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WFH has its pros and cons

It's a norm for some, but working from home has its challenges

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GEORGE TOWN: The typical work day for assistant product design manager Derrick Ch'ng begins at 6.30am.

He turns on his laptop on his dining table and sifts through all work submitted by his designers the day before.

Then he goes for a 3km jog around the neighbourhood park 150m from his apartment in Bandar Baru Ayer Itam.

By 9am, he's back in front of his laptop, ready for online meetings.

Working from home (WFH) is a permanent feature in Ch'ng's company now, and he only goes to the office once a month to physically check products at his factory in Prai.

"At first, I hated working from home. I felt a great need to be at the office. But sometime in 2021, when Covid-19 case numbers were really high and our own workers were getting infected, we were made to work from home. Now my team

and I find it more efficient," Ch'ng, 44, said.

During the pandemic-triggered movement control order that began in 2020, Ch'ng said he started exercising frequently and learned to cook.

"I usually make a late breakfast after my morning meetings are over, which can be oatmeal with fruits or just an omelette," he said, explaining that he's pre-diabetic and pre-hypertensive.

"But I have lost more than 5kg. My blood sugar level is still a little high at around 6.5 but at least my morning blood pressure is below 130/90 now.

"It is because I work from home that I can adopt a healthier lifestyle," he said.

Universiti Sains Malaysia's economic sociologist Prof Chin Yee Wahah believes that WFH arrangements are here to stay, especially for knowledge workers.

"I spoke with the manager of a [multi-national corporation] in Penang. We have a national shortage of engineers and because of the

work-from-home system, they now hire many engineers from Pakistan, the Philippines and so on.

"The manager pointed out that if every engineer in the team from around the world went to their office, there wouldn't be enough space," he said.

But while there are definite advantages, workers and employers must also consider possible problems.

Prof Chin also encountered a couple who work as software engineers. They send their kid to a babysitter during the day while they work from home.

"It depends a lot on the nature of your job and the condition of your home. I observe that to work from home, you need the proper ambience. If your home is small and you have many young kids, it might not be suitable," he said.

He stressed that a high speed internet connection is critical for the WFH culture to take off in Malaysia.

"With 5G Internet speeds becoming the norm, I think we will see this culture flourishing," he said.

He said for employees, working from home saves time and money they would otherwise spend commuting to and from the office, and which they could then spend on either being more productive or to improve their quality of life.

For employers, Prof Chin said the obvious savings are in not having to provide workstations for every member of the organisation as well as lower electricity and maintenance costs.

"In the United States, some offices are now gathering places for colleagues to meet and interact rather than to do actual work," he said.

But there is one possible problem of the WFH culture that Prof Chin foresees: it will make everyone's circle of friends smaller.

"You stop meeting colleagues, clients, suppliers and people in general when you stay home all day to work.

"So people who work from home need to make an effort to continue meeting and interacting with people face-to-face to maintain work relationships," he said.

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