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## **2. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF WORKING FROM HOME DURING CORONAVIRUS (COVID 19) PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY**

**Pravinah Marimuthu, Dr. Hemaloshinee Vasudevan**

**Abstract:** This paper aims to reveal the psychological impact of those employees who were stranded and forced to work from home during the Covid19 pandemic in Malaysia. The paper deliberates on the challenges the respondents faced during the unexpected movement control order imposed on the country in early 2020. A social survey was conducted among 104 working employees and data were then analysed to support this case study. The conclusion derived offer some strategies to overcome the psychological impact of working from home during a pandemic like Covid19.

**Keyword:** Coronavirus Covid19, working from home, psychological impact

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper begins by focussing on the case of an individual who had to work from home during the Covid19 pandemic that happened not so long ago in our country, Malaysia. Sara is a senior employee in a prestigious automotive organization in Malaysia. She has been working for 25years in this organization, and was employed as an associate at the Logistics Division where she enjoyed the privileges offered in her category. Sara is a very talented employee, and an asset to her organization. She is well-motivated, has a great personality, and is well-qualified in her educational background. Her experience and dedication had enabled her to reach her current position as a Logistics Division Manager. Sara embraces a very demanding job responsibility in the organization where she coordinates storage in the ports and plants, organizes shipment, operates the IT system to monitor costs and stock levels as well as prepare official documentation for regulatory bodies like the Malaysian Customs Department, the Transport Ministry of Malaysia, and the Inland Revenue Board of Malaysia. Sara also manages and mediates with colleagues to ensure that stocks are maintained and transported efficiently, besides liaising with

Malaysia's Regulatory Bodies in rectifying the compliance of policies for automobiles and parts. Sara works on weekdays, from 8.00 am to 5.00 pm; she also represents her organization by attending meetings at various places. Her constant outstanding performance is well recognized by the higher management.

The affliction of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) disease in early March 2020 had overwhelmed Malaysia, and shocked the whole world simultaneously. On 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, announced the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO). This was the first time it happened in Malaysian history.

. In compliance with the MCO, all facilities including government and private premises, with the exception of premises engaged in the provision of essential services, were ordered to cease operations, and remain closed. In the same breath, the Covid19 pandemic had also forced Sara's organization to comply with the lockdown policy. This compelled Sara to move towards the unique experience of working remotely from home for survival. This unexpected pressure had imposed a huge challenge on Sara psychologically.

## **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF WORKING FROM HOME DURING COVID19 PANDEMIC**

The case describes the psychological impact faced by an experienced automotive manager, Sara, during the unexpected Covid19 outbreak. The unanticipated pandemic had frozen most of the industries in Malaysia including the automobile industry. After a virtual meeting, Sara's organization decided to provide a new personal laptop for her to work from home. As an experienced staff with crucial responsibilities, Sara was now forced to perform her duties in a new norm. Sara then proceeded to obtain her new laptop which has been pre-set for her daily job from her organization. Upon reaching home, she immediately logged into her website to commence work. It was at this point where she discovered her first challenge - IT technical issues. She confessed that her privacy setting of the laptop did not allow her to access her company portal. The restriction caused by

the privacy setting, connectivity capability, and server limitations caused Sara much anxiety and restlessness to the point that she was unable to focus on doing anything. She tried numerous attempts to resolve the issue, but failed. Finally, Sara contacted an IT technician who was supposed to assist her in addressing all her software problems. Due to the accessibility to only phone-call instructions, Sara had many complications in unravelling all her IT issues by merely following the instructions. Sara had never faced such issues before. Moreover, Sara also tend to receive many telephone calls from her superior on a daily basis, thereby making it difficult for her to focus as she had to take telephone instructions, and confirmation for orders, followed by numerous other work tasks. Even though Sara was given a laptop to work from home, she was also facing time-challenge because her work from home experience was no longer confined to the 9.00 am to 5.00pm schedule. This means that she was on constant telephone conversations even though she also had to work on her laptop to facilitate operations. Sara seemed to be doing almost everything herself, with no assistance. Her experience indicated that she received calls as early as 6.00 am and as late as 12.00 midnight. During this Covid19 crisis, the Employee Act 1955 XII 60A on Hours of Work did not apply. Soon, Sara was overwhelmed with so much work and so much input from her organization to the point that it caused her weariness caused by so much distractions.

Moreover, Sara was also a parent with young children who required her attention since they too were confined to the home during the Covid19 pandemic. Sara confessed that the most difficult part of her responsibility was managing her children while also working from home. School closures impacted by the MCO had created the option of "distance learning" for school children. As a parent, Sara was compelled to take on the additional full-time teaching job while as a mother, Sara also had to cook and feed the children every meal. She also had to do all the household chores since she was also without a house help. Other challenges which were encountered by Sara included noisy environment, family presence and other minute details that required her attention. All of these reduced her level of focus, hence her productivity. As a result, Sara became more disturbed than expected of a work from home employee. She was shouldering all the job responsibilities,

such as preparing notifications and documentations for the suppliers, distributors, and regulatory agencies without any help. This had ultimately exhausted her tremendously at the end of each day. Clearly, the need to switch to different roles on a daily basis for Sara had caused her immense anxiety, exhaustion, and pressure. Following this, Sara also began to feel that the boundary between work and home life was blurred and invisible. Then Sara lost control; she did not really know how to balance her roles between work and home since this was almost everyone's first experience. To enable her to function well in operating her job responsibilities, Sara worked until late at night. This caused Sara more stress, exhaustion, and finally burn-out.

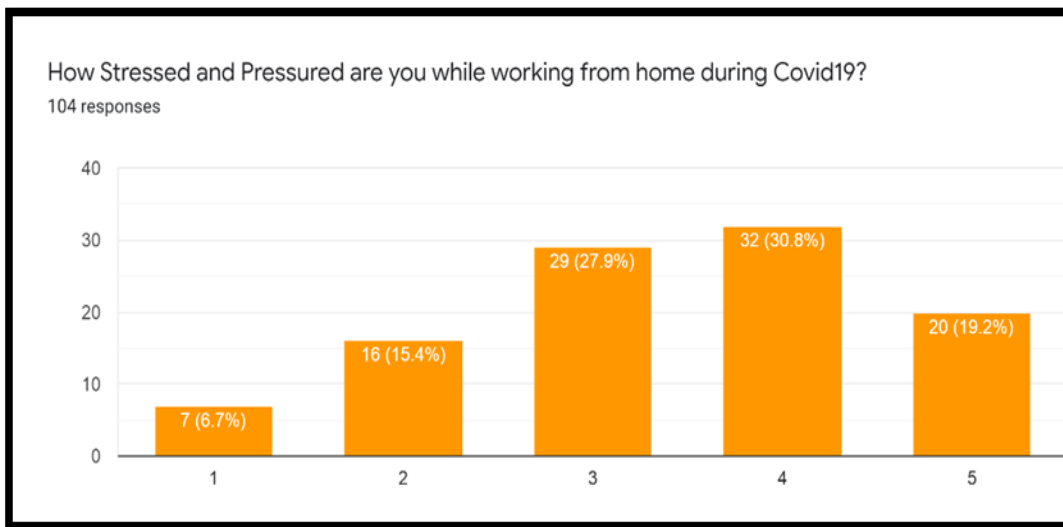
Her efforts at blending her work with home life had drained and depressed Sara. The condition worsened when Sara encountered a very bad network problem upon using her laptop. The circumstance was not only irritable, frustrating, but also discouraging because it obstructed her from performing her job well. As had been noted, Sara had been assigned with several tasks by the management, such as to submit several reports to several government agencies for approval. The poor network caused her immense problems. Throughout the day, the government portal server was not responding due to high traffic from all the industries. Since most of these submissions were also created by those working from home, all the Telco provider network services were under high usage. As a result, poor network connections prevailed throughout the country, causing many work-from-home employees much inconveniences, including Sara. Regardless, Sara still needed to find the resources to summarize and update her top management on a daily basis. Over the period of the MCO caused by Covid19, Sara was badly affected psychologically.

This incident is a case study of just one individual working from home, but it allows us to envisage the psychological impact of the MCO on a senior manager in the automotive industry, working from home during the Covid19 pandemic. In this context, it can be seen that distraction in performance due to unplanned and pressured situations contributed to the condition of the employee. In this case of psychological distress, the employee must notify the organization of the psychological impact encountered. In brief, the employee

was affected by: (a) IT technical Issues, (b) multitasking and distraction issues, (c) work-life balance issues and (d) network connection issues.

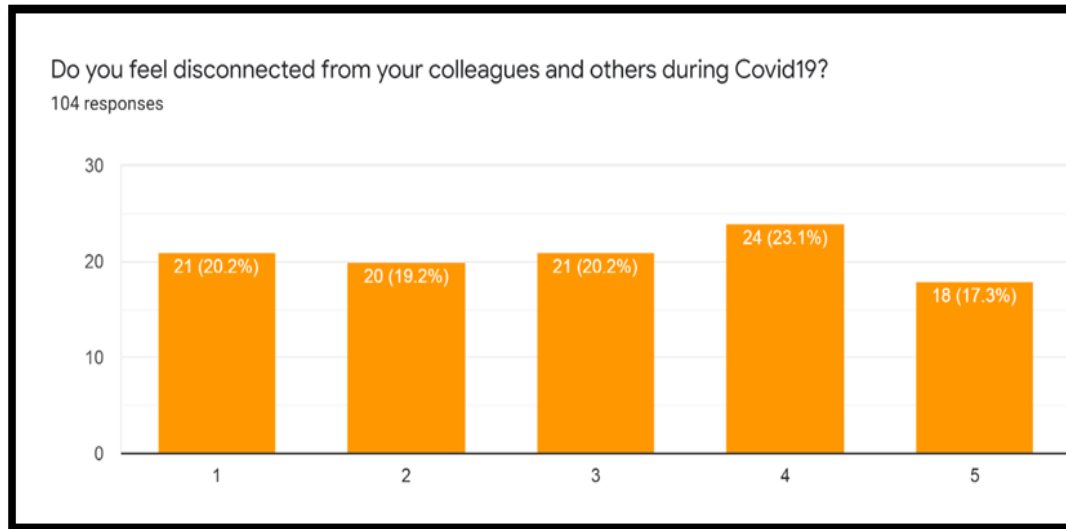
**Survey conducted on individuals working from home During Covid19 in Malaysia:**

To verify the condition of work from home employees during the Covid19 pandemic in the context of Malaysia, a survey of 104 respondents was conducted. The results developed are presented in Table I below



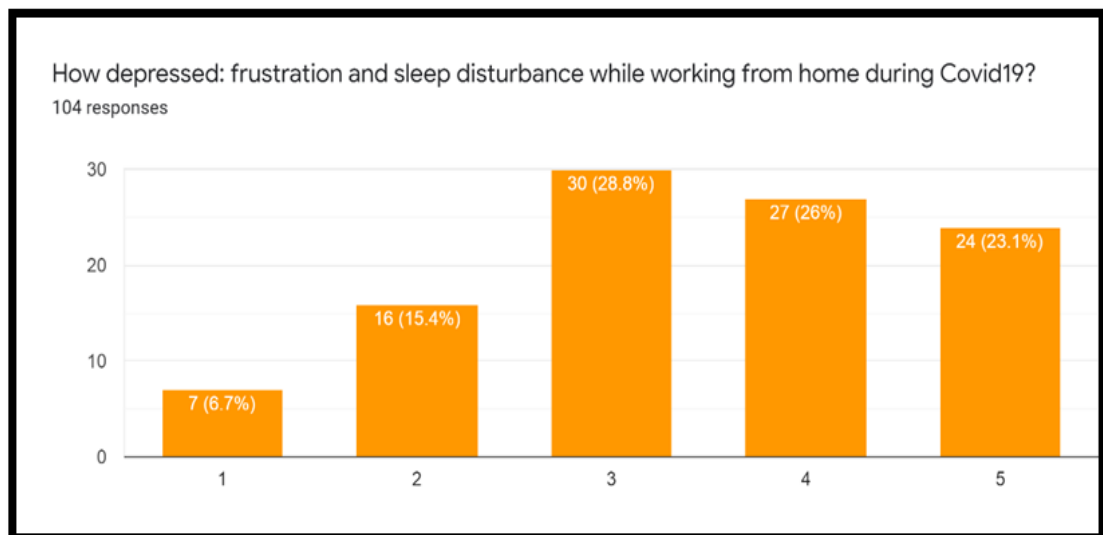
**Table I: Stress and Press during Covid19**

This survey findings support the fact of this case study. Among the 104 respondents who were surveyed, 81 of the respondents had rated 3 and above out of 5 for stress and pressure while working from home during Covid19. Another set of findings derived is presented in Table 2.



**Table 2: Feel disconnected from colleagues and others during Covid19**

Here, the respondents were asked about their feelings of being disconnected from colleagues and others during the Covid19. The respondents' other emotional responses are presented in Table 3.



**Table 3: Depressed: frustrated and sleep disturbance during Covid19**

The survey results reflected the respondents' depression level as employees working from home during Covid19. A total of 81 respondents had indicated feeling depressed,

frustrated, and had sleep disturbances during Covid19. This shows that employees working-from-home during the Covid19 movement control order had been psychological impacted by the pandemic.

**(Sources: Author's Own)**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Working from home may have seemed conducive for many employees prior to the Covid19 pandemic and the lockdown situation. However, this perception had changed in the current year when the whole world was affected by the Covid19 pandemic. It seems clear that many employees may have found working from home acceptable at the initial stage, but as the lockdown extended to months, many of these employees were also finding it exhausting to work from home. This situation had affected everyone in the world, and one of the causes for this could be the absence of a proper documented Standard Operations Procedure (SOP). It seems obvious that the challenges experienced by employees working from home had triggered many complications such as causing a loss in the work-life balance. Employees seemed to be at the beck and call of their employers constantly, without any time limit, thereby leading to various complications. Based on this, some recommendations which can help to overcome these challenges are provided in relation to this case study.

### **Technology:**

To work efficiently from home, it is vital for the employees to ensure that they have the technology that suit their skills and needs for their work responsibilities and tasks. There is also a need to provide technology support because in the case study, Sara had many issues to deal with despite getting some assistance from an IT expert. Employees may need to be given refresher courses in line with their work demands. By equipping the employees with adequate technology skills, problems arising from the work-from-home condition can be better resolved. This condition is best resolved before it intensifies, thereby saving time for everyone and reducing unnecessary stress and anxiety for all concerned. Besides the technology issue, it is proposed that organizations with IT



professionals be ready to share their tips on preventive actions with other employees so as to avoid the recurrence of similar problems. This will be more cost-effective, logical, and reassuring for employees. For instance, preparing employees with technology skills like Zoom, Skype, hangout or WhatsApp Group Video call as a measure to deliberate on work issues.

### **Work tasks**

In the case of being overloaded with work tasks, it is advisable for organizations to be prepared to segregate job duties adequately so that the workload can be shared among employees, and not overtask one employee unnecessarily. Organizations must also take the initiative to make work easier for employees working from home, such as providing more laptops to increase productivity, thereby reducing the psychological impact of the employees who need to work from home during a pandemic.

### **Planning**

It may be appropriate for employees working from home to develop a working schedule or plan so that they can commit themselves to their work responsibly. For instance, it would be more appropriate for employees working from home to schedule and divide their time between work and family life. To ensure the work-family balance issue, designated workspace at home should be arranged so that employees can mentally and physically detach their work and family life accordingly. The workspace barrier will ensure that they are not disturbed or distracted during work hours or alternatively when engaging their family, hence a better, balanced, and healthy lifestyle. There would be fewer interruptions from the family members during work, and office depending on meal time or family time. Work environment may be made more conducive by spacing it out so that duties are fulfilled without disturbances.

### **Network issue**

Network issues had arisen during the Covid19 lockdown (MCO) because its usage had exceeded the demand, hence it became a nationwide problem. Clearly, all the Telco

companies were unable to meet the demands. For this purpose, a daily dose of IGB free internet was offered to all, which indirectly created a higher intense usage in every household. Although this offer was a good set-off for the citizens, the timing had also created complications. It is therefore proposed that such offers be given for late-night working hours. This would allow employees working-from-home a smoother usage of the network. Some people have followed this strategy to complete their jobs with speed and efficiency. It appears that even government portals had managed to function uninterruptedly during late-night. The increase in Wifi and Cloud software systems have certainly made it easier for most people to "work from home" but for those not used to the system and condition, working-from-home can cause other complications.

### **Government support**

As a result of the outcome derived from this case study, it is recommended that the Malaysian government revise the current Employment Act 1955 60 with an additional clause in clause 60.A to protect those working from home employees. This amendment would be beneficial for future occurrences of having to work from remote places involving working people.

### **Employees**

Besides looking for a solution to resolve some of the current problems faced by those working-from-home, individuals who are employees working-from-home may also need to do something for themselves so as to stimulate productivity. For instance, stretching or doing yoga in between work hours. Exercising has been found to stimulate endorphins and serotonins so that employees are not feeling depressed or overwhelmed by their work demands. A regular exercise of 20 to 30 minutes a day would drastically reduce their rate of anxiety, as has been proven in many scientific studies (Erica and Jackson 2013), thereby eliminating any psychological and mental influences.

Additionally, employees working-from-home should also learn to say 'No' to their employers. They need to turn down further work demands if they know that they cannot manage further burdens because working-from-home should also be operated with

limitations, depending on the schedules and responsibilities. Employees could split their workload with other employees who has been provided with office laptop. Employees working from home must learn not to stretch their working hours. One of the greatest faults that employees working from home make is to not know when to stop work. These employees forget to draw the line between family and work, hence this can spill into their family life.

Employees need to take breaks from time to time so as to relax their body and brain, particularly those who work with laptops. Alternatively, employees may consider making their work space at home more conducive, either by decorating the work-space, or redesigning it somehow to make it look a little different so that it makes them feels like formally working. Practising these may add fun and liveliness to their work besides reducing their anxiety and stress.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Covid19 pandemic is a once in a generation experience, and it has certainly pressurized many people into drastic transformations. Undeniably, the situation had caused most organizations and employees to conduct their work differently, especially to work from the limitless boundaries of their homes for business survival during the MCO (Movement Control Order). Due to the stretch of time involved, the implementation of the MCO was one way to embrace many unexpected outcomes. The pandemic is the first of its kind throughout the world, and it had created many challenging issues, and caused many to suffer mentally and psychologically. In a nutshell, it can be said that this experience had opened our eyes to many issues one of which is the psychological impact caused to employees. Thus far, such a condition is an unexplored area, but this paper has provided a small window into looking at how one employee working from home had to endure various issues such as IT technical issues, sharing workspace with family, and having distractions while maintaining her mental wellbeing. Based on this input, it is therefore, worth acknowledging that such a situation needs more focus, and so a working outline which can offer the best of SOPs would be beneficial. Moreover, given that very little is

understood about its impact on home and family life, a more proactive approach would be appropriate. Generating a balance between work and home life is surely a goal worth pursuing. In retrospect, employees also need to build their respective framework and patterns for working from home so as to lessen any constraints imposed by their work-from-home demands. It seems clear that if precautions were not taken to mitigate the onset, the psychological impact may persevere causing more employees to suffer from their mental wellbeing. Nonetheless, further studies are necessary to make such assessments and the application of the proposed strategies.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest affecting the publishing of this case paper because the respective peoples' names and organizations were not mentioned.

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