The Covid-19 Pandemic Response A Study of Teleworking During the Malaysian MCO What Penang Employees Had to Say

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Abstract

One of the main effects of the Covid-19 pandemic is the working arrangement of many employees to work from home across occupations. It is understood that when unplanned change needs to be implemented, employees from some employment groups who had very little experience with working from home have to embrace the new arrangement while employees across employment who preferred to work from home, are now able to jump into such working arrangements. Consequently, the blanket arrangement to work from home may affect the employees differently. Determining the conditions that positively support teleworking will ensure companies to be more prepared if the needs arise in the future or even to continuously implement such arrangement in relation to the current situation. A descriptive qualitative study was conducted in Penang and a total of sixteen employees were approached for the study. The participants in the study were purposively selected to ensure best contribution to the issues highlighted in the study. In general, many of the participants have mixed feelings towards teleworking and some of them had no intention of continuing with teleworking in the future. Based on the thematic analysis, results showed that three themes emerged from the data and they are: conflict of commitment, context, and efficiencies.

Keywords: Work from Home, Teleworking, Remote Work, Technostress, Pandemic

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) was first notified on December 31, 2019, to the existence of a few pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, which were later attributed to a new “2019-nCoV” virus. It was renamed “Covid-19”, which stands for ‘Corona Virus Disease’ (of 2019), on February 11, 2020. On March 11, the United Nations declared the spread of this disease as a pandemic (Diyana & Razak, 2020).

In accordance to that, on March 16, 2020, the then Malaysian Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, declared that Malaysia had to be on nationwide movement control order (MCO) from March 18 to March 31, 2020, to curb the global pandemic. All places of worship, business premises, nurseries, government and private schools, government and private offices except those providing essential services had to be closed (Tang, 2020).

Following the MCO by the Malaysian Prime Minister, the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) made special working arrangements for its employees. MDEC implemented a Work-From-Home (WFH) arrangement backed by an Alternative Work Arrangement (AWA) standard of procedures for all employees (“MDEC employees to work from home”, 2020). Shamsuddin Bardan, the executive director of Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), has mentioned that government, as the biggest employer in Malaysia, had to be an example of facilitating employees to work from home (Robin, 2020).

However, Malaysian businesses are struggling to facilitate their staff to work from home during the MCO as they discover, teleworking is more than just having a laptop and broadband
connection (“Covid-19 shutdown”, 2020). Cybersecurity Malaysia has warned employees who work from home to follow good practices to avoid cyberattacks. The increase in usage of internet consequently increases cyber risks correlated with data and services of the organizations (Yuen, 2020). In addition, prior to the MCO, only a handful of companies have either fully or partially introduced WFH. Therefore, it is understandable that for some, the transition has been smoother than others, especially if employees are already experienced in remote working environment and the technology needed for it was made available even before the MCO.

Therefore, it is imperative for companies to gain deeper understanding of challenges that influence employees’ abilities to work productively throughout the MCO period. In addition, it is also not known if employees working in this condition are better prepared than before to productively produce expected outcome, especially many are not well verse with the technology.

Literature Review

From a business perspective, one of the main effects of the Covid-19 pandemic is the working arrangement of many employees to work from home across occupations. It is understood that when unplanned change needs to be implemented, employees from some employment groups that had very little experience with working from home have to embrace the new arrangement while employees across employment who preferred not to work from home, are now also have to jump into such working arrangements. At the same time, there are also some employees in certain employments experienced a less dramatic change. These are groups of employees who have a significant experience with work from home arrangements.

Teleworking has been referred to as remote working, working from home and telecommuting. Teleworking enables employees to work outside their office, in other words, it enables flexibility in the location of work (Chung & Van der Horst, 2018). Technological improvement of communication devices, systems, and ample association among people in this globalized era has led to employees working from almost anywhere in the name of teleworking (Smith, Pamlos, & Pitts, 2018). Teleworking involves less mobility, resolving travel issues to and from the home for work (Biron & van Veldhoven, 2016). Teleworking is challenging for companies that do not have the funds and resources needed to help employees telecommute. Besides that, to ensure teleworking smoothly progresses, investments in information and communication technology and network infrastructure must be made, and policies should be developed to protect the companies’ assets (Ansong & Boateng, 2018).

In relation to the factors that affect the success of teleworking arrangement, several elements were discussed by past researchers. Among those elements is the social support received by the employees. It is believed that a strong social support reduces the negative impact of stress as well as the strain from isolated work environment (Mesmer-Magnus, Viswesvaran, 2005). For example, family support as a backbone of the work from home environment has been found to reduce work-family conflict since all the works are now done at home and there is a possibility that the time dedicated to work also increases tremendously (Adkins & Premeaux, 2012). Such supportive environments are associated with effective work-home transitions because employees who have supports might experience lesser. In addition, spousal support is also a critical source of support in the family environment. In fact, when employees start to work from home, spousal support provides a sense of stability at home and improves work-life conflict (Rao, Apte, & Subbakrishna, 2003). This is important especially for those who are new with teleworking, in order for them to be able to focus on the work while at home and able to spend enough time to do the work.

Apart from that, it is also important to understand how access to technology impacts upon the likelihood that the employees will be able to successfully telework. Therefore, it is unsurprising for companies to look at the relationships between ICT usage and teleworking and how this is influencing the successful arrangement of working from home during the recent Movement Control Order. For example, Alexander et al. (2010) found that usage of ICT had a greater impact upon the decision to participate in flexible working.
schedule than traditional socio-economic factors. In fact, Alexander and Dijst (2012) further explored this idea by postulating that the extensive use of ICT has a large impact upon the ability to have flexible working arrangements. Thus, it is evident that in order to ensure effective implementation of teleworking, support from the infrastructure is also paramount.

In addition to the ICT infrastructures, the nature as well as the arrangement of the work within the companies are also playing significant roles in determining the successful implementation of teleworking (Taskin & Edwards, 2007). Some companies are organizationally ready for teleworking, especially those with high skilled and autonomous workers. Thus, companies with a high proportion of these types of employees such as real estate, financial institutions and education (Welz & Wolf, 2010), are easier to change to teleworking arrangement (Taskin and Edwards, 2007). In countries like the EU and the USA, employees with better education level are more likely to telework as compared their other counterparts (Noonan & Glass, 2012). This is probably due to the need to be able to grasp new skills and deal with ICT infrastructures.

However, with the advancement of technology, the influence of ICT usage is debatable as the use of ICT for work become commonplace and as most people already have a computer and Internet at home, ICT availability and usage should not be the discriminating factors anymore. One notable exception could be that the introduction of telework can be associated with the need to make changes in the way works need to be done (Illegems et al., 2001). From the companies’ point of view, telework has displaced employees from the physical control of their supervisors and therefore affect the supervision of work especially in evaluating contributions and ensuring smooth coordination. Apart from that, some employees may experience remote access issues and unable to get certain confidential data due to security concerns.

Even though telework is sometimes associated with difficulties of monitoring, previous studies did show that in some situations, telework does presented an increase in productivity (Pyörä, 2011). In those situations, the productivity sometimes increases through less absenteeism related to the work-life flexible arrangement (Kitou and Horvath, 2008). Employees will have more time focusing on the work by not having to commute to the office and the flexible working time also allow them to do more work. Yet, the relationship between teleworking and the well-being of employees is something that may affect productivity in the long run. Teleworking can be seen as a means of easing the growing tensions between work and family life. These tensions are particularly strong among women managers (Fagnani et al., 2004), as well as employees that need to commute long hours. However, due to the location of work and the absence of official working hours, one of the dangers of teleworking, is the risk that work may affect family life (Maruyama et al., 2009).

One of the reasons that support the successful implementation of teleworking is the advancement of ICT and the widespread availability of ICT infrastructure. However, such situations have created different challenges when the employees became increasingly dependent on technology. This has created negative mental responses, such as anxiety, stress and mental fatigue, which are known as technostress (Suh & Lee, 2017). It is a situation caused by a failure to cope with new computer technologies (Gimenez-Nadal & Molina, 2019). Among the contributing factors are technology complexity, information overload, multitasking, and persistent connectivity. As a result, voluntary and involuntary working from home have also created a different impact on employees. Employees working from home involuntarily were found to have bigger family conflicts, experiencing stress, burnout, turnover intention and decline in job satisfaction. Voluntary employees reported experiencing low stress and less intention to leave their jobs (Kaduk et al., 2019). Job insecurity had negative association on working from home interference and mental well-being, resulted in a research conducted from general stress (De Witte, Pienaar, & De Cuyper, 2016). A research done on remote e-workers indicated the employees cognitive functioning and psychosomatic conditions were overlooked, instead only the affective state and their social and professional life were known. It was highlighted that teleworking causes threats to the employee’s professional advancement and impacts social and professional isolation (Charalampos et al., 2019).
In addition to that, the space used in the house, the accountability that an employee has outside of the office and the number of people present in the house while the employee teleworks, can easily ignite work-family misunderstandings (Solís, 2016). Background noises and technical glitches make conference calls a bigger dilemma while working from home (Alexia, 2020). On top of that, it is vital for management to make alternative actions to support employees working from home in coping risk of delayed communications, misinterpretations that bound to happen, the inadequate information richness and bigger conflicts (Zuofa & Ochieng, 2017). Moreover, it was found that teleworkers received more phone calls then they usually do in the office (Bloom et al., 2015). Research conducted on two different employee backgrounds, the administrative employee and academic employee in the same organization found that both had different intentions to telework. Administrative employees preferred teleworking due to number of toddlers at home, frequency of face-to-face communication and frequency of using email. Academic employees on the other hand preferred telecommuting due to home and workplace delay in time, frequency of face-to-face communication, frequency of using fax machine, email, and mobile network (Ismail et al., 2019). It was found that remote workers had limited communication with supervisors and not so close relationship with their customers, also had lack of status and respect within the company and financial rewards to take a second job (Maria, 2019).

Although the arguments presented by previous studies showed that if certain conditions are met, teleworking will be beneficial to the companies in harnessing the best talents to work for them, teleworking has also reported several possible difficulties and challenges for employees. In fact, over half of the employees who earlier preferred working at home, changed their mind to go back to the office in line with the social isolation and declined success rate for position promotions (Raffaele & Connell, 2016). However, once working from home became a necessity like the current MCO situation, issues related to the difficulties faced by employees while teleworking need to be properly addressed. It is imperative for companies to understand the interaction between the employees and type of jobs that they perform. Specifically, there may be some relationships between some employees, in some jobs to be better suited for teleworking. Understanding these situations can have a profound impact in identifying which different jobs will be suitable for teleworking arrangements.

Consequently, the blanket arrangement to working from home may affect the employees differently. First, there are some employees who hesitated to a compulsory working from home structure but now found themselves actually participated actively in such arrangement. Determining the conditions that positively support teleworking will ensure companies to be more prepared if the needs arise in future or even to continuously implement such arrangement in relation to the current situation.

**Methodology**

A descriptive qualitative study was conducted in Penang, as it is one of the 6 states that recorded faster economic growth than the national figures in 2018 (DOSM, 2019). This design provides rich data that allows the researchers to have better understanding of the issue at hand.

A total of sixteen employees were approached for the study. The participants in the study were purposively selected to ensure best contribution to the issues highlighted in the study. The main inclusion criterion was to be involved with teleworking arrangement with their respective organizations as they will be able to articulate what it is like to work from remote location during MCO period. Out of the sixteen, eleven full time teleworkers participated in the study and another five were not included because these employees did not participate with teleworking during the MCO.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted at the beginning of the MCO period, throughout the month of April 2020. Each participant was interviewed once over the phone due to the MCO and lasted around 50 minutes each. The interviews were conducted based on a guide that consisted of several questions that focused on their experiences while participating in teleworking arrangement with their respective companies.

The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed manually afterwards. All the transcripts were read thoroughly to
ensure familiarisation with data that will assist in the generation of codes and initial themes. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data using the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six steps involved are the familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, development of themes among codes, revision of themes as well as finalization of the themes. This type of analysis is used for qualitative data reduction and sense-making of qualitative material in order to identify subthemes and core themes.

Findings and Discussion

In general, many of the participants have mixed feelings towards teleworking and some of them have no intention of continuing with teleworking in future. Based on the thematic analysis, results showed that there are three themes emerged from the data: conflict of commitment, context, and proficiencies.

Conflict of Commitment

The first theme indicates that many of the employees have experienced increases in the stress level of juggling work and domestic chores. This theme reflected two sub themes, normalizing WFH as part of family life and managing technostress as part of family life.

One of the most frequently cited topics related to teleworking is the difficulties in managing work life demand. Such difficulties have created a conflict of commitment. This is mentioned in relation to the need to complete all assigned tasks and at the same time, the need for taking care of family through the teleworking arrangement.

“People haaaaaa... they think when you work from home, you got so much time and so relaxing. Given a choice, better go to work la, at least the boss will not have very high demand on you” [Emp 10]

In particular, the employees had to manage the pressure of limited time to complete everything. This is becoming more evident during the MCO period because not only parents are not going to work, the higher learning institutions, schools, kindergartens and nurseries are all closed as well and some of these institutions also have made arrangements for online interactions. Obviously, this has put extra burden to the employees in juggling the work life commitments. The involuntary working from home was found to also impact employees with higher strain based on work life conflict.

“... my house... can get very busy with kids not going anywhere. I also have to help them with homework, you know. And the teachers gave them like non-stop... must check their Google class like every day... so, very busy la”. [Emp 10]

“Actually, work from home also must be very discipline... I know some people become very lazy and never do their job. Me, I treat it like normal... 9-5 as usual. Problem solved”. [Emp 2]

On the other hand, stress from the conflict could be alleviated by having a flexible corporate policy that allow employees to manage their work and deal with family concerns autonomously. These findings supported results from previous studies on technostress by offering in depth views on the characteristics of work life interactions in creating stress. Being flexible in managing how the work ought to be done appeared to be able to alleviate the conflict greatly.

“I work from home and I don’t have to report to my boss every now and then, as long as the job is done, then I’m good. This works well for me cuz my wife is working as one of the frontliner... so it can get very messy with things at home”. [Emp 5]

Hence, a flexible work policy and strong family support are needed for employees to maintain a positive outlook while participating in teleworking.

Context

Context was another theme that emerged from the current data. It is related to the work and organizational conditions during the MCO, including inadequate infrastructure, particularly the seamless internet connectivity. This theme indicates that the employees' infrastructures are important for teleworking. The theme includes the two sub themes new accessibility to work and creating conducive place to work.

For a start, the sudden shift to teleworking added
more pressure to employees that had not previously invested in internet accessibility, as they now need to ensure that they have connectivity to access all the solutions required to work and communicate from home.

“My internet connection is barely able to do the job. You know lah with MCO, kids also need to use the internet and stuff. Sometimes I have to off the vid” [Emp 2]

“Luckily I bought a new laptop before the MCO since my old one needed repair.” [Emp 3]

Many of the employees stated that the implementation of telework arrangement fell largely to them. At present, their implementation strategies involved sourcing the equipment although some claimed that the companies provided them with the laptop and internet connections, attending training, and creating an ad hoc support group among themselves.

“They (company) give me a laptop so that I can do my work from home. Good thing tho cuz my wife also need to work from home and school also ask kids to use Google classroom, right?” [Emp 1]

However, some of them were already stretched. They mentioned considerable frustration at not having additional resources for the telework arrangement, particularly to support training, and idealistic expectations of how rapidly knowledge could be acquired in implementing teleworking.

“I think company cannot expect us to be very familiar with this work from home or what you called it just now, teleworking. Not convenient lah for me to do my work at home for a long time. Hope this MCO can settle fast.” [Emp 9]

Furthermore, the space used in the house, the accountability that an employee has outside of the office and the number of people present in the house while the employee teleworks also create new challenges form them to deal with.  

Proficiencies

Proficiencies were identified by employees’ knowledge, skills, training, and experience. Teleworkers need ICT tools such as e-mail, telephone, and live internal messenger to be in touch with the office. However, it was found that teleworkers were not provided enough training regarding the use of mobile technology to complete their job assignments. There were two sub themes supporting this theme, competencies to use ICT tools as well as the capabilities to self-regulate while teleworking.

“I was so scared that I forgot to off the mic when my kid run into the room asking for a pizza...what a nightmare” [Emp 9]

Employees’ work experience during the MCO was characterized by the complexity of balancing family and work commitment, lack of equipment and related infrastructure support, and inadequate capacity building among the workers, which led to continuous worries about completing the assigned jobs.

“You know this is the first time I heard about Zoom...last time I checked zoom is just a sound...” [Emp 8]

In addition, lack of online experience was also identified as providing a potential issue for below par job performance. For example, some employees noted, that new people dealing with telework, they do not always feel on top of everything and they were not always kept abreast about changes in the instructions due to overwhelming emails and notifications.

“One of the problem with the speed of it, i.e. catching up with everything, ...you’re just frequently asking others for things, I mean, you keep saying ‘so we’ve done with this now, right, so are we doing that now’ and many times I find myself way behind others” [Emp 5]

“I don’t even dare to look at my emails...simply too many and half of it are reminders and notifications....” [Emp 3]

The tempo and momentum of the information sharing, with its fast pace and high volume of information, led to some employees, again especially those who are new with ICT, feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information shared, and frustrated by having to keep updating themselves from one task to the next without having fully delivered on the earlier tasks yet. This is an important factor since keeping up with the work could be the baseline for employees’ ability to complete their jobs.
“...it never gets lesser but busier, and the works just get pushed back...” [Emp 3]

“I’m lucky I guess, I’ve been using skype for quite some times and when the company wants to conduct meeting via skype, I was like...no worries!” [Emp 1]

Although some of our participants showed good knowledge of teleworking, our findings suggest a need for ongoing education to reinforce employees’ understanding of teleworking and the demand it puts on individuals, therefore decreasing any unnecessary anxiety about participating in teleworking in future.

Framing the Experiences of Employees Participating in Teleworking During MCO

The study has uncovered rich descriptions on how Penang employees experiencing teleworking that has been derived from the interactions with them in this study.

First, the framework in Figure 1 takes into consideration the element of potential conflict between work and home life (see Figure 1). The conflict can originate either from the technostress experienced in the new technological enabled working environment or from the ability to accept that work is now done from home.

Second, the result also indicated that the difficulties in defining the boundary between work and home might affect the effectiveness of the work done from home. Even though now work is done from home, certain elements and infrastructures need to be provided to ensure that it actually can be done from home. In addition to that, the environment also needs to be conducive for work to be done since to many people, home is not really a place to do work in a long run.

Third, results also highlighted that the new work arrangements, which are distinct from the traditional face to face office interactions require new skillsets to ensure that employees can create and maintain boundaries between roles, which requires them to be efficient in transitioning from one role to the other. The employees need to be trained properly and to be strongly supported by the companies.

Conclusion

Introducing as well as implementing teleworking without having enough time to prepare during MCO is a challenging feat. Results from this study showed that ideas such as teleworking that looks beneficial in theory may not works perfectly in the employees’ daily jobs and may lead to operational issues instead. Proper coordination and support need to be put in place by companies and in this case, a closer collaboration between employees and companies is essential. Nevertheless, it was found that during the recent MCO period, there are some setbacks that companies have to address before teleworking can be part of a new norm in Malaysia.

This study examined the various reasons for the gaps between the expected benefits regarding teleworking and the issues highlighted by the respondents and it was found that in general, there is a lack of preparation by the companies as well as the employees, perhaps influenced by the sudden need to implement teleworking due to the Covid 19 Pandemic situation. It is also found that among the companies that have implemented teleworking during this time, few wish to maintain it beyond the MCO period. However, such outcome needs to be taken with cautions and cannot be generalized as it concerns small number of companies located in Penang.

Apart from that, it reinforces the need to have a proper planning prior to the implementation of teleworking. What is striking in this situation is its employees state of readiness. This is not a new problem as employees’ competencies are paramount whenever changes need to be done with regards to the nature of the jobs. This study has shown that the low level of successful implementation is explained by the lack of preparations by both companies and employees.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the
understanding of successful implementation of teleworking by Malaysian companies during MCO period, emphasizing how lack of preparation, coordination and collaboration can negatively impact teleworking arrangement. When conflicts in the work setting of the employees remain unsolved, these conflicts may potentially affect the employees as well as their ability to perform their jobs.

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