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4. COVID-19: IMPACT OF MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER (MCO) ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The world has been shaken by the COVID-19 at the end of 2019, affected by the deaths and diseases. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people's lives as well as businesses. In this case, Malaysia also exposed to the Malaysian government rules and procedures by implementing the Movement Control Order (MCO) to resolve the COVID-19 pandemic. Most people were affected during the MCO, especially in the employment sectors, both employees and employers. Not just of the economy affect, but it also concerned the outbreak of diseases and deaths during this MCO and COVID-19 pandemic. Mainly, the issues are about business closures, salary cut, loss of jobs, financial problems, distancing from loved ones, inability to perform one's duty, domestic abuse, and also loan repayments that people were unable to resolve. In these circumstances, everyone fully attempted with stress, pressure, mental torture and health problem that create many uncertainties and insecurities during the MCO period. This case discusses the impact of the MCO on the employees' and employers' mental in Malaysia and how to overcome the mental health issues.

JEL Classification: M190

Keywords: Movement Control Order, MCO, COVID-19, pandemic, mental health, employees, employers, government

Prologue: Below are two examples illustrating two actual cases that had been told to the authors

I. INTRODUCTION

Situation 01: Eric (pseudonym) is an engineer at one of the pioneer companies in renewable energy in Malaysia. He had just got married last year, and they were expecting their first child in May 2020. Eric has been working with the company for almost five years, but over the last two years, the company has been suffering from some financial difficulties due to the top management's internal problems. Salaries and compulsory contributions, such as the Employee Fund Provident (EPF) and The Social Security Organization (SOCSO), have been delayed often, Eric and his colleagues to feel insecure. As of March 2020, Eric and his colleagues have not been paid their last three months' salaries.

Situation 02: Riana (pseudonym) is an entrepreneur who runs a catering business. Her company has received tenders to supply food to several child care centers around Putrajaya. Over the past 4 years, her business has been doing well since the child care centers in Putrajaya have grown rapidly. Despite the fact that her business is not a

multibillion business, her monthly income is sufficient to support her family as a single mother with a son. She was also able to employ an assistant to help her with her food preparations for the child care centers. Her assistant is paid daily wages based on the days she is called to come for work only.

1.1 THE SITUATION OF THE MENTAL HEALTH OF EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS DURING THE MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER (MCO) IN MALAYSIA

Since the early part of December 2019, the world has been engulfed by shock, disdain, fear, pain, insecurity, worries, and depression, since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a type of coronavirus that has never been identified before. COVID-19 can cause respiratory infections including pneumonia, fever, sneezes and dry coughs. People can acquire the COVID-19 infection through close contact with others who suffer from the viral symptoms including coughing and sneezing and also those without the symptoms. In general, the virus is transmitted from human to humans or from humans to animals via air droplets.

On March 11 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Almost every country in the world was under its mercy with some countries experiencing more deaths than others. As of the middle of April 2020, the total number of cases worldwide has exceeded 2 million cases, with a record of over 160,000 deaths. At present, there are no specific vaccines or treatment for COVID-19 although there are some on-going clinical trials evaluating potential treatments. As a prevention method, almost all countries in the world are experiencing a total lockdown or self-quarantine as a measure to avoid the outbreak.

On March 18th 2020, the Movement Control Order was implemented by the Malaysian government throughout the whole country as a preventive measure to flatten the curve of the COVID-19 pandemic. This move was officially declared by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, under the restricted activities order of the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988, and the Police Act 1967. To put this mandate into force, the government and the police stressed the general prohibition of mass movements and gatherings across the country, including religious, sports, social and cultural activities. All houses of worship and business premises need to be closed except for supermarkets, public markets, grocery stores, and convenience stores selling everyday necessities. The closure was also extended to all kindergartens, government and private schools including daily schools, boarding schools, international schools, primary and secondary schools, pre-university institutions, all public and private higher education institutions, and skills' training institutes, nationwide. All government and private premises, except those involved in essential services, were also ordered to be closed. All Malaysians were prohibited from travelling abroad while all foreign visitors and tourists were not

allowed to enter Malaysia. For those who had just returned from overseas, they were required to undergo a health checkup and to do a self-quarantine of 14 days.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a medical phenomenon; it is also an economic downfall for many countries throughout the world. When the government of Malaysia enforced the Movement Control Order (MCO), most businesses were affected. Many of the company's activities could not be carried out as planned. For companies that were categorized under essential services, operations were allowed, but activities were limited in terms of time and movement of the employees. Obviously, the biggest impact being felt by companies that do not belong under the essential services' category had to close their offices and business premises. Many of these companies suffered huge losses, and their cash flow was disrupted. While there were various initiatives provided by the government of Malaysia to help these companies in terms of financial supports, many were still unable to survive.

“In the middle of April 2020 during the MCO, Eric’s employer had issued an unofficial memo via the communications system (WhatsApp’s Messengers) informing the employees that the company could not afford to pay the employees' salaries anymore, and the management has decided to shutdown the company. Eric was a bit confused as there was no formal notice issued by the HR Department, except for an unofficial memo order. As the country is still in the midst of the MCO enforcement, it is difficult for Eric and his colleagues to meet their employer. Eric would also be unable to seek advice from the Department of Labor since all government offices have been ordered to close during the MCO. Meantime, Eric continues to seek new jobs through the job search engines, such as JobStreet, JobsMalaysia, and other platforms. Eric has to get a new job as soon as possible because his baby would be born soon. Although Eric knows of the country’s situation during the MCO, and that the world’s economy has also been equally affected by the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, it is hard for him not to feel stressed, and finally, he fell into a depression. Each night he struggled to sleep; he had lost his appetite; he is easily triggered to anger, and he is beginning to isolate himself from his family members.

Meanwhile, Riana has been losing her source of income for a whole month. From 18th March 2020, the government has enforced the MCO four times until further notice. Since the call of the MCO, Riana’s entire business operations had ceased completely. Due to an absence of food supplies to the child care centers, and a loss of income, Riana also had to temporarily suspend her assistant during the MCO. For Riana, this may make it easier for her assistant to find another job because Riana herself was unable to bear the cost of her assistant’s salary when her business stopped operating. Her savings may only last another two months. Should the MCO be extended further, Riana would be further confused because she is not certain of what strategies to take in order to ensure that her business operations can start again. Riana has been staying at home with her son for more

than a month already and her situation is causing her to worry even more about her business problems until her emotions have become unstable. She is beginning to neglect her son, her appearance, her home and often, she is scolding her son harshly for small mistakes. She is feeling very distressed during this MCO situation.

From the two cases of Eric and Riana, we can imagine how the MCO predicament had impacted on the mental health of the respective individuals, especially those with business operations like Riana, and those working for others, like Eric. Previous studies, "Perceptions of work stress causes and effective interventions in employees working in public, private and non-governmental organizations: a qualitative study" published in BJPsych Bulletin (2016) had noted that there is a relationship between job security and employees' psychological well-being. One of these studies was conducted in 22 countries in Europe in 2014, and the result showed that work-related insecurity affected the mental health of the employees. They suffered from symptoms like headaches, anxiety, depression, and many more. This condition of the mental health and its effects not only applies to employees who have lost their jobs, but also employers who had to close down their businesses. Mental health illnesses also affect those who have to work from home due to the restrictions of their movement to the workplace. One's wellbeing is connected to one's health and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), defined health as: "Health is a condition that includes physical, mental and social health and not just the absence of disease". Thus, according to Malaysian Ministry of Health (MOH) (2012), mental health is the condition in which individuals realize their potential to respond to stress, to work productively, and to contribute to society. Mental health also refers to how one thinks, feels and acts, how to deal with problems, how to overcome these problems, and how one interacts with others. Some of the most common mental health problems include depression, panic disorder, general anxiety, compulsive obsession, compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and sleep disorders (MOH, 2012).

2.0 CHALLENGES THAT AFFECT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS DURING THE MCO

The enforcement of the MCO since March 2020 had created several significant impact on the people, especially the employees and employers, some of which are connected to mental health problems. It appears that the MCO had affected both the employees and the employers negatively in terms of their finances, and their job securities. During the MCO, the prohibition of business operations had caused a huge drop in income for all involved. While some companies were already facing financial difficulties prior to the MCO, the added COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem even more, causing some employees to have no jobs and no income and yet they had higher expenses due to the stay at home requirement. Although some companies and their operations were allowed to run, this was permitted on a limited time only, again contributing to a drop in income. While businesses were slow, employers were still expected to bear all the costs, such as

employee salaries, business and operations expenses, various bills, rentals, employees' EPF contributions, and many more. As the world's economy collapsed, some employers were also unable to sustain their businesses such as hotels, travel agents, hair salons and barbers and small-time hawkers. Consequently, these employers had to take the decision to close down their business operations and to retrench their employees. Other businesses that were still operating on a small scale chose to cut their employees' salaries. To the employers, terminating the employees during the MCO was not an easy procedure because they need to provide compensations as well as follow certain procedures that had been set by the government. This process was expected to consume a lot of time, with a lot of procedures since many of the government offices were also closed during the MCO. In some cases, the employers chose to implement the work from home basis for their employees. This also means that they had to monitor their employees' performance remotely. In the case of employees working from home, it appears that their work climate may not be conducive such as a lack of facilities, poor work condition, family disruptions and so on, all of which can affect their work performance, and this could lead to bad results for their employers and companies. Companies may also lose their customers when their companies are not performing as expected, thus the MCO has a huge impact on the employer-employee chain.

It was observed that the biggest impact caused by the MCO on employees who were with the private sector was their job security. Many were afraid of losing their jobs as their companies sized down or ceased operations. Others felt uncertainty because their current employers now have the power to retrench those, they are less favorable of, and alternatively, there will be salary cuts due to the world's economic collapse and recession. Many feared a dismissal, hence the difficulty to find a new job. For those employees working from home, they would be working under conditions that are unfavorable hence more discomfort and more stress. As for employees working with companies that fall under the essential service's category, they are still required to go to their workplace to work, but unlike before, they too would also be facing many difficulties such as a lack of support, time restraint, movement restraints and also fear because their exposure to work also means that they would incur risks of contacting the COVID-19 disease.

Other employees are those who are also parents with school-going children or children placed under childcare centers. Since the MCO was implemented, they would be further stressed because apart from their need to work, whether at home or to be at the workplace, their children and their welfare becomes an issue. There may be no one available to care for the children while they attend to their work; hence their insecurity about their work escalates. This is particularly true of those attached to the aviation, travel, and hospitality industry as well as those whose workloads have increased due to the outbreak, such as nurses, policemen, medical health officers, and other frontline workforces. To the latter group of employees, the increasing workload is significant as the shortage of labor builds up. Thus, the risk of being exposed to the disease is even

higher for these key employees. As can be anticipated, many of these employees need to be at the forefront of dealing with the disease that they would be unable to see their close family members, such as their spouse and children. Based on this, one can easily comprehend how the MCO had created a new way of working for all employees, and employers. As a consequence, the MCO bears a very strong and influential impact on everyone, thus the stress and pressure of these people are expected to increase.

While the self-confidence and motivation of the employees during the MCO had degenerated, work productivity is also expected to have declined, hence the possibility of businesses declining. From the perspectives of the employees and employers, there are various issues to bear, and they are mainly negative ones, for instance, the demand of the workload and the other connected factors can cause the people involved to suffer from various mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, stress, denials, anger, and so on. If not addressed, this issue could cost the nation a significant amount of money. A study, "Workplace mental health – The Business Costs" provided by Relate Mental Health Malaysia (RELATE) estimated that mental health conditions among employees may be costing the country as much as RM14.46 billion a year. The MCO requirement incurred by the COVID-19 outbreak, has certainly contributed to the escalation of mental health issues among the people, both employees and employers. When both parties in such situations as described above constantly worry, and become engrossed in their gloomy future especially when thinking about their financial situations, business drops, job losses, unemployment, fear of being infected with the COVID-19, work-related discomfort, change of job roles, family problems, children, food, violence, abuse and so on, the respective individuals can certainly become depressed. This could create symptoms such as eating disorders, isolation, and various other behavior changes. Others may display a change in demeanor, from being happy to sad, from gentle to aggressive, followed by physical symptoms such as fatigue, headache and muscle aches. While many of them may treat these symptoms as unimportant and possibly even ignore them, they are mental health issues that need to be addressed. The reason these symptoms are overlooked is because many of us are lay persons with little knowledge about mental health issues.

2.1 GOVERNMENT SUPPORT AND PREVENTION MEASURES TAKEN BY EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS IN ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS DURING MCO

Mental health problems among employees and employers during the MCO are not a small issue. This is because referring to WHO (2003), people who are working but are suffering from mental health symptoms and are yet untreated, can cause huge losses to the company and the country. This implies that all parties concerned such as the employees and the employers should take appropriate measures to address mental health problems, particularly at an important time like the MCO.

Employers facing various issues should not have to wait for the guidelines, policies or laws provided by the government, in their effort to curb mental health issues running within their own organizations. In fact, all employers need to have their own strategies that can be used to address the issue of mental health among their own employees during the MCO implementation. In particular, they could further enhance their current strategies by accommodating them to suit the employees' needs during the MCO. Employers need to monitor their employees' mental health by providing on-going support so as to improve their employees' personal flexibility, and to help them cope with their pressures. Every manager needs to know how to identify employee problems and provide assistance to their employees before it is too late. In the MCO condition, employers can increase their level of mental health support by providing online courses on mental health knowledge. They need to ensure that their employees are educated in understanding all the symptoms that can lead to mental health problems. This information would make it easier for the employees to take the appropriate and relevant action when they themselves are experiencing such symptoms. In addition to the motivation and on-going monitoring of mental health, employers also need to ensure that all facilities and support tools for employees are complete while they work from home during the MCO enforcement. Employers also need to constantly monitor and educate their employees so as to ensure their capability of adapting to the tools or support system provided before implementing the work from home culture. Doing so can reduce further pressure while they work under unfavorable circumstances. In return, employees need to regularly communicate with their employers in the event of work-related problems. Alternatively, they need to communicate with government-provided assistance if personal issues' affecting their work performance also affects their wellbeing. They should frequently discuss their issues with their colleagues so as to alleviate any unforeseen problems. During the MCO enforcement, employees and employers need to work together to ensure that the work completed is of the same quality before the MCO was implemented. This shows good work standard while working under different circumstances. If the employees provide the cooperation to the employers in such circumstances, the company has a higher possibility of being sustainable, thereby reducing the employer's difficulty whilst also ensuring job security for the employees.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 cases in Malaysia from early January 2020, the Malaysian government has continuously provided help and support in every aspect. This includes financial and moral support to all Malaysians especially those below a certain level of earnings. As an initiative to assist employers and employees affected by COVID-19 during the enforcement of the MCO, the government had approved a number of schemes such as COVID-19 Economic Stimulus. Amongst the help and assistance provided was the deferral of tax payments for certain sectors such as travel, airlines and hospitality, deferment of personal loan payments and corporate loans, and others. The government also offered some wage subsidies for employers to continuously pay their employees'

salary during the MCO. The government also made available, an additional fund to assist the SMEs by providing low-interest loans through the Special Relief Fund (SRF). They also provided assistance to those who had lost their income during the MCO by providing food and cash hand-outs to certain households. This effort of the government helped to reduce the burden of the employees and employers in Malaysia, hence a reduction to their mental pressure. Authorities such as the MOH, and the National Security Council (NSC) as well as the media were also noted to be involved. For instance, by always reporting on transparent news, and by promptly taking action on any news that may be affecting people's emotions, especially the news of the spread of the pandemic that had worried employers and employees who still needed to work in their workplace. The government's assistance was not confined to financial aids and food supplies only. In fact, the government also extended its concerns to the mental and emotional health of those affected by the implementation of the MCO. For example, the government prepared a special and complete guideline for management to use at the workplaces during the COVID-19 outbreak. The aim was to reduce worries among employees and employers, and to ensure that no infection of the virus occurs while work was being carried out at the workplace. The government also activated helplines for the general public, such as emotional and psycho-social COVID-19 helpline, the COVID-19 Special Counseling Service helpline, and the MyCareCov19 helpline. These helplines were for counseling clients on topics related to family, community and spiritual services, and also as a liaison for domestic violence and abuse issues.

3.0 CONCLUSION

Mental health problems among employees and employers during the MCO implementation should not be taken lightly. With the continuing spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increasing number of infected cases of the virus, the MCO duration imposed by the government may take longer than expected. Throughout these hard times, all parties need to take rational steps to ensure that their mental health is in a controlled condition. Previous studies "The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence" published in Rapid Review (Feb, 2020) have shown that conditions in quarantines can lead to an increase in mental health problems. If an individual is exposed to persistent health problems, and is unable to handle stress, the individual may develop mental illness. There is a clear connection between life's stress and mental illness. The risk for mental illness is higher among those with a family history of mental illness, psychological issues, and certain personality problems due to chemical imbalances in the brain and brain abnormalities. As a result, the individual may eventually develop diseases, such as depression, Bipolar Disorders and Schizophrenia and so on. Many mental patients tend to refuse treatment due to shame, and also because mental illness does not seem like a sickness. Most mental patients prefer to keep their problems to themselves until the pressure is finally under control. Other patients may act harshly by injuring

themselves. The individual's mental condition becomes worse when he/she becomes overburdened, pressured, and have a maximum level of anxiety.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The discussion question for this study includes:

1. What is the cause of mental health problems among employees and employers during the MCO in Malaysia?
2. What is the effect of the MCO on the mental health of employees and employers in Malaysia?
3. How does the Malaysian government control the mental health problems among employees and employers during the MCO?
4. Based on your experience, explain how your organization prevented mental health problems in the organization.
5. Comment on the level of effectiveness of the mental health assistance provided by the government in Malaysia.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest affecting the publication of this case study because the respective people's names and organization were not mentioned in the case study.

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