UNDERSTANDING THE WORK AT HOME CONCEPT, ITS BENEFITS AND
CHALLENGES TOWARDS EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

The proportion of employees working at home or utilizing flexible working arrangements has been increasing along with the advancements in information and communications technology (ICT). This concept is not only applicable to ICT sectors but have also been used by employees in other sectors. Previous studies have reported that the working at home concept promotes employees work-life balance and allows employees to fulfil family responsibilities while completing work demands in a timely manner. However, in Malaysia, the flexible working concept is minimally applied despite its benefits. Due to work and family constraints, employees choose to opt out of the labor force. This matter might be reflected by the increasing population proportion of outside labor market. This paper reviews the concept of working at home at international as well as local levels. The benefits of working at home from employees’ perspectives are gathered. The present research also discusses the potential challenges from this flexible working concept that employees in Malaysia may face. It is hoped that this paper will trigger researchers for in-depth studies on working at home by looking into more specific interest.

Keywords: working at home, flexible working concept

1. Introduction

Work at home (WAH) is a recent trend in few international companies such as Amazon, Dell and Xerox. Home-based work help employees’ healthy work life balance by not bound to fix working hours and freedom to schedule the work. Generally, WAH gives benefits to employees as well as employers. In Malaysia, as the improvement in technology is going well, there is less constraint to work from anywhere. Some of the employees’ burdens like stress, travelling cost and family responsibilities will be lessen. This paper will discuss further the relevant of WAH in Malaysia in terms of some variables such as age, gender and types of job.

The WAH concept is one of the various ways of flexible work arrangement apart of part time work system and flexible working hours. The quality of working life is affected by work and home balance. The need of WAH become a rising concern among the employees and employers due to its benefits. WAH was applied by nonagricultural workers since industrial revolution. In early 1990s, the rates of men and women whose applying WAH are equal. A survey during that era indicates that they brought work home but did not paid for that work, 23% of WAH employees were married woman with children and most WAH employees are professional (Deming, 1994).
In Malaysia, the population outside the labor force (OLF) has increased from 6.7 million in 2014 to about 7 million in February 2016. The population of OLF includes those who are not categorized as employed or unemployed. According to 2014’s Labour Force Survey Report, the main factors that increased the OLF population were attending schools and furthering studies, 44.8% and housework, 42.5% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015). The unemployment rate has also increased from 399,500 in 2014 to 506,000 in February 2016. However, from these statistics, there is no clear indication whether men or women have contributed to the increment of OLF population and unemployment rates. It is a great concern where talented graduates cannot be retained in the labor market due to inflexible working environment and not family-friendly employment policy.

Previous studies have highlighted that implementation the WAH, telework, telecommute or flexible working arrangements policies into workplace might be the solution to preserve graduates and talented employees from leaving the labor force due housework and family matters. The flexible working concept is often applied in ICT sectors (Srivastava et al., 2015) where employees are allowed to work from home or at the office. Recent studies have reported that academics were given to the option to telecommute for delivering distance or open education programmes at higher education institutions (Percival, Vogel & Muirhead, 2011; Tustin, 2014). With the increasing improvement in ICTs and gadgets, WAH policy could be applied to any sectors that heavily uses computers and internet.

The main motivation of this study arises from the fact that there is lack of understanding of the WAH concept and how it contributes to the economy, at least, in Malaysia. Therefore, this study aims to collect potential variables that affect preference and understanding of WAH concept. Through literature review, the advantages and disadvantages of working from policy from the perspectives of employees and employers are listed out. Hence, we can further develop a framework that could model WAH preferences. The contributions of this study is twofold. First, we address the gaps of the existing literature related to WAH. Secondly, we proposed a framework that could capture the WAH index in the future.

The structure of this article is as follows. Section 2 explains that ‘work-at-home’ terms that used by researchers. Based on past international and local studies, the general trend of WAH concept are summarized in Section 3. The advantages and disadvantages of using the WAH policy are discussed in Section 4. We also discuss the challenges of using WAH policy in Malaysia. In section 5, we proposed a conceptual model, which can be used to investigate the status of WAH policy usage in Malaysia. Finally, the summary of this article as well as the expected outcomes of this study are included in Section 6.

2. Work at Home Terms

Researchers have used different terms to address the ‘working from home’ (WFH) or ‘working at home’ (WAH) concept. Regardless of the nature of job, the commonly used terms are home-based work (Grough, 2012), homeworker (Mehrotra & Biggeri, 2005), telework (Ng & Khoo, 2000) and telecommute (Teh, Ong & Loh, 2015).

Specifically, Grough (2012) has provided definitions for home-based worker, homework and teleworker. ‘Home-based worker’ is defined as ‘a worker who carries out remunerative work with his or her home or in the surrounding grounds’. A homeworker is an industrial outworker who
carries out paid work from home typically on a piece-rate basis’ while, a teleworker is based in home and often have ICT-related work. Some researchers have used the terms ‘home-based worker’ and ‘homeworker’ interchangeably.

The terms of work-family, work-home and work-life seems similar but they give different definitions. Sok et al. (2014) used the term home since the definition covers the possible home activities. Meanwhile, since all terms are literally explained the activities outside work, hence all the terms are referred as work-home (Guest, 2002). The introduction of WAH has brought changes in growing of women labor force participation, dual-earner couples and single parents.

Recent studies have used the term ‘flexible working arrangements’ (FWAs). According to Subramaniam, Overton and Maniam (2015), the common FWA modes are flexi-time, working from home, teleworking, permanent part-time and career break.

3. General Trend of Working at Home

3.1 International Findings

Venkatraman et al. (1999) investigated the working from home concept implemented by Statoil Company for its transformation purpose to global energy group. The company install computer and IT services at employees’ homes where employees can obtain daily tasks and save their documentations in an intranet portal. Venkatraman et al. (1999) found that WAH preferences differed between employees’ job positions such as managers and clerks and tasks such as group work and writing reports. WAH concept was found beneficial for employees working on shifts. In addition, employees at home were able to coordinate their work, stay current with developments at work and able to read, reflect, think and write effectively in a peace and quiet environment.

Based on the data from the US National Study of Changing Workforce (NSCW), Halpern (2005) studied how time-flexible work policies can improve health, reduce stress and save money. Job stress occurs when there are conflicting aspects in one’s job. For instance, attending a meeting when the employer needs to be at home with a sick child. The results showed that employees had greater loyalty to their employers and reported fewer symptoms of stress when the number of flexible work policies was widely available. Jang (2009) also used the NSCW dataset to examine the relationship between work-schedule flexibility and employees’ perception of workplace support, supervisory support, work-life balance and well-being. The results were employees who had flexible work schedule reported higher levels of work-life balance, which in turn positively affects their well-being. In addition, perceived flexible works schedule was found a mediator of perceived supervisory and workplace support, thus fitting a theory that a good organizational culture helps creates a more positive perception of workplace flexibility.

Troup and Rose (2012) investigated the impact of formal and informal telework arrangements on work-family outcomes such as job satisfaction, time spent on childcare and satisfaction with the distribution of childcare tasks in Queensland, Australia. They found that formal telework arrangement had greater positive effect on women’s job satisfaction. The flexibility of working time (informal telework arrangement) for women provides optimum satisfaction towards child care distribution with their spouse. It also allows them to act on family needs and responsibilities.
In India, Srivastava et al. (2015) studied the perspectives of IT employees on the work from home (WFH) concept. The majority of the employees claimed that their work was flexible and agreed that the main advantage of WFH is helps balancing work and family life. They also agreed that the major disadvantage of WFH is the lack of communication between colleagues. Perhaps this may be the reason why the number of days spent for WFH was on average two days per week. Overall, WFH was suggested to kept as an option for employees.

3.2 Local Findings

The ‘working at home’ concept is not a recent trend in Malaysia. The idea has developed since WAH seen as the new element in human resource strategy. Flexible employment can be implemented in Malaysia by considering technology, rules set up by employers and employees’ preference (Suparmaniam, 2015). Technology development in Malaysia is in line with Malaysia’s goal to attain high income status in 2020. High technology is a priority to Malaysia to improve the economic growth. Bremmen (2012) reported that Malaysia was in the second place in technology sector among the South East Asia countries, leaded by Indonesia and followed by Thailand. The increasing of smartphone users allow them to communicate through email, online message and video.

Ng and Khoo (2000) discussed the issues and prospects of teleworking in Malaysia, at the time when information and communication technologies (ICTs) was rapidly growing and making an impact in businesses and industries. They infer that teleworking could facilitate in realizing the national objective of achieving a knowledge economy and society. In this era, the most common job across industries conducted by teleworking was customer service. The industries that offered this flexible job was airline, software development and telecommunication industries. In banking and finance industry, data collection and research was reported to be one of the teleworking jobs, while in printing and publishing industry, teleworking was confined to sales and data processing only.

Subramaniam, Overton and Maniam (2015) investigated the effects of demographic factors and socioeconomic factors on the women’s FWA preference at the workplace. They also looked into the possibility of FWAs have impact on women’s ability to multitask office work and housework, thus achieving work-life balance. Their study revealed that socio-economic factors have significant effect on women’s preference of adopting FWAs. Moreover, educated women with high occupational status, hold Bachelor degrees and earning higher income are more interested in FWAs compared to less educated women. Subramaniam, Overton and Maniam (2015) suggested that labor market policies and future family structures should be aligned. They also raise the need for increasing awareness of how both genders can achieve work-life balance in the paid labor market. In addition, employers were suggested to provide more family-friendly policies.

4. Advantages, Disadvantages, and Challenges of Working at Home Policy

4.1 Advantages of Working from Home

Based on past international and local studies, the advantages of implementing the WAH policy are tremendous and often interlinked with each other. We summarize the advantages into several key points:
1. Sufficient time to meet family demands and responsibilities (Troup & Rose, 2012). The main point of working from home is to be able to meet family demands (childcare needs or elderly care) while doing daily work. Employees who undertake this mode of work are not only able to monitor their children’s growing progress but also guide them for their development. This advantage can strengthen relationship between family members (Kossek, 2011; Subramaniam, Overton and Maniam, 2015).

2. Save time from commuting or travelling (Ng & Khoo, 2000; Srivastava et al., 2015) A huge number of people are wasting their time of travelling to-and-from work. There are many commercial cities that have unbearable heavy traffic before and after office hours. By WAH, employees can save time from commuting or travelling, reduce stress from family and work conflicts (Halpern, 2005) and also save money from fuel or public transportation expenses (Church, 2015).

3. Operating cost reduction and some fixed expenses can be shared (Halpern, 2005; Church, 2015; Teh, Ong & Loh, 2015) If you are doing your own business, you can have a huge saving with WAH. Office rent and secondary expenses can be reduced. Stationeries, telephone bills as well as other expenses are shared between house and office.

4. Convenience and flexibility (Ng & Khoo, 2000) With WAH, you can decide your own time and accommodate other tasks that need to be done. You can be more flexible in term of timing, space and etc.

5. Improves health and minimize number of sick leaves (Halpern, 2005; Church, 2015) Employees with health issues will benefit from the WAH policy by resting at home and doing work at appropriate times thus reporting absence from work or submitting medical certificates will be unnecessary. Employers should experience reduce health costs when the number of absence, the number of late clock-ins or early clock-outs decreases. Furthermore, there will be lesser incidences of late submission of work or missed deadlines because of family concerns and demands.

6. Increase in work productivity and job satisfaction (Troup & Rose, 2012; Church, 2015). This benefit appears to be a large factor in increased job satisfaction from those employees allowed to leverage the option. Bloom, 2014 observed that employees who quit at half the rate of people in the office, way beyond expectation. It is reported that people who applied WAH have much higher job satisfaction. The Staples Advantage study reflected higher job satisfaction rates. He claimed that home workers reported 25% lower stress levels, 73% said they consumed healthier food while WAH, 76% were loyal to their company and 80% reported a better work-life balance (Hendricks, 2014). A whitepaper by Microsoft called “Work without Walls” included survey results from employees that work from home, and the number one benefit stated by far was work / home life balance at 60% (Kruse, 2012).

4.2. Disadvantages of Working from Home

Despite its benefits and awareness on the flexible working concept, employees were also found showing concerns on:
1. Fall into slackness (Vishal, 2016)
Supervising and monitoring are not happened for those who are WAH. They can set their own working hours and do not have to dress up in a certain ways to make them feel comfortable and less pressure. As the result, they might be delayed the start of work and do not take things seriously until the deadline is approaching.

2. Pressing personal chores (Vishal, 2016)
WAH makes one too engage with the personal chores. The time taken to complete the tasks will be delayed and it affect the employee’s productivity. Self-discipline is needed to draw a line between home and work to get the job can be done on time.

3. Lack of competitive spirit (Srivastava et al., 2015)
Lack of human interaction and communication with co-employees and employer lessen the competitive spirit as well as it may reduce the productivity of employee. Since workplace is where the employee can meet-up with people and have social networking, it could be the best way to runaway from the stress at home and vice versa. Unfortunately, there might be no escaping route for those who are WAH.

On the other hand, from the employers or human resource point of view, the increase in work flexibility or work from home option always lead to increase in operating costs (Halpern, 2005) such as installing hardware, software and telecommunications infrastructure (Ng & Khoo, 2000). In addition, the flexible working concept would not help employees’ professional career development and might increase. Among their reasons were:

- Lack of communication and collaboration with colleagues, supervisor and subordinates (Ng & Khoo, 2000).
- Declining quality of work due to lack of discussions with colleagues.
- Lack of work supervision.
- Trainings and re-trainings for teleworkers are costly (Ng & Khoo, 2000).
- Lack of personnel with the requisite skill (Ng & Khoo, 2000).

4.3. The Challenges of Working from Home for Employees in Malaysia
An important component of a successful adoption of WAH is high self-discipline and self-management with a focus on tasks and outcomes. An employee should have high discipline, high self-motivation, excellent organizational and time management skills for using WAH. For instance, allowing for separate workspace at home and setting rules for family can help to keep an employee to stay focus during work-hours. This approach might be useful for employees with young children. Distraction from family members could slow down the momentum and the task will be delayed.

Employees should also keep in mind that when they choose to commit with WAH program, their employers and supervisors would expect timely and quality work submissions as equal to the work by office-based employees. A schedule is needed for an employee to keep the task on track to complete it by or before deadlines. They should start and finish work on time every working days in order to maintain the discipline in work. Furthermore, they must be willing to attend seminars and
training by themselves or immediately by employers’ order so that their knowledges and skills will up to the par with their office colleagues.

The organization might have limited budget to provide equipments and tools at the workplace and home office of employees, although sufficient equipments and tools are essential for employees to complete their task faster and increase their efficiency and productivity level. Therefore, employees must be understanding at such matter. Other than that, employees who choose to work at home must maintain active communication with supervisor and coworkers. Communication with co-workers can be done through email, instant messages and video calls, which can help employees to complete of task with persistency and quality. In addition, employees will neither feel left out by coworkers at the workplace nor having lack of competitive spirit if the communication exists.

5. Conceptual Framework and Research Methodology

Moving forward from this article, we intend to investigate that current understanding and preference of working from home among employees in Malaysia. Through literature review, we found several relationships between preference of working from home with job satisfaction, work life balance and several work-related support from employer and supervisor. International findings found significant relationship of demographic variables towards preference of working from home. These demographic variables are age, gender, marital status, occupational profile, qualification, pay and job tenure (Felstead et al. 2002). However, gender and marital status have effect on work-life balance. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed model framework which will be used in our future study.

Figure 1: The WAH model framework.
We propose that structural equation modelling (SEM) should be used to analyze the simultaneous effects of multiple variables. From the model in Figure 1, several hypotheses can be tested.

6. Conclusion

In the present study, we review past studies about the concept of working from home at international and local levels. The advantages and disadvantages of implementing the work at home (WAH) policy or flexible work schedule were gathered. We discussed the challenges that employee in Malaysia might face when adopting such mode of work. Meanwhile, this paper also aims to collect potential variables that might affect employees preference of WAH and thus proposed a model framework for future investigation.

The outcomes of this study will have implications with regards to employees’ satisfaction and work-life balance. Organizations need to recognize the formal or informal WAH arrangements as well as the less frequent arrangements may be useful for different employees at different times. Increase knowledge about WAH will assist Human Resource (HR) practitioners to be more effectively implement WAH arrangements.

WAH concept is an option for individuals who are tied with family responsibilities and health issues. This mode of work will not only keep educated and skilled individuals into the labor workforce thus contributing into the economy, it also enhances gender and social equity along the concept of a caring society.

References


