

# Long weekends vs productivity

Malaysians will have at least nine long weekends this year. While workers rejoice, employers worry if this will affect productivity, considering the bleak economic forecast for 2016.

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THE year-end holiday season has ended worldwide. But in Malaysia, workers have something else to look forward to – there will be at least nine long weekend breaks this year.

Thanks to a number of national holidays falling on Fridays, Mondays and Sundays, those in Malaysia can take more than a few days' break, with the closest reprieve being the coming Chinese New Year.

The two-day public holiday falls on a Monday and Tuesday, enabling most workers to have a four-day weekend off.

Apart from national holidays, there are state holidays as well, and the people can look forward to marking their calendars for days off work and planning vacations.

Employers, on the other hand, are worried that these dates may have a bearing on productivity.

Although 2016 has fewer long weekends compared to the 10 last year, employers are faced with the prospect that the economy is expected to grow at a slower pace this year.

The nation's economy is expected to grow by 4% to 5% – slightly lower than the 4.5 to 5.5% last year.

Inflation is also expected to worsen at between 3.2% and 3.7% due to the weak



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ringgit and government subsidy cuts, which may push up the cost of living.

With all these factors coming into play, reports say that this could potentially shrink the margins and earnings of companies.

Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF)

executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan says it is crucial for employers to plan their work calendar properly, in view of workers taking longer leave, combined with the projected weak economy.

"We are worried about these factors in the current situation. Employers need to have a plan and see it through or suffer. There should be better cooperation between employers, employees and the Government," he says.

Shamsuddin says statistics show that about 4% of work days are lost due to unplanned days off, such as medical and emergency leave.

"This includes cases of some employees who do not even bother to inform the company that they are taking the day off when they are scheduled to work," he points out, adding that there should be more accountability over such issues.

The situation is even more doubtful now with the dim economic climate.

Shamsuddin laments that while most companies are recording average performance, some are barely surviving.

"My advice to companies is to hold on as long as possible so that when the economy picks up again, they have the available resources to seize opportunities.

"Retrenching staff should be the last resort," he says.

Shamsuddin says this is because losing skilled employees ultimately means more time and money will be spent by companies to retrain and rehire new staff members when the economy recovers.

"Employees should also in turn, appreciate their employers and cooperate with them in trying to meet goals," he says.

Shamsuddin also urges employees to respect their company's yearly work calendar.

Among the nine long weekends this year, three are on Monday, two on Friday and three on Sunday, meaning there will be a replacement holiday to be observed on Monday for certain states.

If Hari Raya Aidilfitri falls on July 6 and 7, (a Wednesday and Thursday), workers need only take a day's leave on Friday to enjoy a five-day break.

There will be eight long weekends in 2017.

Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) secretary-general N. Gopal Kishnam points out that it is an employee's right to utilise his or her allocated number of leaves in any way they wished.

"The long weekends this year are good to provide a chance for employees to rest. When they come back to work, they will feel refreshed and have better work attitude," he says.

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In terms of productivity, Gopal Kishnam likens it to taking two hands to clap – both employer and employee must work together to yield successful results.

“The employer should create a conducive work environment by providing the necessary facilities for workers. For example, employers in the manufacturing sector

should not ask workers to rely on 50-year-old machines,” he says.

At the same time, Gopal Kishnam says workers must spend their time at work wisely and not waste it by being idle.

As for civil servants, Cuepacs president Datuk Azih Muda says the long holidays will not affect the performance and productivity of public sector workers if early preparations were made.

“Cuepacs also finds that such holidays can

help alleviate the stress faced by civil servants, especially in the current challenging economy and rise in cost of consumer goods,” he says.

Deputy Human Resources Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Abd Muttalib acknowledges the pros and cons of long weekends for both employers and employees.

“For employers, they may have to pay their workers extra if they need them to work during these public holidays, in accordance with

the law. On the flip side, workers will welcome such breaks to relax and may feel more spirited when they return to work,” he says.

Ismail, however, stresses that a balance must be struck and employees should not take overly long breaks that could affect their performance at work.

“No matter what, productivity should not be compromised. Both employees and employers need each other to propel companies forward,” he says.