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University Staff Happiness during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparative Analysis between Staff who Work From Office and Work From Home

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ABSTRACT: During the COVID-19 pandemic, most universities have requested their employees regardless academic or non-academic to either work from the office or work from home. Work from home allows employees to work on their own sweet time, within their own comfort of their home. However, Work from office has some limitations, including lack of convenience, the shortage of resources, improper infrastructure, etc. In order to investigate the employee happiness level during the pandemic, a group of researchers conducted a study by distributing a questionnaire via email to all staff. The objective of the study is to compare the level of happiness between those working from home and those working at the office and between acadecicians and administrators. It is hypothesized that employees working at the office are happier than those working from home. The study used an online questionnaire survey, which was distrubuted to all staff via email. A descriptive analysis was performed and the results indicate that those work from home have lower levels of happiness as compared with those work from office. The finding confirm the earlier assumption that employees working from the office are happier than those working from home despite the spike of COVID-19 cases. This study provides some implications on how to address the issues of happiness of those involved in work from home. Providing assistance and support can ease the challenges faced by employees. Future studies can verify the findings by investigating the issue among the general public. In general, employees are generally happier when working from the office than working from home. Academic staff and the administrative staff are equally happy working from home and at the office. However, they are happier than the administrative staff when working from home except for academicians holding administrative roles.

Keywords: *work from the office (WFO), work from home (WFH), COVID-19 pandemic, public university.*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit the whole world at the end of 2019 has significantly changed people's lives, and how we perform our routine work at the office. In most countries, work has been reorganized to allow people to work from home (WFH) (Mehta, 2021). However, some employees, especially those doing critical jobs, are allowed to work from the office (WFO) with stringent procedures; no social gathering, they have to be two meters apart from each other and cannot be confined for more than four hours. In addition, organizations have introduced a new work arrangement where only 40% of the total human resources can work in the office anytime. The others have to perform their work at home.

There are many challenges associated with WFH (Mehta, 2021; Sutarto, Wardaningsih, & Putri, 2022). Among them are first, lack of facilities makes accomplishing work more difficult than WFO. The staff must organize their workstation at home using their initiatives and limited financial allocation. It creates an additional financial burden for the staff to get the necessary work facilities. Second, WFH is more daunting than WFO as the staff has to juggle between office work and house chores and between the boss instructions and their children's requests. It creates additional pressure on them. Third, working alone at home limits the collaboration between peers, as the staff previously had while working at the office. Fourth, it affects the quality of work and time required to do the job.

For some academics teaching in a public university, WFH is a blessing since they don't have to travel to and from the office, every day and they don't have to attend classes that are normally located far from one another (Ibrahim, Rezali, & Yunan, 2021; Mahmud, Yee, Pazim, Mail, Mansur, Abdullah, & Boroh, 2020). They don't have to come early to the office to compete with others to get the parking space, and they can save a lot on travel expenses. WFO, on the other hand, risks them to virus infection, although all the standard operating procedures have been strictly followed. Most academicians work alone except for some who are involved in team teaching and WFO gives them ample time to engage in other academic activities. They can use unused travelling time to research, write and publish journal articles, and attend to students' needs more effectively.

Many researchers worldwide have studied the challenges and benefits of WFH and WFO during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ibrahim et al., 2021; Mahmud et al., 2020; Mehta, 2021; Wardaningsih & Putri, 2022). However, the effect brought by the COVID-19 pandemic is different from one organization to another and from one individual to another. Therefore, this study examined the academic and non-academic staff's happiness levels at one public university in Malaysia according to their different dimensions. It is expected that study's findings can provide sought-after evidence on the psychological conditions of the university staff so that appropriate actions can be taken to address the problems. The study's objective is to compare the level of happiness between those working from home and those working at the office and between academicians and administrators.

2.0 Literature Review

In this current situation, it is crucial to address the influence of work on the employee's life and well-being. Employee happiness has been associated with the outcomes of both work and individual lives. Although various research has been conducted to measure workplace happiness, most studies still focus on job satisfaction rather than employee happiness (van der Meer & Wielers, 2013). It is also contended that employees' physical and mental well-being is vital in determining a company's success (Bataineh, 2019). Happy employees are likely to be more committed and show high performance at work (Othman et al., 2018). However, the concept of employee happiness in the workplace is still not widely studied despite its importance for organizations (Joo & Lee, 2017). The current virus outbreak has caused a new challenge to the organization. Former employees who usually spent time at the workplace now need to adjust to new surroundings by working remotely like WFH.

2.1 Work From Home (WFH) and Work From Office (WFO)

The concept of Work From Home (WFH) has become a work arrangement alternative for any organization in the presence of COVID-19 (Mustajab et al., 2020). WFH can be defined as the concept of work that does not require the employee to go back and forth to central workplaces. Also known as 'homeworking', it is a settlement where employees carry out job-related tasks at home by using electronic media as tools for communication (Beauregard et al., 2013). WFH has been sufficiently studied in the past. A study by Rupietta and Beckmann (2016) reported a significant positive effect of WFH on employees' work efforts, while another existing study analyzed the impact of WFH on employees' productivity and found positive implications related to the variables (Bloom et al., 2015; Mustajab et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, telecommuting has also been linked to employee tasks and contextual performance (Gajendran et al., 2015). While WFH are said to affect private employees' work effort positively, productivity and contextual performance, how about the happiness of public sector employees? Would it differ from the level of satisfaction of those WFO? This study is meant to investigate academic and non-academic staff happiness according to its different dimensions at one public university in Malaysia.

2.2 Management Support

Management support is a factor that can reduce employee stress in the workplace (Romano, 2000). According to Cohen and Wills (1985), the supervisor is the most essential individual in an employee's workplace, having an extensive impact on their prosperity. Social support from supervisors has appeared to affect worker strain and fulfilment. Furthermore, it directs the effects of different work stressors on employee strain and fulfilment. Previous studies have highlighted that work resources and targeted support from supervisors and coworkers can boost work engagement significantly (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker et al., 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). But, how does management support determine employees' happiness in an organization? This study further investigates academic and non-academic staff happiness according to management support in one public university in Malaysia.

3.0 Research Methodology

A group of researchers conducted a study by distributing survey questionnaires via an online platform to all university staff and the process started in early September 2020 and ended at the end of the same month. A total of 12,143 responses were obtained, recording a response rate of 69%. The researchers developed the questionnaire items according to the PERMA model proposed by Seligman (2018),which comprises positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. Another dimension was included, infrastructure, since this dimension is also critical to affecting the staff happiness.

The questionnaire items were initially created based on the respondents' input from a focus group study conducted earlier in 2017. The KJ-Method introduced by Jiro Kawakita in the 1960s was used to develop, organize, and confirm the items that should be included in the questionnaire (Kawakita, 1986). After a thorough debate, review and test, the panels of experts approved the questionnaire and it is ready for use to gauge the university staff happiness level. For the COVID-19 version, some adjustments were made to the items to address the issue of WFO and WFH.

The data collected from the respondents were analyzed using descriptive analysis to examine the representativeness of the data (Peiró, Kozusznik, Rodríguez-Molina, & Tordera, 2019). Data analysis used Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 23. In addition, the mean score for each dimension of the happiness model was calculated to determine the level of happiness of the university staff according to each dimension. The test of difference (t-test) and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) performed to analyze the differences in overall happiness level and the differences in each happiness dimension when WFH and when WFO. Apart from that, the happiness level of the staff with support given by management was also presented. The results were presented in tables and figures to facilitate understanding.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

As shown in Table 1, 12,143 respondents (69% out of the total population of UiTM staff) participated in the survey, which was administered for a month starting from 1 November 2020 to 30 November 2021. The respondents could be divided into 5187 (42.7%) male staff and 6959 (57.3%) female staff. 5226 (43%) are academicians (lecturers) and 6917 (57%) are from administration.There are 28 faculties in UiTM, which could be divided into three field clusters. Out of 6563 respondents under the management of faculties, most are from Science and technology Cluster (63.1%), while the Business and Management Cluster and Social Sciences Cluster contributed 23.1% and 13.8%, respectively. UiTM are spread all over Malaysia, with the main campus located at Shah Alam and Selangor. The total number of respondents from the main campus are 5702 (47%) and the total number of respondents from other branches are 6441 (53%).

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

Variables	Description	Frequencies	Percentages
Gender	Male	5187	42.7
	Female	6956	57.3
Job positions	Academic	5226	43.0
	Non-Academic	6917	57.0
Field Cluster	Science & Technology	4138	63.1
	Business & Management	1519	23.1
	Social Science	906	13.8
Locations	Main Campus (Shah Alam & Selangor)	5702	47.0
	Branches	6441	53.0

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Happiness (WFH, WFO and Management Support)

Variables	Means	Standard Deviations	95% Confidence Interval
Work From Home (WFH)	73.7	16.38	(73.4, 74.0)
Work From Office (WFO)	74.9	14.42	(74.6, 75.2)
Management Support	73.8	14.23	(73.6, 74.1)

During the pandemic, the management allowed the staff to work from home or from the office ona rotational basis to adhere to the Standard of Procedures outlined by the government. Hence, this study measures the happiness level of the staff when working from home (WFH), when working from the office (WFO) and also staff's perceived happiness level with the support given by the management when WFH or WFO. Table 2 shows the overall average happiness level, standard deviation, and the 95% confidence interval. Staff are happier when working from the office (M = 74.9, SD = 14.42), 95% CI [73.4,74.0] than working from home (M = 73.7, SD = 16.38), 95% CI [74.6,75.2] . The average happiness level for the support given by management is 73.8 (SD = 14.23) with 95% CI [73.6,74.1].

Staff are happier when working from the office than working from home (Ibrahim, Rezali, & Yunan, 2021; Mahmud et al., 2020), most probably due to work facilities, office environment, and colleagues. Some required facilities such as office equipment, internet access and networking facilities, and references are unavailable at home. Furthermore, it is pretty challenging to transform people's mindsets regarding the concept of working from home. For some people, the office is the one place to work and home is the place to rest and clear the mind from thinking about work-related matters. When they have to engage in WFH, there is no more boundary on this matter; consequently, they feel unhappy with the arrangement. Another plausible reason is the absence of helpful colleagues while working from home.

Table 3: Results of T-Test Analysis for Happiness Level When WFH, WFO and Support Based on Gender

Variables	Means Female	Male	95% Confidence Interval	T-test (p-value)
Work From Home (WFH)	74.8 (16.4)	72.3 (16.2)	(1.85, 3.08)	7.888 (<0.001)**
Work From Office (WFO)	75.0 (14.3)	74.8 (14.6)	(- 0.34, 0.73)	0.720 (0.236)
Management Support	74.8 (13.7)	72.5 (14.8)	(1.78, 2.89)	8.251 (<0.001)**

** Significance at the 0.01 level of significance

As shown in Table 3, female staff (M = 74.8, SD = 16.4) as compared with male staff (M = 72.3, SD = 16.2) were significantly happier when working from home, $t(11147) = 7.89$, $p < .001$. There was no significant effect for gender on the average happiness level when working from office $t(11274) = 0.72$, $p = .236$, despite the score for females (M = 75.0, SD = 14.3) was higher than the male (M = 74.8, SD = 14.6). Regarding the management support given by the management, the average score for females (M = 74.8, SD = 13.7) was significantly higher compared with the male counterpart (M = 72.5, SD = 14.8) with $t(10492) = 8.25$ $p < .001$.

The female staff normally have to play double roles as employees and mothers to their children (Atteh, Martin, Oduro, Mensah, & Gyamfi, 2020). When there is an opportunity for WFH, they feel happier as they are closer to their family members. However, for those who have to work from the office, their satisfaction levels are similar to their male counterparts. Both the male and female staff are given equal treatment that contributes to a similar score on happiness. Regarding management support, female staff are happier than their male counterparts because of the opportunity to engage in WFH.

Table 4: Results of T-Test Analysis for Happiness Level when WFH, WFO and Support based on Job Positions

Variables	Means Academic	Non-Academic	95% Confidence Interval	T-test (p-value)
Work From Home (WFH)	76.5 (16.8)	71.5 (15.7)	(4.36, 5.58)	15.972 (<0.001)**
Work From Office (WFO)	75.2 (15.2)	74.7 (13.8)	(- 0.08, 1.01)	1.677 (0.047)*
Management Support	76.0 (14.6)	72.0 (13.7)	(3.41, 4.51)	14.319 (<0.001)**

** Significance at the 0.01 level of significance * Significance at the 0.05 level of significance

Table 4 shows that academic staff was significantly happier either when working from home $t(10197) = 15.972$, $p < .001$ or when working from office $t(9985) = 1.677$, $p = .047$ compared with administration staff. The score for academic staff (M = 76.5, SD = 16.8) was higher than administration staff (M = 71.5, SD = 15.7) when working from home. Scores for both Academic staff and administration staff when working from the office were (M = 75.2, SD = 15.2) and (M = 74.7, SD = 13.8) respectively. Regarding management support, the average score of the happiness level between academic staff and administration staff was also significant $t(10492) = 14.232$, $p < .001$ where the score was (M = 76.0, SD = 14.6) for academic staff and (M = 72.0, SD = 13.7) for administration staff.

For academic staff, WFH or WFO does not make much difference as long as they can conduct online classes (Ibrahim, Rezali, & Yunan, 2021; Vu, Hoang, Than, Nguyen, Dinh, Le, ... & Nguyen, 2020). They normally have teaching materials with them that can be used anytime and anywhere without the constraint of being in the office or home. Nevertheless, most documents and references are placed safely at their respective offices for administrative staff. WFH requires them to bring back critical document that requires extra care and vigilance. Concerning management support, the academic staff are happier than the administrative staff because all academic staff are required to WFH except those holding administrative roles. However, the administrative staff have to WFO on a rotational basis. This contributes to the difference in happiness levels between these two groups.

Table 5: Results of ANOVA for Happiness Level When WFH, WFO and Support based on Field Clusters

Variables	Means Science & Technology	Business & Management	Social Sciences	F-test (P-value)
Work From Home (WFH)	74.9 (16.5)	74.1 (17.7)	75.1 (17.2)	1.352 (0.259)
Work From Office (WFO)	74.8 (14.6)	73.6 (15.4)	72.8 (15.7)	7.292 (<0.001)*
Management Support	75.0 (14.4)	73.9 (14.7)	72.9 (15.1)	7.681 (<0.001)*

** Significance at the 0.01 level of significance

A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of three different field clusters (Science and Technology cluster, Business and Management cluster and Social Science cluster) on the average happiness level when working from home (WFH), when working from the office (WFO) and regarding the support received from the management. A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the mean happiness level when working from the office between at least two groups (F(2, 6086) = [7.292], $p < .001$) and also for the support received from the management (F(2,5763) = [7.681], $p = .001$).

Tukey's HSD Test for multiple comparisons found that the mean value of happiness level when working from home significantly different between Science and Technology cluster with both Business and Management cluster (p = 0.038, 95% CI = [0.05, 2.22]) and Social Science cluster (p = 0.002, 95% C.I. = [0.60, 3.26]). The mean value of happiness level for the support received from management is significantly different between Science and Technology cluster and the Social Science cluster (p = 0.043, 95% C.I. = [-2.25, -0.03]).

The findings indicate that the Science and Technology cluster is happier while WFO than the other clusters; the Business and Management and Social Science clusters. The most plausible reason is that the science and Technology cluster science and Technology cluster staff have to do lab work, operate machines, and are involved in other activities unrelated to the staff in the Business and Management and Social Science clusters. In terms of management support, they are also happier because they are allowed to go to the office and perform their functions as long as they can ensure their conformance to established SOPs.

Table 6: Results of T-Test Analysis between WFH and WFO based on Locations

Variables	**Means**		**95% Confidence Interval**	**T-test (p-value)**
	Main Campus	**Branches**		
Work From Home (WFH)	73.3 (16.4)	74.0 (16.4)	(-1.29 , -0.07)	-2.175 (.015)*
Work From Office (WFO)	73.9 (14.6)	75.8 (14.2)	(-1.90 , 0.27)	-6.997 (<0.001)**
Management Support	73.0 (14.1)	74.5 (14.3)	(-1.54 , 0.28)	-5.551 (<0.001)**

** Significance at the 0.01 level of significance * Significance at the 0.05 level of significance

Table 6 shows that staff at branches was significantly happier either when working from home $t(11147) = -2.175$, $p = .015$ or when working from office $t(11022) = -6.997$, $p < .001$ compared with those in the main campus. The happiness score for the staff at the main campus (M = 73.3, SD = 16.4) was lower than those at the branches (M = 74.0, SD = 16.4) when working from home. Scores for both Academic staff and administration staff when working from office were (M = 73.9, SD = 14.6) and (M = 75.9, SD = 14.2) respectively. The significant difference the average happiness level score between staff at the main campus and at branches was shown in the result showing $t(10492) = -5.551$, $p < .001$, where the score was (M = 73.0, SD = 14.1) for main campus' staff and (M = 74.5, SD = 14.3) for branches' staff.

The findings denote that the staff working at the branch campuses are happier when WFH as well as WFO. The most plausible reasons are that most branch campuses are smaller and the staff are closer to each other. Therefore, they support each other, regardless of the situation, during the hard and normal periods. Regarding management support, similar findings are recorded because of the size of the campuses (Vu et al., 2020). Since they are closer, management is more concerned about their staff well-being. As a summary, those working at the branch campuses are happier than those working at the main campus.

The nature of the work seems to figure in the differences in happiness levels among various cohorts. Difficulties in accessibility to work-related tools and information seem to be associated with relatively lesser levels of happiness among the staff. Alderfer's ERG theory is relevant to the taxonomy of needs (Arnolds, & Boshoff, 2002). The theory proposes that people have existence (E), relatedness (R) and growth (G) needs. Existence describes people's physiological and safety-related needs. Relatedness mirrors the interpersonal relationship needs that include social belongingness and esteem-related needs. Growth describes people's intrinsic desire for personal development, consisting of esteem-related and self-actualization needs. Although the theory focuses on work motivation, fulfilling these needs contributes to a person's happiness level (Caulton, 2012; Shin & Kim, 2021). Thus, the difficulties experienced while working from home can affect a person's ability to achieve his/her work goals. Thus, this hinders the fulfillment of his/her growth needs and causes lower work happiness levels.

The work community environment of the staff also contributes to their levels of happiness (Ribeiro, Lopes, Fernandes, & Diniz, 2019). The branch campuses' staff are generally happier working at the office or working from home than the staff on the Shah Alam main campus. It mirrors the generally closer work community ties and mutual support in the branch campuses that are located in less urbanized locations. The mutual work support may have led to fewer difficulties among the branch campuses' staff in achieving their growth needs.

The suggested association between happiness levels and the ability to achieve the staff's growth needs have implications in their work motivations. According to Alderfer's ERG theory (Arnolds, & Boshoff, 2002), continued difficulties in achieving growth needs would cause a person to shift to be motivated in achieving existence or relatedness needs with lesser difficulties. Thus, future work productivity may suffer at the university. Nonetheless, this may be mitigated by providing easier access to work tools and information to staff working from home.

The findings of the study suggest that employee happiness increases if the employees receive sufficient support from their colleagues and management regardless of whether they work from home or at the office. Support can be in the form or physical, monetary, emotional and psychological support. Second, female employees prefer to work from home because they have multiple roles: employee and mother. Third, academicians prefer to work from home because their job does not require being stationed at one location. They can conduct class from home, write journal articles or books at other locations, and collect data for research at data collection venues. On the other hand, administrators prefer to work at the office since they can get all the required facilities to meet their structured work requirements.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Staff are generally happier when working from the office than working from home. Although academic staff are equally happy working from home and at the office, they are happier than the administrative staff when working from home, except for academicians holding administrative roles. The Science and Technology staff cluster are more comfortable working at the office than from home. Staff working at the branch campuses are happier than Shah Alam staff when working from home or in the office. Staff's happiness seems to be related to the nature of work engaged. Difficulties that arise due to inaccessibility to the work tools and information appear to contribute to either relatively greater unhappiness working from home or relatively greater happiness working at the office. It is seen in the cases of the administrative staff who are relatively not happy working from home, and the Science and Technology cluster that is relatively happier working at the office. Theoretically, the results mirror the growth needs of Alderfer's ERG theory. The levels of unhappiness suggest difficulties among the staff to achieve their growth needs. Work productivity may suffer as staff shift to achieve the existence of relatedness need which has more minor hindrance to fulfilment. Better accessibility to work-related tools and information whilst working from home may mitigate the shift to other needs and subsequent productivity loss.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All the authors contributed equally to this work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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