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Perspective

The call for hybrid work arrangement post-pandemic

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Abstract: COVID-19 has led to abrupt changes in work norms and practices. Despite receding pandemic restrictions, the popularity of remote or hybrid work has not subsided. As employees around the world continue to call for more flexibility and autonomy in the way they work, human resource leaders must continuously consider and evaluate decisions based on ever-changing sentiment, balancing the interests of employees and employers alike. In this perspective article, we review the current state of work in the Southeast Asian region, focusing on Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, and present preliminary results from a region-wide mental health assessment that was conducted in late 2022. We argue for the continuation of hybrid work in the region and elaborate on the mental health risks that come with remote working.

Keywords: remote work; hybrid work

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has led to abrupt changes in work norms and practices. Considered a luxury a mere 5 years ago, remote working has disrupted the way the world works and given rise to unprecedented workforce trends, such as The Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting, that have challenged organisations to make employee well-being a priority.

Despite receding pandemic restrictions, the popularity of remote or hybrid work has not subsided. As of mid-2022, 57% of companies in the Asia-Pacific region offer either fully remote or hybrid working arrangements (CBRE, 2022). In addition, most workers in Southeast Asia do not prefer a full-time office return, with 32% preferring to work from anywhere, 29% preferring full-time remote work, and 23% preferring a hybrid work arrangement (EY, 2021). Industry surveys have also shown that 6 in 10 workers in Southeast Asia would quit their jobs if not offered flexible working arrangements post-pandemic.

Despite the challenges in the early transitional periods of the pandemic, employees are not keen to let go of remote working arrangements. While some employers may express opposition to the idea of continuing remote work, heightened workplace productivity in the past 2 years indicates that employers too stand to benefit from the continuation of remote work. However, if remote work is to be normalised in the future of work, employers and employees in the region need to grasp the full picture that comes with remote work—the benefits, the risks, and the ways to optimise remote work for everyone involved.

2. Work arrangements in Southeast Asia post-pandemic

In October 2022, Naluri sought to measure the state of mental health in Southeast

Asia through an online public mental health campaign that asked for respondents to complete the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS-21) and the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT-12) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; Schaufeli, et al., 2020). We include results from n = 13,227 respondents who are full-time employees aged 18–65 years old across Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand.

To obtain a clearer picture of the risk factors affecting the mental health of employees in the region, we also assessed their current work arrangements at the time. Contrary to Western markets, where remote and hybrid working has dominated the employment landscape the past few years, nearly 70% of employees across Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand are back in the office with a full onsite work arrangement (**Figure 1**). In contrast, roughly 24% of employees were working with hybrid arrangements, and only 7.5% of employees in the region were fully remote. This is certainly a stark contrast to the 34% of the American workforce who worked entirely remotely in 2022 (Owl Labs, 2022), and may be reflective of the increasing number of employers in the region calling for a full return to office life (CBRE, 2022).

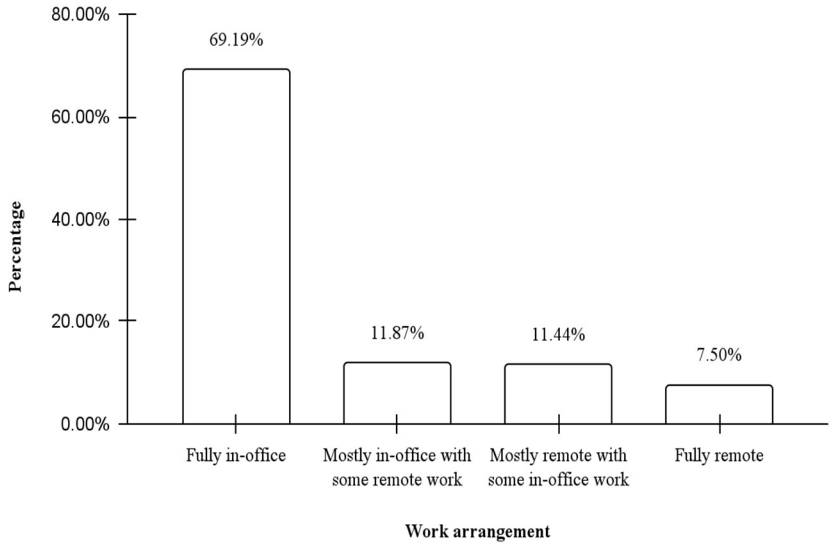

Figure 1. Distribution of employees in Southeast Asia by work arrangement.

Work arrangement and job satisfaction

The predominant narrative surrounding the adoption of remote work has been skewed towards the positive end, and a growing body of research supports this. Remote work has been shown to lower the risks of employee depression and anxiety (Lee, 2022), improve sleep health, and improve work-life balance (Ipsen et al., 2021). Furthermore, as measured using Dolbier et al.'s validated 1-item measure of job satisfaction (Dolbier et al., 2005), our findings show that fully or mostly remote workers in the region report higher job satisfaction than their in-office counterparts (**Figure 2**). Given that job satisfaction strongly influences turnover intention (Chen et al., 2019), this finding highlights the need for employers to fully consider and deliberate any decisions towards returning to office full-time in the future.

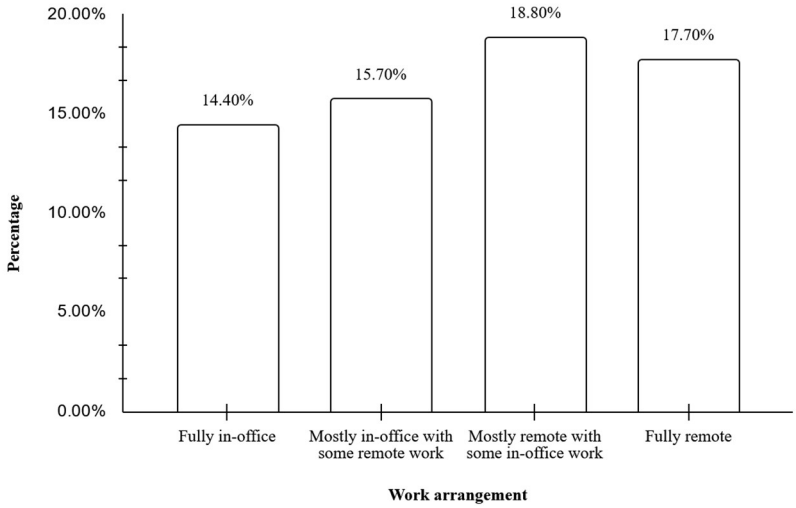

Figure 2. Percentage of employees reporting being satisfied or extremely satisfied with their job by work arrangement.

Employees are not the only ones gaining from remote work. Research has shown that, at an organisational level, remote working has translated to short- and long-term gains for employers. Globally, around 50%–60% of employees report being more productive when working remotely, with nearly 70% of employees aged 18–39 also reporting an increase in the quality of their work when working remotely (Cisco, 2022; Owl Labs, 2022). Not only do employers reap the benefits of higher productivity and quality of work, but when employees are offered access to remote work options, they also report increased innovation, work engagement, commitment to the organisation, and decreased intent to leave (Von Bommel, 2021).

3. Work arrangement and mental health

Despite the individual and organisational benefits that remote work can bring, it is equally important that employees and employers acknowledge the psychosocial risks of working remotely. With a higher commitment to work, remote employees can put themselves at risk of burnout, especially given that working remotely often comes with putting in more hours (Buffer, 2022).

Using the 12-item Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT-12) and the 21-item depression, anxiety, and stress scales, we set out to measure the mental health of employees in the region by different types of work arrangements (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995; Schaufeli et al., 2020). Across the region, our data shows that employees who are working remotely—either fully or in hybrid arrangements—report higher risks of burnout than employees who have been back in the office full-time (**Table 1**). Fully remote employees are also reporting higher risks of depression, anxiety, and stress compared to their hybrid and in-office counterparts, which further accentuates the added risks that come with remote work.

Table 1. Breakdown of mental health prevalence by work arrangement.

	Work arrangement			
	Fully in-office	**Mostly in-office with some remote work**	**Mostly remote with some in-office work**	**Fully remote**
	N (%)	**N (%)**	**N (%)**	**N (%)**
Depression				
Normal	2028 (22.20%)	410 (26.10%)	345 (22.80%)	168 (16.90%)
Mild	795 (8.70%)	147 (9.40%)	138 (9.10%)	62 (6.20%)
Moderate	1714 (18.70%)	308 (19.60%)	299 (19.80%)	170 (17.10%)
Severe or extremely severe	4615 (50.40%)	705 (44.90%)	731 (48.30%)	592 (59.70%)
Anxiety				
Normal	2353 (25.70%)	473 (30.10%)	400 (26.40%)	182 (18.30%)
Mild	580 (6.30%)	112 (7.10%)	99 (6.50%)	68 (6.90%)
Moderate	1663 (18.20%)	291 (18.50%)	288 (19.00%)	168 (16.90%)
Severe or extremely severe	4556 (49.80%)	694 (44.20%)	726 (48.00%)	574 (57.90%)
Stress				
Normal	2904 (31.70%)	565 (36.00%)	509 (26.40%)	251 (25.30%)
Mild	938 (10.20%)	112 (7.10%)	99 (6.50%)	109 (11.00%)
Moderate	1661 (18.10%)	274 (17.50%)	262 (17.30%)	186 (18.80%)
Severe or extremely severe	3649 (39.90%)	545 (34.70%)	559 (36.90%)	446 (45.00%)
Burnout				
Low	724 (8.10%)	86 (5.70%)	85 (5.80%)	59 (6.10%)
Average	3183 (35.80%)	537 (35.30%)	525 (35.80%)	289 (29.80%)
High or very high	4991 (56.10%)	899 (59.10%)	857 (58.40%)	621 (64.10%)

4. Discussion

4.1. Risk factors of remote working

Burnout is a work-related phenomenon that involves employees experiencing exhaustion, facing emotional and cognitive issues, and feeling detached from work (Schaufeli et al., 2020). One of the many ways employees develop burnout is through an imbalance between work-related demands and resources. When work stressors and demands exceed the personal or organisational resources that employees have access to, employees experience fatigue. When this imbalance is unaddressed and long-standing, this fatigue becomes chronic over time, eventually leading to the development of burnout (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

Where remote work is often touted as a solution to promote employee well-being, our findings show that this may not always be the case for employees in the region. Although it may seem counterintuitive for remote employees to report the highest job satisfaction and the highest risk of burnout at the same time, our findings do fall in line with existing research. While it is true that remote work can translate into improved employee well-being and productivity, research shows this relationship is rarely direct and often influenced by other factors such as physical health and emotional health, as well as social and organisational support at work (Fajri and Haerudin, 2022; Shimura et al., 2021). As remote work continues to be in high demand post-pandemic, identifying and addressing the unique risk factors that come with

remote work is important to help employers and employees fully optimise and benefit from remote work.

4.1.1. Hyperconnectivity

Increased adoption of digital technologies is a necessity to maximise the benefits of remote work. Ironically, the medium that allows for work to be conducted remotely is also the medium largely responsible for driving the high burnout rates in remote workers. Hyperconnectivity refers to the phenomenon of being instantly available for communication anywhere and anytime (Quan-Haase and Wellman, 2005). In the context of work, hyperconnectivity drives an "always-on culture" that demands an employee's availability to attend to work tasks, such as answering emails, calls, and pings, almost anywhere and anytime (Ghislieri et al., 2022).

In addition to regular job demands, remote workers often face an additional expectation from their employers to be available 24/7 (Fukumura et al., 2021). Without question, an "always-on culture" drives employees to higher levels of burnout, as this expectation often translates to longer work hours and larger work demands with very little time for employees to fully rest and recharge their own personal resources (Fukumura et al., 2021). Given that the devices hosting the communication avenues for remote work are constantly within reach throughout the day, the lines separating work and non-work use of digital technologies are often blurred.

Thus, being hyperconnected also increases technostress—stress caused by work-related technology usage, which can lead to fatigue, restlessness, and physical discomfort (Singh et al., 2022). Owing to the increased use of new and familiar digital technologies (Farmania et al., 2022), technostress can increase psychological strain, causing technology exhaustion and decreased well-being (Singh et al., 2022). Given that remote employees rely on higher usage of digital technologies, unmitigated technostress serves to increase their risks of burnout and distress.

4.1.2. Work-home spillover

The easily blurred lines between work and non-work domains make remote workers more vulnerable to work-home spillover. While conflict between work and personal demands is experienced by all groups of employees, work-home spillover is distinct and unique to fully remote workers, driven by hyperconnectivity as well as the risks that come with a lack of temporal and spatial boundaries separating work and other domains of life.

An oft-cited benefit of remote work is the removal of commutes, which understandably removes a large source of stress for employees worldwide (Chatterjee et al., 2021). However, removing commutes can also mean removing the routine set of actions that psychologically and physically separate work from non-work domains of life. When work takes up at least 8 hours of the day, and those hours are spent largely at home, it is easy for employees to unknowingly make work the main aspect of their lives, making it harder to stop work from overtaking other aspects of life such as hobbies, friends, and family (Fukumura et al., 2021).

While research has shown that working remotely from home can make employees more immersed in their work, this immersion also makes it more difficult for employees to detach from work (Chi et al., 2021). A lack of time or temporal barriers

also makes it easy for remote employees to get lost in their work, resulting in long hours into the night and even working on weekends (Fukumura et al., 2021). Where these may seem to translate to higher employee productivity, this benefit is largely short-term and superficial. Work-home spillover merely facilitates remote workers to overwork themselves, often to extreme exhaustion, thus leading to higher burnout, and in effect, reduced productivity (Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė et al., 2022).

4.1.3. Lack of support

Working remotely has been shown to decrease communication, brainstorming, and social interaction with colleagues (Šmite et al., 2023). These aspects of social work life are integral to building social support at work, which can protect employees against burnout by mitigating the effects of work stress on well-being (Fajri & Haerudin, 2022). When working remotely, the social support systems at work are often displaced or limited by communication barriers, which increases the risk of loneliness and social isolation amongst remote employees, driving reduced work engagement, emotional exhaustion, and increased burnout (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2023; Vander Elst et al., 2017).

Remote employees who do not work in remote-first organisations also face a higher risk of experiencing professional isolation—being removed from professional peers and facing the lack of professional mentorship, collaboration, and development that comes with it (Kutoane et al., 2021). Though some may see the removal of unnecessary work socialisation as a perk of remote work, this may actually be contributing to higher burnout in remote workers. Spontaneous, unplanned conversations in the workplace are not only essential for socialising but also function as avenues for collaborative problem-solving (Šmite et al., 2023). Without shared lunches and coffee breaks, or "over the shoulder" conversations, employees working remotely are not only at risk of isolation and loneliness, but they are also at a disadvantage when it comes to learning and development (Jämsen et al., 2022). Despite some seeing reduced work socialisation as a benefit owing to reduced distractions during the workday, this can also lead to increased workloads over time, as remote employees may spend additional unnecessary time addressing blocks or problems in work that could have been solved in a 5-minute conversation across cubicles (Jämsen et al., 2022).

Separately, despite having had the last two years to adapt to changes in remote work, remote employees often receive inadequate support from their employers. Remote employees often suffer from less visibility than their in-office counterparts, and this can translate to increased difficulty in career growth (Buffer, 2022). In addition, the inability to monitor remote employees can lead managers to overcompensate by demanding higher productivity, increasing expectations on employee availability, and micromanaging (Fukumura et al., 2021; Hernandez and Abigail, 2020), all of which may further the risk of burnout as well as jeopardise organisational trust in remote employees.

4.1.4. Unhelpful coping

Blurring work boundaries and schedules often comes at the expense of basic self-care. Partly driven by pandemic restrictions, but also by longer work hours, the past

two years of remote work have led to a proliferation of coping behaviours that can negatively impact the health and well-being of remote employees.

Compared to in-office or hybrid employees, being fully remote is associated with more sitting and less exercising, with remote employees reporting higher sedentary behaviour and lower physical activity overall (Fukushima et al., 2021; Streeter et al., 2021). Remote work has also been linked to impaired sleep health (Afonso et al., 2022), dietary changes such as increased snacking (Białek-Dratwa et al., 2022; Sato et al., 2021), and problematic internet use as a coping strategy (Deutrom et al., 2022). These behaviours can negatively affect the physical and emotional well-being of remote employees, which makes them more prone to strain when dealing with the demands of remote work (Perry et al., 2018), thus increasing their vulnerability towards burnout.

4.2. Mitigating risk factors of hybrid and remote work

4.2.1. Greater autonomy in job crafting

Despite concerns about trust and lack of monitoring, providing remote workers with more autonomy has actually been shown to improve job satisfaction and reduce the impact of work strain and emotional exhaustion (Charalampous et al., 2019). One way to allow employees more autonomy is by promoting job crafting, which allows employees to proactively redesign their work, in order to better balance the demands and resources of their jobs with their abilities and needs (Ingusci et al., 2021). Through job crafting, employees can take the steps needed to avoid behaviours that can negatively affect their well-being, and opt for strategies that can help them increase their resources. Research has shown that when job crafting strategies are used, the impact of workload on remote workers' stress can be reduced by up to 17.53% (Ingusci et al., 2021).

To promote job crafting, managers can consider (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022):

- Allowing employees autonomy and flexibility to negotiate the types of work tasks that they do;
- Allowing employees flexibility in working hours, without expecting them to be accessible outside of those hours;
- Allowing employees the freedom to choose tasks that not only play to their strengths but are also challenging them towards further growth.

4.2.2. Practising empathy in leadership

By relating to the thoughts, emotions, or experiences of their employees, empathetic leaders are able to show that they really care for their employees' needs and achievements. When leaders are empathetic, they are more sensitive to signs of overwork or distress in their subordinates and show a higher willingness to help employees with personal problems, further consolidating a social support system for employees working remotely (Gentry et al., 2016). This can make a great difference in guiding supervisors and managers to reassess work objectives and priorities in a way that actively takes into account the well-being of remote employees.

Empathetic leadership has been positively linked to increased job performance for both leaders and their subordinates (Zivkovic, 2022). More importantly, research has shown that when managers practise empathetic leadership, remote employees

report a 43% decrease in work-related burnout (Von Bommel, 2021). When managers show active support and acknowledgment of employees' feelings and efforts, remote employees also feel less social isolation (Charalampous et al., 2019).

Organisations can help build empathetic leadership by providing resources for managers to improve active listening skills (Gentry et al., 2016). Given the limitations of remote work, nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, posture, and gestures can be easily overlooked. Hence, it is important that managers of remote employees improve their active listening skills—listening intently and mindfully—to ensure that their remote employees are given the appropriate time, attention, and visibility.

4.2.3. The importance of intention

With the blurring of boundaries between work and non-work, there is a greater need for intentional self-care among remote workers. As home no longer holds the same restorative effect, those working from home will require more self-discipline to routinely detach and reset from work. In addition, with the added flexibility that comes with remote work, intention plays a vital role in making sure that remote employees are mindful and focused on work during their set working hours, which can help reduce work-home spillover in the long run.

When it comes to well-being, self-discipline, and intention are often the key factors that determine how remote work can affect health and wellness. For remote employees, tangible strategies for more intentional self-care can include:

- **Morning and evening routines to help open and close work days**

With no commutes to physically separate work and non-work lives, routines to start and end the work day allow employees to create a psychological separation between work and non-work. In this aspect, we recommend including mindfulness breathing exercises, journaling, and spending time with loved ones to create more effective work openers or closers.

- **Setting a hard limit on when to physically and mentally get off work**

Often, the attractive factor of remote working is the flexible hours it provides. Hence, it is understandable that remote workers often shun set working schedules and hours. Creating a time limit on the last hour of the day to get off work helps employees become more accountable for creating time boundaries. Whether this limit is 6 p.m. or 10 p.m., when the time comes, we recommend physically removing yourself from your workstation, turning off the notifications on your work devices, and focusing on the rest of your day.

- **Self-discipline in managing physical and mental wellness**

Maintaining a consistent sleep schedule, getting appropriate amounts of physical activity during the week, making time for hobbies, and avoiding harmful coping behaviours—such as mindless scrolling and endless snacking—require a higher level of self-discipline for remote workers. Setting small, daily self-care goals can help remote employees be more accountable and self-disciplined in managing their own health.

4.2.4. The role of resilience in the new normal

Resilience can protect employees from burnout, acting as a personal resource to tap into when job demands are high and organisational resources are low. Specifically,

for remote workers, having higher resilience can increase feelings of personal accomplishment—something that is often reduced in remote work (Ferreira & Gomes, 2021; Hill et al., 2022), which decreases work engagement even further. Separately, resilience has also been shown to help remote workers reduce dysfunctional coping strategies (Sygit-Kowalkowska et al., 2022), which in the long run helps remote workers manage their stressors more effectively.

Despite being a personal resource for employees, employers also play a role in improving employee resilience through:

- **Training managers to practice resilience-enhancing leadership**

  This can include being supportive of employees' personal goals, providing a sense of safety against failures—especially for challenging tasks, and building the core belief that employees can be further developed, regardless of where they are at the moment (Franken et al., 2022).

- **Providing resources for employees to build resilience remotely**

  This can be in the form of mental health support via counselling or coaching, or online resilience and stress-management training. It is important for resources to be scalable, personalised, and most importantly anonymous to help employees overcome personal and social stigmas around help-seeking.

5. Conclusion

Despite its lauded benefits, remote work is not challenge-free and can come with increased psychosocial risks. However, shifting employee demand for greater flexibility will continue to persist in this new normal. Our data reveals that a win-win option for both employers and employees lies in the middle ground: hybrid working. Moving forward, the key concern lies in how to mitigate the risks of burnout when employees are working remotely while at the same time maximising employee productivity and engagement. We recommend employers provide for greater autonomy in job crafting, foster empathic leadership, and promote initiatives to build employee resilience. For employees working remotely, we highlight the importance of intention and self-discipline in managing the unique challenges that come with remote working. As organisational practices continue to shift and evolve post-pandemic, both employees and employers must play their roles in building a new normal that works for all.

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