

The bright benefits that the WFH culture brings, apparently also come with sinister stress on employees

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PETALING JAYA: The lifting of the work from home (WFH) mandate effective tomorrow has brought a sigh of relief not just to employers but also many workers who are longing to return to work on site.

With the green light given to the private sector in conditional movement control order (CMCO) states to operate at full capacity, many workers see an end soon to their WFH practice, which has been in place for close to a year.

For them, working from home seems more like living in work. In failing to strike a balance, they feel that their work lives have taken over their personal space.

There is the tendency to work longer hours due to an increased workload. And for those who do not have a proper home office setup, there is no distinction between home and office life, said the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF).

"In such a situation it is difficult to draw the line between working from home and home life," its executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan told theSun yesterday.

While WFH offers flexibility to workers, it is a double-edge sword that causes added stress to those operating from homes that are not ideal for work.

According to a recent survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, 71% of employers are struggling to adjust to remote working and 65% of employers say maintaining employee morale has been a challenge.

Workers may benefit from less time spent commuting, fewer interruptions and greater flexibility, but WFH implemented due to Covid-19 is different in actual practice, Shamsuddin pointed out.

“Responsibilities of working parents could have increased dramatically due to school closures,” he said.

“Working parents may be involved in home-schooling and care of children of school-going age. There may be more than one family member sharing the same space for online schooling or remote working.

“Having to share working spaces, strain in relationships or domestic violence may interfere with job performance, disrupt working schedules and affect work performance.

Shamsuddin said people seem to feel more alone without the necessary support. The lack of physical connection can leave workers feeling they have nowhere to turn when they feel stressed or anxious, he added.

“It becomes more challenging to form a strong support network, which is crucial for good mental health.”

A trend of back-to-back virtual meetings is emerging at many work places. A series of such meetings would be difficult, if not impossible, in an on-site work environment.

“With fewer opportunities for informal gatherings, many workers are spending more time at these meetings. As well as being a time-drain, these video meetings can cause fatigue and leave participants feeling disconnected,” Shamsuddin said.

“Employers have a duty of care for all their workers and need to, as far as it is reasonably practicable, provide a working environment that is safe and without risks to physical and mental health.”

According to Shamsuddin, the situation is compounded as social life has been limited due to movement restrictions.

He said studies have indicated that being unable to interact with friends and isolation from colleagues are the main negative points of WFH.

Based on a National Health and Morbidity Survey in 2019, 42% of those in depression said their employers did not provide them with support. According to Mercer’s 2020 Global Talent Trends Study, only 22% of companies were ready for mass remote working prior to the outbreak of Covid-19.

It also noted that 89% of 138 respondents (employees) were able to adopt WFH and a total of 58.7% admitted that they were being abused in terms of flexibility of WFH while 73% had trouble managing their working hours.

The study found that 62% of respondents were facing difficulty maintaining effective communication as well as 65% who were lacking equipment and technology.

Meanwhile, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idri psychologist Dr Fauziah Mohd Saad said workers have to be smart in managing their time.

“There should be good time management. One must be able to also reason with their superiors,” she said, and advised workers to talk to their employers about intrusion into their personal time.