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THE movement control order to stop the spread of Covid-19 has triggered an important side effect: the growth of work from home (WFH) culture in Malaysia today.

And the practice is set to continue even after the pandemic, with the Human Resources Ministry proposing to amend the Employment Act to support it.

But the idea to continue WFH post-pandemic has been met with split views – it's a "yes" from the civil service and mostly "no" from private sector bosses.

Most employers in the private sector prefer workers to return to the office when the pandemic is over, but they are open to changes.

In the public sector, civil servants have done well WFH and it will definitely be a long-term policy beyond the pandemic, says the Public Service Department.

"Such a practice will continue even after the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme," the department tells *Sunday Star*.

Once the MCO was imposed at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 and people began WFH, the public sector swiftly adapted to this culture, the department says.

A circular was issued by the department to improve the public service delivery system and to strike a balance between fulfilling work duties and employee well-being.

"The policy allows officers to WFH as per our circular, and was created as an alternative way of working," it says.

Ultimately, the department believes that the benefits of WFH far outweigh its challenges.

"WFH has improved staff mental well-being, happiness and motivation, which resulted from a better work-life balance," it explains.

The department's main concern is to ensure that this avenue will not be misused by civil servants and its implementation will not affect the quality of service delivered.

"Those who work from home must comply with rules such as remaining at home and being contactable at any time during work hours," the department says.

On March 8, Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the Human Resources Ministry and

Making it work from home

The practice of working from home triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic looks set to continue beyond the health crisis with the government proposing to amend the law to support it. What do employers and workers think?

Public Service Department will look into expanding WFH facilities, with full pay, to people caring for aged and ill family members.

The option should also be given to men with newborn children so that they can support their wives, he said.

On this, the department says it will be reviewing WFH facilities for the public sector, together with the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry.

"Any findings will be tabled to the government later," it adds.

WFH can also be seen as a stepping stone towards further digitalising public service.

"At present, most ministries and government agencies have embarked on increased digitalisation to ensure that more services can be made online," it says.

As at March 5, the WFH policy for the public sector and industries under the International Trade and Industry Ministry still applies throughout the different phases of the MCO.

For offices in areas under a conditional MCO, only 30% of the workforce is allowed to be physically present while those in areas under a recovery MCO can have the optimum level of staff present and can operate fully. However, heads of departments can still implement a WFH

directive according to its suitability for their operations.

In the private sector, however, most employers prefer how things were under the "old norm," with all employees working in the office as soon as possible.

Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan says this is the sentiment of most bosses.

"In a survey last year, most employers said no to keeping WFH arrangements while less than 10% will consider implementing it in the long term," he says.

However, Shamsuddin acknowledges that there are advantages to WFH, provided the framework is ironed out properly.

"If the government wishes to amend the law to support WFH, they should consult all stakeholders including employers and workers," he says.

Because workers would need proper work stations and equipment at home, Shamsuddin suggests tax incentives be given to workers if they pay for such items.

"If bosses chip in, they should get some tax relief too," he adds.

Looking forward, Shamsuddin believes that WFH is not part of Malaysian culture yet but things can be changed to suit the times.

Shamsuddin says there are several issues employers face in terms of WFH, mainly productivity loss.

"Many workers faced Internet connection problems leading to interruptions in getting things done. This must be addressed by the government and Internet service providers quickly. Otherwise, employers will not have the confidence to pursue WFH," he explains.

Another issue is whether worker health and safety can be taken care of when they WFH.

"Who will be responsible if any untoward incidents occur when staff are working from home?"

"As employers, we need to provide a safe workplace. But in this case, it will be a big challenge if we are supposed to inspect every worker's home," he says.

It was reported that the Social Security Organisation assured contributors that they were covered for work-related accidents even if these occur in their homes.

However, Shamsuddin says he prefers this is set out clearly in law.

"The law has to say that if an employee works from home, their home is considered a workplace that is covered for injury and other incidents," he says.

SME Association of Malaysia president Datuk Michael Kang concurs that most small and medium-sized enterprises will not continue with WFH after the vaccination programme.

Like Shamsuddin, he finds that Malaysia is still not ready for WFH and the country's infrastructure is not yet in place to support the practice fully.

"WFH did not meet the expectations of bosses in terms of staff performance. There have been too many cases where performance has been derailed by interruptions at home."

Employers found themselves wasting a lot of time monitoring staff, contributing to lower productivity," Kang says.

Deputy International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Lim Ban Hong says WFH is something technology has made possible.

"In fact, WFH has become a norm for many multinational companies that have employees from different countries in various time zones."

"On whether it will stay as a culture post-vaccination, it will depend on the nature of business as each industry has different working environments," he says, citing IT and design companies as examples that adopt WFH.

Lim, who is also MCA vice-president, says the results for WFH is mixed because the pandemic is unprecedented so most companies and employees were not prepared.

"WFH will need proper arrangements. More engagement with stakeholders is needed to craft the WFH framework as it involves several ministries," he says.

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Workers laud working from home as the way forward

WORKERS from both the public and private sector believe the work from home (WFH) option would benefit them in the long run.

Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) president Datuk Abdul Halim Mansor says WFH is a good way moving forward and as long as it doesn't affect operations like manufacturing.

"For example, the Employment Act defines work hours to be eight hours a day, and not more than 10 hours without overtime."

"As such, this should also be followed if employees are to work from home and included in the law."

"Workers may also clock in for work by switching on their laptop or device's camera. They can later be deemed to have finished work when they sign off from their computers at home," Abdul Halim suggests, adding that MTUC will make such proposals to the government.

He says employees must keep communications open at all times during work hours if they are working from home.

The Employees' Social Security Act 1969 should also be amended, he says, as the coverage should be extended to work-related accidents if the employee works from home.

"Any accident during working hours, if the worker is at home and even working from his bed, should be protected by social security," he says.

Abdul Halim says such a framework could attract many qualified professionals – including mothers who had left the workforce to start a family – back to work.

"Developed countries encourage WFH because it saves overhead costs for office space and energy usage."

"WFH must be based on mutual commitment, trust and sincerity. Once you work from home, you must ensure you put in the necessary working hours," he says.

The Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (Cuepac) fully supports the move to make WFH a long term measure by the Public Service Department.

"Such an option has saved us a lot of time and energy, including allowing employees to care for young children if no babysitters are available," says Cuepac secretary-general Abdul Rahman Mohd Nordin.

He adds that civil servants, including himself, are able to prove that they do not abuse the practice of WFH by clocking into work through an online system on their handphones and marking their location at home.

"Technology has made WFH possible and effective, while at the same time ensuring it is fair to employers," he says.

However, Abdul Rahman notes that WFH is not for all roles, as some workers, like technicians, for example, are required to physi-

cally be on site.

In June last year, it was reported that most workers prefer to keep the WFH option after the MCO is lifted, based on a survey by KPMG Malaysia, an audit, tax and advisory services firm.

The survey found that 69% agreed that WFH should continue post-MCO as part of the new normal, while 56% of business owners supported it.

A company executive who wishes to be known only as Sonia, 31, says WFH saves her an hour that would otherwise be spent stuck in traffic on her way to her office in Kuala Lumpur.

"Our boss is allowing us to WFH during the current conditional MCO phase as long as we deliver work on time and do not abuse the practice," she says.

Sonia says while her company has not given any indication that WFH will continue, she hopes that it will.

"I have gotten used to this way of working and it's beneficial as I can settle down at work," she says.

For some, a balance between WFH and going to the office is best.

Marcelo Wong, 33, a supply chain manager at a multinational company, says the ideal situation is to switch between two options.

"For my company, WFH will definitely continue even after the pandemic."

"WFH was implemented years ago even before Covid-19, but made official in 2018 through an online booking system where staff are allotted one day a week to work from home," he says.

In 2019, the allotment was increased to two days, Wong says, and now WFH is purely voluntary.

This company has also recently relocated to a smaller space after considering that WFH will be a permanent option.

Even before Covid-19, the office was designed based on an activity-based style of working instead of each worker being desk-bound. This meant only about 50% of physical space is allocated for staff.

"From a survey, most staff said they would rather work from home or remotely in cafés or co-working spaces a few days a week."

"This was taken into account for the new office design," Wong explains.

He says the company has placed some level of trust in employees.

"But if any employee is found to have abused their freedom, their annual leave will be deducted," he says.

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