

Parity that eludes us for now

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While working from home may take some of the stress away, experts also warn that it could lead to longer hours spent at work.

Every now and then we see new research touting the benefits of work-life balance or the pitfalls of failing to strike that equilibrium.

Early this month, another such report appeared, this time by human resource consulting firm Randstad.

The report serves up some interesting statistics and revelations about human behaviour with reference to attitudes towards work and personal life.

For instance, six out of 10 Malaysians surveyed want their employers to help them improve their work-life balance by allowing them to work remotely or introducing a hybrid of remote and on-site work.

Yet, only 37% of them are prepared to make a sacrifice, specifically to take a pay cut, just to achieve that balance. There is little room for a quid pro quo.

There are many advantages to work-life balance, both employees and their bosses agree. However, they are on different pages on what exactly such balance entails.

Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) president Mohd Effendy Abdul Ghani pointed out that too many hours spent at work could be detrimental to health. Hence the need for balance.

Health experts agree.

Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president R Muruga Raj said an imbalance could result in chronic stress, leading to long term consequences such as diverse physical and mental disorders.

"These health problems include heart disease, various forms of cancer, endocrine disorder, substance abuse, alcohol related disorder, depression and panic disorder," he told FMT Business.

Some studies have shown that working more than 11 hours a day over a period of time can increase the risk of heart attacks, stroke and other stress related disorders, he added.

Apart from that, Dr Gerard Louis, counselling psychologist and dean of the faculty of behavioural sciences, education and languages at HELP University, said it could also lead to social, psychological and emotional problems.

"For instance, it can put a strain on personal relationships," he told FMT Business.

However, there are contrasting views on the nature of work-life imbalance and how to deal with the problem.

As far as Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) president Syed Hussain Syed Husman is concerned, work-life balance must also result in higher productivity.

"The answer is to create a happier and healthier work environment where employees are happy," he said. That effectively takes WFH (work from home) or a hybrid model off the table.

Under Malaysia's Employment Act, work hours will be reduced from 48 hours to 45 hours a week from Jan 1, 2023 in line with an International Labour Organization proposal for a 40-hour week eventually.

Scientific research has shown that the ideal workday is around six hours and people are most productive between 8am and 1pm, Muruga Raj said.

Many countries have already adopted shorter workdays with a focus on productivity while some companies are experimenting with a four-day work week. However, it may be a while before Malaysia does it.

The state of the economy is another factor that plays a major role in determining the viability of remote or hybrid work.

Even Effendy concedes that under current economic conditions, such concepts will not cut it.

"Workers are now prepared to put in the extra hours just to ensure that they are not the first to be 'chopped' in the event that human resource has to start trimming the fat," he said.

It's a matter of survival.

Even if we get past that fear of losing our jobs, the concept of achieving work-life balance through remote or hybrid work is a fallacy.

"People may think that working from home will give them that balance, but we have seen during the MCO (movement control order) that many of us ended up working longer hours," Louis pointed out.

"When you work at the office, you clock out at a specific time and that is the end of the work day for you. But when you work from home, you tend to spend more time at your PC, even after the official work hours," he added.

While some businesses have introduced hybrid work, a widespread acceptance of all-remote or hybrid remains, well ... remote.