

Hybrid workplace to stay for now

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NATION

Tuesday, 07 Sep 2021



Staying cautious: Though Malaysians are easing back into restaurant dine-ins, their return to physical workplaces is expected to be more gradual. — FAIHAN GHANI/The Star

PETALING JAYA: Companies are likely to adopt a mix of on-site and remote work for the time being when economic sectors in the country reopen.

With companies having health concerns over the Covid-19 pandemic and with staff accustomed to the rhythms of working from home it is likely that they will only return to physical worksites gradually.

Malaysian Employers Federation president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman foresees a hybrid system of working in the office and working from home being implemented when economic sectors slowly reopen.

“Taking into consideration variants that could potentially lead to ‘superspreader’ events, employers should consider initially establishing at least two groups of employees.

“The groups can alternate between working in the office and working from home if the nature of the work permits it. This strategy is practical for long-term business continuity and survival of the company,” he added.

Syed Hussain said if companies rushed to go back to business as usual, workplaces might be vulnerable to a Covid-19 outbreak.

“For the initial period, the implementation of a hybrid system may be ideal,” he added.

Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers president Tan Sri Soh Thian Lai said Covid-19 had altered the way business operations were run.

He noted that most companies had already accepted that current business operations – guided by the Covid-19 standard operating procedure, remote working arrangements and other elements – would be the new normal going forward.

“Most companies have adopted different strategies as part of their continuity plan to ensure that operations do not come to a standstill.

“Businesses are taking on a multipronged approach in terms of work operations, as well as focusing on automation and digitalisation, which will help them operate core activities remotely where possible.

“These approaches, including adopting a more permanent or semi-permanent work-from-home (WFH) culture, will differ from company to company depending on their industry, operations and resources,” he added.

Soh urged the government to support employers that incorporated the WFH practice by ensuring that labour laws were flexible enough to adjust to such arrangements, with necessary protection for employees and employers, besides assisting employers who had to undertake some level of investment to equip their employees with the necessary tools to work from home.

In the United States, tech giants such as Twitter and Facebook have announced that their staff can continue working from home for the long term, beyond the pandemic.

A 2020 global survey of more than 9,000 knowledge and office workers showed that 72% of them preferred to keep to a hybrid remote-office work model.

Office workers in Malaysia said it would take some effort to make the return to physical workplaces as they had grown accustomed to WFH culture.

Financial analyst Daniel Lee, 31, said it would take time for him to return to his pre-pandemic work schedule.

“I would have to get used to the rhythm of commuting to and from work – and getting stuck in traffic. I am also used to jumping on virtual calls now, which we can set up almost immediately.

“If I were to go back to the office, I don’t think people will be as understanding in terms of setting up meetings on such short notice,” he added.

Lee also said it would take some adjustments for the entire workforce to be mindful of the fact that some would be working according to a hybrid arrangement.

“For instance, some colleagues may not be able to get their childcare support sorted out, so they may still need to balance the needs of their children while also working from home.

“There may be more planning and awareness needed, especially in syncing up schedules with other colleagues,” he added.

Irene Choo, 27, said it would be a “difficult transition” to start working at the office again.

“Since I started working from home, I don’t have to waste time commuting and have become more efficient at my job,” she said, highlighting that her daily commute previously took at least two and a half hours to and from her office.

But the marketing executive said one downside to working from home was that some supervisors felt the need to regularly check on her work progress throughout the day. A man who only wished to be known as Tan said he had joined a new company during the pandemic and had not met his colleagues in person yet.

“It is strange that this has become the new normal. I definitely miss having non-virtual social interactions with my teammates.

“On the other hand, it would be hard to endure the long commute and traffic congestion again,” he said.

Lagenda Properties managing director Datuk Doh Jee Ming said as vaccines might not provide total immunity, the company would implement hybrid work arrangements for now and in the near future to ensure minimum interruption in operations while providing a better solution for work-life balance.

“We will prioritise the health and safety of our employees and our communities first. We are happy to implement flexible work arrangements for as long as it takes,” he said.

SMB Connection Sdn Bhd chief executive officer Datuk Michael Kang said there was no going back to the traditional way of doing business.

“It will definitely be hybrid. If there is a need to go into the office, then they will. Otherwise, they will work from home. This is the new norm as we have to live with Covid-19.

“We can no longer be in a lockdown, so all of us will have to take care of one another. Everyone will have to follow the SOP and manage their own SOP,” he stressed.

Kang also said digitalisation made work much more efficient and could save costs for businesses, including saving time travelling for meetings with clients by holding teleconferences instead.

Sunway Property and Facility Management chief operating officer Cheng Jew Keng said a large part of its operations was about supporting townships and communities in terms of property and facility management, so a large part of the team – almost 100% vaccinated – was returning to work in strict accordance with the SOP.

However, Cheng said the company had also implemented hybrid arrangements with the flexibility to WFH for non-essential services, adding that they would eventually also return to the office for better collaboration and higher productivity.