

A “New Normal” During Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown: The Effectiveness of Work from Home among Malaysian Parents

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30880/ahcs.2021.02.02.005>

Received 14 August 2021; Accepted 10 November 2021; Available online 31 December
2021

Abstract: COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns meant many working parents were faced with doing work and family care at home simultaneously. To investigate the effectiveness of work from home (WFH) during lockdown, this study draws a subsample of working parents in Shah Alam (n = 362) conducted during lockdown in March 2020. Overall, majority of the respondents highly agreed that WFH is effective for them especially it gives the opportunities for the parents to flexibly manage their work, house chores, and kids. Contrary, this study reveals that mother and those who are self-employed are perceived that they are less effective in their work at home. Further, this study discovers that time flexibility and technology availability are positively influence WFH effectiveness. This signifies that the ability to control working time and the availability of ICT as well as technology tools helps for better balancing work with family life, which finally makes the work effective. These results are consistent with the Work-Family Border Theory and Work Resources Theory that argued time flexibility and technology availability granted for employees helps them in work-family balance and thereby enhance their work effectiveness. This study is significant to the office management in assessing the implementation of WFH platform as well in designing WFH standard operating procedure to ensure that working parents can work from home during the emergency state without compromise the work quality.

Keywords: Covid-19, Work from Home, Time Flexibility, Work-Life Balance, Technology Availability, Work-Family Border Theory, Work Resources Theory.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of people around the world. On 16th March 2020, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, officially announced that the Malaysian Government would implement the Movement Control Order (MCO) as a preventive measure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The MCO, effective from 18th March 2020 until 9th June 2020, was implemented under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases (1988) and the Police Act (1967). This MCO meant that Malaysians were subjected to “partial lockdown” whereby only necessary services were allowed to operate while others are to be withheld until further notice. While these measures have largely stemmed the spread of the virus, they have also had a huge impact on labour market participation [1] [2]. The government shutdowns of businesses and schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have led to serious disruptions in work, schooling, and family life around the world [3].

Given the magnitude of the pandemic shock, many offices and businesses scaled back or ceased operations in the regular workplace because of government-mandated closures and stay-at-home orders. Previously, work from home (WFH) approach has not been implemented widely [4], but currently, a ‘new normal’ resulting from pandemic COVID-19 has spread their wings beyond of normal boundaries for many sectors. Due to that, the parents have to balance their roles between two tasks; an employee that work from home and a full-time parent in managing their children in all aspects including monitoring their education. Thus, the COVID-19 has major consequences on working parents because some employees were able for a transition to remote work, however, for the others, performing work activities from home is impossible.

Work from home (WFH) demand is high due to the precious work-life balanced. According to previous studies, most of the related problem faced by the organization in implementing WFH includes limited access to resources, less conducive home environment as workplace, lack of focus among employees, lack of managerial control, and lack of performance monitoring [5]. With such problems, question arises as “does working from home is effective?” The aim of this study is to understand to what extent work from home approach is effective among parents due to the lockdown. Next, this study aim to identify the possible factors that may influence the effectiveness of working from home among parents in Shah Alam, Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

The work from home (WFH) concept refers to the ability to perform core job activities from home, using technology to communicate for various tasks and activities [6]. Working at home has conventionally been understood as a formal, employer-sanctioned flexibility or ‘telework’ arrangement adopted primarily to promote work–life balance [7]. Despite the widespread expectation that employees who make use of work-home practices will experience less work-home conflict [8], extant research found that work from home had interfered private life [9]. Work at home is now most commonly performed outside of normal working hours on an informal, ad hoc basis, to prepare for or catch up on tasks workers usually perform in the workplace [10]. While the ambiguity of ad hoc, work at home makes it potentially makes parents difficult to capture with their household matters, vice versa.

One thing that must be considered in the implementation of work from home is the realization of positive work effectiveness. Effectiveness in carrying out tasks and responsibilities will greatly affect the achievement of organizational goals. According to [11], work effectiveness is a measure that states how far the target (quality, quantity, and time) has been achieved. The greater the target achieved, the higher the level of work effectiveness. According to [12], work effectiveness is the utilization of a certain amount of resources, targets, and facilities that are consciously determined in advance to produce a number of tasks carried out.

The effect of work from home to the employees’ work effectiveness varies. Relatively, [13] observed that there are intangible benefits companies gain from WFH concept such as increase in moral

values of employees, optimal use of technology, and low salaries. Apart from that, [14] suggested that employees able to balance their family and work time schedules, which makes them happier and healthier. As such, they will be more committed to their job. In addition, the effect on the attitudes of the employees will be reflected in the quality of their job [14], whereby, in the end, the company benefits it. Several other studies also emphasized the increased in employees' autonomy [15], larger time-space prisms [16], increased creativity and job satisfaction [11]. Indirectly, there is also identified positive association of WFH to positive work attitudes. The positive relationship between the work at home arrangement and the quality of work has been found by [17], while [18] showed the association of work from home to higher job satisfaction, strong organizational commitment, and positive well-being.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the WFH concept during pandemic COVID-19, this study sought permission from a private and public companies which have the same WFH arrangement. According to the Work-Family Border Theory [19], and based on the Work Resources Theory [20], providing employees with the flexibility and control over the temporal and physical boundaries between their work and home domains should help employees' work-family balance and thereby enhance their work performance or effectiveness [21] [22]. Through the employees' self-assessment, the factors influencing effectiveness of WFH were determined. Specifically, this study conjectures that time flexibility, work-life balance, and technology availability may positively influence the effectiveness of WFH among working parents in Shah Alam. Next sub-sections discuss the evidence of previous studies regards to the influence of time flexibility, work-life balance, and technology availability towards WFH effectiveness.

2.1 Time Flexibility

Work from home (WFH) can be classified as flexible working environment. Time flexibility is flexible option in family-friendly concept which helps an employee to manage their time between work and life engagement [23]. More specifically, time flexibility or schedule control entails worker's ability to change the timing of their work (that is, to alternate the starting and ending times), and/or to fluctuate the numbers of hours worked [24]. Flexible working time is usually considered a family-friendly arrangement that can provide workers with the capacity to form and blend the boundaries of their work to allow a better fit to their family demands [25]. Previous studies suggested that time flexibility compromises several effects for the employees, including an improved work-life balance, greater autonomy, and improved morale [23]. In addition, employees with flexible working timing were able to manage their work and family responsibilities effectively, thereby allowing them to minimize work family conflict and to improve the performance at work and home [26]. Besides, many studies have suggested that time flexibility would help the employees to attain a better blend between work and non-work activities and help the organizations to motivate their employees [27]. [28] found that time flexibility helps employees to work in their most productive time by considering their circadian rhythm.

Such time flexibility can seem a good idea, but many people find it difficult to manage their time. Several studies have shown that certain individual with flexible working time are likely to increase work-family conflict rather than reduce it [25]. Perhaps, the work-family conflict could arise due to work-family boundary blurring and multi-tasking that can occur through flexible time working [29]. The potential burden from work and children's care while working from home can also explain work-family conflict, whereby parents might be more likely to spend more time with their children when working [30] or might not be able to maintain their work intensity through flexible working in times of increased care demands [24]. Another reason why flexible time working may not necessarily lead to a better work-life balance is because there is a tendency for employees to work harder and longer when working flexibly [31].

Based on the conflicting evidence, this study conjectures that flexible working time is one of the determinants in work from home effectiveness. Therefore, this study conjectures the following hypothesis.

H₁: There is a significant influence of time flexibility on the effectiveness of working from home among working parents

2.2 Work-life Balance

There is a thin line that divides the work and family in the work from home concept. Although the employees can be flexible, mixing work and family matters require extreme balance. Work-life balance, in its broadest sense, is defined as a satisfactory level of involvement or fit between the multiple roles in a person's life [26]. Work-life balance is defined as the extent to which an individual's effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are compatible with the individuals' life role priorities at a given point in time [32]. While according to [33], work-life balance is defined as the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities. [34] suggested that work-life balance can be achieved through five ways, namely as (a) balance time management; (b) having social life out of job; (c) balance work and personal life; (d) work-family balance (can meet and be responsible for the family while performing the responsibility in the company); and (e) able to stay involved in non-work interests and activities (still having time for hobbies).

Previous scholars have found direct positive association between work-life balance and job effectiveness [12] [35] [36]. This positive influence gives evidence that a better work-life balance leads to improved employee performance and job satisfaction [37]. In addition, work-life balance has potentials to implement and monitor the job effectiveness in order to improve employee motivation and job satisfaction, as well as reduce absenteeism and employee turnover [38]. Unfortunately, if not monitored, work-life balance might create even more difficulties [39]. According to [40], too many distractions for employees work from home due to they need to complete house chores, take care of children and their other relevant jobs which needs to be completed. This finally might affect their work-life balance.

Since the level of work-life balance is expected to change overtime, a question of job effectiveness arises in order to facilitate the employees for striking a proper balance between work and life. Based on the discussions, this study predicts the following hypothesis.

H₂: There is a significant influence of work-life balance on the effectiveness of working from home among working parents

2.3 Technology Availability

Some of the other factors which enabled WFH concept are the availability of technology [41]. In fact, some of the competing information technology multinationals companies such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon had come up with innovative working from home offerings so it had to remain competitive on the market. According to [42], the availability of technology is a set of knowledge, skills, and techniques which human transform and use machine products and services to meet their needs. High-quality video conferencing, direct message tools, and applications with real-time are multiple contributions have torn down the work cubicle walls, freeing up employees from the confines of the office and able to make WFH comfortable. This advancement of information technologies has made WFH as an effective and convenient method to produce a productive working environment without attending to physical job place [43].

Previous study suggested that the availability of technology for work at home during off-job time consciously or unconsciously connects people with work; thus, determining how such practice influences employee family life is imperative [44]. The biggest advantage of technology in the modern workplace is the ability to collaborate in real-time with colleagues and contributors from all over the world [45]. Regardless of time differences, this type of collaboration might not always occur during normal business hours. That is why it might be surprising to some that those who used ICT to their

work at home are more productive, less likely to quit and report better job satisfaction [46]. Besides, a study conducted by [18] found that employees who worked from home for a period of 9 months were 13.5% more productive than their office counterparts. Another survey showed that 91% of remote workers believed that they were more productive with advance technology when they worked from home [5]. Based on the preceding discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₃: There is a significant influence of the availability of technology on the effectiveness of working from home among working parents

3. Materials and Methods

This study employs a cross-sectional research design using quantitative approach (Kumar, 2019). Besides, self-administered questionnaire has been adopted to collect data about the underlying constructs proposed in the theoretical model [47]. The cross-sectional is used since the data was collected at one particular time across the selected respondents [48]. The use of such methods may gather accurate, less bias, and high-quality data.

3.1 Data Collection Procedure

The sampling frame of this study is working parents in the area of Shah Alam, Selangor. This study follows decision model table proposed by [49] to determine the necessary sample size because their sample decision model is claimed to be able to provide a good sampling decision. Since the population of the working parents in Shah Alam is more than 100 thousand, this study requires at least 384 sample size to establish as representatives of this study's population. Data was collected from respondents qualifying two pre-conditions: (i) the respondents are currently working from home; and (ii) has been married. Purposive sampling was used to collect the data of the respondents who fulfilled the qualifying conditions [47]. Data was collected through online questionnaire using Google Form. In distributing the survey through online, a links of Google Form is distributed through several social media applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. A total of 365 valid questionnaires were acquired from the online survey, making a return rate of 95% out of 384 targeted respondents. After checking all the survey received, there are three (3) surveys were partially completed and thus excluded from the total returned eligible for analysis. The final number of accepted surveys used in the data analysis was 362 surveys.

3.2 Survey Instrument

The survey questionnaire for the present study consists of three (3) sections. Section A contains of four (4) personal information questions that related to gender, age, marital status, and working sector of respondents. Section B focused on dependent variable to be tested which is WFH effectiveness adapted from [50]. Further, through a self-made questionnaire, Section C consists of items regards to independent variables namely as time flexibility, work-life balance, and technology availability. All constructs is measured on a five-point Likert scale for flexibility and it ease of composition [51] with the anchors of (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree".

As a preliminary analysis of the data collected, the reliability assessment of the scales was carried out by calculating the values of the Cronbach's alpha for each subscale separately. According to [47], reliability coefficient test indicates how well the items in a set which positively correlated from one another. Variables can be considered as reliable if the Cronbach's alpha value was set to 0.7 and above [52]. Table 1 depicts that all variables measuring WFH effectiveness (time flexibility, work-life balance, and technology availability) ranging from values 0.754 to 0.812. Besides, the highest Cronbach's Alpha value is obtained for the subscales of items in the WFH effectiveness construct ($\alpha = 0.812$). Hence, the internal consistencies of all constructs are considered acceptable since each reliability testing exceeds the suggested threshold.

Further, the assessment of normality of the metric variables in this study involves empirical measures of a distribution's shape characteristics (skewness and kurtosis). Table 1 shows that the normality assessment values for WFH effectiveness, time flexibility, work-life balance, and technology availability are between ± 2.00 as suggested by [52]. Therefore, this assessment confirmed that the data of this study is normally distributed.

Table 1: Reliability and normality assessment

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Skewness	Kurtosis	No. of Items
WFH Effectiveness	.812	-1.687	0.634	8
Time Flexibility	.754	-1.285	0.083	8
Work-Life Balance	.787	-1.467	0.238	10
Technology Availability	.765	-1.088	0.663	10

Next, multicollinearity testing was done to examine the relationships among the independent variables. Multicollinearity exists when the independent variables are highly correlated, with r value of more than 0.9 [52]. The correlation coefficient results between the variables are indicated in Table 2. All the independent variables show at least some positive relationship with the dependent variable, and the correlations between independent variables are less than 0.7. To further check for multicollinearity, a collinearity diagnostics test (tolerance and VIF values) was conducted. As shown in Table 2, the tolerance values are greater than 0.10 and the VIF values are lower than 10; hence, no multicollinearity problem exists [52].

Table 2: Pearson correlation coefficient and collinearity diagnostics results

	WFH Effectiveness	Time Flexibility	Work-Life Balance	Technology Availability	Tolerance	VIF
WFH Effectiveness	1					
Time Flexibility	.676***	1			0.567	1.762
Work-Life Balance	.427***	.598***	1		0.513	1.950
Technology Availability	.468***	.594***	.645***	1	0.517	1.936

Note: Correlation is significant at *** 1% level, ** 5% level and * 10% level, respectively, using two-tailed tests.

4. Results and Discussion

Figure 1a depicts that this study is participated by 50.3% of mother as compared to 49.7% of father. Next, Figure 1b shows that majority of the respondents are between 51 and 60 years old. They make up almost one-third (29.3%) of the total responses to the survey given. Further, majority of the respondents have one child (43.6%), followed by two children (31.8%) as shown in Figure 1c. In terms of occupational status of respondents (Figure 1d), majority of the respondents (38.4%) currently worked in private sector, followed by working as government servants (34.5%). On the other hand, there are 27.1% of the respondents are self-employed, such as running business.

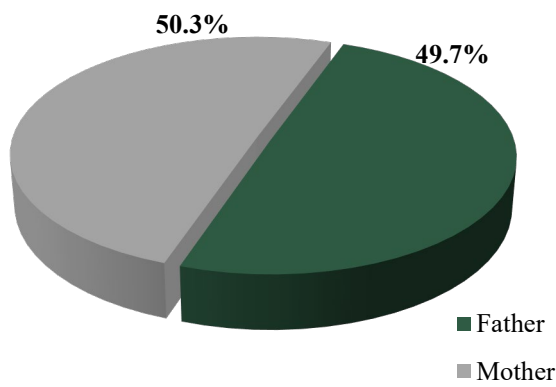


Figure 1a: Parents' role of respondents

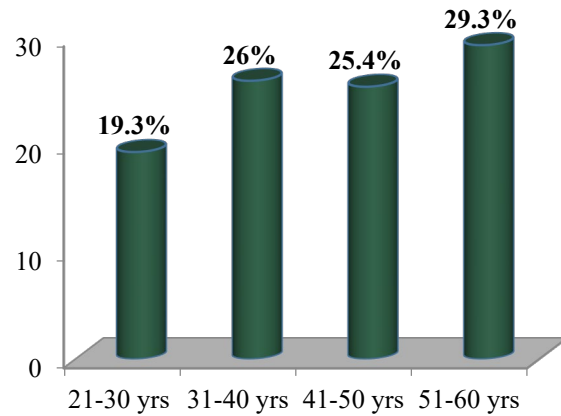


Figure 1b: Age group of respondents

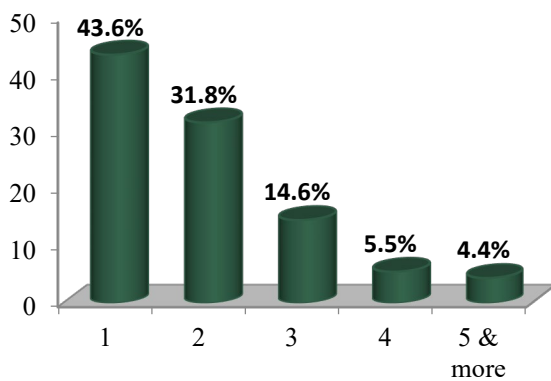


Figure 1c: Number of children

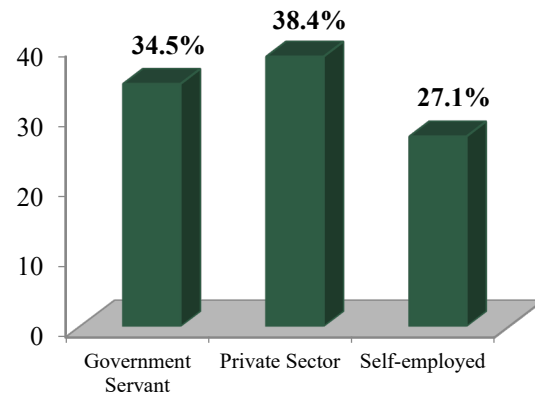


Figure 1d: Working sector of respondents

4.1 The Effectiveness of Work from Home

This section reports and discusses the findings of the study which relate to the extent of effectiveness of WFH approach among working parents due to the pandemic lockdown. One sample *t*-test was conducted to test whether the mean of overall perceived effectiveness of WFH is significantly equal to or different from a specified constant. Table 3 reveals the extent of WFH effectiveness perceived by all respondents participating in this study. Specifically, Table 3 shows the mean result of 4.057 for WFH effectiveness which indicates that majority of the working parents in Shah Alam highly agreed that working from home is effective for them. Overall, majority of the respondents were agreed that WFH is one of the best ways to work when an emergency case happen during pandemic and it can help working parents to manage their time with family because school has been shut down. Perhaps, they are able to manage between work, house chores, and kids.

Table 3: The extent of work from home effectiveness

	n	Mean	One Sample T-Test	
			<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i> value
WFH Effectiveness	362	4.057	122.161	.000***

Note: Result is significantly different at *** 1% level and ** 5% level, respectively, using two-tailed tests.

An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the extent of WFH effectiveness among respondents based on their different role as parents. The results in Table 4 show that there is a statistically significant difference in the scores of WFH effectiveness of working parents based on

different parents' role (t -statistic = 3.386^{***}), and it is significant at 1% level. The result indicates that father perceived that they are more effective when worked at home are compared to mother. Perhaps, fathers are more likely to focus on the work and less likely to be disturbed by doing house chores as well as care their kids as compared to the mothers.

Table 4: Work from home effectiveness shown by respondent based on different parents' role

Parents' Role	n	WFH Effectiveness		Independent Sample t -Test	
		Mean	SD	t -statistic	p value
Father	180	4.1688	0.5967	3.386	.001^{***}
Mother	182	3.9471	0.6479		

Notes: Results significantly different at the ^{***} 1 percent level and ^{**} 5 percent level, respectively, using two-tailed tests.

One-way ANOVA test was conducted to compare the extent of WFH effectiveness level for respondents based on different working sector. Table 5 reveals that there is a statistical significance difference in the WFH effectiveness level perceived by the respondents based on different working sector (F -statistic = 4.138^{**}). The result also shows that respondents work as government servant perceived that they are more effective when worked at home while respondents who are self-employed perceived that they are less effective in their work. This result is consistent with a finding by [53], whereby the impact of pandemic COVID-19 is more significant among micro-enterprises than its larger counterparts. Perhaps, those who are self-employed as entrepreneurs experienced business cancellation or closure and reduced income due to the losing of customers.

Table 5: Work from home effectiveness shown by respondent based on different working sector

Working Sector	n	WFH Effectiveness		One-way ANOVA	
		Mean	SD	T -statistic	p value
Government Servant	125	4.177	0.5962	4.138	.017^{**}
Private Sector	139	4.033	0.5835		
Self-Employed	98	3.939	0.7169		

Notes: Results significantly different at the ^{***} 1 percent level and ^{**} 5 percent level, respectively, using two-tailed tests.

4.2 Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Work from Home

This section reports and discusses the findings of the study which is to identify the possible factors that may influence the effectiveness of WFH among parents in Shah Alam, Malaysia. The results in Table 6 shows that the regression model ($F(3, 362) = 103.318, p$ value = 0.000) is significant at the 1% level, and the overall fit of the model is moderate with R^2 value of 68.1% of the variation in the WFH effectiveness. Approximately, 68.1% of the total variability in the WFH effectiveness is accounted for by the predictor variables collectively in the model. The other 31.9% may be due to other factors which not explained by the model.

With reference to Table 6, result shows that the association between time flexibility and WFH is positive ($t = 12.068; p < .05$) and it is statistically significant at 1% level. Therefore, this finding leads to the acceptance of H_1 . Perhaps, when the employees are given big responsibility of minimum supervision and monitoring for work at home and they are expected to perform with utmost confidence and compliance; this confidence gives the employees a positive aura to improve their work quality and efficiency. This signifies that there is no doubt that the ability to control when to work can be really useful for better balancing work with family life, which finally makes the work effective. This result is

consistent with previous studies where they suggested that when an employee able to manage their time and family effectively according to the time comfortable for them, it allows them to improve their performance at work and home [26], [27], and [28].

Table 6: Factor influencing the effectiveness of working from home

	Hypotheses	Std. Beta Coefficient	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i> value
Intercept			3.743	.000***
Time Flexibility	H ₁	0.620	12.068	.000***
Work-Life Balance	H ₂	0.014	0.251	.802 ^{NS}
Technology Availability	H ₃	0.108	2.012	.045***
Model Summary:				
R ² value				68.1%
Anova Results:				
F-value				103.318
Sig. value				0.000***
Obs.				362

Note: Association is significant at *** 1% level, ** 5% level, respectively, using two-tailed tests.

Further, as it can be observed from the results in Table 6, work-life balance were positively related to WFH effectiveness ($t = 0.251$; $p > .05$), but it is not significant. Therefore, H₂ was not supported. This result indicates that work-life balance does not contribute to WFH effectiveness. Perhaps, it is difficult to achieve work-life balance due too many distractions because the employees have to fulfil parents' role in managing the house chores, take care of children and other relevant jobs which needs to be completed. This result is in tandem with a finding by [40] as WFH does not significantly influence WFH effectiveness.

Finally, hypothesis H₃ was supported as technology availabilities does significantly influence the effectiveness of WFH among parents in Shah Alam ($t = 2.012$; $p < .05$), and it is significant at 5% level. This finding indicates that the development of technologies especially the information communication technology (ICT) allowed for more complicated tasks and activities typically performed in the public sphere to be performed within the private space of the home. This result is similar to a finding by previous studies such as [5], [18], and [46]. These studies suggested that employees are more productive with advance technology when they worked from home.

5. Conclusion

In the middle of the spreading of the Covid-19 virus that has been designated as a pandemic, work from home (WFH) concept can be a way to prevent the acceleration of transmission of the disease while continuing to run a business or job. This study highlighted the extent of WFH effectiveness among working parents due to the pandemic lockdown, and the result shows that majority of the respondents highly agreed that WFH is effective for them especially it gives the opportunities for the parents to flexibly manage their work, house chores, and kids. Contrary, this study clearly shows mother and those who are self-employed are perceived that they are less effective in their work while working from home. Further, this study discovers that time flexibility and technology availability positively influence WFH effectiveness. This signifies that the ability to control working time and the availability of ICT as well as technology tools helps for better balancing work with family life, which finally makes the work effective. These results are consistent with the Work-Family Border Theory [19] and Work Resources

Theory [20] that argued time flexibility and technology availability granted for employees helps them in work-family balance and thereby enhance their work effectiveness.

The findings of this study are helpful for the office management in order to know the extent of WFH effectiveness so that they might assess the implementation of WFH platform for the companies' policy. The policy maker should hence design WFH standard operating procedure to ensure that working parents can work from home during the emergency state without compromise the work quality. In addition, the employees itself may prepare self-guidelines to ensure that they can balance the work-life matters such as having high self-discipline, high self-motivation, time management skills, and excellence work organization while work at home. Allowing for separate workspace at home and setting rules for family can help to keep employee stay focus during work hours.

However, the findings need to be interpreted with consideration for its limitations. First, the responses of this survey are representative of working parents from Shah Alam, Selangor only. One area for further research might be to conduct the study using a larger sample and a broader geographical base from other distinct or states. Second, the selection for the factors influencing WFH effectiveness is not exhaustive. There may be other predictors that may contribute or be reasons of WFH effectiveness which might provide more insight. Thus, further research may consider to include other factors such as work environment, home environment, social influence, and management support to enrich findings in various perspectives. Third, the self-reported behavior on which this study relied are vulnerable to response bias. There is an uncertainty regarding the accuracy of responses because self-reports of WFH effectiveness may be less accurate. To reduce response bias, it is suggested for future research to use in-depth techniques applied to secondary data sources such as interviews or observations. This might help researcher to explore certain aspects that cannot be discover using survey questionnaire.

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