Understanding the Issues Surrounding Work-Life Integration among Employees Who Work from Home (WFH) in Malaysia

Nor Farhana Mohd Azmi[1*], Muhamad Khalil Omar[2] ,Norashikin Hussein[3]

[1]Faculty of Business and Management, UiTM Cawangan Pahang Campus Jengka

[2,3]Faculty of Business and Management, UiTM Puncak Alam, Malaysia

[*]Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

The presence of COVID-19 pandemic resulted in mass lockdowns around the world, and millions of people were forced to work remotely for months, confined in their homes. Work from home (WFH) is likely part of the 'new normal' as the whole world need to adjust to the new practice. The question arises as to how the issues of work-life integration among employees takes place while working from home in Malaysia perspective. This paper aims to explore the issues surrounding work-life integration in Malaysia and emphasizes the need for qualitative research to explore on the issue. Based on the interviewed method with interview script were prepared for the four participants who were involved.

The data were analyzed using the grounded theory as inquiry analysis technique, The findings show a kind of issue surrounding work-life integration for the employees as a result of remote work from home. This integration has been caused by five major themes surrounding work-life integration namely: Work-life Integration Experience, Technology Impact, Organizational Factors, Health and Wellbeing and Gender Dynamics. The study also showed that the there are issues that surrounding the work-life integration and this issue can help an organization to improve their employee's work-life integration in future.   The success of Work from Home (WFH) among employees is a concept of relationships that exist based on trust and this is shown through a symbol of cooperation that is trusted on the commitment on the work given by their managers or superior. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each member of the organization to put in their utmost and maintain smooth and harmonious employment relations in order to achieve a work-life integration.

Keywords: Issues, Work-life Integration, Work from Home, Employees, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The workforce was already experiencing fundamental shifts with new technologies in the digital age, globalization, and workplace culture changing the way we work. The organizations had to quickly change their work practices by shifting workers in the office to home-office arrangements [9]. Working from home is commonly practiced in developed countries and its effects on individual employees and organizations are often debated. In Malaysia, work from home (WFH) is uncommon [13]. Work from home (WFH) is one of the most flexible work practices implemented to achieve the flexibility to increase the commitment of employees to perform their work duties.

During the public health crisis, WFH was seen advantageous since workers could continue to practice physical distancing, making them less likely to be infected with COVID-19 or infect others, which benefited not only the workers but the society at large. The concept of work-life integration has gained increasing attention in Malaysia as the modern workforce navigates the complexities of balancing professional responsibilities with personal pursuits. Work from home (WFH) is one of the most flexible work practices implemented to achieve the flexibility to increase the commitment of employees to perform their work duties. During the public health crisis, WFH was seen advantageous since workers could continue to practice physical distancing, making them

less likely to be infected with COVID-19 or infect others, which benefited not only the workers but the society at large. The concept of work-life integration has gained increasing attention in Malaysia as the modern workforce navigates the complexities of balancing professional responsibilities with personal pursuits.

While work-life integration aims to foster a seamless alignment between work and personal life domains, numerous challenges persist, posing barriers to achieving optimal integration among Malaysian workers [3]. Despite the recognition of work-life integration as a crucial determinant of employee well-being and organizational effectiveness, empirical research within the Malaysian context remains limited, failing to capture the nuanced experiences and contextual factors shaping individuals' ability to integrate work and personal life successfully. However, in the context of Malaysia, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the adequacy and effectiveness of workplace policies and practices related to work-life integration. Therefore, there is an urgent need for qualitative inquiry to explore issues surrounding work-life integration in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Working from home is commonly practiced in developed countries and its effects on individual employees and organizations are often debated. In Malaysia, work from home (WFH) is uncommon [13]. However, the context of the worldwide spread of COVID-19 and the implementation of movement control order (MCO) as well as lockdown orders in some countries has led to the increasing practice of WFH.

Work from home (WFH) is one of the most work practices implemented to achieve the flexibility to increase the commitment of employees to perform their work duties. During the public health crisis, WFH was seen advantageous since workers could continue to practice physical distancing, making them less likely to be infected with COVID-19 or infect others, which benefited not only the workers but the society at large. Following the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic made an impact on various sectors such as tourism, education, manufacturing industry, and many more. [10] estimated that the MCO has likely affected 2.4 million jobs. It is obvious that the pandemic has changed the world of work and made the working conditions to be more dynamic. The work-from-home (WFH) policy is one of the most noticeable adjustments brought about by the COVID19 pandemic. Governments and organizations all across the world are implementing WFH as a new work innovation to ensure the business may continue as usual.

Eventually, it certainly affects social relationships and work and non-work role commitments of individuals working from home [11]. As such, this paper focuses on how working from home (WFH) during MCO affects employee work-life integration. Research on work practices, particularly working from home, has raised concerns about the efficacy of this arrangement in comparison to "on-site work," which requires an employee to be physically present in an office or other work location [10]. The mandatory transition to working from home due to disaster and pandemic as opposed to the option of choosing this mode of work, is also an area of interest in study. However, before delving into the findings of effectiveness, well-being, and the current situation of the pandemic, a look into the origins and developments of this work from home is needed in order to achieve work-life integration among employees.

METHOD

This study is a qualitative study one using grounded theory as inquiry strategy. The research applied a qualitative methodological approach since it will enable a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied, for example when compared to the quantitative method. This study is a qualitative one using Grounded Theory as an inquiry strategy. The Grounded Theory was chosen because its emphasis on multiple meaning that allow researcher to embrace the lived reality of their subjects. The qualitative research not only helps in focusing on the experiences and ideas of the participant but also makes it possible for the researcher to reveal detailed data in its natural setting, and since it is interpretative in nature, it provides an opportunity for the researcher to interpret the data [8].

Data Collection Instrument

A semi-structure interview guide was used to interview participants. The qualitative survey consisted of a series of open-ended questions. Self-administered with questions presented in a fixed and standard order to all participants. In grounded theory, the process of data analysis included three steps: open coding, axial coding and selective coding [5].

Participant Profiles

Purposive Sampling Technique were used due to specific criteria have been decided. A total number of 5 participants were interviewed. The participants were completely voluntary and all participants were through networks of the researcher. An interviewed method with interview script were prepared for the participants. The participants were age 30-44 years old. Among the participants there were one male and three females. The participants were married except one who is still single. The wore in a private company and still apply working from home system. (see Table 1)

The participant was identified through the professional networks of the researchers and their colleagues. The participant was completely voluntary. Each participant shared their information and participated in a 20-30 min interview session. All research ethics were followed in the entire research process to ensure participant confidentiality.

FINDING & DISCUSSION

Table 1 Demographic and Background Information

Code	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Education	Profession	Private/Govt
P1	43	Female	Married	Bachelor Degree	Manager	Private
P2	44	Male	Married	Bachelor Degree	Asst. Supervisor	Private
P3	38	Female	Married	Bachelor Degree	Manager	Private
P4	30	Female	Single	Master	Executive	Private
P5	42	Male	Married	Bachelor Degree	Executive	Private

Researcher was able to identified 13 different types of sub- themes on issues through Open Coding which present the following structure: work-life integration definition, integration between work and personal, obstacles face, technology role, digital tools, policies practices, remote work arrangements, organization improvement or changes, burnout, mental health, healthy work style, gender roles and gender differences. In axial coding, researcher manage to emerged into five themes of issues on work-life integration which includes Work-life Integration Experience, Technology Impact, Organizational Factors, Health and Well-being and Gender Dynamics.

Themes
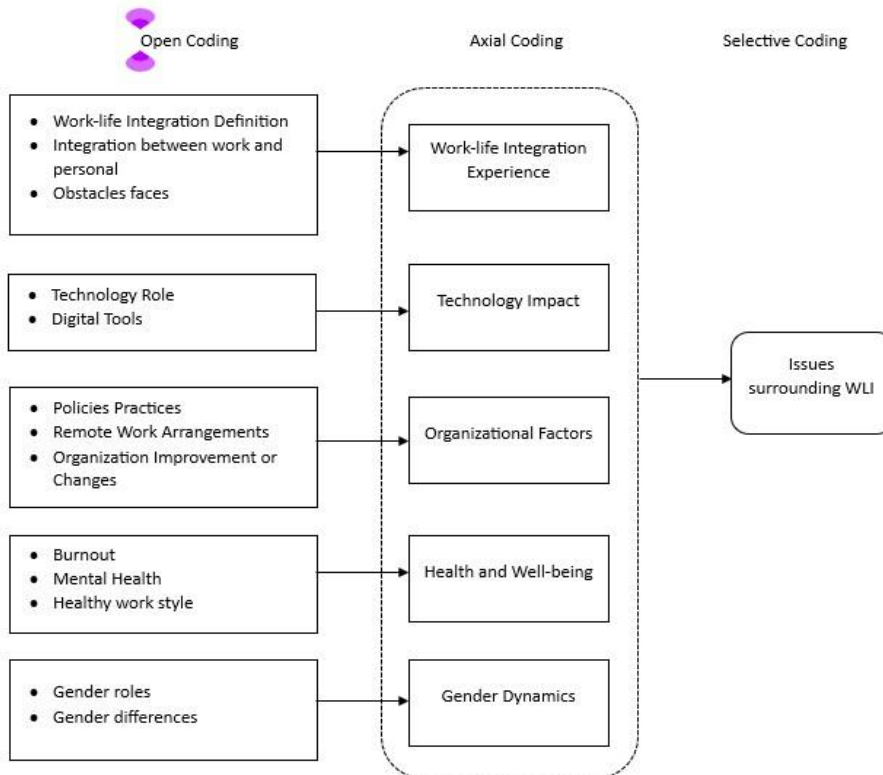
Issues Surrounding Work-life Integration

Work-life Integration and Experience

Employees manage to define WLI based on their point of view and they were able to understand the existing of work-life integration.

"For me, work-life integration is something that integrate between work life and personal life. You can complete your professional work as well as personal activities without feeling stressed because you already planned it." (P4)

"I can manage well both work, family and others related engagement." (P1)

"Creates a flow between all aspects of an employee's life but unfortunately it is

really hard to do so." (P2)

Employees manage to integrate between work and personal life and they were able to cope with the current situation which is WFH. However, in certain situation it is really difficult to handle between work and personal life.

"I make sure my work or tasks completed during office hours and the remaining day fully utilize for family and other engagement" (P1)

"I work 5 days a week from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. and on weekends I will spend my time with my family. For now, I'm happy with my life because I can make sure that I will have time for my activities and at the same time, to make sure that all my professional work is done. I will always plan my schedule." (P3)

Being physically absent from work has fed up into the idea employees are available at all times. WFH have giving perception that employees will be able to respond at anytime and anywhere. Hence, the supervisor will always keep on monitor employees due to lack of trust.

"Urgent or heavy workload in office that need to sacrifice after office hours and weekend time." (P1)

"Lack of trust from supervisor in completing the task from home." (P3)

Technology Impact

"Made life easier. More time can arrange between work and personal matters without impacted work productivity" (P1)

"The role of technology has facilitated work-life integration because as I mentioned earlier, jobs can be done even when you're on holiday with your family. So, you get the job done and at the same time, you got spend time with family." (P4)

"Technology can facilitate work-life integration by enabling remote work and flexible schedules. However, it can also hinder it by creating an expectation of constant availability, leading to difficulties in unplugging and increased stress levels." (P5)

The developments of technology have allowed employees to conduct meetings from home, complete their tasks, and coordinate and perform required tasks (Sengupta & Dwa, 2022). It was assumed that technology really help the employees in facilitate the work-life integration. The used of smartphones and remote work tools is a good method in order to help them completed their task according to the due date and make their life easier. However, the connection of the internet can be an obstacle when the employee WFH. The lack of technological and internet support while WFH can also contribute to weakened employment efficiency of the task delivery [3].

"Digital tools and technology have been extremely useful started with pandemic period. Now Malaysian workers can be mobilized and work from anywhere to ensure productivity is not impacted." (P1)

"Working from anywhere makes yourself available when required but sometime Internet is to slow and work cannot be done according to the dateline" (P2)

"Technology and innovation help Malaysian workers do their work efficiently. Technology also increases work-life integration because work can be done everywhere and it doesn't matter if the workers do not come to a physical office." (P3)

Without adequate technological and digital equipment, efforts to ensure WFH practices run efficiently are futile. Indirectly, the work-life integration among employees will also not be achieved.

Organizational Factors

Organization policies and practices play an important role in order to ensure the employees manage to work productively. Improvement on the existing policies can be done if it is required since WFH have been part of today's practices. Although working from home is considered the most flexible job, According to Hill et al., 2023, lack of supports from employers tends to reduce the productivity of employees. The differentiation of whether the option to work from home is forced upon an employee (whether due to a natural disaster, pandemic, or lack of access to the physical workplace), or when it is a voluntary option also plays a role and has been studied by [13], who mentioned that with the former, the organization will more likely provide support and guidelines.

"Proper tools and platform for check in check out to update location and diary to record day to day work activities." (P1)

"Check-in in application and update schedule every day." (P2)

"Flexible working hours. If you have a problem that needs you to take leave, you can do your job online." (P3)

"My organization offers flexible working hours, remote work options, and mental health support programs. They also encourage employees to take regular breaks and vacations to recharge." (P5)

Health and Well-being

"Yes, especially when there is a project with tight timeline." (P1)

"When Internet connection down and slow while I need to fulfil the due date for the project." (P2)

"Yes, there have been times when I experienced burnout due to an imbalance between work and personal life. It often happens when work demands increase unexpectedly, making it hard to maintain personal routines and self-care practices." (P5)

Working on the dateline can sometime lead to stress and burnout. Employees need to know how to overcome their stress in order to maintain a healthy life style. Try to take a pause during work can be one method that can help to reduce and overcome stress.

"Do what you love to do and take pause while working on the task." (P1)

"Always make sure all your tasks completed timely and manage well." (P2)

"For now, every weekend or twice a month I will make sure that I coming back to my parent's house." (P3)

"I practice time management techniques, such as the Pomodoro Technique, to maintain productivity without overworking. Regular exercise, meditation, and hobbies also help me manage stress and maintain a healthy work-life balance." (P5)

A study by [4], [12] in remote working emphasized the increased concentration levels expressed by employees who cited office distractions as a hindrance to on-site working, while [2] investigated the greater flexibility offered by this mode and how that contributed to increased rates of well-being. A decreasing work-home conflict was also investigated with the merging of both spheres stated as being harmonious and reducing uncertainty. It is predicted that company employees' managerial processes will continue to change, even after the current health pandemic is under control, in order to keep everyone safe. To date, employment norms and standards have changed and will continue to change due to the pandemic [7]

[1] stated that, currently, employers are more lenient with their employees and are willing to accommodate different schedules and work situations, such as allowing parents to watch their children while working. These leniencies are expected to continue for the foreseeable future, and employers who want to gain a competitive advantage will likely be asked to make more accommodations for their workers' needs and preferences.

Gender Dynamics

Based on this finding, it can be identified that gender is not a big issue but still it contributes to the surrounding on WLI. Employee stated that women are more details and get usually more stress compare to men. Men was easier and less complicated in integrate their work and personal life.

"Depends on what type of work and role. For me, in general gender is not the main issue." (P1)

"Gender roles and expectations will influence the result of work-life integration. Depends on the individual or family itself." (P2)

"Women is more details that men. That is why women will get more stress in managing it" (P3)

"Men are easier in handling work-life integration compared to women but it depends on the situation." (P4)

"Yes, women often face more pressure to balance work and family responsibilities, leading to unique challenges. Men, on the other hand, may face societal expectations to prioritize work, which can also impact their work-life integration efforts." (P5)

A sudden transition to working from home and other new work arrangements has caused many disruptions in the work and day to day life of workers, leaving most employers clueless about how to effectively manage workers in the new remote work arrangement and work from home. The findings of this study clearly show that there are issues surrounding work-life integration among employees who work from home in Malaysia.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to enhance work-life integration among employees who work from home: Develop Clear Policies for Remote Work: Organizations should establish clear guidelines and policies for remote work. These policies should address work hours,

communication expectations, and protocols for virtual meetings to help employees manage their work-life boundaries effectively. Provide Training and Resources: Offer training programs to help employees develop skills necessary for remote work, such as time management, virtual communication, and the use of digital tools. Providing access to resources like ergonomic office equipment can also improve the work-from-home experience.

Foster a Supportive Work Culture: Create a supportive organizational culture that recognizes the challenges of remote work. Encourage open communication between employees and managers, and provide regular feedback and support to address any issues related to work-life integration. Address Gender-Specific Challenges: Recognize and address the unique challenges faced by women in balancing work and family responsibilities. Implement policies that promote gender equality and provide support for childcare and other family-related responsibilities. Enhance Managerial Support: Train managers to effectively support and manage remote teams. This includes developing skills in virtual communication, providing regular check-in and being responsive to employees' needs and concerns. Monitor and Adapt Policies: Continuously monitor the effectiveness of remote work policies and practices. Gather feedback from employees regularly and be willing to adapt policies to meet their evolving needs and challenges. By implementing these recommendations, organizations can improve work-life integration for their remote employees, enhancing their overall well-being and productivity. Future research should continue to explore issues on work-life integration among employees who work from home by using the instrument of Quantitative Methods.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights on work-life integration (WLI) among employees who work from home (WFH) in Malaysia reveals several significant findings. The sudden transition to WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic posed numerous challenges for employees, including increased stress and difficulty in managing work-life boundaries. The research highlights that while WFH offers flexibility and safety benefits, it also introduces complexities that affect employees' well-being and productivity. Employees reported difficulties in separating work and personal life, leading to increased stress and burnout. The study noted gender-specific challenges, with women experiencing more stress due to detailed-oriented work and balancing family responsibilities. Effective remote management and regular feedback mechanisms are essential to support employees and address their concerns. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of implementing supportive policies and practices to enhance work-life integration. Organizations need to prioritize employee well-being, provide necessary resources, and continuously adapt to the evolving needs of their workforce to foster a healthy and productive remote work culture.

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