

The struggles of working from home are worth it

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A FRIEND, Azman, told me it is not easy working from home (WFH), unlike what some people claim. There are unexpected challenges, he says.

Although the business development manager of an automotive company believes video-conferencing is a godsend as it is just as productive, if not more productive, than in-person meetings, there are many challenges remote workers like him face every other day.

In a meeting consisting of more than five people, there's likely to be interruptions and distractions. Azman does not like being interrupted or talked over during

a meeting, either by his superior or colleagues. And this has happened to him far too frequently.

When Azman raised a salient point, one or more participants in the meeting interrupted by raising their respective opinions, oblivious to what the other speaker was saying. Although the meeting was moderated, the superior was obviously unable to control it. Hence a lot of ideas and comments were lost along the way. The meeting became unfruitful and unfocused.

Since such interruptions are so glaring and irritating, there's a rule of thumb during his company's video-conferencing now — those who wish to speak need to be seen raising their hand. In another company's meeting, a weary-eyed toddler came into the frame of a video conference, interrupting his mother who was secretary of the working group.

The toddler was demanding loudly for his breakfast. When the woman excused herself and stood up, she was caught on the video wearing *kain batik* wrapped around her waist that prompted her boss to comment:

"Aren't you supposed to be in office wear during the meeting?", which instantly drew laughter from the participants.

That's not all. The audio and video in video-conferencing can sometimes become a nuisance. My third son, a consultant with an environmental auditing company, told me it is hard to stay focused on a meeting simply because the Wi-Fi lags in our home.

The lagging causes the video to buffer and the audio to scramble for a few minutes. This disruption and noises from other occupants, and even the slightest sound of a door closing, irritate him all the time.

Owl Labs, a United States-based company that makes 360-degree video-conferencing devices called the "Meeting Owl", said this year people are using video meetings 50 per cent more than they did before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The survey by the company discovered that 79 per cent of respondents believed video-conferencing was more productive than in-person meetings but they agreed that it came with chal-

lenges. Because of these challenges, 80 per cent of them said there should be at least one day a week with no virtual meetings.

Despite the challenges that come with remote work, 77 per cent of respondents believed that when the pandemic is over, the option to work from home would make them happier. According to Owl Labs, money could be a big factor. People are saving approximately US\$500 per month by working from home.

But remote workers aren't just saving money. They're also saving time. By working remotely, employees save an average of 40 minutes per day on their typical commute — that's three hours and 20 minutes a week!

Clearly, the struggles of working from home are worth it. Half the respondents say they would not return to a job that doesn't offer remote work after the pandemic.

While the pandemic ushered in an entirely different future in terms of working life, Malaysians are beginning to espouse and adopt the new work setting. Indeed, digitalisation has altered

the workforce in the country but in some other developed countries, it had happened long before the pandemic.

A mid-management government officer in Putrajaya told me that he was happy to embrace WFH. Video-conferencing is the way to go, he said, although there are interruptions and distractions that occur along the way.

He likes the way meetings are being set. The staggered times allow him to spend quality moments with his family. Even more, it saves him time and the cost of having to get to work from his home in Shah Alam.

The downside of this is that the fluidity and nature of government business are so related to the masses that require 24/7 attention. Anything happens on site, government officers still have to run to the office to meet or retrieve archived documents that are usually not kept in their laptops.

The writer, a former NST journalist, is now a film scriptwriter whose penchant is finding new food haunts in the country