**The Sociocultural Barriers of Work-From-Home Arrangement Due to COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia: Implications and Future Implementation**

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**Abstract**

The rapidly escalating COVID-19 pandemic entails many unprecedented life circumstances, including in the way people work. The social distancing policy has forced companies to adopt work-from-home (WFH) arrangement to maintain business sustainability amidst both health and economic crises. While in many developed countries, WFH arrangement has been a common practice, this is not the case in some Asian countries, particularly in countries where high power distance emphasizing heightened supervision and punishment among workers are still a preferred managerial style, such as Indonesia, China, India, and Thailand. For companies with such a power-reliance managerial style, WFH could be seen as a threat towards productivity as face-to-face supervision cannot be performed. On the other hand, not all workers have a positive attitude and a sense of readiness towards implementing WFH and having involuntary WFH arrangement adds as a potential stressor on top of those caused by management demands and lack of trust. While acknowledging that WFH is considered as beyond an option in this pandemic period, this commentary paper aims to critically identify key barriers of WFH implementation in some Asian countries, particularly in autocratic societies, using both theoretical and contextual approach. The paper concludes by discussing recommendation for future studies and proposing strategic implications for companies and workers to effectively adopt WFH arrangement, especially in societies where WFH is still a new practice or is involuntarily held.

**Keywords:** Asia; autocratic leadership; Covid-19; flexible work arrangement; teleworking; work-from-home; work-life balance

**Introduction**

December 2019 marks an important milestone of the history of the human being as a new coronavirus (COVID-19) emerged in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in China, which became the epicentre of the outbreak (Zhou et al., 2020). Three months later, a significant widespread of the virus has affected 143 countries, which pushed World Health Organization (WHO) to escalate the status of the outbreak into a pandemic, signalling a maximum precaution of the alarming levels of spread and severity of the virus (World Health Organization, 2020). Lockdown procedure and social distancing policy come into play in affected countries to control the outbreak by *flattening the curve* (Stevens, 2020). With this strategy, human exposure is minimized to slow the spread of the virus by avoiding non-essential gathering and by utilizing technology to assist individuals for conducting essential tasks.

In work and employment context, social distancing policy is enforced by adopting an alternative working arrangement where employees are encouraged or even enforced to perform their work at home (Work From Home; WFH), as much possible as their work nature allows. WFH practice actually has a considerably long-standing history. It was first introduced since the early 1970s with the term “telecommuting” (Nilles, 1975), and continues to evolve with various nomenclatures, such as remote working (Hardill & Green, 2003), teleworking (Alizadeh, 2012), working-at-home, working-at-a-distance, and home-working (Yehuda Baruch & Yuen, 2000). While no universally agreed term has been in place (Yehuda Baruch & Yuen, 2000), WFH is the universally and widely used term in this COVID-19 pandemic (Yeung, 2020), and perhaps will set as a benchmark for terminology in future studies.

In Asia, although flexible working arrangements are not a widely accepted practice (Chow & Chew, 2006), its popularity varies among countries. Hong Kong (Yehuda Baruch & Yuen, 2000), Singapore (Dick & Tung, 2003), and Japan (Boston College of Global Workforce Roundtable, 2007), for instance, are among the first Asian countries to consider adopting flexible work arrangement. Some countries in other parts of Asia with high power distance and more traditional managerial approach, such as Indonesia, China, Thailand, or India (G. H. Hofstede, 2001), are still considering WFH as a less favourable practice. In general, the effectiveness and acceptability of WFH do not translate seamlessly from country to country as cultural factor plays an imperative role to determine its suitability (Dick & Tung, 2003). Hence, adopting compulsory WFH arrangement due to the pandemic may bring particular challenges for Asian societies.

Regardless of the favorability of WFH, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the world’s biggest implementation of WFH (Yeung, 2020) as it is now practised in almost all affected, if not all, countries and is arguably defended as the ideal strategy to flatten the curve. While work can be considered as one of the essential tasks for an individual, a company, or a nation to sustain, the essentiality of work also lies in the way that it contributes to individuals’ psychological well-being by providing a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Litchfield, Cooper, Hancock, & Watt, 2016). In this sense, whereas certain modification is required in the way and where people work given the pandemic, it is important to adopt the best available strategy that enables individuals to work not only for their survival, but also to maintain or even enhance their well-being. To this end, this paper particularly aims at addressing sociocultural barriers to experiencing benefits of WFH arrangement in some Asian countries through theoretical and contextual approaches. The paper concludes by suggesting modifications in implementing WFH in Asia by accommodating concerns from both the side of employers and employees.

**Historical Overview of WFH**

WFH can be understood as combining work and living space to optimise resources and make the most of the space at hand for the benefit of both employees and employers. Historically, WFH can be traced back to medieval times where the working-class society opened shops and traded from their homes (Applebaum, 1992). In such an era, rooms at homes were multifunctional – used for both house works (e.g. cooking for the family) and business works (e.g. butchery, dressmaking to earn money). The popularity of “offices” then started to emerge during and after the industrial revolution, where workers need to leave their homes to go to worksites and offices. Employees started to work inflexibly at a specific time of the day (e.g. 9 to 5) in employer-provided sites with employer-provided tools or equipment. With the increasing numbers of women entering the workforce in the early 1970s, more flexible working arrangements were necessitated (Schonberger, 1971). Researchers began to explore several benefits of offering more flexible working time. The benefits validated by research are, but not limited to, reduction of stress that leads to an increase in employee’s job performance, promoting physical health as it offers a great opportunity to sync the working time to employee’s body clock, and promoting a work-life balance (Elbing, Gadon, & Gordon, 1975).

**Theoretical Review: Culture, Management Style, and WFH Arrangement**

A growing body of literature suggests that culture plays a vital part in describing various patterns of human relationship (G. H. Hofstede, 2001), including workers’ relationship within an organization (Key & Key, 2000). McGregor (1960) identified two types of managerial styles in relation to the cultural values: autocratic (Theory X) and participative (Theory Y) style. Theory X is defined as a managerial policy and practice that are informed by a belief that employees must be controlled, directed, coerced, and threatened with punishment to encourage them to achieve the company’s objectives. On the other hand, Theory Y operationalized on the belief that employees are responsible and self-motivated to perform in their roles. Direct and visible supervision is a key element in Theory X management style and is what WFH arrangement could not fully address (Teh, Hooi, loh, Ong, & Hong, 2013). This explains the hesitance of managers with paternalistic leadership style to adopt WFH arrangement. On the contrary, flexible work arrangement is plausibly more acceptable in organizations with Theory Y-based approach as employees are given trust and opportunity to perform their duties at their own paces with minimal supervision (Scholefield & Peel, 2009).

A more comprehensive perspective developed by Hofstede (2001) may assist in the understanding of how society’s cultural profiles determine the acceptability and effectivity of WFH practices. Hofstede (2001) developed a framework to understand the nature and structure of individual’s relationship in their societies through six dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and indulgence. Hofstede’s six cultural dimensions have received broad attention from scholars in corporate research area, such as international marketing (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010; Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoham, 2007) and management (Geert Hofstede, 1999). Hofstede’s work in overall impact both practical and theoretical interests due to their ability to elaborate the complexity of cultural phenomenon into simple and assessable terms (Fang, 2010). Despite the usage of cultural dimensions in representing the multifaceted construct has been criticized for its inability to comprehensively portray all relevant aspects of culture (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2000), the benefits of using the cultural dimension approach in observing and analysing culture as a construct outweigh its limitations (Soares et al., 2007).

Societies that are characterized by high power distance and high masculinity may struggle in implementing WFH. Individuals with a high level of power distance will engage in autocratic leadership style (G. Hofstede, 1983), where power is distributed unequally to satisfy the dependence need of people with no power. High power distances in culture are associated with fewer checks and balances on the power holders as well as higher temptation to use the power for their own benefits. Given the reduced physical interaction between employers and their employees in WFH practices, one may assume that in large power distance cultures, WFH could not reach its ideal goals due to the abuse of authority exercised by the managers. Similar to those in Theory X management style, autonomy and flexibility offered in WFH limit both manager’s control and employee’s need to be controlled, directed, or supervised. Thus, without strict control over their jobs, the employees who are accustomed to the conventional working arrangement may find it difficult to manage the flexibility provided by WFH and eventually fail to exhibit their best performance.

High level of masculinity is also reflected in the importance of status, attributes, and outward appearances (Hofstede Insights, 2018). Such a social status and outward appearance require physical displays of spacious and elegant workspace, parking privilege, and other facilities and arrangement, which cannot be accommodated through WFH arrangement. In high masculinity society, men are assigned to play assertive and dominant roles while women are expected to do more service and caring roles. Men, whose in most Asian societies act as the primary income earner in a household, are allowed to show-off their social status and success not only to the society but also to the other family members (G. Hofstede, 1983). WFH arrangement hinders such privilege since the primary income earner must stay at home during the working hours and probably engage in household chores such as cleaning or taking care of children or parents. This situation may impede the effectiveness of WFH in a way that men in masculinity culture are unskilful in household chores, which increases work stress, family conflict, and eventually blur their focus on the main job (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Conley, 1991).

Employees with high collectivism, high uncertainty avoidance, low long-term orientation, and low indulgence profiles may also find it challenging to adapt WFH arrangement. The need to belong, that is considered fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), is plausibly a stronger motivating force to work for individuals in a collectivist society. In this sense, working alone at home provokes a sense of social isolation and disconnectedness (Donnelly & Proctor-Thomson, 2015), which experience is further intensified among those in Asia as collectivist societies. Adapting to a new working arrangement also invites resistance for individuals who prefer to avoid uncertainty and who have a low level of long-term orientation. These individuals prefer to maintain stability and traditions, and tend to view societal change with suspicion (G. H. Hofstede, 2001). Lastly, those with a low level of indulgence often find themselves being guilty when they are given more room for self-care, autonomy, and independence, which are the key benefits of WFH arrangement as it is introduced to promote work-life balance (Elbing et al., 1975). In more extreme cases, such a pang of guilt may lead individuals to think that they have to work 24-hours a day at the cost of the freedom in regulating the work rhythm (Huuhtanen, 2003).

**Contextual Review: Sociocultural Perspective on Implementing WFH in Asia**

The above section has discussed the theoretical overview of how culture plays a role in determining the effectiveness and acceptability of WFH in Asia. This section outlines how the context and cultural bounds commonly observed in many Asian countries potentially hinder some individuals from experiencing the benefits of WFH.

Organizational and leadership culture is the key factor that determines the effectiveness of WFH (Huuhtanen, 2003). This highlights the real struggles for implementing WFH in Asia as their organizational culture and company personnel policy often require physical presence for salary and incentive system (Shimozaki, 2003). In Indonesia, for example, the autocratic approach and the lack of employees’ trust are translated into a reward system where employees are given a daily incentive (*‘uang hadir’* or *‘uang makan’,* loosely translated as ‘attendance allowance’ or ‘meal allowance’) based on their fingerprint absence (Suarlan, 2017). With this policy, not going to the office means having a salary cut. Apart from the personnel policy, employers also express concerns of not being able to sufficiently supervise their subordinates without a face-to-face encounter (Shimozaki, 2003; Teh et al., 2013).

On the employee’s side, the excessive responsibility at home associated with the cultural responsibility to take care of elderly family members (Debavalya, 2008) may act as a barrier towards WFH implementation in Asia. Unlike in many Western countries where elderly have access to public services, in most Asian societies, family remains the main support system and children are culturally responsible to take care of their elder family members (Lei, Strauss, Tian, & Zhao, 2015). While international studies have suggested the benefit of WFH for parents with dependent children to maintain the balance between work and family roles (Kaduk, Genadek, Kelly, & Moen, 2019; Troup & Rose, 2012), the effectiveness of WFH might be questionable for individuals who co-reside with their extended family members (parents, parents-in-law, and other dependent family members). Too many roles outside work can result in excessive demands and distraction when individuals have to perform their work at home, which may eventually lead to work-family conflict. On top of that, there is a common belief that people do not work when they are at home (Boston College of Global Workforce Roundtable, 2007). Such a belief may explain why designated workroom at home is either missing or difficult to set up, despite being one of the most important factors for effective WFH practice (Donnelly & Proctor-Thomson, 2015).

Another challenge is associated with the technological infrastructure to enable work at home. Internet connectivity holds a major and determining factor for an effective WFH. While Singapore has successfully established the fastest and reliable broadband connection (153.85 Mbps on average), most other Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka (25.17 Mbps), Indonesia (19.09 Mbps), Myanmar (16.84 Mbps) are still left behind (World Population Review, 2020). Not to mention, internet connection in some Asian countries are still considered costly for the users (Azhar & Lin, 2017; Soriano, 2019).

In summary, both Asian employers and employees in societies with high power distance (Long, Huang, & Lau, 2012) are more likely to be negatively affected by WFH since both parties need physical interaction to exercise their roles in the culture.

**Conclusion: The Future of Flexible Work Arrangement in Asia**

Traditional work arrangement with both employees and employers meet in designated office appears to remain a favourable practice in Asia to accommodate the needs of both parties. However, this assumption has a lack of empirical ground given the lack of studies about flexible work arrangement in Asia.

While Asian employers and employees are forced to adopt a WFH arrangement in this pandemic, one might ponder the future of WFH in Asia. Literature suggests that WFH is particularly beneficial for female workers to allow them in performing roles at work and in her household (Teh et al., 2013; Troup & Rose, 2012). In Asia during the past two decades, there has been a remarkably increasing rate of female’s participation in education and industries (Himawan, Bambling, & Edirippulige, 2018, 2019). Despite their increasing workforce participation, women are also culturally bounded with household duties assigned through their traditional gender role (Jones, 2018). As they are socially expected not to be the main family earner (Utomo, 2012), WFH facilitates an ideal avenue for them to control flexibility in achieving their desired careers while still maintaining cultural compliance to be a family nurturer.

The fast-growing technology and shifting lifestyle that values more of self-indulgence (Himawan et al., 2019) seem to suggest that flexible work arrangement in Asia may be more about a matter of *when*, than *if*. Hence, much research has to be done to examine and improve flexible work arrangement in Asia, and perhaps this COVID-19 pandemic provides an ideal timing for conducting such studies as Asia is now undergoing probably the biggest involuntary WFH experiment. Cultures and subcultures need to be taken into account in future studies about WFH in Asia. Given the wide disparity of cultures in Asia, future studies should establish clear geographical and cultural boundaries when investigating the phenomenon. It is also important to maintain fairness by considering both employer’s and employees’ perspective. Current sociocultural values often assume employees are in a more advantageous position in WFH arrangement, whereas they may actually experience frustration due to certain cultural burdens and technical limitations when performing work at home.

**Recommendation**

*For Employers*

It is understood that the preference towards certain management style very much reflects the cultural values upheld by the societies (G. H. Hofstede, 2001). However, it is important to note that the relationship between management style and the cultural values in the society is descriptive in nature and does not imply causality. In this sense, while autocratic leadership may reflect high power distance cultural profile (Key & Key, 2000), it does not necessarily mean that autocracy is the most effective leadership approach. In fact, scholars argue that the autocratic approach is a traditional leader-focus leadership style and stress the importance of followers-centric perspective in identifying effective leadership approach (Lin & Sun, 2018). This claim is supported by many recent studies that suggest the preference for more participative leadership among employees in Asia (Rawat & Lyndon, 2016; Yukongdi, 2010).

With regards to the WFH, an important key element to achieve the effectiveness of WFH practices is by nurturing a trustful work atmosphere, which implies a more participatory approach. This should be translated into an evaluation system that rewards employees not based on the hours they spend for work, but on the quality of their work outcome. The company’s policy to reduce employees’ salary when they work at home (Cho, 2020; Hamdani, 2020) has no reasonable base. In fact, working at home entails an increased risk due to poorer ergonomic condition (Huuhtanen, 2003) and is associated with increased expenses of electricity and internet connectivity. Under the pandemic circumstances when salary cut is observed, the decision has to be viewed as to the last available option for company survival rater than due to the work from home policy.

To accommodate managers’ controlling function and employees’ social needs, a sense of presence could be endeavoured by utilizing video conferences regularly for work coordination. This could address employees’ social need and is an important strategy to gain a feeling of *being there* with team members despite being in different places (Fontaine, 2002).

Some workers may involuntarily perform WFH arrangement under this pandemic circumstance. Research suggests that involuntary WFH is associated with greater work-to-family conflict, stress, and burnout (Kaduk et al., 2019), which will affect their work performance. To address this issue, companies could engage in participative approach by asking employees to raise and discuss their concerns and to find mutual outcomes, which is found to be an effective strategy for both ends (Lee, Zhang, Dallas, & Chin, 2018).

The inadequate understanding of the benefits of WFH and the absence of clear guidelines in WFH implementation may shape a sceptical attitude of the merits of WFH implementation among employers (Hynes, 2016). Since this working arrangement is both inevitable and involuntary in this Covid-19 pandemic, employers must use this opportunity to take an initiative to strategically prepare the organizations for these rapid changes and to potentially adopt this flexible work arrangement in the long run. It is understandable that in Asian culture where uncertainty avoidance is high, employees may not correspond to these changes as ideally expected. However, with a participative approach to form a clear and mutual understanding of WFH benefits, WFH as a corporate strategy can be successfully implemented and beneficial for both parties.

*For Employees*

Essentially, WFH only means that the work that was conducted at the office is now performed at home (or outside the office) to allow greater time flexibility to achieve a sense of work-life balance (Nilles, 1975). The flexibility of WFH often comes with the cost of blurred temporal and spatial boundaries between work and household duties. Therefore, without careful implementation, WFH could end in work-family conflict, rather than balance. Research highlights the importance of having a designated working space (Donnelly & Proctor-Thomson, 2015) and time (Huuhtanen, 2003) to ensure the effectiveness of WFH. Hence, it is important to maintain regular life rhythms by allocating proportional time for work, family, and social purposes.

An extra effort might need to be done to familiarise family members regarding the new habit of working at home. Dependent children and elder parents might need to be well-informed about this new adjustment so that they do not expect individuals to perform household roles during office hours. Setting up a workspace in a private room could be an ideal strategy (Y. Baruch, 2001) to minimize the distraction of others’ presence as well as to introduce the new role at home to their children or elder parents.

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