

# APPROACH TO REMOTE WORKING: PERCEPTIONS, VISIBILITY AT WORKPLACE, AND THE IMPACT ON THE CAREER PROGRESSION

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## ABSTRACT

*In this present day, remote work arrangements are seen as having a new future ahead as another emergent trend in strategic human resource planning. Despite the increasing popularity of remote working among employees and employers even before COVID-19 hits the globe, there are also increasing concerns that are being expressed by both employers and employees about their presence at the workplace and how this will affect their future career progression. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of workplace visibility had already been a topic of discussion. However, the current situation has brought about significant changes and is anticipated to result in varying perspectives on the importance of visibility in the workplace, particularly in light of the potential for remote work arrangements in the foreseeable future. This, in turn, may have implications for the career advancement of employees. This pre-planned study adopts the exploratory qualitative research design, where the respondents are from financial sectors in Klang Valley, Malaysia, who previously or are still working remotely, either in hybrid or full-time modes. The data collected from the interview's session will be processed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.*

**Keywords:** *remote work arrangements, visibility at workplace, career progression, approach to remote working*



## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has indeed been a catalyst for speeding up the adoption of remote work arrangements around the globe. Wyld (2022) describes COVID-19 as the 'Black Swan' which means an unexpected event that goes above and beyond what is normally expected of a situation and has potentially serious consequences. Black Swan events are distinguished by their extreme rarity, severe impact, and widespread belief that they were obvious in retrospect. The 1<sup>st</sup> phase of Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented by the government of Malaysia (Hashim *et al.*, 2020) with the aim to contain the spread and break off the chain of the said virus. Therefore, employees were compelled to work from home or remotely as people were urged to stay in and engage in social isolation (Mahmud *et al.*, 2020). Remote work is defined as work performed by an employee away from the office universally, such as at a hotel, café, home, or even on the other side of the globe, either half of the time or fully remotely (Bjærntoft *et al.*, 2020; Clancy, 2020; Richardson & Kelliher, 2015; Yarberry & Sims, 2021).

While there is an increasing amount of empirical evidence documenting many aspects of remote working, most of the research that has previously been conducted has focused on a framework that highlights multiple views of the challenges, benefits, and downsides of remote work (Mohd Rahim *et al.*, 2018). Seeing the future of remote work as a new work arrangement that will continue to gain attention in line with the rapid growth of information technologies and the seamless communication and virtual collaboration technologies, it is indeed calling for the need for more research to be conducted from other sides of human resource management (HRM), such as performance management, the prospects of career development and progression, training and development, and others.

Hence, this article is structured in a way that it will help the readers understand the approaches that are potentially to be undertaken by the organisation when making a decision on adopting the remote work arrangements and how this approach to the adoption of remote work will shape their perspective on remote workers and their visibility at the workplace, which is believed to impact their future career progression.

## **Problem Statement**

This present research stems from research conducted by Hamsa *et al.* (2016) in Malaysia that led to the discovery of three of the key perceptual constraints of telecommuting, namely the ‘fear of isolation’ while working at home, the ‘reduced face-to-face interactions with others’, and ‘losing the chance for promotion’, all of which were found to be negatively correlated with the inclination to telecommute, signifying that the higher a respondent perceives the potential constraint, the less likely she is to telecommute. Research that was carried out during the pandemic that highlighted the impact and challenges of working from home during the pandemic listed face-to-face contact, visibility, and communication as the key challenges when employees work from home (Ambikapathy & Ali, 2020). The study also lacks empirical evidence, as they noted at the end of the study that the willingness does not reflect the real results of the telecommunicating (one of the alternatives to remote working) adoption in Malaysia. Both studies highlight the need for a larger sample and an in-depth interview to further understand the issues.

Richardson & Kelliher (2015) highlighted that the traditional model of a standard working arrangement may no longer be applicable to different modes of working arrangements. They further added that the practise was emphasising visibility or physical presence at the workplace, whereby remote workers, who have a lower degree of physical presence due to the nature of their working arrangement, are more likely to be disadvantaged. This will deter their performance and commitment to the organisations, which will later result in their low trust towards the new work arrangements system and the organisations. However, this was the case when COVID-19 had not yet spread throughout the world, and it is anticipated that there would be changes as a result of the enforcement of lockdown or MCO in Malaysia, which has viewed the remote working arrangement in a new light and even the enforcement of the remote working arrangement in Malaysia.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The objective of this qualitative pre-planned study is to explore the organisation's approach towards the remote work arrangements (High Road or Low Road), the perceptions of the managers and employees on

the visibility at the workplace of the employees that work remotely, and how the chosen approach to the remote work arrangements will affect their career progression in the long run if they choose to work remotely.

SO1: To explore which approach the organisations are pursuing when they choose to implement remote work arrangements.

The first study objectives intended to find out how the organisations approach remote work arrangements and what triggers them to implement them. It is expected that the approach that organisations pursue when implementing remote work arrangements will somehow impact the career progression of the employees affected by the arrangements.

SO2: To investigate managers' and employees' perspectives on working remotely.

SO3: To investigate the way managers and employees perceive the visibility of remote workers in the workplace.

The second and third study objectives are very important to the research as they will serve as the centre of the whole study. At the end of the study, the researchers will be able to describe the level of understanding among the managers and employees about remote work and visibility at the workplace in Malaysia, which in this study would be circulating in the financial industry (banking sector). Through these objectives, the researcher is expected to discover the views and perceptions of working remotely, which later shape the perceptions on the objectives of the research that follows.

SO4: To explore the views of managers and employees on the career progression of employees who work remotely.

The fourth objective of this study is to explore the perceptions of managers and employees on career progressions and how those aspects will affect those employees who choose to work remotely. How will organisations tackle the career progression of remote workers, and how will it differ from employees who work in traditional work arrangement settings in offices? At the end of the study, the researchers expect to learn more about the career progression of remote workers in the organisations.

SO5: To examine the effect of the approach chosen by organisations to implement remote work arrangements on employees' perceptions of their workplace visibility and the future career advancement.

The last research objectives of the study are to relate and discuss the impact of the approach that an organisation chose towards implementing the remote work arrangements with the perceptions of the employers and employees on the visibility at the workplace and how this will influence the career progression of the employees that work remotely.

## **LOW ROAD AND HIGH ROAD APPROACH TO THE REMOTE WORK ARRANGEMENTS IMPLEMENTATION**

Low road or high road models closely associate with human resources practises, especially when talks about the wage policy in low-wage industries (fast food, cashiers, hotels, etc.) came into discussion (Osterman, 2018). However, the high road and low road concepts also can be the drivers of other Human Resources practices in an organisation. OECD (2017) stated that employers who pursue 'high road' strategies, in which employees and the skills they possess are viewed as an integral part of a company's competitive advantage, are distinguished from those who pursue 'low road' strategies, in which labour is treated as a commodity and workers are viewed as a cost to be minimised.

Organisations that have a long and positive history of remote working will have embraced remote working as a key driver of long-term organisational performance rather than viewing it as a goal in itself, leading to the design of human resource policies and practises that recognise and support remote working, and systems and processes will be in place to manage performance and to identify and develop potential in the remote worker community (Delany, 2021). It's interesting to look at the 2013 Forbes' 'Top 25 Companies for Work-Life Balance' and notice that the #2 company listed, National Instruments, claims that the benefit of working from home is a big reason why it's been in the Top 50 Best Places to Work for five years in a row (Smith, 2013), which strongly supports that there is a high road approach to remote work and it has been the identity of many

well-known organisations internationally. A study by Subramaniam *et al.* (2021) revealed that some academicians who desire work flexibility due to domestic responsibilities find WFH or FWAs appealing.

In contrast to High Road, according to the same authors mentioned above, organisations adopting Low Road use 'Numerical Flexibility' (non-standard employment) to keep costs in line with demand by altering the amount of labour employed (Delany, 2021). Because this strategy regards labour as a net expense, raising wages and conditions fundamentally contradicts management's profit maximisation goal, which leads to low investment in human capital as they try to curb the cost as much as they can. OECD (2017) in their working paper listed reasons for employees to pursue a low road approach, which is 1) firms can continue to profit due to the low road; 2) low-road strategies can be self-reinforcing at the firm and economic levels; 3) managers may be unaware of the potential benefits of better utilising skills or may lack the knowledge to put these ideas into action; 4) short-term concerns may overshadow long-term gains; and 5) economic downturns can inflame these concerns. Low Road approach taking the High Control practise that is designed to produce reliable but not outstanding performance that cannot compete with the standards of excellence laid by world-class competitors (Gill & Meyer, 2008). Figure 1 illustrates the two approaches to the implementation of remote work arrangements and the stances that stand within the two approaches to implementing the remote work arrangements.

## **EMPLOYEES VISIBILITY AT WORKPLACE AND THE IMPACT ON THE CAREER PROGRESSION**

Munck (2001), as cited in Kossek & Van Dyne (2008), refer to employees' visibility as the visible time that employees are working at the office and use it as an indicator of their commitment level to work. In an experiment conducted by Elsbach *et al.* (2010), they used the term 'face-time' which they defined as 'the amount of face-to-face interaction that occurs between employees and relevant others, or the amount of time an employee is merely seen at work or around the office' (p. 736). One of the biggest limitations of remote work is that employees who work from

home may feel that they are missing out on face-to-face interaction and collaboration (Church, 2015). In the latest systematic literature review conducted by Ferreira *et al.* (2021), feeling isolated and out of touch, or a lack of physical interaction problems, has been elicited from a total of 19 literature reviews that are categorised as remote work disadvantages, and it was the highest in the disadvantaged category.

However, this has not been the case since the inception of technology. The advancement in communication technology has made visibility possible not only for those that are in the same space and field as us but also for those that are located geographically apart from us (Fonner & Roloff, 2012; Timonen & Vuori, 2018). Supported further by Castells *et al.* (2009), more robust task scheduling through information and communication technology (ICT) developments has elevated the management and employees' ability to communicate and share resources from remote locations. However, due to the interdependent nature of the work process with the other colleagues, the employees that work remotely will somehow have to be physically present with their colleagues and work together with them (Kossek & Van Dyne, 2008), which is why organisations with large distributions of remote employees oftentimes emphasise the significance of 'flying-in' employees for periodical face-to-face meetups and team-morale building conditioning (Soroui, 2021). Which also might be the reason that some organisations choose to implement hybrid work arrangements instead of full-time remote work arrangements.

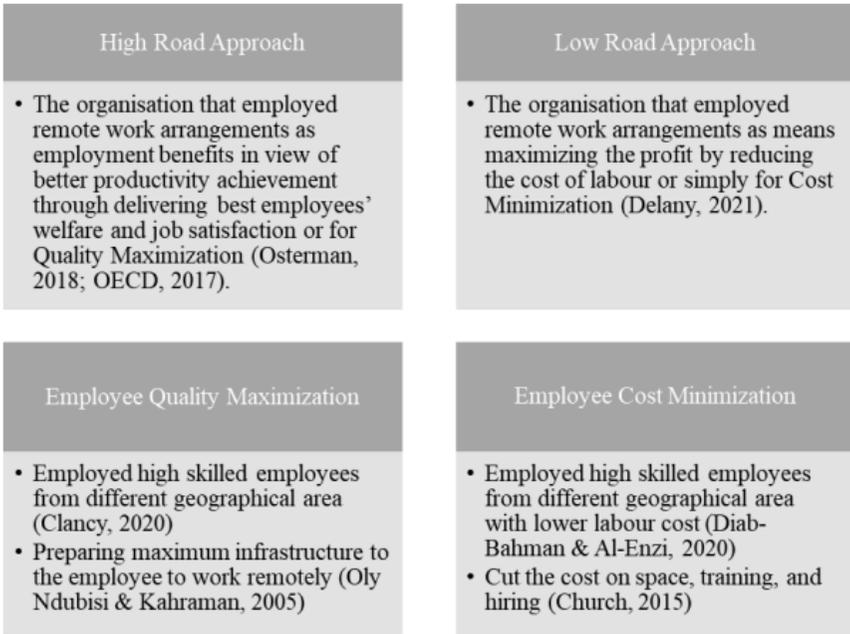
Employees have expressed their concern over the remote work arrangements that will endanger their career progression. Richardson & Kelliher (2015) revealed in their study by interviewing that there is an expansive amount of concern among the employees that they will somehow become invisible, potentially affecting their relationships with the higher management and their colleagues, which will later affect the progression of their career even though they gain credit for the improvement in their productivity and performance. In one of the most popularly cited experimental studies on remote working arrangements by Bloom *et al.* (2015), it was recorded that these phrases, 'out of sight, out of mind', mean that when an employee is not present, they will be invisible, as in their performance will go unnoticed, and due to this, it will hinder their chances of being promoted, which could endanger their career progression.

In the long run, these would pose a threat to the career progression and development of the employees.

A study conducted by Mumin *et al.* (2014) by survey with over 500 employees across many industries in Malaysia revealed that one of the main concerns about the soundness of implementing remote work arrangements in Malaysia is the feelings of isolation that result from employees' perceptions of their lack of direct interaction and visibility in the workplace, which may have an impact on their performance reviews as well as their opportunities for career advancement. However, this large-scale study was conducted many years ago before COVID-19 hit the globe, signalling that there is interest among researchers to study the remote work arrangements in Malaysia, but the significance of studying the remote work arrangements became more prevalent and significant during and after the pandemic.

## **COVID-19 ELEVATED THE IMPLEMENTATION OF REMOTE WORK ARRANGEMENT**

Remote work arrangements have seen many developments and changes to the current conventional work settings, and it appears that this trend is spiking and attracting interest from human resource practitioners all over the world since COVID-19 hit the globe and will continue to flourish even after COVID-19 (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). A growing number of organisations have embraced remote working, with some employees working from home, as a component of more flexible working, to the extent that remote working is increasingly described as the post-pandemic new normal for employment, with benefits for both employees and employers (Delany, 2021). It is expected that 23 to 25 per cent of workers in developed economies will possibly work remotely for three or more days per week (Lund *et al.*, 2021). According to a survey conducted by the Centre for Creative Leadership, a US-based education, prior to the pandemic, more than half of businesses in Asia expected their employees to work in the office full-time and at present, that figure has plummeted to 13 per cent (De Wei, 2022). This is further corroborated by a report from UNDP and Talent Corporation Malaysia (TalentCorp) that in 2021, 80% of Malaysian employees will prefer WFH (Work-from-Home) on a weekly basis, with over half preferring it at least three days per week, indicating that there is a positive response for employees in Malaysia to work remotely or from home.



**Figure 1: The High Road and Low Road Approach to Remote Work Arrangement**

The use of cloud file sharing and communications technology has also significantly increased during COVID-19, which is a key enabler for employees working remotely while also having access to the same resources as when they are physically present and working in the office (Church, 2015; Richardson & Kelliher, 2015). Furthermore, one of the aspects that allow working remotely is the convenience of communication technology, which allows teams to connect with each other across boundaries (Castells *et al.*, 2009; Di Martino, 2001). This is evidenced by Zoom, a video conferencing software and tools that has gained enormous popularity since the COVID-19 outbreak across the globe, whose sales have increased by 370 per cent in the first three months of 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year, reaching \$882.5 million with more than 300 million daily users (BBC News, 2021; Tillman, 2021). In Malaysia, Yeoh (2022) conducted a quantitative study on the acceptance of working from home following the pandemic as the new normal working environment, and the results showed that the employees believed that technology advancement will have a positive effect on the acceptance of the employees' ability to work from home. When

severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) swept the globe in 2003, home working or remote working was not an option for the majority of workers because the majority of people did not have access to essential devices and equipment to carry out their work at home. However, this is no longer the case, as home working in the current coronavirus disease pandemic era is quite different, with technology now providing more options for workers (Vyas, 2022).

## **HOW DOES THE APPROACH TAKEN TO REMOTE WORK ARRANGEMENTS IMPLEMENTATION AFFECTING THE PERCEPTIONS ON THE VISIBILITY AT WORKPLACE, AND THE IMPACT ON THE CAREER PROGRESSION?**

Osterman (2018) highlighted that the two focus practises that have been the subject of a hot debate pertaining to the High Road approach are improved scheduling practises and increased investment in training and career ladders to gain access to higher-paying jobs. Which signals that there is a link between the high road approach to remote working arrangements and the ability of the employees to secure their chances of future career progression inside the organisation. Herr (2001) writes in his paper about the historical perspective of career development, of which career progression is part of it, that career development serves as a mechanism to provide people with hope, affirmation of their individual dignity and worth, and assistance in establishing new career paths. In simpler terms, career motivation can be a strong motivational factor for an employee to perform well and develop their skills. A highly skilled employee is an asset to an organisation and can be a competitive advantage, and this has been orchestrated in a study by Hamadamin & Atan (2019) that found that human resource development had a substantial and positive impact on the sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) of an organisation. However, developing and hiring highly skilled employees requires more funds.

Contrary to the high road approach, there is the low road approach, wherein the organisation is going low road in implementing the remote work arrangements because the employer's objectives are to maximise profit by reducing the cost related to human capital (Delany, 2021). Given that, one

of the main reasons for the adoption of remote work arrangements is to minimise the cost (Ferreira *et al.*, 2021), which means that career progression was the least of the organization's concerns, as career progression means that the employees would have the luxury of moving up the ladder, which usually comes with a better pay check and other benefits that go along with it. Traditionally, pay increases and job promotions were the objective criteria typically used by researchers in their study on career success (Abu Hassan Asaari *et al.*, 2019; Poon *et al.*, 2015), which indicated that progression was equal to the career success of an individual.

It is expected that the organisation's various approaches (high road and low road) will influence how they perceive the visibility of employees while they are working remotely. Osterman (2018) and Delany (2021) take the high road in shaping the perceptions of visibility of employees who work remotely in other aspects to manage performance in identifying the need to progress further in their career because they value the employees, and this will drive the employees to perform at their best. In contrast to the low road approach, visibility may be the reason that the organisation will use against the employee when supporting the employee's advancement, given that their motivation for instituting remote work is to minimise the cost of human capital (Delany, 2021). In Malaysia, where the majority of employers are still unfamiliar with the concept of remote work, there are now opportunities to implement the remote working arrangement and observe its effects on many variables and uncertainties, such as career development, which are viewed as long-term and sustainable effects on employees (Spurk & Straub, 2020).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

As for the intended study, researchers decided to adopt a qualitative research approach with phenomenological research as a design inquiry for qualitative research. A qualitative research approach involves non-quantitative data gathering and analysis methodologies, strives to explore social interactions, and describes reality as seen by respondents (Adams *et al.*, 2007). A phenomenological research design inquiry, as per being described by Creswell (2013), is a philosophical and psychological research strategy in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of persons

as recounted by participants concerning a topic that culminates in the core of the experiences of several people who have all experienced the event. Phenomenology shares certain characteristics with grounded theory (such as an examination of participants' behaviour) and employs comparable data collection procedures, but it focuses on understanding how humans experience their surroundings (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The research inquiry is thus suited to answer the research question, whereby the query must be about experiencing a phenomenon, such as, what is the experience of the event or phenomenon under investigation (Elkatawneh, 2016). Due to that, oftentimes, the studies that employ phenomenological ways of research inquiry will be conducting interviews with the participants to obtain the data needed (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The phenomenon under study is the remote work arrangements that came into enforcement during the MCO for the past two years and the continuity of the remote work arrangements post-MCO.

Participants in the study are employees of Klang Valley financial services and businesses. The initial pre-planned number of interview participants is 20 people. In addition, the data obtained is judged sufficient for the study and the researcher will move on to the following stage, which is data analysis, if the repeated interviews provide the same data and answers that have reached 'saturation'. The researchers will employ the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) method because it allows the researcher the flexibility to add, eliminate, or modify codes when working with raw data (Crosley, 2021).

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the approaches (high road or low road) adopted by the organisation when deciding to implement remote work arrangements will determine the future career advancement of the employees within the organisation. This will influence how they perceive the employees' visibility in the workplace. Multiple records and surveys have confirmed the increasing popularity of the implementation of remote work arrangements for a variety of reasons and occasions that benefit both employees and organisations. Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate the connections between the parties affected by the implementation of the arrangements,

particularly in terms of career advancement, as it is expected that this trend will continue to grow in popularity in tandem with growth of the communication technology and cloud sharing. The pre-planned study is anticipated to generate a set of conceptual frameworks that briefly describe the relationship between the approach taken by employers in implementing remote work arrangements and the perception of remote work, workplace visibility, and career advancement. Due to the likelihood that remote work arrangements will continue to receive more attention in the near and distant futures, it is anticipated that the findings will also shed new light on future career progression-related issues of remote employees. This paper will assist policymakers in developing well-structured policies on the implementation of remote work arrangements to protect the rights of remote workers from exploitation by employers and to ensure that employees who work remotely have equal opportunities for career advancement.

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