

Experts see new normal as more online, possibly more isolated future

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KUALA LUMPUR (Sept 27):- A future of continuous masking, testing regularly for COVID-19 and quarantining at home when necessary while life goes on, as outlined by Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin, is almost upon us.

Malaysia plans to go into the endemic phase by the end of October, which is when it hopes 100 percent of its adults, or 71.6 percent of its total population, will be fully vaccinated. Almost all sectors are expected to open by then.

Despite the fact that Malaysia will soon reopen, the life people will return to will not be the same as the one they left before COVID-19 came into the scene. The pandemic has left its mark on us and our lives, and many of the things we adopted to prevent the virus from infecting us will likely continue.

Are we ready for it?

“Any particular thing, if we keep repeatedly doing it, over time, it becomes part of us,” said Prof Datuk Dr Mohammad Shatar Sabran, a social expert. “It’s not going to be a restriction anymore; it was but when you get used to it, it’s just nothing.”

ONLINE MOVE

Experts see people leading a more online and possibly a more isolated life as part of the new normal.

Life went online, for the most part, due to COVID-19. Many aspects of work, play, love, comfort and gatherings took place online and experts do not see much of it changing.

Retailer Datuk Andrew Lim said COVID-19 has accelerated the move to online as businesses desperately needed to find a way to stay solvent while forced to close their stores during the lockdown.

“Now even the makcik and pakcik, our senior citizens, know how to use the (smartphone and go online),” he said.

Mirroring the Retail Apocalypse in the United States, he expects more stores to become a hybrid mix of brick and mortar and online sales.

Lim, who is also the executive chairman of SOGO and Gama group of companies, said more stores will turn into fulfillment centres, where the majority of shop space will be given to stock to be delivered or picked up, with a small place reserved as a showroom or a lifestyle centre to advertise wares and usage to passers-by.

Although malls have now reopened, he said they are getting 40 percent of the footfall they used to get and does not expect the situation to fully improve until the pandemic is over.

“Where we used to do RM1 million a day, we would see RM400,000 of sales a day now. Because people are afraid, you see,” he said.

Compounding the problem is the fact that a significant chunk of the usual customers, that is, the tourists, are missing.

Even businesses that require face-to-face interactions, such as salons and spas, have integrated an online component to their business model, which helped them survive the prolonged lockdown.

Sandie Lee, salon owner and representative of Malaysia Affiliation of Nail Salons Industry, said they have had to make minimal adjustments for their physical customers now that salons can open their doors to fully vaccinated customers.

“The beauty line is considered one of the fastest in adapting to the new normal as we have the advantage of practising some of the SOPs (standard operating procedures) already since a long time ago, such as sanitising and using gloves and masks,” she said.

The big change was in their online presence. Since nail salons and spas can no longer have more than four customers at any one time, they plan to continue selling their beauty products online and delivering the items to their customers.

INVEST IN CONNECTIVITY

This shift to a more online world is reflected in how we work as well. Companies planning to reopen their offices are required to make changes to ensure good ventilation and prevent transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace.

In the meantime, they have also invested in infrastructure that allows eligible employees to work remotely during lockdowns. Meetings that once required everyone in a department to cram into small spaces are now conducted online.

Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan said it is unlikely employers would go back fully to pre-pandemic practices after adopting online communications technology.

He said while there will be some need for face-to-face interaction, they have also seen the benefits of going online for their employees and for clients.

“From the employer’s side, it can mean a lot of savings,” he said.

“If they are renting office space, for example, they may want to go on the hybrid model and of course (will not) require so much space. We can give up some of the space and save some rental.”

As for employees, the benefits include more time, saved from being on the road and dealing with traffic, to devote to work, something reflected in a recent survey by human resource solutions agency Randstad.

According to the HI 2021 Workmonitor Survey, more than two-thirds of respondents in Malaysia would be happy to continue working remotely.

As such, Shamsuddin said the government needs to invest heavily in improving Internet access for all Malaysians to prevent the digital divide from widening and provide tax incentives to employers and employees alike to help them purchase the necessary equipment.

He also said the government should increase focus on improving cybersecurity. Malaysia currently ranks fifth, together with Russia and the United Arab Emirates, out of 194 countries on the 2020 Global Cybersecurity Index conducted by the International Telecommunications Union.

With a reduced need for venues to conduct large conferences, he said hotels and conference centres that used to host them will have to recalibrate to attract new customers.

VIRTUALLY SOCIAL

As we move our lives online, human connections have suffered even more during the lockdown and may continue to suffer during the endemic phase. With COVID-19, there will be limits to almost every aspect of our lives, which will in turn curtail our social habits.

Even if we go back to the office, not everyone will be there as there will be limits on capacity. We will have to maintain physical distancing and practise other preventative measures at work and at play.

While it may be a more isolated life, experts say it does not need to be more lonely.

“Lonely is months of lockdown,” said Associate Prof Dr Mas Ayu Said, an epidemiologist at Universiti Malaya.

“I’m still gossiping with my friends even though we’re wearing face masks. You need to keep your distance but as long as the activity is like talking to friends, it will still remain the same.”

Mohammad Shatar, who is also the chief executive officer of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), agreed, saying the new normal will become second nature to people.

“I know in the future, the government is not going to say we need to wear masks but automatically people will do it (to prevent getting sick),” he said.

He also said people should be fully vaccinated in order to return to society and those who decided against getting the vaccine should be prepared to be sidelined and refused service.

“When we are doing this vaccination thing, it is not for me myself but for the society. Because if I'm not doing it, that means I'm not helping the community, I'm not helping the society,” he said.

Dr Mas Ayu said as many people as possible should be vaccinated so that the unvaccinated few, like young children, could still go out without much consequence. Social activities may be able to return to close to normal as a result.

Data from the Ministry of Health shows breakthrough infections are rare, occurring more often after 120 days of being fully vaccinated at 5.3 percent, while deaths remain low at one out of 10,000 people.

According to the US Centres for Disease Control, vaccinated people are also infectious for a shorter time, which means they will end up infecting fewer people than an unvaccinated person, who remains infectious for at least 10 days from onset of symptoms.

Dr Mas Ayu, who is also a public health medicine specialist at the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, Universiti Malaya, said the government's decision to give booster shots to those at risk, either because of health or occupation, will fix the waning protection issue and reduce the transmission rate even further.

She added the new normal will require people to employ common sense and make a judgment on the safety of a venue before deciding to participate in social activities.

“Just be cautious. If someone is coughing badly, I think you should just stop (and) leave,” she said.