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 <https://doi.org/10.55463/issn.1674-2974.51.1.1>

Remote Work Policies as a Critical HR Practice to Navigate through the COVID-19 Pandemic and Improve Job Performance: A Review Article

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Received: October 16, 2023 / Revised: November 10, 2023 / Accepted: December 13, 2023 / Published: January 31, 2024

Abstract: Remote work has lately become the norm in most countries during COVID-19. Since it was an unexpected movement forced by government rules and regulations to control the situation, followed by most organizations to maintain sustainability and ensure continuity, organizations have found it complicated to establish and develop a telecommuting policy to monitor the new work environment norms. This study aims to critically evaluate the impact of remote work policies on employee job performance, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and investigate the challenges and opportunities presented by remote work in the Malaysian context, assessing how organizations have adapted to this unexpected shift in work dynamics. Through this exploration, this study seeks to bridge a gap in the existing literature by focusing on the effects of remote work policies rather than remote work itself on job performance and organizational outcomes. This review revealed that the concept of remote-work policies is complex, and there is a conflict with the results of previous studies. However, the nature of the organization may determine the direction of all issues related to remote work policies.

Keywords: COVID-19, remote work policies, employee job performance.

遠距工作政策作為應對新冠肺炎大流行並提高工作績效的關鍵人力資源實踐：評論文章

摘要：最近，在新冠肺炎疫情期間，遠距工作已成為大多數國家的常態。由於這是政府規則和法規為控制局勢而強制採取的意外行動，以及大多數組織為了保持永續性和確保連續性而採取的行動，因此組織發現建立和製定遠距辦公政策來監控新的工作環境規範非常複雜。本研究旨在批判性地評估遠距工作政策對員工工作績效的影響，特別是在新冠肺炎大流行期間，並調查馬來西亞背景下遠距工作帶來的挑戰和機遇，評估組織如何適應這種意外的轉變工作動態。透過這項探索，本研究旨在透過關注遠距工作政策而不是遠距工作本身對工作績效和組織成果的影響來彌補現有文獻中的空白。該綜述表明，遠距工作政策的概念很複雜，並且與先前的研究結果有衝突。然而，組織的性質可能決定與遠距工作政策相關的所有問題的方向。

关键词：新冠肺炎、遠距工作政策、員工工作績效。

1. Introduction

A strong movement to remote work caused by the COVID-19 epidemic is unprecedented, and companies need to cope with the changes that have taken place in the work environment to enhance job performance [2]. Remote work policies refer to a set of roles, procedures, and planned regulations that guide the work of employees working far from the office and organize the process for effective achievement and productivity of employees working from home. Remote work policies are a concern of HRM in epidemic mitigation, such as COVID-19. To understand remote work policy, we must first understand how it works. There is no universal agreement on the term of remote work; however, generally, it is a method by which employees conduct work far from the office using electronic tools and connections [4]. According to [63], remote work is the way of working at or from the house (all or at least part of the contractual working hours of the employees). [27] stated that remote work has gained many terms from previous researchers, such as telecommuting, e-work, telework, remote working, and virtual work. The idea of remote work began in the US during the early 1970s [35]. However, this method has driven its popularity for several reasons: work flexibility [29], advancement in ICT, environmental concerns [40], and the governmental requirements for companies to consider those employees who request working remotely [19, 67]. However, a remote work policy refers to the agreement, procedures, or roles outlined by the employer to facilitate the process and set the basis for conditions such as when and how employees should work in another place other than the office. To establish a remote work policy, firms should follow particular tasks and steps that include identifying the work nature and which jobs can be performed from home, drafting the policy based on input from other successful telework companies, employee training on the new remote work, actual implementation, and finally the measurement of the results [21]. The policy should include communication techniques, trust issues, virtual presence options, performance measurement, teamwork concerns, and technology support [61]. Although Malaysia has provided continuous support, many companies in Malaysia have not supported the implementation of remote work practices; consequently, employees have been suffering from low-level performance and poor productivity because they lack task accomplishment flexibility [37].

2. Remote Work in the Malaysian Context during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis presents unprecedented challenges and has profound implications for people's lives and work. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home has become the norm for millions of workers in the EU and worldwide [62]. Early estimates [18] indicated that close to 40% of workers in the EU began working full-time because of the pandemic. In fact, as of 2019, only 5.4% of employed people in the EU-27 usually worked from home, a share that has remained almost constant since 2009. However, over the same period, the share of employed workers working at least sometimes from their homes increased from 5.2% in 2009 to 9% in 2019. Working from home was considerably more common among self-employed than dependent employees, although it increased similarly for both categories over the past decade. In 2019, almost 36% of the self-employed in the EU-27 were working from home, up from 30% in 2009. The prevalence of telework among dependent employees was just above 11% in 2019, up from 7.5% in 2009. Comparing these figures to the Malaysian context, Malaysia remains the same. From the employees' end, implementing government lockdown coincided with an immediate and unexpected shift to teleworking, often leaving them unprepared and ill-equipped while dealing with complex family/home situations. This sudden change in the work environment has constrained individuals to engage in what [12] called adjustment to a new work situation and practices, as developed in the Theory of Work Adjustment.

In the Malaysian context, the government responded to slow the virus transmission in different ways, such as reducing the employees' working hours, implementing strict roles to force organizations to have a minimal number of employees in offices, and starting to switch and boost the public sector to implement work-from-home policies. According to [60], one-third of Malaysian private sector employees were required to work from home due to several movement control orders implemented by the government that might be a significant stimulus for Malaysian organizations to invest more in the new remote work environment.

A recent study [43] investigated Malaysian employees' attitudes toward the new norm of remote working and the level of conflict between work and family during the Movement Control Order imposed by the government due to COVID-19. The study used a sample size of 562 employees working in seven

different Malaysian industries. The study revealed that Malaysian employees do not like remote work and are impartial to the challenges, flexibility, and benefits offered by this new work norm. The respondents reported occasional conflicts between work and family responsibilities. Another issue reported by the respondents is that Malaysians are ready to adopt remote work. Khan et al. [37] conducted another study in the Malaysian context to examine how telecommuting engagement affects employee job performance. The study included 229 employees involved in telecommuting work arrangement practices from 11 oil and gas companies located in Kuantan and Pahang. The study revealed that all telecommuting variables, including job autonomy, work–family balance, work productivity, and occupational stress, significantly impact employee performance. Therefore, promoting and developing remote work policies in Malaysia were recognized as necessary because employees will have more proper guidelines to assist in their work practices. However, there is still a scarcity of research on remote work in Malaysia, and its implementation is almost unavailable [52].

Malaysian companies faced a big challenge when the government started movement control orders on March 18, 2020, which required physical distancing to reduce disease transmission among employees. During this pandemic, all companies in all sectors were affected and had to adopt a remote work policy. When the MCO in Malaysia started, 44% (out of 168,182 respondents) of workers surveyed by Malaysia's Department of Statistics (DOS) reported that they worked from home, as most business activities were stopped [16]. The remote work policy differed from one company to another. Some companies implemented remote work policies fully, whereas others asked their employees to work on shift patterns (such as working from home for at least two or three days while going to the office only if necessary). Thus, COVID-19 was a massive experiment for those who had never worked remotely [32].

Such a situation presented a unique opportunity to investigate the Malaysian situation regarding their readiness to implement WFH policies in the face of such an epidemic crisis. To the best of our knowledge, there is no sufficient basis for remote work policies in Asia and Malaysia, in particular. Thus, it is essential to have such policies. Malaysia initiated amendments to the current employment law to support remote work policies. According to the Public Service Department, remote work will be a norm for civil servants even after COVID-19, and employees in the private sector will be allowed to follow this remote work as well [13].

There are tremendous changes in the organizations' policies as they have to rely on remote work and apply remote work policies. These policies have covered many aspects, such as work–life balance. Work–life

balance is an equal arrangement between work and life [59]. Mustajab et al. [44] conducted a qualitative study on how working from home impacts employee productivity, which shows that work–life balance of male workers was much better because they had more time to chat with their families and perform their responsibilities. For females, especially married, there was a problem with the work–life balance since they have much more responsibilities at home and cope with the distraction from home activities. Additionally, [11] explained that COVID-19 has expanded the gap for employees for a balance between personal and work life; due to the closure of schools and child-care services, the paternal role of the employees has increased. Additionally, there is alternation toward maintaining video meetings and virtual events, and many HR leaders attempt to redesign work, duties, and jobs to maintain flexibility and collaboration [46].

A survey was conducted by [50] to gain insights into employees' perceptions of remote work arrangements during COVID-19. The report involved 440 professionals in different industries, job functions, and seniority. The survey was conducted from April 16 to May 13, 2020, to reveal the employees' sentiments about working from home. The following figures present the results. The first part represents employees' satisfaction with remote work arrangements among companies in Malaysia. The results showed that approximately 28% of the respondents indicated their satisfaction with the remote work arrangement, 19% stated that their productivity increased, and 34% wanted more remote work arrangements in the future.

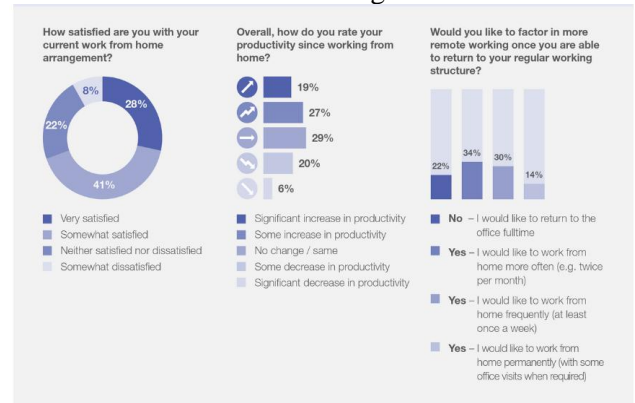


Fig. 1 Survey on satisfaction levels of remote work arrangements in Malaysia [50]



Fig. 2 Survey on satisfaction levels of remote work arrangements in Malaysia [50]

The second part of the survey focused on factors affecting the working environment. Flexibility (74%), less commuting time (62%) and a comfortable environment (51%) are the three main contributing factors that increase productivity. In addition, three main factors lead to decreased productivity: more distractions (42%), internet connectivity (29%), and lack of socializing with peers (29%).

3. Positive and Negative Effects of Remote Work on Employee Productivity

The virtual movement in business has strongly impacted employee job performance [45]. Nevertheless, there is a conflict among researchers to determine the direction of this effect because many arguments exist in the literature for both sides. This is also supported by [5], which asserted the debatable issue of the effect of remote work on the performance of employees. Thus, in this section, the researchers explore both sides of the effect and come up with a conclusion based on previous studies and the available literature to bridge the gap. Both sides of the argument are illustrated.

To start with the positive sides of remote work policies, many potential merits outweigh the demerits. There is much research that supports the positive aspects of remote work. Narayanamurthy and Tortorella [45] stated that virtual work increases employee productivity, and this influence is much greater than the financial incentives. Stevens [57] even showed that organizations can create a more productive workforce with virtual work options, which, in turn, creates motivation and better work–life balance. Another potential aspect of remote work is flexibility of work due to less commuting, which saves time and improves talent accessibility globally [26]. Therefore, some advantages of remote work are outlined in the following paragraphs.

First, remote work saves both cost and time. Shareena and Shahid [54] examined the perceptions of 50 respondents toward remote work. The respondents highlighted that their traveling time is saved, which gives them a chance to care about their family. Ambikapathy and Ali [6] add that working from home enables employees to finish their tasks on time and have a better work–life balance. Remote work increases the control of work patterns, improving flexibility and productivity [45] and reducing contact with others.

Productivity is another advantage of remote work. Snyder [55] evaluated a virtual research network report based on 250 case studies and journal papers. The evaluation showed that remote employees showed more productivity than their counterparts. Dutcher [25] confirmed that employee productivity increases because they are involved in creative tasks alone and

not interfering with surrounding people. Nevertheless, much effort should be focused on developing remote work policies that can guide the work. PWC [49] explained that almost 52% of business executives who allow remote work confirmed that productivity is increased among their employees. In addition, [65] claimed that increasing productivity has the largest potential and will help in more focus on the working from home trend even in the future.

The third aspect of virtual or remote work is communication among employees. It is clear that communication has significantly adjusted; however, this change to digital types of communication might be more effective and efficient. The strong revolution toward virtual communication, such as email and video calls, has facilitated the exchange of necessary information among employees [68]. This view was supported by [48], which found that 65% of respondents believe that traditional communication methods are adequately substituted by digital tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The new digital tools may have their limitations, but their essential purpose is still achieved. Nevertheless, further advancement in the world of communication is still expected in the years to be come, and COVID-19 was a good push for such progress.

In addition to cost savings, increased productivity, and enhanced communication, remote work provides flexibility for employees. According to [48], 38% of the respondents stated that it is easier to maintain a work–life balance, whereas 49% found it easier to choose their work schedule. In turn, the work flexibility gained by the remote work policy decreased the percentage of turnover among employees [65]. In addition, this flexibility also helps the organization recruit talent because they can manage their working time and schedule [66]. Saludin et al. [52] mentioned some social advantages too, such as the creation of employment opportunities in rural areas, job opportunities for the disabled, and a reduction in traffic jams and accidents.

Moving to the negative side of remote work and its impact on employee job performance, some downsides have been argued in the literature review. A recent survey conducted by Deloitte among Chinese firms revealed that 46% of the respondents expected performance reduction due to the new work environment of telework enforced by COVID-19 [8]. First, remote work causes distraction. In most of the Asian developing countries, remote work is a new norm with not much experience in such a concept. Thus, the lack of companies in controlling the remote work environment, for example, the interruptions and distractions from the physical workplace environment and non-work-related emails and calls [24], and the poor connectivity of the internet [1] will lead to less concentration among the employees. In addition,

remote work will decrease the concentration of employees because they will not be able to balance their personal and professional lives [54]. Second, employees working remotely face decreasing levels of motivation because they are far from the traditional working environment [47]. According to [48], 36% of the surveyed employees feel less motivated in remote working environments. Hutajulu [31] revealed a contradictory result, which stated that employees were more motivated by working remotely, which increased their performance. However, [9] showed that remote work leads to less motivation through his study on the employees of the Polytechnic University of Valencia. The author claimed that employees lose team spirit even if they are still working virtually together, which reduces their motivation. The third disadvantage of remote work that directly impacts on employee motivation, satisfaction, and productivity is the lower recognition received by the employees. It is difficult for employees to show their effort and stand out to be recognized by their managers because all communication is achieved electronically. According to [39], recognition and support are critical employee social needs that might be lost while telecommuting, leading to less employee satisfaction and productivity. This is because supervisors or managers have no idea how much effort employees devote to achieve their targets or tasks. Remote workers may spend more time doing a task because of some difficulties; however, only the outcome will be evaluated and not the challenges and issues the employee has faced during the process [31]. In addition, an impaired manager–employee relationship will exist because of the distance between them [26]. Fourth, remote work is claimed to affect the mental health of employees. A recent survey of 1,000 Americans, published by TELUS International, showed that 75% of employees in the U.S. are struggling with remote work because of the anxiety, stress, and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 [64]. Russo et al. [51] found a strong relationship between the well-being of employees and their productivity. Remote employees suffer from feelings of loneliness and isolation while working from home, which lowers productivity levels [65]. In addition, other factors that may negatively affect the mental health of employees include the pressure to work extra hours, difficulty in unplugging from work because of being accessible on the laptop, and depression caused by a lack of tangible career progress. Therefore, we can conclude that remote work can cause distraction, less motivation, lower recognition, and poor mental health. All of these disadvantages can lead to reduced employee productivity. Thus, it is the organization's job and policy makers to take such factors into consideration while developing remote work policies.

4. Challenges of Remote Work and

Remote Work Policies

COVID-19 revolutionized norms in the business world. This forced organizations to navigate and shift to remote work environments where companies suffer from many challenges. According to [27], technological limitations, organizational preparedness, social isolation, and managerial reluctance are among the challenges that hinder the implementation of working from home policy. Therefore, this period is critical and requires more effort because organizations must ensure that their human capital can maintain a sense of connectivity and teamwork.

Insufficient infrastructure and technological illiteracy are among the main challenges facing the working-from-home policy. Organizations in most Asian countries, including Malaysia, lack technological readiness and stable access to software applications. According to a survey [14], most respondents (84%) cannot access digital applications at least once every week, with technical problems experienced every day by 11% of the respondents. Nevertheless, this remains to be the responsibility of the organizations [22]. PWC [49] mentioned lack of training, which is a main factor in increasing performance [3], and lack of access to important office equipment as some of the technological problems. For example, a survey was conducted among 503 (80.9%) employees working at the administration level at University of Technology MARA Selangor Branch, Malaysia. The results of this survey showed that 87.1% of the respondents had high levels of satisfaction. However, the work performance among the same respondents decreased by 53.7% [28]. According to the same author, the remote work policy must be reassessed and only staff with adequate ICT equipment can work from home. In addition, [6] stressed the need for prior preparation for remote work implementation, such as high-speed internet connectivity and comfortable surroundings.

The nature of the work is another challenge for the remote work policy. Not all work positions can be performed from home. If we consider the manufacturing sector, for example, all the operation employees and supervisors must be working on the site. For such positions, it is difficult to achieve remotely. According to [30], remote work can only be suitable for some jobs that deal with research data and require reading and writing, but not for some jobs that require the person to be at the office or on-site. Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of the organizations to adjust the roles and responsibilities to suit the remote work policy. Besides, organizations should also be technologically ready and provide the necessary tools, equipment, software, and systems that go in line with the job nature and enable the employees to be productive and maintain a sense of connectivity.

Distractions and work–family conflicts are also a concern for many researchers. Employees working

from home are more vulnerable to work–family conflict and distraction. Employees struggle to separate their work from their family life. According to [43], when the boundary between work and family is blurred, employees are more distracted by life issues and cannot focus on their work. This was stressed by [31], which claimed that employees' moods are influenced by family problems because the two boundaries exist in the same place and time. In addition, because of the sudden and unpredictable situation caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, managers are forced to form new strategies to maintain expansion and increase capital and customers during the epidemic. This has certainly made the managers have high expectations of the employees. Employees, thus, have found it difficult to maintain a good balance between work and family life for some reasons. The role of the employees has been shown to be a conflict because the employees have to do more home roles since most of the organizations closed. A good example can be the closer of the schools that has forced the employees to perform the role of the teachers at home. Moreover, some employees must work on site and cannot visit their families due to movement restrictions. Additionally, many employees have lost their jobs and the uncertainty of when the situation will return to normal has increased the stress among the employees. Unprecedented levels of uncertainty have spread among workers around the world [17, 38]. The situation has intensified in Malaysia since the remote work policy was unexpected [43].

In addition to the above challenges, collaboration among employees is another challenge because organizations are not ready for a full remote work mood in Malaysia, the setting is complex. The organizations try to follow government regulations by allowing a certain percentage of remote works for different employees while some of them are still working from the office. Thus, managers need to devote considerable effort to organizing employees and achieving collaboration among them. In a study [23], more than half of the respondents indicated that collaboration is difficult during remote work. Several skills and behaviors are required to manage this environment successfully [42]. In addition, [10] conducted a study that involved 256 employees working in the U.S. and found that 40% of the respondents believed that cross-functional collaboration would be reduced because of the pandemic. Therefore, there is a need to adopt new methods of monitoring because employees cannot be monitored by traditional methods [53]. Therefore, monitoring, coordinating, and controlling processes are more ambiguous and complex, which may reduce the productivity and efficiency of employees.

Flexibility is another concern that is not necessarily achieved with remote work. This is because

organizations care about employee performance and productivity. In other words, office work is carried out at home, and employees may need much more time and effort to achieve their work targets from home. According to [32], employees still need to perform non-traditional office-based work. According to [56], activities conducted by Microsoft Teams doubled on Saturdays and Sundays during COVID-19. This may indicate how much overtime work employees have to do even outside the working time [47]. In addition, managers are trying to achieve during COVID-19 due to the losses. This of course affects how they treat employees. In addition, managers do not know how much effort is expended by employees. They evaluate the outcomes but not how the employee has been suffering to make this result. Therefore, all of this hinders the flexibility of remote work.

Furthermore, there are other challenges associated with remote work policies, such as security, employee isolation, misunderstanding, and role ambiguity. Fraij and Aburumman [66] conducted a study to investigate the adoption of remote work as a solution for crisis times such as COVID-19. The study revealed that security was among the main challenges faced in developing and adopting remote work policies. Fraij and Aburumman [66] have made recommendations from the interviews. Some of these recommendations include finding a legal framework for remote work and offering frequent technical support for remote workers to ensure the security and confidentiality of data. Ipsen et al. [33] also found that role ambiguity is a common aspect of remote work. In addition, employees work more hours with a lack of support and visible leadership with less social interaction [41].

5. Relationship between Remote Work Policies and Job Performance

Remote work policies refer to a set of roles, procedures, and regulations that are planned to guide the work of employees working far from the office and to organize the process for effective achievement and productivity of employees working from home. Previous literature is still lacking in explaining that employee job performance is influenced by remote working strategies [32]. Much research has focused on how working from home affects employee job performance [5], with no focus on the effect of the policies themselves [63]. Nevertheless, the results of the previous studies are of two different sides. Allen et al. [5] found that working from home leads to better employee job performance. However, others have revealed that remote working leads to critical issues such as the intensification of labor and hampers knowledge sharing with employees being socially and professionally isolated [20]. According to [36], a remote work strategy involves many systems and

software such as virtual conferences, channels of communication, and automation of specific operations. Therefore, with no effective policy implemented, companies will face many problems and difficulties such as poor employee productivity, ineffective and inefficient processes and workflows, and poor or less security and confidentiality of information. Even though many studies have investigated the positive and negative sides of remote work, all those studies are limited to presenting the real effect of remote work policies implemented on employee job performance. According to [37], misunderstanding and unawareness of remote work impacts will lead to employee job performance failure.

Supporting the advantageous side of remote work policies, [7] investigated how the performance of employees is impacted by remote work with a sample size of 1,000 employees and focused only on one Ctrip Chinese travel agency. The respondents were separated into two teams; one group worked from home for four days per week, while the other continued working from the office for nine months. Both groups received equivalent technology, compensation, and tasks. The results showed an increase of 13% in the performance of employees who worked from home and 9% because of the increase in communication. Furthermore, the study has shown that the company's overall performance increased from 20% to 30% due to the implementation of the remote work policy. In addition, a survey conducted by FlexJobs found that 95% of respondents reported higher or equal productivity for workers who work from home, with 51% of them reporting higher productivity [15].

With these mixed results and a lack of research on the effect of remote work policies, they have become a necessity to regulate work during crisis times such as COVID-19. Through such policies, firms and managers can articulate and communicate regulations and work procedures for the continuity and sustainability of the organization. Such policies should include things such as work shifts, who must be in the office and who must work from home, availability and check-in times, eligibility for remote working, and so on. Proper planning is essential for developing a well-planned and flexible work arrangement.

6. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the concept of remote work policies. Remote work has lately become the norm in most countries during COVID-19. Since it was an unexpected movement forced by government rules and regulations to control the situation and followed by most organizations to maintain sustainability and ensure continuity, organizations have found it complicated to establish and develop remote work policies to monitor the new norm of the working environment. This paper also discussed remote work

policies in the Malaysian context, which shows that Malaysia is still lacking in remote work because they did not expect it and organizations are still not ready; the advantages of remote work policies, such as significant work motivation, work-life balance, saving cost and time, flexibility, and recruiting talent; and disadvantages, such as distractions, isolation, and less cross-functional collaboration. In addition, the paper also outlined some of the challenges faced in implementing remote work policies by organizations, including fostering collaboration, creating an environment with no distractions, complex controlling processes, and providing the technological infrastructure. This study significantly contributes to the theory and practice of remote work policies. Theoretical significance is evident as it addresses a gap in the literature by examining remote work policies, particularly in the context of the unexpected shift caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study goes beyond the previous literature by considering remote work policies as a construct that affects job performance. The investigation focused on the Malaysian context, revealed the challenges faced in developing remote work policies by organizations, and explored the advantages and disadvantages of such policies. Practical implications arise from the findings, providing organizations with insights to effectively address challenges related to remote work, including collaboration, distractions, control processes, and technological infrastructure. The study's primary recommendation emphasizes the need for policymakers, represented by the Malaysian Ministry of HR, to encourage HR professionals and provide them with training on effective remote work policies. In addition, we recommend having proper remote work policies and ensuring their dissemination and implementation for organizations. Future research should delve into the long-term implications of these policies on multifaceted dimensions, including employee satisfaction, collaboration, and innovation. In addition, a comparative analysis of remote work policies in various countries and industries could uncover best practices and shed light on contextual factors influencing their success.

Acknowledgment

This research became possible thanks to monetary assistance from Tun Hussein Onn University of Malaysia and UTHM Publisher's Office via Publication Fund (E15216).

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