies of Advantages of WFH

Myriad studies have been done to explore the advantages of working from home. A study by Zain et al (2021) studied the effectiveness of working from home (WFH) during lockdown in Malaysia. This quantitative study discovered that time flexibility and technology availability influenced the effectiveness of WFH. Another study by Tabassum and Sarker (2021) with the purpose to examine how WFH affects employee satisfaction levels. The results depicted that there is a positive relationship between home-based work and employee satisfaction. The results also corroborate that flexibility is considerably correlated with work-life balance as WFH provides enough flexibility in time, helps create work-life balance, and lower stress.

Apart from that, Abdullah et al (2020) conducted a study to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of WFH from the employees' perspectives. This study involved 110 Malaysian employees who are married and have children and a survey via Google Form was used. The data was analysed using SPSS according to the themes in the theoretical framework proposed for this paper that are; Family Values, Increase in Performance, Isolation, and Disrupt Work-Life Balance. The findings found that the respondents agreed that WFH has more advantages than the disadvantages. The result indicated that WFH helps the employees to improve and maintain a good relationship with their family and it increases the employees' working performance as it gives them convenience. This study also exposed that the employees are being able to achieve a work-life balance as they still can manage their social life.

In addition, Putri and Amran (2021) examined the effect of WFH to the workers on work-life balance during COVID-19 pandemic. This study employed the use of quantitative study, specifically questionnaires, as the research instrument. The researchers used descriptive and verification analysis for data analysis. The analysis relies on data derived from the questionnaires to 30 Gramedia TSM workers who performed their work at home during the pandemic and later compare the score results with the ideal score. The findings showed that

WFH has a positive and significant effect on work-life balance, but, if it is not done properly, it is possible for WFH to have a negative impact on the workers' work-life balance.

Next, Marasigan (2020) investigated the effectiveness of work from home and the employees' job performance. This quantitative research involved 300 respondents of a multi-national service corporation in the Philippines which consist of 250 employees and 50 supervisors and managers. The results proved that WFH is effective, and the work performance of the employees during WFH is rated with high level in term of speed, work quality, and work target. However, this study showed that WFH did not affect the employees' work-life balance. Through the homework arrangement, they can balance their responsibilities as part of the family and as an employee.

Past Studies of Challenges of WFH

Many studies have been done to investigate how the motivators for WFH affect the perception of WFH. There are three main challenges that employees who WFH face which are reduced work productivity, increased in the stress level, and disruption in between work and personal life

A study by Mustajab (2020) investigates the impacts of working from home as an effort to prevent COVID-19 and its impacts on work productivity. There was a total of fifty respondents involved in this study with thirty females and twenty males. They were chosen using snowball sampling and were interviewed by the researchers. It was found that WFH affected the employees' productivity as they had to balance their work and house responsibilities. In addition, the study also found that female employees are generally more affected with WFH compared to male employees as female employees are required to multitask by doing the house chores and office work at the same time.

Similar result was found in a study by Verma (2021) on the impact of COVID-19-induced factors on employees who WFH. He found that employees faced an increase level in their work commitment that led to them having distress. Moreover, they were also struggling to focus on their work due to distractions from family members while they are working from home. The respondents for this study are one thousand working professionals who worked from home who answered an online survey with semi-structured questionnaire. There were six major categories in questionnaire items: job role overload, lifestyle choices, family distraction, occupational discomfort, job performance, and distress. Data were later analysed using descriptive statistics.

Another study by Weerasinghe and Jayawardana (2020) on 450 workers in Sri Lanka found that role conflict could arise from having flexibility in work. By using a structured questionnaire and convenience sampling technique, data was collected and analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with the aid of AMOS. The result shows that as people are allowed to work from home and have more flexibility in their work, they might find it difficult to separate their work life and personal life. Having these two roles intercept with one another creates a role conflict in a person. Therefore, it is important to have a work-life supported organizational culture to help employees balance their life while they are working from home.

In conclusion, these studies found that working from home poses more disadvantages than advantages. The studies on the challenges of WFH show that WFH could reduce the work productivity, increase the stress level, and disrupt the balance between work and personal life

Conceptual Framework

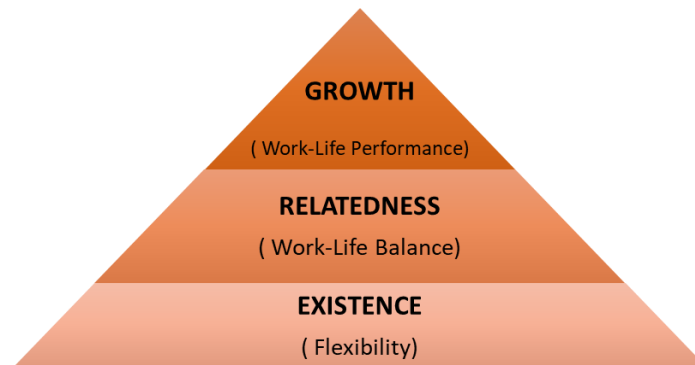


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study: Title: *Flexibility, Work-Life Balance, and Work Life Performance: Perception Of Working From Home?*

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. This study is adapted from Alderfer's (1969) motivation theories is combined with the factors in Abdullah et al (2020) to form this study's framework. Alderfer's (1969) three factors are then combined with the work form factors by (Abdullah et al., 2020).

Existence (flexibility)

As offices gradually reopen after COVID19 lockdown, a flexible work plan is being put in place to boost the economy and balance employees' work-life. According to Unicef (2020), flexible working hours are an alternative schedule to a standard or traditional work environment. In general, a Flexible Working Arrangement or FWA is a concept of flexible work arrangements by changing work patterns that allows employees to choose their working hours. These includes 1) Flextime scheduling; 2) Flexibility in the number of working hours and 3) Flexibility workplace (WFH) (Georgetown University Law Center, 2006). According to Kelliher & Anderson (Simanjuntak et al., 2019), FWA implementation is predicted to be a future solution to improve job satisfaction, employees commitment, work life balance and encourage employees to give their best performance. Employees who are given the freedom to work is expected to continue to achieve optimal output, regardless of how they achieve it.

Relatedness (Work life balance)

Work- life balance is defined as the relationship or quality of working life and quality of life. People who are employed are expected to divide their equal times between professional and personal life. Besides, relatedness is all about relationship and how people find balance between their personal and work life. People who are working from home during the pandemic should manage their time very well as they tend to juggle work and family time. The study by Abdullah et al (2020) found that despite of the long working hours during WFH period, people do not lose sight of their priorities. This shows that they are able to achieve work- life balance during WFH period. Plus, working from home does not make them rest

deprived too (Abdullah et al., 2020). From a different perspective, another study by Panojan et al (2019) identified the major factor affecting work-life balance is the deadlines. This happens when employees experience long working hours plus many deadlines to meet. It is then hard for them to enjoy their personal life by spending time with their families and friends. Despite of the challenges, be it employees who are married with families or employees who are single, should try their best to achieve a positive work-life balance in their life in order to have a healthy relationship with people around them.

Growth (Work Life Performance)

The third factor is growth, which refers to workers' self-actualization. According to Amir et al (2021), this is at the highest level and is attained through the work performance of remote workers. Only when the sentiments of existence and relatedness are met can the person progress to Growth as Growth includes employees' desire to be more productive (Alderfer, 1969). In a study by Ahmad et al (2022), on learner's motivations for studying from home found that a learners' growth is reflected in their learning performance. The same can be said for workers as proven in the study by Abdullah et al (2020), on the views of employees working from home post COVID-19. The study found that working from home improves a worker's performance as the majority of their respondents think their performance were boosted because working from home eliminated distractions. They felt more productive because they had the freedom to complete their responsibilities whenever and wherever it is most convenient for them.

100 participants were purposely chosen from both private and government sectors in Malaysia. The instrument (refer to table 1) used is a survey adapted from (Abdullah et al., 2020). Apart from the demographic profile in Section A., there are 3 other sections. Section B, 10 items on flexibility, Section C has 10 items work life balance, Section D has 10 items on Work Performance.

Table 1

Distribution of Items in Survey

SECTION	FACTORS	NO OF ITEMS
B	Flexibility	10
C	Work life balance	10
D	Work Performance	10
	TOTAL NO OF ITEMS	30

Table 2

Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.933	30

Data is collected via goggle form and analysed using SPSS version 26. With reference to table 2, the SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach analysis of .933. Thus, showing high internal

reliability for the instrument. Data is presented in terms of percentage for the demographic profile and mean scores to answer the research questions.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

Q1. Gender

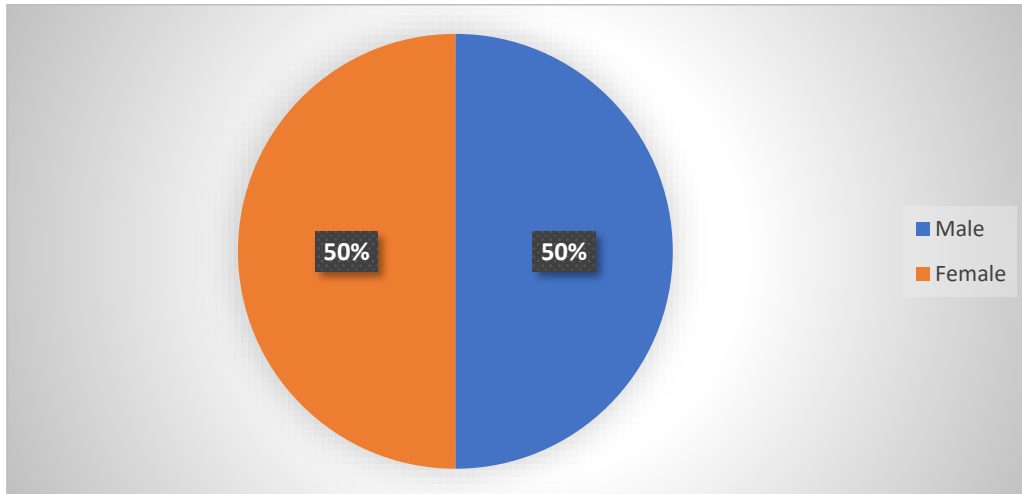


Figure 2- Percentage of Gender

Figure 2 indicates that there are 50% male and 50% female respondents.

Q2. Age Group

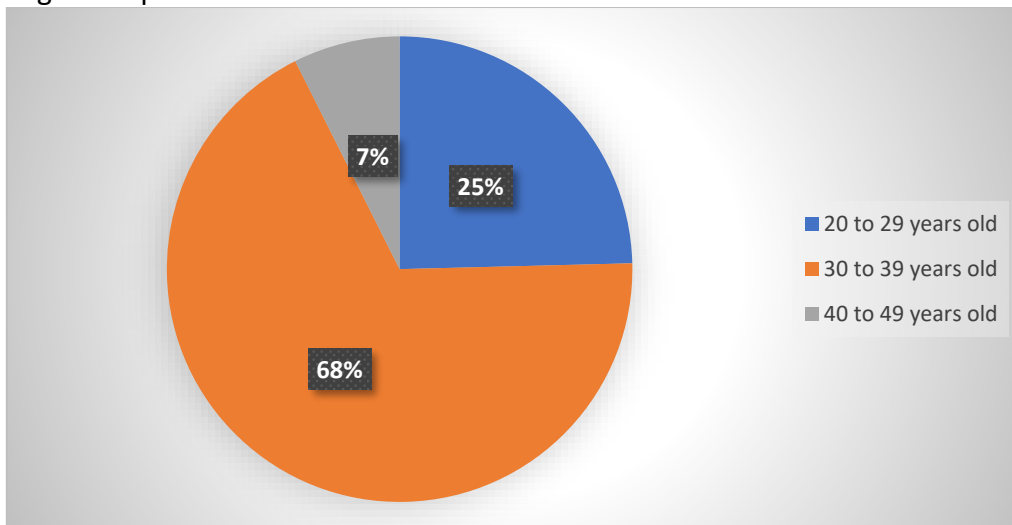


Figure 3- Percentage of age group

Figure 3 shows the percentage for age group. 25% of the respondents is from 20 – 29 years old, majority of the respondents (68%) is from 30 – 39 years old age group while only 7% of the respondents is from 40 - 49 years old age group.

Q3. Highest Academic Level

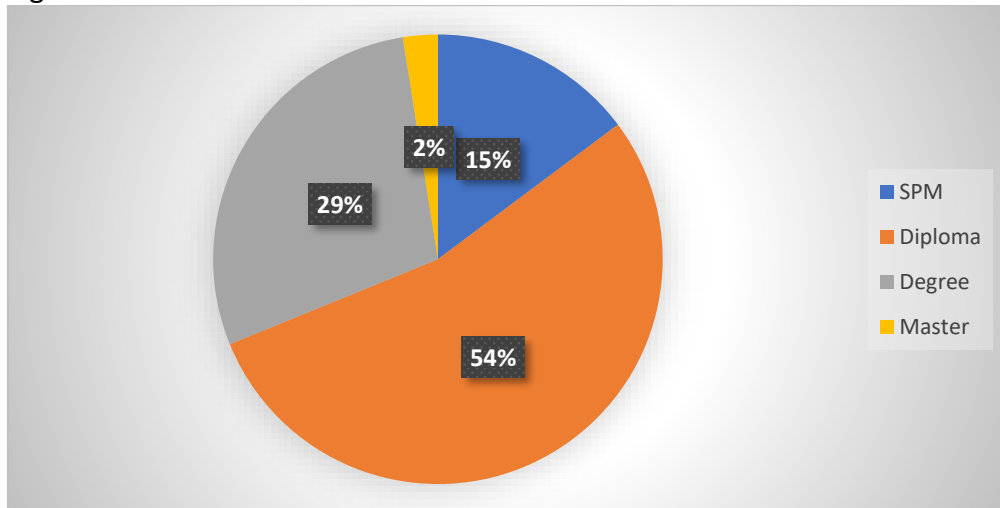


Figure 4- Percentage of Highest Academic Level

Figure 4 presents the percentage for highest academic level. Majority of the respondents is diploma holder with 54% followed by degree holder with 29%. In addition, 15% of the respondents has SPM qualification while only 2% of the respondents has master's degree.

Q4. Marital Status

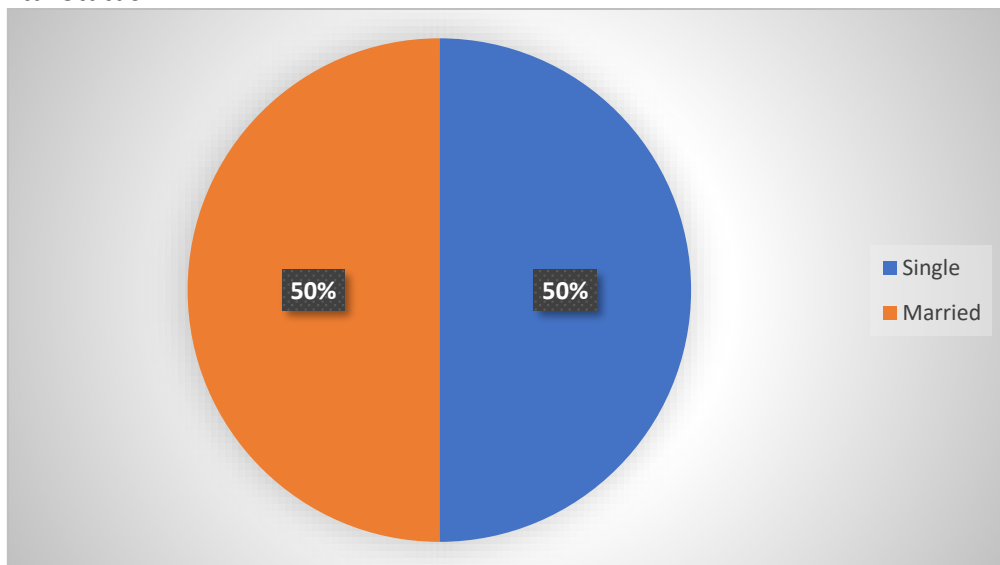


Figure 5 – Percentage of Marital Status

Figure 5 indicates that there are 50% single respondents and 50% married respondents.

Q5. Residential Area

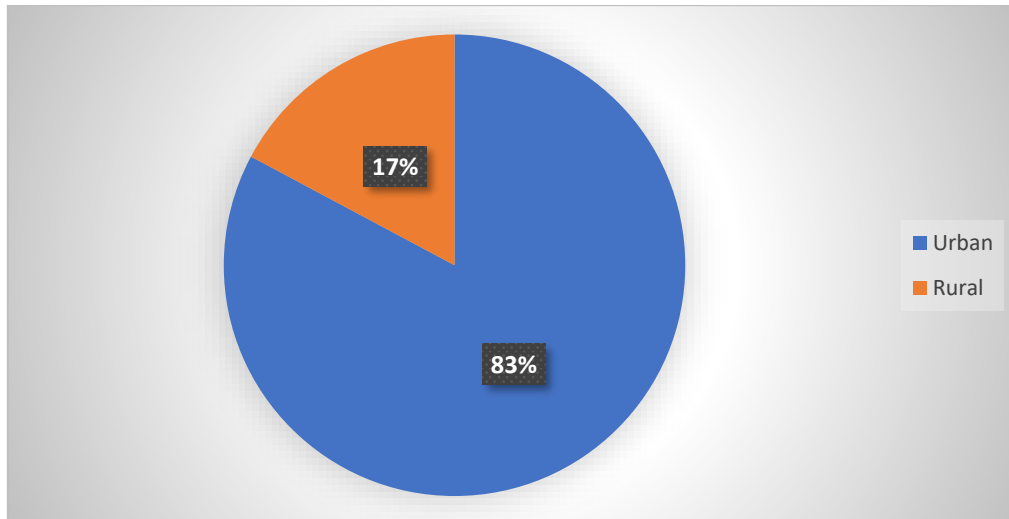


Figure 6 – Percentage of Residential Area

Figure 6 indicates that most of the respondents are from urban area with 83% while 17% from rural area.

Q6. Employment Sector

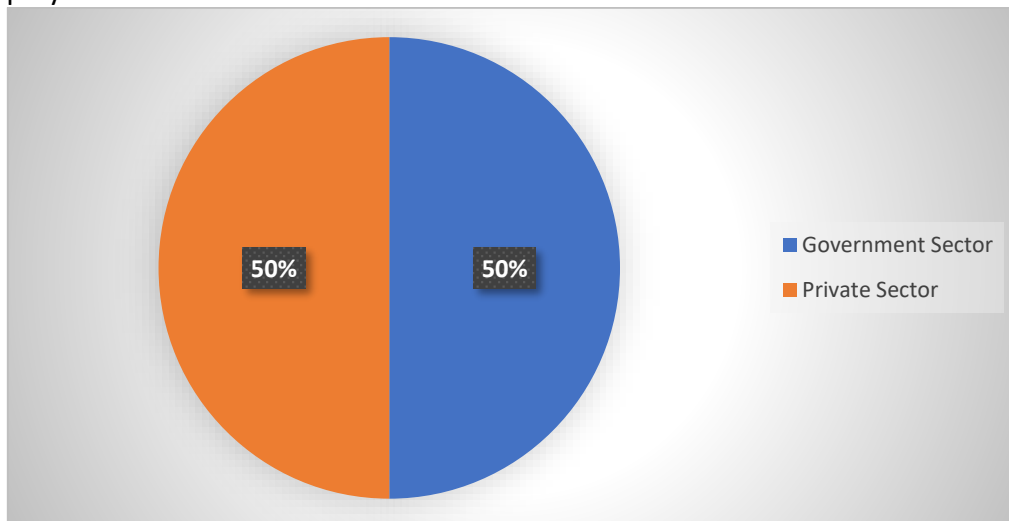


Figure 7 – Percentage of Employment sector

Figure 7 shows that 50% of the respondents is from government sector while another 50% of the respondents is from private sector.

Q7. Home Internet Speed

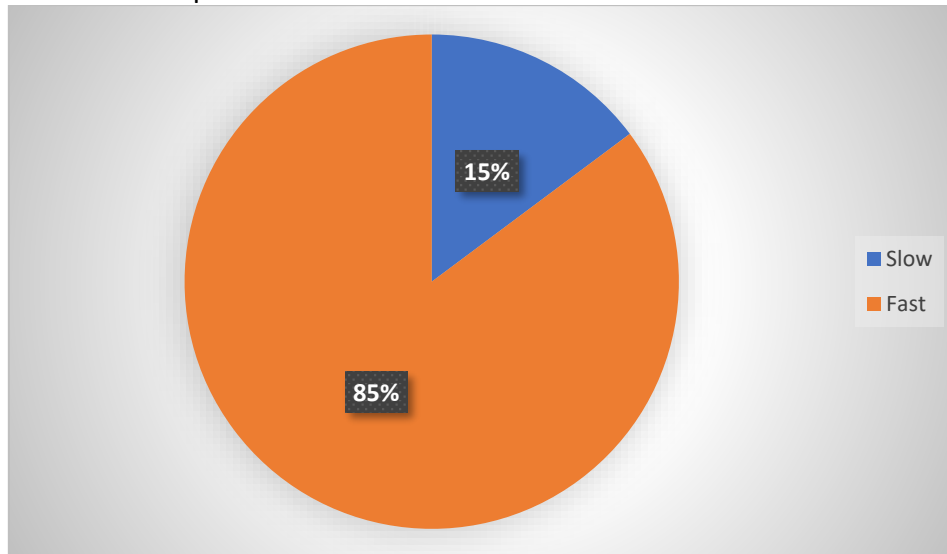


Figure 8 – Percentage of Home internet speed

Figure 8 shows that majority of the respondents (85.2%) has fast internet speed in their homes while the rest (14.8%) has slow internet speed in their homes.

Findings for Flexibility

This section presents data to answer research question 1: RQ1 - How does 'Flexibility' affect perception of WFH?

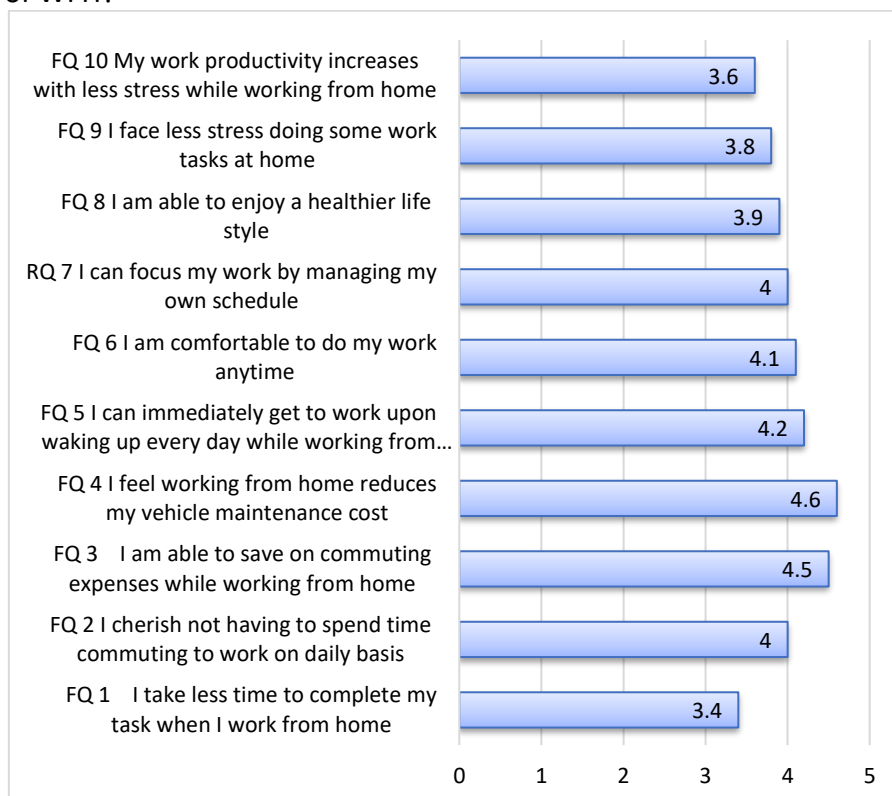


Figure 5- Mean for Flexibility

Figure 5 presents the mean score for Flexibility. The highest mean score is 4.6 which is ‘I feel working from home reduces my vehicle maintenance cost’ followed by ‘I am able to save on commuting expenses while working from home’ with a mean score of 4.5. Next, items ‘I cherish not having to spend time commuting to work daily’ and ‘I can focus my work by managing my own schedule’ have the same mean score of 4.0.

Findings for Work-Life Balance

This section presents data to answer research question 2: RQ2 - How does ‘Work Life Balance’ affect perception of WFH?

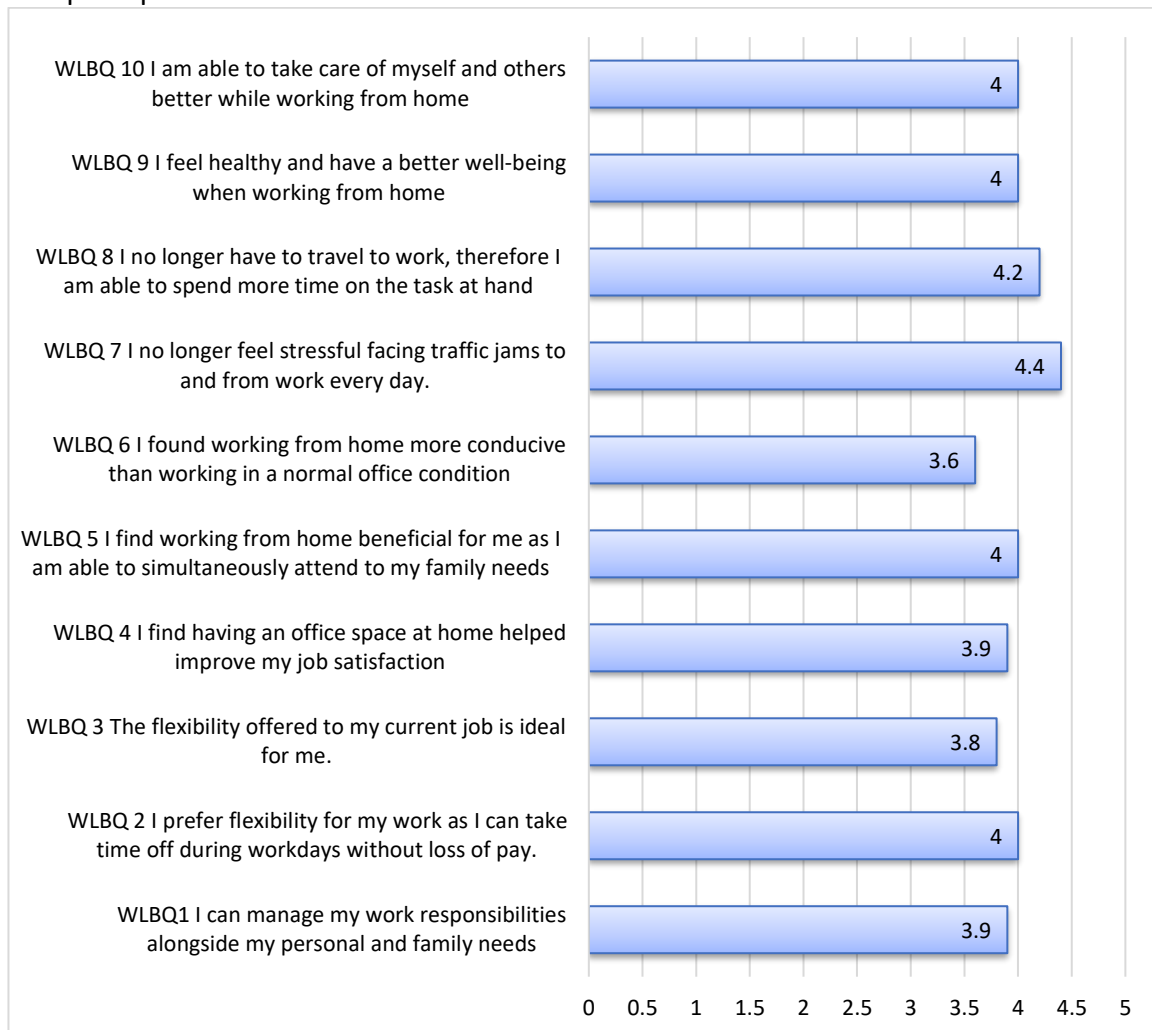


Figure 6- Mean for Study-Life Balance

Figure 6 shows the response of respondents on ‘Work Life Balance’. The highest mean score (4.4) recorded is for the statement, ‘I no longer feel stressful facing traffic jams to and from work every day’. Following that with only a slight difference, is the second highest mean score (4.2) for the statement, ‘I no longer have to travel to work, therefore I am able to spend more time on the task at hand’. These results tell us that the elimination of commuting is a major factor of Work Life Balance that affects the perception of EFH. However, the statement with the lowest mean (3.6) recorded for the statement, ‘I found working from home more conducive than working in a normal office condition’ which indicates that respondents felt that working from home was not more conducive compared to working in a traditional office setting.

Findings for Work Life Performance

This section presents data to answer research question 3: RQ3 - How does 'Work Life Performance' affect perception of WFH?

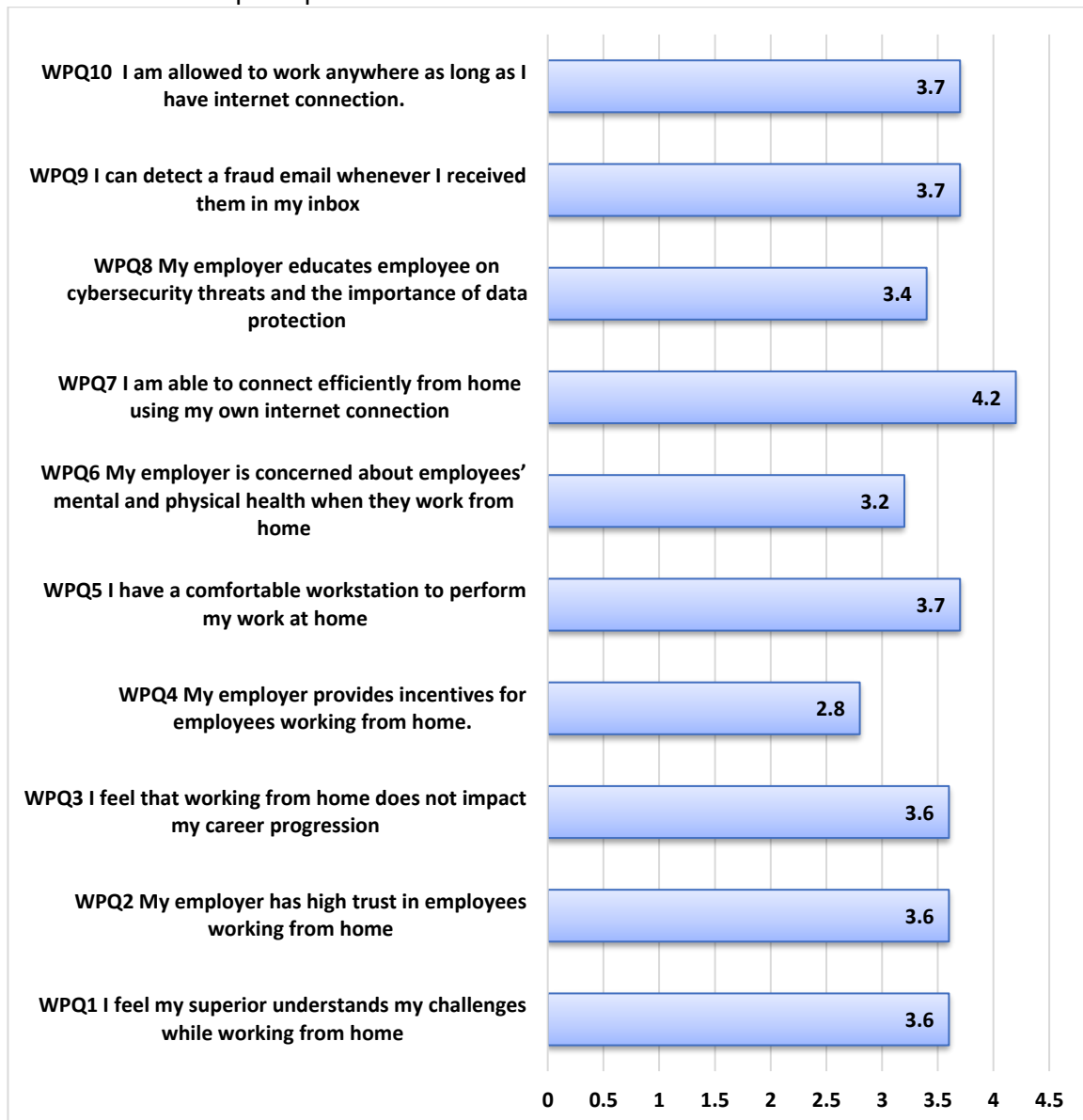


Figure 7- Mean for Work-Life Performance

Figure 7 shows the response of respondents on work life performance. It can be clearly seen that majority of the respondents are able to connect efficiently using their own broadband connection when they are working from home with the highest mean (4.2). Consequently, followed by having a comfortable workstation, able to detect fraud email and freely get connected with public Wi-Fi recorded the second highest mean (3.7). It could be said that the respondents are comfortable to use the public Wi-Fi to complete their task and are satisfied with their workstation at home. Moreover, by having only a slight difference on the recorded mean (3.6), respondents do also think that working from home period does not influence their work progress, their superior understands the challenges, has high trust in them. Other than that, providing ergonomic chair recorded the lowest mean (2.7). In this case, it could be said that most of the employers do not offer their employees an ergonomic chair while working from home.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Based on our findings, employees agree that WFH reduces their vehicle maintenance cost and save on commuting expenses. WFH gives freedom to employee to determine where he/she works, in other words, they have their work area that will provide comfort in doing their work to increase employee job satisfaction. Employees with flexible schedules may not have to commute to the office every day. This saves them money on commuting expenses, work clothing, and eating lunch out every day. Flexibility in working hours helped them achieve greater productivity and less or no time commuting enabled them to be more productive. In the negative aspect of flexibility, employees agree that they take more time to complete their work when they WFH. This can definitely lead to burn-out and increased work-related stress. In addition, with the freedom to move around and take breaks whenever the mood arises, it might be difficult to stay focused on the tasks they're working on. This can ultimately lead to slower productivity. According to Clapp et al (2011), employees often lose focus on work, this is due to the number of disturbances caused by secondary tasks causing disturbances to the memories of their primary tasks especially to older employees.

In terms of Work-Life balance, employees no longer feel stressful facing traffic jams to and from work every day, therefore enabling them to spend more time on the task at hand. It is evident that commuting plays an important role in WFH. Employees have learned that WFH can help in balancing work and home life. And, employees have found that working at home has its benefits, including the ability to be productive. This study found that most employees felt that WFH afforded them some level of flexibility in how they use their time, which allows them to balance the responsibilities of their paid work with their responsibilities of taking care of others. According to Dockery & Bawa (2018) there is balance and fairness in the division of family tasks and responsibilities and makes family relationships better and more harmonious when employees WFH. Furthermore, WFH reduces the consumption of food outside of home but increases the chances of consuming self-made meals. WFH benefits people by eliminating commute time. Lack of time to prepare healthy meals has been considered the main barrier to healthy eating (Escoto et al., 2012; Munt et al., 2017; Welch et al., 2009). This time restriction might be lessened by WFH, enabling people to prepare healthier meals. In the negative aspect of WFH, employees agrees that that they felt that working from home was not conducive compared to working in a traditional office setting. WFH can only imply a situation in which responsibilities for both work and family are combined. The work-life balance cannot be felt by female employees because they struggle to balance work and social life. Married women have more domestic household responsibilities, after they finish their office work at home, they typically have to finish household tasks like caring for children and cleaning the house (Mustajab et al., 2020).

To determine the calibre of the task and an employee's performance, productivity of workers and employees is considered vital. Based on the findings on Work Life performance, employees prefer working at home as they have a stable internet connection. Good internet connectivity is the ultimate tools for remote workers. Additionally, employers are flexible to allow employees to work anywhere as long as they have a good internet connection. Distractions like the television, pets or household chores can affect how you perform your job. Therefore, employees should choose a work station that they could be able to focus on finishing the task at hand. Some remote employees even travel while they work, as long as there's a reliable internet connection so they can complete their job duties. On the other hand, the findings shows that there is a lack of support from the employers towards their

employees during WFH. Employers should provide workers the specific tools, equipment, supplies, and technology needed for performing the required tasks when implementing WFH. Under Work Health and Safety laws, employers have a legal duty of care for the health and safety of their employees and others at the workplace “so far as is reasonably practicable”. This duty of care extends to working from home arrangements, meaning reasonable steps should be taken to ensure the employee’s home workstation meets workplace health and safety requirements. Some companies will provide everything a remote employee needs. They may send a computer, smartphone, printer, and more, depending on the needs of the job. This usually helps companies feel secure knowing their remote worker has everything they need in their home office to perform their job duties successfully.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The paper provides several implications for the use of the working from home in Malaysia. Even though employees do agree that flexibility has benefits of its’ own, there are also a number of issues it raises. Some people take advantage of flexible work hours as an invitation for work from home and relax. This means playing and having fun while doing work at the same time. This can disturb the concentration of the employee while doing their jobs and can cause errors. Employers should thus monitor their staff members' output when they are working remotely. Additionally, it is evident that travelling to work is a major nuisance for the employees. As we can see, they are more productive and less stressful when they do not need to commute. Many people who work from home choose to start their work days earlier—and subsequently boost their productivity. Given that working in remote environments presents challenges such a lack of IT assistance and other tasks that might reduce job satisfaction, it is also important to pay attention to the workload that must be done. Organizations need to recognise that working from home (WFH) increases productivity since it frees employees from the bother of commuting and allows them to do more work. Therefore, businesses must explicitly train their personnel on using technology remotely if they want to leverage these benefits.

It is suggested that further research include

- i) To look from the perspective of employers on the idea of WFH.
- ii) It is not apparent in this study about employer’s flexibility, work-life balance and Work performance.

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